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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 25 Feabhra 2026

Wednesday, 25 February 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy James O'Connor) i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

9 o'clock

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy James O'Connor): 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 Michael Cahill - To discuss the national planning framework and the sustainable rural housing guidelines

Deputy Shane Moynihan - Plé a dhéanamh ar stádas DEIS do Ghaelscoil Lir.

Deputy Peter Roche - To discuss review of SNA deployment toolkit and eligibility thresholds in schools across Galway East and Ireland.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh - To discuss funding for the Ballyfermot Youth Service and the adventure centre and skatepark project,

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue - To discuss community childcare facilities in Fingal West.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí - To discuss the importance of eating disorder services during eating disorder awareness week.

Deputy Joanna Byrne - To discuss funding for the breakfast club for St. Paul's SNS, Drogheda, County Louth.

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 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 a State commemoration to mark 150 years since the escape onboard the *Catalpa* of six IRB POWs from a British penal colony in Western Australia on 17 April 1876.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the capacity of childcare provision in Cork North-Central.

Deputy James O'Connor - To discuss the return of the Midleton-Youghal rail corridor.

Deputy Matt Carthy - To discuss delivery of a permanent special school in County Monaghan.

Deputy William Aird - To discuss the future of Droimnín private nursing home, Stradbally, County Laois.

Deputies David Cullinane and Conor D. McGuinness - To discuss the need for neurodiversity early intervention classes in primary schools in Waterford.

Deputies Naoise Ó Cearúil, Aidan Farrelly and Réada Cronin - To discuss emergency works and capital works in respect of St. Patrick's Primary School in Celbridge, County Kildare.

The matters raised by Deputies Aengus Ó Snodaigh, James O'Connor, William Aird, Catherine Ardagh and Matt Carthy have been selected for discussion.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I think there is an understanding I am taking the Topical Issue matter in the name of Deputy Willie Aird. It was No. 3 but is now No. 1.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy James O'Connor): We will start with Deputy Willie Aird and his Topical Issue matter to the Minister for Health to discuss the issue of Droimnín private nursing home, Stradbally.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Nursing Homes

Deputy William Aird: I raise the issue of Droimnín private nursing home in Stradbally, County Laois, and ask the HSE to give serious consideration to retaining this facility on a full-time, permanent basis. As the Minister of State is aware, following an application by HIQA under section 59 of the Health Act 2007, the High Court directed the HSE to assume responsibility for the operation of the nursing home as a provider of last resort. This followed serious and persistent non-compliance identified during the HIQA inspections in April and September 2025, relating to governance, staffing, care planning, healthcare delivery and

residents' rights. As widely reported, the HSE has now taken operational control of the centre. I acknowledge the overriding priority has rightly been the safety, care and welfare of the residents of Droimnín nursing home.

Enhanced clinical oversight, health professional supports, staff education and daily senior level monitoring are now in place and the residents cared for safely, with no current infectious disease outbreaks. I also believe this intervention presents an important strategic opportunity for the care of the elderly in County Laois. Droimnín is a 70-bed, HIQA-registered designated centre, providing long-term respite and step-down care. It serves the wider Laois region. It is a state-of-the-art, purpose-built building. At the time the HSE stepped in, approximately 40 residents, many of them highly dependent, were living in the centre. County Laois has experienced a chronic shortage of nursing home places in and around Stradbally and the surrounding areas. Families are under severe pressure, with long waiting times, limited local options and increasing dependence on placements outside of the county. This places further strain on patients, carers and acute hospitals.

I ask the Minister to consider if the most appropriate course of action is for the HSE to retain Droimnín as a publicly-operated nursing home on a permanent basis. We do not want this valuable capacity lost to the system. While there may not be a precedent for such a decision, I am asking the Minister of State to outline whether permanent HSE ownership and operation of Droimnín is actively being examined, how this facility could contribute to addressing the shortage of long-term and step-down care beds in County Laois, what engagement is taking place with HIQA and other stakeholders on a long-term governance model and what assurances can be given to residents and families to safeguard continuity, stability and the future capacity of the centre.

There are many people in my own area around Portlaoise who have to go to nursing homes outside of County Laois.

Droimnín is a nursing home in County Laois. I ask the Minister of State to endeavour to do everything possible under the guidance of his Ministry.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I thank Deputy Aird for raising this very important matter. On Wednesday, 4 February 2026, following an application by HIQA under section 59 of the Health Act 2007, an order was made by Portlaoise District Court cancelling the registration of Droimnín nursing home. The HSE was directed to step in and take over operational control of the centre, acting as the provider of last resort. The focus at this time is to ensure the safety, care and welfare of the residents living in the nursing home while longer-term arrangements are progressed. The Deputy has already alluded to that.

Droimnín nursing home is situated in Stradbally, County Laois. The nursing home was registered to accommodate up to 70 residents and to provide long-term, respite and step-down care. HIQA inspections in April and September 2025 identified significant and persistent non-compliance across a range of regulations with issues identified pertaining to governance and management, staffing and training, care planning and healthcare and residents' rights and complaints procedures. HIQA subsequently sought cancellation of the centre's registration, leading to the court direction requiring HSE intervention. At the time, the HSE assumed control, there were 39 residents living in Droimnín nursing home. We must ensure that the

highest standards of care are provided to all nursing home residents and ensure they are maintained in a safe and secure environment. Their safety and well-being are of paramount concern.

The HSE has put an interim management and clinical governance structure in place, including the appointment of a person in charge, supported by senior operational and clinical teams. Arrangements are in place to ensure appropriate staffing, payroll and clinical oversight. Following the HSE intervention, the 39 residents have benefitted from consultant geriatrician reviews and individual GP correspondence, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and tissue viability nursing input, and access to education and training programmes for staff. The HSE's intervention is solely focused on protecting residents in Droimnín nursing home and ensuring continuity of safe, appropriate care. Residents in Droimnín nursing home remain in place and are being cared for in a safe, supportive environment. The situation continues to be actively monitored at senior HSE level with daily oversight and contingency planning in place. The HSE has assured me that it will keep the position under review while engaging with HIQA and other stakeholders on the next steps. Ensuring the welfare and safety of the residents is secured is of the utmost importance, and work to alleviate the concerns of residents, their families and staff is a priority during this difficult time.

I know how important this is to Deputy Aird. He knows many of the residents in Droimnín nursing home. I met with the HSE in the days following the HSE taking over the nursing home and discussed clearly the procedure that we are putting in place. As the Deputy said, it has moved to put a range of measures in place in terms of the welfare and safety of residents. All options have been explored by the HSE for Droimnín nursing home. The particular issue the Deputy has put forward is being considered by the HSE as well. At this moment, however, the most important thing is to ensure the welfare and safety of residents and that they feel they are in secure environment in Droimnín nursing home. That is very much happening with the HSE *in situ* operating the nursing home.

Deputy William Aird: I thank the Minister of State for his response and note his comments. It is acknowledged that Ireland's population is ageing, and this will bring significant challenges. We must plan proactively to meet these needs. There are three HSE nursing homes in County Laois: one in Abbeyleix, St. Brigid's Hospital in Shaen and St. Vincent's community nursing unit in Mountmellick. While I mention St. Vincent's community nursing home, I am delighted to see that the new 50-bed extension is nearing completion. I urge the HSE to proceed without delay with the remaining phases to deliver the full complement of beds. I must make it very clear that the situation in Droimnín nursing home arose from regulatory failure but it now offers the State an opportunity to strengthen public nursing home provision in an area of growing need. This is a chance to secure long-term, high-quality, publicly delivered care for the older people in County Laois.

I visited St. Vincent's hospital in Mountmellick the other evening. It is a hospital that is very near and dear to my heart because my late mother worked there for many years. When the new extension or new build is open, I urge the Minister of State to consider revamping the existing rooms that are available in the hospital. That is very important. I walked through the hospital and spoke to people. I know many people who are there and there was not one patient - those who could interact with me - who had nothing but the height of praise. I want to take this opportunity - I do not often get it - to thank all the people and staff in the nursing home in

St. Vincent's in Mountmellick. The single biggest problem in St. Vincent's hospital, which Members here all know as public representatives, is to try to get people into it and have beds available. That is the biggest problem. It shows the care and attention the patients are getting in St. Vincent's hospital. There is just one little thing I would ask the Minister of State to raise when he is in discussion there. I hope the church there, which is visited by the patients many times a day on a daily basis, is linked to the new build so people can come and go as they would be used to doing over many years in St. Vincent's.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Once again, I thank Deputy Aird for raising this important matter of Droimnín nursing home in Stradbally. As I said earlier, all options are being explored by the HSE. Specifically, in terms of St. Vincent's in Mountmellick, I know the Deputy has a keen interest in that community nursing home run by the HSE. I would like to give him clarity on a couple of points.

First, the church will continue to be accessed by residents and staff, as required, and the day care will remain operational in its current location. The specific point the Deputy raised in respect of linking the new building and the church is something I will take up with the HSE. I have no doubt the Deputy will have written to the HSE on it in his own way.

It is expected that the existing residents' transition to the new building will be during the week beginning 23 March. Furthermore, as the Deputy is aware, the eight-bed dementia unit will continue to operate in the existing building. The HSE is looking at doing a feasibility study on the existing building to see what can be done within it and its utilisation across a range of areas, including additional rehab and long-stay and short-stay beds in the community nursing unit, CNU. That is a general summary of where we are with St. Vincent's in Mountmellick. The residents will transition very shortly. It is a 58-bed unit consisting of 57 long-stay beds and one short-stay bed. I will take that particular issue the Deputy raised in respect of the church up with the HSE and I ask him to follow up with it as well.

I will finish on Droimnín nursing home. It is worthwhile to acknowledge and thank both HIQA and the HSE for their prompt and personal response to the situation. As I said, poor care, mistreatment, neglect or any form of abuse of any person living in long-term care is completely unacceptable. The primary focus is ensuring that we protect the safety and welfare of the 39 residents in Droimnín nursing home. That is obviously the key focus. In terms of the other matter the Deputy raised, all options are being explored by the HSE.

Youth Services

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I want to raise the decision by the Department not to award funding to the Ballyfermot Youth Service under this year's community safety innovation fund. It is a service that for the past two years has been supported by the innovation fund to employ three highly effective staff members, namely, two workers based in the adventure centre and skate park and a dedicated psychotherapist providing essential mental health support to our vulnerable young people.

Unfortunately, Ballyfermot is an area with a high prevalence of suicide among young men. These vital posts are, therefore, vital and working hard for the community.

I visited the project recently and want to put on record how impressive it is. You walk into the beautiful skate park that has been there for a while and there is not one bit of graffiti. It is minded so well by the boys and the local community. It is a beacon of hope and a fantastic park. People come from all over Dublin to see it and skate on it. It is a community hub. Every afternoon it is full of young people. What makes it special is it is not just a facility; people are building relationships with the staff and with each other. The staff know the risks. They know who is struggling at home, who needs guidance and who to pull aside for help and community support. It is a preventative-type relationship. It is relationship based.

The essence of the project is community safety. Over the past two years, the funding has enabled diversion from antisocial behaviour. It is just the tip of the iceberg but it has reduced engagement by kids with scramblers and in street disorder and has created a structured, safe environment for young people who might otherwise be on the margins.

The psychotherapist post has been vital. Many of these young people do not have anywhere else to go. Mental health crises are on the rise and early intervention in a trusted youth-friendly setting is not something I would like to see lost. Previous Ministers have visited the area and used the skate park because it makes for good pictures with politicians. The fact it was not funded again was pretty devastating for the centre. The Minister has to come out. I am inviting him out to see the skate park and the work being done. I saw first hand how that work strengthens the community and the engagement with social workers on site.

Without this funding, two front-line posts will be lost within weeks. This places the entire project at risk. Because the staff are there and the children are attending, the place is kept immaculate. Will the Minister review this? It is essential. We speak in this House about early intervention and diversion, especially in relation to disadvantaged areas. We speak about community partnerships. I can say hand on my heart that this project is delivering for young boys and young men in Ballyfermot.

Will the Minister consider the decision in relation to the Ballyfermot youth centre, or identify an alternative funding mechanism, ideally on a multi-annual basis, to ensure these posts and this centre can thrive? I extend a sincere invitation to him to visit the service. We might get him on a skateboard. It is something he needs to see and appreciate to get a proper vision of what is going on here.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank Deputy Ardagh for raising this important issue. I am aware of the outstanding work Ballyfermot Youth Service does. I know it from talking to the Deputy and other representatives and from my own general knowledge in respect of it. I want to see that excellent work continue. Before I came in here this morning, I had a look at the website for Ballyfermot Youth Service and I could see the extent of the outstanding work it does for youths in the community.

The Deputy's concern is about funding that previously came to the Ballyfermot Youth Service from the community safety fund, particularly regarding the skate park and the psychotherapist posts. Before responding to that, I will bluntly state that I will take up her invitation. I will come out to the skate park. I will not get on a skateboard but I will certainly come out to see it.

The Deputy will be aware the community safety fund has been an important part of the State's response to ensuring we have community safety. The then Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Michael McGrath, permitted the establishment of this fund in 2022, along with the then Minister for Justice, Deputy McEntee. Proceeds of crime seized by CAB are partially invested back into the community through the fund. Since 2022, over 127 community safety projects across Ireland have benefited from the fund. In 2025, I achieved allocation of a budget of €4.4 million to it. For 2026, I achieved a further increase to a figure in the region of €4.75 million. This reflects the importance of the fund and why it is so necessary.

When I get money into the fund, I seek to distribute it so as to ensure communities affected by criminal activity predominantly see the benefit. That is why the fund has been used so well in supporting projects addressing youth engagement, domestic violence, restorative justice and substance abuse. I agree with the Deputy that the funding of the skate park and psychotherapist post show the fund is playing an essential part in Ballyfermot in terms of what it seeks to do.

I have to point out, however, that the purpose of the community safety fund is not to provide repeated, consistent, annual funding. Because it is a limited and small fund, the objective is to pick projects in areas of disadvantage around the country and provide funding for individual projects. It is important to say it is not intended to provide long-term or continuous funding for projects. Nonetheless, I am conscious of the valuable role of the Ballyfermot Youth Service. It clearly delivers important supports throughout the community. I urge Ballyfermot Youth Service to engage with the national community office in my Department and get an assessment of the application process. Obviously, it did it before and was successful in its applications on two occasions. I think it got funding of €150,000 for 2025. I ask the service to engage with my Department. The community safety fund application process will be opening up again this year.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I thank the Minister for agreeing to come out to the skate park. We know early intervention is far more effective and less costly than dealing with problems once they escalate. The Minister stated correctly the fund is to be put back into communities where there is drug-related crime and high-level antisocial behaviour. This is one such community. The service has benefited massively from the innovation fund and is grateful for that. It has worked well but needs to continue.

It is really unfair. They are given resources to set up a service that is working well and doing what we all want to see happen. In an area like this, we want to see kids diverted from antisocial behaviour and given proper and targeted mental health supports. Then the rug is pulled from under them.

I understand the fund was not created to give services multi-annual funding but we need to look at a multi-annual funding approach for services like this. They will absolutely engage with the community office in the Department, but is there any alternative source of funding? It is a perfect project for the Department of justice. It is effective and accomplished in furthering the ambitions the Department has in relation to youth diversion. I ask the Minister to look at the project and see what can be done to give it secure funding.

I meet a lot of staff in these services and every year they are fighting for funding to keep open, when they really want to be working and delivering their service. We need to look at

funding these services on a multi-annual basis. This is the only way we will tackle disadvantage in many parts of our city, including the Minister's area.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I agree with the Deputy.

It is an essential part of ensuring we get youth diversion from criminal activity that we put in place facilities and services for young people. We had a very important discussion in this Chamber recently about scramblers and how young men and boys were using them, but we need to try to provide alternative avenues and opportunities for people to engage in certain types of activities of interest to them. I fully appreciate the skate park is something Ballyfermot Youth Services wants to see continue. I want to see it continue just as much as the Deputy does. I will engage with officials in my Department in respect of it.

I just want to be careful about giving false hope that this can be sorted out this year in the short term. I am going to come out to the skate park and get an update from officials in respect of what is available. We can engage with other ministerial colleagues as well to see if any other emergency funds are available for the purpose of such essential community projects as the skate park. I do have to just emphasise again the purpose of the community safety fund. It is a small fund, only €4.5 million. I am hoping to get it up even further than that this year. The fund tries to pick deserving projects around the country doing very useful work to ensure that communities are safe, particularly communities disadvantaged as a result of criminal activity. If I get into the trend of saying we have set multi-annual funding that is always going to come from the fund, the application process and the diversity of the fund will be altered. I do hear what the Deputy is saying in respect of the importance of the skate park and the psychotherapist role. I will engage with officials in my Department and continue to engage with the Deputy. I look forward very much to coming out to Ballyfermot skate park.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I thank the Minister. I suppose the fund is a victim of its own success when it is creating these fantastic services that people want to see continue. I welcome the engagement the Minister will have with his Department in relation to this issue and that he will come out to visit the skate park. I want to mention as well that the facility has a programme for young people and children with disabilities. It has a cycling programme on every summer, which I think is highly commendable.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy James O'Connor): I apologise to Deputy Ardagh because I missed her second contribution. That concludes her Topical Issue question. I thank her. Before we proceed, I thank the Minister very much for his constituency visit with me last week. It went down very well. I very much appreciate him taking the time to come to meet the Youghal Socio-Economic Development Group.

Commemorative Events

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: On 17 April 150 years ago, an American whaler anchored off Western Australia. It was captained by a US citizen, George Anthony, and it had an ulterior reason to be at that point on the other side of the world from where it had sailed from New Bedford, Massachusetts. Unbeknownst to most of the crew, in fact, it was on a mission other than whaling.

Its story began with a smuggled letter to Fenian and Irish Republican Brotherhood, IRB, leader John Devoy from six prisoners of war incarcerated in Fremantle prison outside of Perth, Western Australia. The six were Thomas Darragh from Broomhall in County Wicklow, Michael Harrington from Macroom in County Cork, James Wilson, whose real name, in fact, was McNally, from Newry, Robert Cranston from Stewartstown in County Tyrone, Thomas Hassett from Doneraile in County Cork and Martin Hogan from County Limerick. That letter set in motion a devious, cunning and audacious plan to rescue the six military Fenians. Military Fenians were Irish men who had been in the British Army and who enlisted and took the Fenian oath. From them, the British sought vengeance. While others in the 1867 rising were pardoned, these men were being made an example of to stop other Irish men in the British Army from joining republican forces.

Considering it was 150 years ago, it was against all the odds that the whaler got to the pre-appointed place on Easter Monday, 17 April. The key part of the expedition cost over €1 million in today's money. The men were picked up from the road gang they were involved in by a backup team of sympathisers and IRB men who had travelled to Australia to act upon this plan. They included John Breslin from Drogheda, Thomas Desmond from Cobh, Thomas Brennan from Dublin, John King from Tallaght and Denis Duggan from Dublin. They brought the six men to Rockingham, and they rowed out to sea to make good their escape. Even though they got on board the *Catalpa*, a standoff of four hours ensued when a police boat pursued them and told them to pull to. They refused, and showed they were flying the Stars and Stripes. They managed to escape and spent the next four months travelling back to New York, where they were met on 19 August 1876 to wild celebrations.

I think this event is worth celebrating. It is being celebrated in Rockingham itself by the Irish there. It should be celebrated in the United States and celebrated here in the museum, etc. I have been involved in events in the decade of centenaries, and going back to the 1798 centenary events, in which the then Minister, Seamus Brennan, was centrally involved. We then had the Famine commemorations, Robert Emmet's bicentenary and the 1916 and decade of centenaries events. This is important. It is strange there is not a commemorative programme by the Government thus far. I think this would fit perfectly into it. It is not just national, but local in all those towns I mentioned and also international, involving Australia and America. It is something our Irish diaspora looks at to try to ensure we celebrate their role in Ireland's freedom.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Ó Snodaigh. I am very pleased I have temporary responsibility for the issue of commemorations in the Department of culture. I agree with the Deputy that it is important that we should celebrate the great rescue by the *Catalpa* and how it carried out the rescue of the six military Fenians. The 150th anniversary of that important event is approaching in April this year and I commend the Deputy for raising this issue in the House this morning.

Obviously, the State gets involved in many official commemorations. Aside from that, it is important that we recognise as a community and as elected representatives in this House that we also have a responsibility and an ability to celebrate great historical events. The Department, in which I am not the Minister, has done a very good job of respectfully commemorating important events that happened 100, 150 and 200 years ago. It is important we continue in respect of that.

The Deputy will be aware that a commemorations advisory committee was established in May 2025 under the chairmanship of Bryan Dobson, the distinguished former broadcaster. It includes individuals from across the board in academia and politics. I am informed, and pleased to say, that the anniversary of the *Catalpa* rescue has been brought to their attention. I am asked to say that the committee agreed that a State commemoration to mark the event would not be possible at this stage because of the proximity of the anniversary, which, as I said, takes place two months from now. It is beneficial that the committee is aware of the event and that the Deputy has raised it.

Obviously, John Devoy played an essential part in the *Catalpa* rescue. In my capacity as the Minister for justice, individuals have come to me in respect of the rescue by the *Catalpa* of the Fenians out in Perth. It is an important issue that we are discussing here today. I had the privilege many years ago to be in Fremantle Prison in Perth. It is a long way away and a lonely place to be if you are an Irish person, particularly back in the middle of the 19th century. It was a fantastic rescue. It is an essential part of the history of the Irish struggle for independence and it is important that we remember it.

The Deputy will be aware that when it comes to official State commemorations, not every individual event can become an official State commemoration.

This does not mean that we do not celebrate other important events and discuss them in the House. As I said, we have commemorated very many significant events professionally and, I think, sensibly here. When we look at what is ahead of us, a number of other important significant events are going to occur in the next number of years. Last year we celebrated the 250th anniversary of the birth of Daniel O'Connell and it was done very well. Some outstanding documentaries were made in respect of it. Ruán Magan made an outstanding documentary in respect of Daniel O'Connell's life. The important thing is that we are not just looking to the past but that we are educating Irish people and, indeed, the world about the great story of the Irish struggle for independence. It is a magnificent struggle that we should seek to promote to the world.

When we think of other important events, there will be a significant celebration in respect of Catholic emancipation. This was an issue that deserves to be recognised. It liberated the overwhelming majority of Irish people from discrimination and unfair treatment. I hear what Deputy Ó Snodaigh has said and I welcome that he raised this issue today. The Department, of which I am not a Minister, does not have official plans to commemorate the *Catalpa* but we can certainly celebrate it.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It is important, even though there will not be a State commemoration, that the State should get involved. We should try to encourage State institutions to mark the event. The National Museum has a flag. The Minister knows of Joe Clarke who fought in 1916 at Mount Street which is in the Minister's constituency. I have a picture of that flag being handed over and he is in it, as is my father. It was in 1972. Frank MacGabhann contacted me and when I looked up the picture I remembered it from when we were kids. There are connections there and, while this is personal to me, these connections go around the world. We need to recognise the events that shaped Ireland and the role that our diaspora had in shaping this nation. It is important that the message goes out that we respect it. Whether it is a small event or a big event in embassies in the United States and Australia to

mark this event, whether it is a publication or a republication of material that was sent before, whether it is a pull-out in one of the newspapers, there are ways the State can get involved without having a full State commemoration. It is important that such an initiative happens.

Books have been published, one of the most recent of which is *The Voyage of the Catalpa* by Peter Stevens. We can also go to books by Joseph Clarke and others; there is a whole load of them. Let us try to encourage people to read them, and maybe try to encourage some of the film companies to look at them as scripts. We have seen adventures from every other piece of work, most of which are fictional, but this is a true-life story that could be very easily captured. It would send out the message that we remember the audacious plans of Irish republicans around the world, our exiled nation if we want, who helped shape the nation. It is important when we get the opportunity to do so that we mark those occasions, and whether it is a full State commemoration or the State supporting some local commemorations it should happen.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I agree with Deputy Ó Snodaigh. The rescue by the *Catalpa* is a fantastic story. Irrespective of the prejudices Deputy Ó Snodaigh and I have, and that other people have, for preferring certain commemorations over others, it is objectively a fascinating story that deserves to be reported and promoted. In a way, it is a bit like the story of the Invincibles in the aftermath of the Phoenix Park killings and what happened there. Deputy Ó Snodaigh emphasised, as I did, that the State does not have to be the one driving every commemoration. For instance, as the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, Deputy O'Connor, is well aware, last evening I attended an event in the Rotunda to start the celebrations for the centenary of Fianna Fáil. The State is not involved in this; it is not on the list of events that the State has decided to commemorate, although it could very well be but it is not.

Simply because the State has not decided to assume responsibility for it does not mean that individuals who are interested or individuals who are involved cannot seek to celebrate events that are particularly special and-or important to them. Deputy Ó Snodaigh has obviously done this in respect of the *Catalpa* and I commend him for it. Even just having this debate here this morning is important, as we are promoting the narrative about the remarkable rescue. I have no doubt Deputy Ó Snodaigh will continue to highlight this. I am very pleased to say that Bryan Dobson and his committee are aware of it. I am sure there are other mechanisms, aside from official State commemorations, whereby support can be provided to local groups who want to commemorate important historical events.

To close on an important point, obviously we all come to commemoration with our political biases and our political interests involved. It is also essential that we recognise we have to be inclusive about commemorating events. This country has been very inclusive, as we commemorated the Ulster Covenant, which was not an issue a lot of people in the House would have thought they would have been supportive of. It is important that we commemorate events that may not suit our political agenda. I thank Deputy Ó Snodaigh for raising this important question.

Rail Network

Deputy James O'Connor: I want to raise the issue of the return of the Midleton to Youghal railway. As a TD for the constituency of Cork East, I want to report to the House and to the

Minister that the overwhelming view of constituents in my area is their desire to see further expansion of the east Cork rail corridor beyond Midleton, restoring it once again to the town of Youghal and opening the stations in the villages of Mogeely and Killeagh.

The east Cork area is one of the fastest-growing regions of the country in terms of new housing stock and visible population growth. Unfortunately, this is causing issues with traffic congestion. It is no news to the House that I have been a very passionate advocate for upgrading the N25 corridor between Midleton and Youghal, particularly with regard to bypassing Castlemartyr and going down to the village of Killeagh. However, I want to be very clear that as a TD for the constituency I fully support the return of the railway to Youghal. I support what it would do for the local area and I support the objective of dealing with the issue of traffic congestion.

It is worth putting on the record that making this happen faces a number of significant hurdles. One of the most important to reference is that a strategic decision was taken in January 2019 by Cork County Council, through a motion brought forward prior to the 2019 local elections, seeking to put in place a greenway between Midleton and Youghal. This came in at a cost of more than €22 million of local authority funding and matched funding from the Department of Transport under the previous Government. A lot of people feel this was a missed opportunity with respect to the return of rail.

I want to make clear to the House that people in the area are adamant they want to see the train back, in terms of what it would do for their quality of life and that of their families, commuters going to work and children going to school in these areas. We have to see a pathway. From my perspective, as somebody who has had the experience of being on the transport committee and engaging with the previous Minister for Transport on a very intensive basis, we look at strategies such as the Cork metropolitan area transport strategy, the national planning framework, the strategic plans the NTA has for the area, Project Ireland 2040, the national development plan and the all-Ireland rail review, and, unfortunately, the return of the Midleton to Youghal rail corridor is not listed.

Sometimes investment can lead to a complication. We will have investment in the full electrification of metropolitan rail in Cork on the Mallow, Midleton and Cobh lines, the construction of eight new train stations on the existing line and ongoing dual tracking being done in preparation for full electrification of the line. However, the line between Midleton and Youghal is single track and I have been told the investment required for it is probably somewhere north of €350 million for the full retrofit of the existing line.

Realistically, there is an expectation that it will not be possible to have dual-track electrified rail to Youghal and for the greenway to survive. It is not for me to adjudicate on that as I am not an expert in this field but a decision has to be taken on that issue.

On behalf of the constituents of my area, whom I am proud to represent, I want to bring the case forward to the Government and the Minister of State in the Department in respect of this matter. Can the Minister of State give us a realistic feel for how feasible this is? Can he give us some degree of insight into the plans that are in place or what may be happening?

We all know about the review of the CMAT strategy. If the Minister of State could give us some information on that, it would be very helpful.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I thank Deputy O'Connor for raising this important issue. As Minister of State with responsibility for rail, I thank him for the opportunity to address the House on this issue today.

The National Transport Authority, NTA, has responsibility for planning and developing public transport infrastructure and for developing the Cork metropolitan area transport strategy, CMATS. This strategy has been developed by the NTA in collaboration with Transport Infrastructure Ireland, Cork City Council and Cork County Council. A key principle for CMATS is to reduce dependency on the private car within the Cork metropolitan area while increasing the appeal of sustainable transport options, such as Cork area commuter rail, light rail and BusConnects Cork.

As part of this process, the route from Midleton to Youghal was earmarked for development as a greenway, and the final phase of the greenway opened in December 2024. CMATS will be reviewed and updated every six years. As part of this process, the optimal transport provision in the area, including between Midleton and Youghal, can be reconsidered. The next review of CMATS is expected to commence later this year. As part of this review there will be a number of public consultations, giving stakeholders the opportunity to voice their opinion on the matter. I encourage all stakeholders to participate in this important process.

In addition to CMATS, the all-island strategic rail review, which was published in July 2024, sets out 32 strategic recommendations to enhance and expand the rail system in Ireland and Northern Ireland up to 2050, aligning with net carbon zero commitments in both jurisdictions. The recommendations seek to transform the quality of the rail system to the benefit of passengers and wider society on the island, through additional track capacity, electrification, increased speeds, higher service frequencies and new routes.

A proposal to develop a line between Midleton and Waterford along the south coast was examined as part of the review but, ultimately, this route was not included in the final recommendations of the report. Analysis undertaken as part of the review indicated that it would likely be more cost-effective to route longer distance services between Cork and Waterford via improved railways between both cities and Limerick Junction, rather than on a new line. One of the review's recommendations is that the review be updated once a decade, taking into account the latest policies and developments. The potential for the Midleton to Waterford line could also be reassessed at this stage.

The Deputy spoke about a greenway, which is very popular and is working very well, and the challenges to get the space to put a double-track line down there. However, part of this is the consultation process for CMATS, which will be opening later this year. That is the pathway to see where we will go with on this.

Deputy James O'Connor: I appreciate the feedback. It is clear there is that opportunity next year with CMATS.

I want to be crystal clear and honest with people on this. Making this happen prior to the construction of an upgraded N25 between Midleton and Youghal is going to be a difficult challenge. Politically, everybody whom I have dealt with here in Dáil Éireann wants the return of the rail. That is the prevailing view of the TDs in the constituency. However, the public want a sense of a timeline for this happening.

The Minister of State mentioned CMATS and the all-island rail review. Neither of those contain the return of the Midleton to Youghal rail line on the strategic plan. Those are hurdles and barriers. For the public, which has huge interest in this topic, it is important there is reference to that. A capital project of this scale and nature needs to be on capital plans in order for it to happen. That is probably the one thing that has been exceptionally disingenuously pumped out by people involved, who want to make this feel as though it can be done with the click of a finger and overnight, when that is just not how things happen.

I remind people that back in 2021, when I had a run-in with the former Minister for Transport, Eamon Ryan, I threatened to resign and pull my support from that Government. It took that level of action to get some degree of an acceptable response from both the Department of public expenditure at the time, under the then Minister, Michael McGrath, and from the Taoiseach and the then Minister for Transport, Eamon Ryan.

Being honest, there are huge political barriers and challenges. My ask of the Minister of State is for him and the Department to help us through this process to see if CMATS is an opportunity to consider the future viability of the project.

Deputy Seán Canney: I understand the Deputy's frustration in trying to get a clear line of sight on what might be happening here. From the outset, the CMATS review will start later this year. That is the avenue by which this project will or will not move forward. This project does not appear in the national development plan, which we have published, or in the sectoral plan for transport and the all-island rail review, in which we have picked projects to do. It is not on the radar, to be honest. We need to use CMATS to see if it is part of the strategy for Cork. Cork people, the county and city councils and the NTA will have a role in all of that, as will the representatives locally. This project has not been included in the all-island rail review and the only next step forward, and the most immediate thing that is going to happen, is the review of the Cork metropolitan strategy. There will be several public consultations on that, giving stakeholders the opportunity to voice their opinion on the matter. I encourage all stakeholders to put in their submissions.

In addition, one of the all-island rail review recommendations is that the review should be updated once a decade. It will be 2034 when this will be completely reviewed. The Deputy and the people of Cork have a desire to create a railway between Midleton and Youghal but, at present, it is not on the strategy for Cork transport or in the all-island rail review. There is an opportunity to see if we can get it into the Cork metropolitan transport strategy. That is the opportunity. I will not pre-empt the outcome of that strategy here today, other than to say it is the vehicle by which this will change from being something people desire to becoming part of the strategy for the development of Cork.

On that, I visited Cork station and met with Irish Rail down there. I have viewed all the projects and development it wants to do. It is very good news for Cork, with the works it has already done. The ambition it has for the future is also very good for Cork. This is just one element that has not made it into the system yet. Whether it does or not will depend on CMATS, when it starts later this year. I will not pre-empt the outcome.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit.

Expanding Access to General Practitioner Care: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that:

- access to timely General Practitioner (GP) care is a fundamental pillar of a safe, effective and equitable health service;
- GPs play a vital role in our health service, managing the majority of people's medical care needs, and acting as the first point of medical contact for most patients;
- GPs provide a core leadership role in delivering care outside of the hospital setting, and are central to the provision of Sláintecare's new model of integrated, multidisciplinary care; and
- to continue the shift away from our current hospital-centric system, patients must have timely access to GP and community-based healthcare services that are free at the point of use;

notes that:

- Ireland is an outlier in Europe in not providing universal primary healthcare that is free at the point of need, instead, we have a system of eligibility which is determined primarily on the grounds of income or age;
- according to the Health Service Executive (HSE) Primary Care Reimbursement Scheme, approximately 42 per cent of the population has access to free GP care through medical cards or GP visit cards, and the remaining 58 per cent pay out of their own pocket;
- the cost of visiting a GP can range from €50 to €90;
- in 2025, research commissioned by the Irish Cancer Society found that more than 30 per cent of people surveyed didn't attend a healthcare appointment because of cost;
- the same survey revealed that 25 per cent of people prioritised other costs over their healthcare, including heating and eating;
- a key recommendation from the Oireachtas Special Committee on the Future of Healthcare Sláintecare Report, published in 2017, was universal GP coverage by year five of implementation;
- the 2016 Programme for Government committed to extending free GP care to under 18s, which never happened;
- free GP care for children aged under six was rolled out in 2015, but it took another eight years before free GP care for children under eight was authorised in 2023; and
- the 2025 Programme for Government commits to extending free GP care to children up to at least 12 years;

further notes that:

- the 2017 Sláintecare Report stated that the current GP contract was a barrier to a primary-care orientated health service, and recommended an entirely new contract to facilitate new ways of working;
- the current GP contract is over 50 years old, and although it has been amended on numerous occasions, the core contract does not reflect modern day general practice, nor the future career expectations of young trainees and GPs;
- research carried out by the Irish College of GPs in 2023, found that almost half of trainees, 48.1 per cent, were not prepared to take up the contract within a year of finishing their training;
- the same research found that just above one third, 36.7 per cent, of graduates felt comfortable with the traditional responsibilities of the GP principal/partner position;
- the need for better working conditions, greater flexibility and new ways of working has consistently been identified by the Irish College of GPs and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, in their GP Retention Project; and
- in April 2023, the Department of Health and the HSE initiated a Strategic Review of General Practice, which was due to be completed that year but is still ongoing, nearly three years later;

acknowledges that:

- according to the Economic and Social Research Institute, an additional 943 to 1,211 GPs will be needed by 2040;
- while the Irish College of GPs estimates that 2,000 more GPs are needed due to current demand of our aging population and population growth;
- in 2024, just two counties exceeded the World Health Organization's recommended ratio of 100 GPs per 100,000 of population, with areas of deprivation and rural areas worst served;
- it is well established that there are higher and more complex health needs in areas of deprivation, yet there are fewer GPs working in these communities compared to more affluent areas;
- it is estimated that Dublin's North Inner City has one GP for every 3,525 people, compared to the national average of one GP for 1,759 people; and
- a third of the population lives in rural Ireland, yet the Irish College of GPs estimates that only 10 per cent of GPs work in these areas, with many in solo practices;

further acknowledges that:

- the Chronic Disease Management Programme (CDMP) has clearly demonstrated what general practice can deliver, when structural programmes, which align with Sláintecare, are implemented and resourced; and

— last year, the HSE's report on GP-led Chronic Disease Management found that participants in the programme had 30 per cent fewer emergency department attendances, 26 per cent fewer hospital admissions, and 33 per cent fewer GP out-of-hours visits;

is concerned that:

— many GPs are overworked, burnt-out and increasingly overburdened with administrative work, all at the expense of their own work-life balance;

— in the absence of reform, we are seeing the increasing corporatisation of general practice, with small family practices being bought up by investor-owned corporate entities with multiple locations;

— a significant number of GPs are approaching retirement, with the Irish College of GPs estimating that 600 GPs are aged 65 or over, 300 of whom are aged 65 to 69, and 300 of whom are still working aged 70 and over;

— according to an Irish Independent survey of 275 registered GPs carried out in 2024, more than half of the GPs could not accept new patients, with more than two out of three GPs in rural Ireland unable to take on new patients; and

— there are critical gaps in out-of-hours GP services, and capacity constraints in daytime general practice are putting additional pressure on out-of-hours services; and

calls on the Government to:

— in the forthcoming budget, implement the Programme for Government commitment to expand free GP care to children up to 12 years of age;

— immediately set out a clear timeline for the delivery of universal GP and primary care, which is free at the point of use, within the lifetime of this Government;

— introduce a salaried GP model, with GPs directly employed by the HSE, for underserved communities, beginning with rural areas and offshore islands, and expanding into areas of deprivation and out-of-hours services;

— create a new DEIS for GPs scheme, deprivation-weighted General Medical Services capitation rates, with a cap on list size, in recognition of the additional health needs of patients in deprived areas;

— expand locum cover supports for GPs, by developing a nationwide HSE locum bank to ensure all GPs can take leave;

— develop a new GP contract which facilitates new ways of working, meets the work-life balance and career expectations of younger GPs and trainees, and incentivises health promotion, public health work, disease prevention, and the delivery of integrated care;

— invest in a national GP Clinical Lead role, to design, test and support new models of rural and remote general practice care;

— establish a primary care health equity working group, with representation from frontline services and patients living in deprived areas, similar to the successful Scottish model;

- accelerate the delivery of HSE-built primary care centres, to provide suitable premises for GPs and their teams, and support the delivery of integrated, multidisciplinary care;
- develop a national strategy to attract, support and retain future GPs, and this should include increased exposure to general practice in medical schools, structured post-training fellowships, specific time spent in practices in both rural areas and areas of deprivation during GP training, and measures to support more diverse, flexible, and equitable career pathways;
- accelerate implementation of the Irish College of GPs' 2023 report, entitled "Medical Student to General Practitioner - An urgent call to action";
- provide an additional 100 GP training places, through the expansion of training capacity in hospitals and supporting training practices;
- implement a new model of out-of-hours GP care, which is uniform across the country, to ensure that access to out-of-hours care is consistent;
- align general practice nurses' terms and conditions with their HSE colleagues, recognise and support general practice nurses' continuing professional development, and establish clear career pathways for progression;
- increase annual public health nurse training capacity, from 160 to 240 places;
- remove the Common Conditions Service fee for medical card holders;
- provide universal access to the CDMP for all patients with type 2 diabetes, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cardiovascular disease and any further expansions such as the planned inclusion of chronic kidney disease;
- expand the CDMP to include severe and enduring mental health difficulties, epilepsy and other conditions as appropriate, in consultation with GPs delivering the service;
- develop a structured women's health programme for general practice, which deals with contraception, screening of STIs, fertility, pre-conception, endometriosis and menopause; and
- develop a national GP data framework to provide for integration with future eHealth systems, standardised data collection, greater data flow, data stewardship and investment in analytical capacity.

GP services are the bedrock of our health service but they are built on crumbling foundations. The warning signs of this looming crisis cannot be ignored any longer because timely access to GP care is a cornerstone of safe, effective and equitable healthcare.

It is now almost nine years since *Sláintecare* was published. It was a ten-year plan to deliver universal healthcare based on need and not ability to pay. While *Sláintecare* is still Government policy, at least on paper, it now feels like delivering universal healthcare has been relegated to some time in the future and little more than a nice idea because if this Government was truly serious about delivering universal healthcare we would be well on the road to free GP care by now. However, the sad reality is 58% of the population are still paying up to €90 to see their GP, and that is just get in the door. Promises to remove costs have been broken time and again.

The 2016 programme for Government committed to extending free GP care to all under-18s but a decade later all that has been delivered for children is an extra two years of free GP care; up from under-6s in 2015 to under-8s in 2023. The latest Government pledge is to deliver free GP care for under-12s. That programme for Government commitment needs to be implemented this year and a roadmap for delivering universal coverage by 2030 must be set out.

GP care should be free. This might sound radical but it should not. Nowhere else in Europe would you be paying between €50 and €90 just to see the GP. It costs nothing to see the GP in most European countries, including Austria, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain. If you are in Croatia, Bulgaria, France or Latvia you pay just €1 or €2 to see your GP while in Belgium and Luxembourg it costs no more than €7. In Cyprus, it is at most €15 and even at the higher end in Finland and Sweden, it costs on average €30. Meanwhile in Ireland the majority of people are paying double if not triple that to see their GP. This is not normal yet there is no sign of a plan from Government to change that.

Hiding behind the strategic review of general practice just will not cut it any longer. That review was first promised in 2019 yet it still has not been completed seven years later. The core GP contract is over 50 years old and even though it has been amended many times, it is still not fit for purpose. For example, we are still expecting most GPs to provide their own buildings. We would not ask a teacher to build a classroom, so why ask a doctor to build a surgery? Why is it we still have not recruited HSE-employed GPs as recommended in the 2017 *Sláintecare* report? Surely it is a no-brainer, especially for underserved communities in rural areas and offshore islands. The ICGP research shows more and more younger GPs have no interest in the responsibilities that come with the traditional business model. They do not want to run a small business; they want to provide healthcare and this should not be too much to ask.

A new contract and new ways of working alone will not address the looming crisis in general practice and that is why our plan published today contains 20 proposals, including further measures to increase capacity such as strategic workforce planning, more training places and a new locum support service. In areas of deprivation more specific reforms are needed. That is why we are proposing a DEIS for GPs scheme. This will provide deprivation-weighted GMS capitation rates. Currently there is a significant jump in capitation rates for patients over 70 and while age is one of the most important determinants of health, it is not the only one and deprivation must also be recognised because patients living in disadvantaged areas have higher health needs at a much younger age.

It is also important to say general practice is more than about doctors. GP nurses are indispensable members of the practice teams yet their value is under-recognised. This is why we want to see an alignment of the HSE rates for nursing pay as well in general practice.

We in the Social Democrats except general practice needs more than a quick fix. What is needed is an entirely new approach to protect the unique value of general practice because the relationship between a patient and the GP is unlike any other in healthcare. Government cannot simply ignore this looming crisis in general practice any longer. A plan is needed, not a never-ending review. This is why the Social Democrats are proposing a 20-point plan to reform general practice. I hope the Government accepts it and implements it in full.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I thank my colleague, Deputy Rice, for all of his hard work and passion on this issue. Our GP services are stretched beyond their limits. In most areas of my constituency of Cork South-West GP practices are no longer taking on new patients. People ring practice after practice only to be told there is no room. Families who move to the area cannot access primary care locally. Young people ageing out of paediatric care struggle to find a GP of their own. This is not unique to west Cork and is happening all across the country, particularly in rural areas. This is about basic access to healthcare - to fundamental vital care that should be available locally without charge. There is no justification and no excuse for people being priced out of a GP visit. It is the bare minimum the State should provide and it is the norm across western Europe.

Infuriatingly, Ireland continues to cling to a two-tier model of health where access, speed and quality of care can depend on your income. Nine years ago, and lead by Róisín Shortall, we achieved cross-party agreement this could not continue. Sláintecare set out a ten-year plan for universal healthcare with free GP access for all by year five. It is nine years on and we are nowhere near delivering it. When cost remains a barrier people delay care. They wait a week then another and hope symptoms pass. Minor infections become more serious, manageable conditions escalate and inevitably pressure then shifts to already-overcrowded emergency departments.

Extending GP care is not radical but logical. Our motion calls for free GP care for under-12s this year and for universal free GP care by 2030. It is a clear, achievable pathway to ending financial barriers once and for all. Expanding access must go hand in hand with expanding capacity. A significant number of rural GPs are approaching retirement. Many practices rely on one or two doctors covering huge geographical areas often without proper locum support. When one retires or even takes well-deserved leave, the impact on their community is immediate. One of the main barriers to attracting young doctors into rural practice is the cost and administrative burden of setting up a business, so we need a new approach.

The Social Democrats are calling for a new GP contract and the introduction of salaried GPs directly employed by the HSE starting in underserved rural communities and offshore islands. This would remove the financial risk for doctors and give communities security. It would introduce a DEIS for GPs scheme with deprivation-weighted capitation rates so practices serving disadvantaged communities are properly funded for the higher level of need and a nationwide HSE locum bank, so GPs can take annual leave, parental leave and sick leave like any other worker while ensuring continuity of care for the community. To have a comprehensive out-of-hours service to access the care you need should not be a postcode lottery.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I begin by commending Deputy Rice on bringing forward this motion and basing it on in-depth engagement with people affected by the crisis in GP care as well as with policy that can address it. The Government is blue in the face accusing the Social Democrats of having no solutions to the problems we highlight, which are problems it has created through a failure to plan, a failure to invest and a myopic ideological default to privatisation.

The Government can rest easy today because this motion contains clear and practical solutions, which, despite the Government's narrative, we consistently tend to provide. At its

core, this debate is about something simple yet transformative. Access to a GP is the front door to our health system. When that door is locked or costs too much to open, so much else backs up behind it, leading to hospital waiting lists, overcrowded emergency departments and untreated illnesses in our communities.

The evidence collected by Deputy Rice is overwhelming. Our party survey shows that while almost all respondents are registered with GPs, only one in eight can get a same- or next-day appointment. One in three face a wait of a week or more and nearly half of respondents ended up in emergency departments or out-of-hours services simply because they could not access daytime GP care. This is not a functioning general practice system; it is a system under severe strain.

Cost is also a major barrier. Three in five people report delaying or avoiding seeing their GP because of fees, which can range from €50 to €100. Ireland, as Deputy Rice outlined, remains an outlier in Europe by not providing universal GP access free at the point of need. Sláintecare settled the principle of universal access years ago. What is missing now is delivery and a credible timeline from the Government.

Capacity pressures are equally stark. The ESRI estimates that we will need up to 1,200 additional GPs by 2040. The Irish College of GPs, ICGP, suggests that the shortfall may already be closer to 2,000. At the same time, hundreds of GPs are approaching retirement. One of the structural problems in this regard is that we continue to expect doctors to become entrepreneurs if they are to become GPs. Young doctors finishing training are effectively being asked to set up and run small businesses. They must secure a premises, hire staff, manage payroll and deal with administration and financial risk before they can even begin providing medical care. For many, that model simply no longer fits modern medical careers or life. It is a major barrier to recruitment, particularly in rural areas, socio-economically deprived communities and fast-growing towns. Direct recruitment of doctors by the HSE through a salaried GP model would offer a practical way around this. It would allow GPs to focus on clinical work rather than business risk. It would remove the upfront financial barrier to establishing practices and give the State a direct means of replacing GPs when the need to do so is greatest.

Access is also deeply unequal. Rural communities struggle to recruit doctors. Deprived communities carry heavier illness burdens and have fewer GPs.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I thank my colleague, Deputy Rice, for bringing this motion forward and the huge amount of work he has done in outlining what we should have in this country, that is, free GP care. As already stated, Ireland is an outlier when it comes to free GP care. In Europe, access to adequate GP care, especially in disadvantaged areas like parts of my constituency of Dublin South-Central, is vital in order to have healthy communities. Research from adverse childhood experiences and longitudinal studies like the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing show that ageing populations need greater care and disadvantaged areas need preventative care from an earlier age.

Adverse childhood experiences are more prevalent in areas of socio-economic disadvantage because of intergenerational poverty and trauma. A child who experiences four or more adverse childhood experiences growing up is more likely to die prematurely of preventable diseases. For those who do not know, an adverse childhood experience includes a child growing up in

poverty, living in homelessness or an insecure housing situation or being the victim of abuse, whether physical, sexual, psychological or emotional. When this is combined with life choices, such as addictive behaviours or psychological and mental health challenges, it leads to poor medical outcomes for people who have experienced such adversity. It is vital that GPs in poorer areas of the country, where adverse experiences are more prevalent, are trained to understand not only why it happens but how to help and deal with someone who comes to them in adult life for support. Of course, those GPs need to be supported because they are more likely to suffer burnout, similar to other people working in those communities.

Of course, GP care is not available often because of pricing or the lack of timely appointments. Some of the responses from the survey that Deputy Rice gathered state, “Trying to get an appointment is like winning the lottery. They are always busy.”. Another individual stated:

I actually rarely bother going to the GP as the typical wait time for a chest infection is six weeks. Because of this, I have to go to the out-of-hours doctor. If I were to wait for the GP appointment, I would be healthy again by that time. I should not have to wait for a bad chest infection to pass and be in pain when I could get antibiotics and get on with it in a week.

If adverse childhood experiences cannot be prevented, we have to be able to deal with them. If people cannot get appointments because they are not available or too expensive, that will create a challenge for them.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: We heard from Deputy Rice about the extortionate cost of GP care for families all across the country, which ranges between €50 and €100. Not only is that incredibly expensive, but women will probably pay double that to get basic healthcare once they are premenopausal or menopausal. GPs will charge between €120 and €200 or, perhaps, €250 for a consultation when it comes to menopausal clinics. That is an incredible amount of money.

We are in a lucky situation where we know a lot more about menopause. We know the symptoms. A total of 51% of the population will experience menopause. Some will sail through it, while others will find it more challenging. For those who find it challenging, there are medical interventions available. I welcome the hormone replacement therapy, HRT, initiative the Government came out with. That is important. For women wishing to go on HRT, however, they must first be assessed. In order to be assessed and receive a prescription, they have to go to their GP. If they go to their GP with any symptom that could be related to menopause, they will be charged extra. They will be charged €150 plus whatever else it costs for the blood work. That is just for one consultation relating to menopause. I do not know of any other medical condition for which people have to pay extra to be seen.

I have spoken to GPs about this and the rationale is that they are longer consultations. That is fair enough. There is probably an argument for that. However, if I were to go to my GP with a mental health issue, it would require a long consultation but I would not be charged extra. If I were to go to the GP with more serious medical issues, they would also involve long consultations, but I would not be charged extra. I do not understand why menopausal women have to pay twice or three times the amount a normal GP clinic charges. That is inherently unfair.

I acknowledge the free HRT. It has been a lifesaver for so many. When times are tough and family budgets are tight, however, I know women will not look after themselves. If that means not getting a GP appointment because it will cost €150 or €200, they will sacrifice their health so that their family can be looked after. That should not be the case. I ask the Minister of State to take that on board and look into those unfair costs for menopausal women.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank Deputy Rice for the dedication and vision he has brought to this most important issue. There is a postcode lottery when it comes to accessing effective doctor care within our system. To give context, the national benchmark is one GP per 1,759 people. In my constituency of Dublin Central, it is dramatically higher. In the north inner city, for example, it is one GP for every 3,525 people. In Cabra-Glasnevin, it is one GP for every 3,060 people. In my constituency, particularly in the north inner city part of it, there are a plethora of issues we often discuss, no different to many other constituencies. There is poverty, deprivation and inequality. When looking at the GP-to-person ratio, it cannot be denied that a structural inequity is also built in.

I have visited the GP Care for All practice in Summerhill many times over the years. When people visit the practice, which was founded by Dr. Austin O'Carroll, they will find communities of people who have grown up and spent their whole life in the inner city. They will find the Roma community and people who have come from other parts of the world. There is a diverse community there, all with a particular need that is clearly under-served.

In the north inner city, we have known for years that people develop chronic illness earlier, sometimes more than a decade earlier compared to more affluent parts of the city. This includes earlier cases of heart disease, respiratory illness and diabetes, as well as a lower life expectancy. This is not about genetics; it is about systemic inequality. What did the State do in response? It tried to close down the GP Care for All system in Summerhill.

The residents, who have all the issues we have laid out before, and the doctors had to take placards and signs and stand outside their practice and had to come to Dáil Éireann, just to have the basic necessity of a GP care service maintained and not have the added anxiety they may lose it. We are asking them to firefight deprivation without the tools and now we are asking them to firefight health inequality. This is why the Social Democrats are calling for a DEIS for GP scheme, deprivation-weighted capitation rates and a cap on list sizes, so doctors in areas like Dublin Central are resourced for the reality they are working in. Our current funding model recognises age but it does not recognise deprivation. Capitation increases at the age of 70. In the north inner city, however, many patients present with the health profile of a 70-year-old at the age of 50 but the system is not funded in that way. Equality is giving everyone the same. Equity is recognising that some communities start further back.

The north Dublin GP training programme started in 2011 with Dr. Austin O'Carroll and it is a model that works. Deputy Rice has given 20 points on what could improve our GP care system across the country. We hope the Minister of State will take it on.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta. Bogfaimid ar aghaidh chuig sliotán an Rialtais agus an Aire Stáit, Kieran O'Donnell.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): Ciarán Ó Domhnaill.

I welcome the opportunity to engage with colleagues on the important matter of expanding access to general practice care. I wish to thank the Social Democrats for raising this issue, and Deputy Rice for leading on the motion. I am taking this debate on behalf of my colleague, the Minister for Health, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, who is travelling to the EPSCO meetings today. The Government will not be opposing the motion.

We are all aware of how central general practice is to the provision of healthcare in Ireland. For the majority of patients the GP is the primary care provider, acting as the first point of contact for most health issues. We all know that GPs provide an invaluable service. GPs help to direct the care of their patients, acting also as the gatekeepers to other primary care services and the wider healthcare system. Indeed, central to the Sláintecare vision is a more community-centred healthcare service, which Deputies have name-checked, with care provided to more patients closer to home in primary care settings. Access to GP services is essential to realising this vision.

GPs provide care to patients over their entire lifespan. They develop patient-doctor relationships that improve the service provided through a greater understanding of the patient and their health needs. At times of serious illness that relationship is of particular value as the trust built up over time is of enormous assistance in both recognising health issues and in helping patients to manage them. In the case of older people, the relationship often carries even greater weight. All people aged over 70 have access to GP care without charges, and by virtue of this have access to the full range of GP services, including the chronic disease management programme, which I will speak about more in few moments.

Having said that, we recognise that the Government needs to continue to improve access to GP services, particularly in underserved areas and more remote rural areas, to meet the growing demand for GP services. Increasing access to GP services is largely dependent on increasing our GP workforce and the programme for Government commits to increasing the number of practising GPs. Significant work has already been undertaken in this regard, to increase GP numbers and improve access to GP services.

To make general practice in Ireland more attractive as a career, and to increase the level of services provided to patients, investment in general practice has been increased by over €340 million under the 2019 and 2023 GP and general medical services, GMS, agreements. Both agreements increased payments to GMS GPs and increased the range of supports provided to GP practices. Under the 2019 GP agreement rural practice supports were increased and a support for practices in urban areas of social deprivation was also introduced. The social deprivation grant available to eligible GPs supports practices to cover the costs of additional clinical supports to meet the needs of patients within the practice from socially deprived urban areas. The 2019 agreement also introduced the GP-led chronic disease management, CDM, programme. The programme is well regarded by patients and GPs, and helps to bring care for chronic disease further into the community. It has been successful in shifting care away from hospitals, with over 90% of patients on the programme managing their conditions in the community. In 2025 alone, over 650,000 GP-led patient reviews were provided under the CDM treatment programme, including approximately 400,000 reviews for people aged over 70 years

of age. Work is under way to expand the conditions covered under the programme to include chronic kidney disease and familial hypercholesterolaemia.

Further expansions of the programme would require careful consideration and consultation with GPs. First, we need to be sure that we have the capacity in place to manage any expansion in eligibility. In addition, we need to recognise the unique relationship that is at the heart of the programme when it comes to determining which clinical conditions it can best serve. The programme requires active engagement on the part of patients to manage their conditions, in co-operation with the GP and the GP nurse. Any additional clinical conditions to be added would have to be amenable to this approach.

Almost all GP practices are digitalised. The 2019 GP agreement also sets out measures agreed in relation to the further digitisation of health services and GP engagement with these initiatives. More recently, GPs have used digital solutions to switch from paper to electronic prescriptions, for electronic referrals to hospitals and for managing the sharing of patient data under the CDM programme. The 2023 GP agreement introduced a new grant for additional practice staff capacity and a support for staff maternity leave taking. It also introduced a locum sourcing support for rural GMS practices. These measures have helped to make working as a GP in Ireland increasingly attractive to doctors, and the positive impact of this is being seen in the number of GPs undertaking GP training. Medical graduates are showing an unprecedented level of interest in general practice, with record numbers of graduates applying for GP training in recent years. The 2023 agreement also provided for the expansion of eligibility for a GP visit card from children under six years of age to all children under eight years and to all those earning up to the median household income.

In the limited time I have I want to cover certain areas. With regard to strategic planning for GP services, a strategic review of general practice is currently under way led by the Department of Health and with support from the HSE. The review, with stakeholder input, is examining a range of important issues affecting general practice, including issues around GP capacity, the reform of GP out-of-hours services, possible improvements to the GP training system, and the need for further and revised GP supports. The potential for HSE-employed GPs, as well as other possible measures to bring more GPs to underserved areas, is also being examined. Significant progress has been made under the review, which is to be completed this year. The report will identify the arrangements necessary to improve the current system of GP care. While the existing GMS-GP contract has been significantly updated under the 2019 and 2023 GP agreements, and via circular, it is acknowledged that a new contract should be developed. The findings of the strategic review will serve as a blueprint to bring forward a new, modern GP contract.

Work is also under way in other areas to improve the level of GP service provision. For example, a comprehensive women's health programme in general practice is also being developed in line with a relevant programme for Government commitment. A strong pipeline is in place for the continued construction of primary care centres, which serve as ideal locations for the provision of GP services alongside other primary care services. The common conditions service, CCS, recently commenced enabling community pharmacists in Ireland for the very first time to provide advice and treat eight common conditions. This private service is accessible to all patients and will help reduce the need to attend GP practices for the eight conditions.

I would like also to address the amendment to the motion tabled by Deputy Sherlock. The Government is fully committed to supporting the balanced delivery of GP services. Although not set out in legislation, it is accepted that GP services should be delivered at the local level, and that where possible service provision should be sufficient to meet local demand. To this end, we provide additional supports to practices in rural areas, and since 2020 have provided additional supports to practices in areas of urban deprivation. The 2023 GP agreement introduced additional supports for staffing, enabling GPs to take on additional health and social care professionals to aid their patients. The strategic review of general practice will further address the issues of delivering a balanced GP service able to meet the needs of patients at the local level.

However, the Government has concerns about how the Health (Availability of General Practice Services) Bill is currently set out. In the first place, there is a lack of clarity around the terms of the Bill. No attempt is made in the Bill to define what a fair and equitable distribution should be or what constitutes the social determinants of health status. The Minister and the Government are fully aware of the impacts of social deprivation on health status.

While the Bill brought forward by Deputy Sherlock relates only to GP services, the Government is focused on building fair and equitable access to all services. We will continue to work towards that goal.

It is difficult to see how the HSE could fulfil the legal obligation that this Bill would impose without clarity around the additional expenditure that would be required. For these reasons, the Government will oppose the amendment to the motion tabled by Deputy Sherlock.

The Minister for Health and the Government fully recognise the important work of general practice. We have invested significantly in general practice to increase GP capacity and to provide for increased supports for the provision of GP services. There are an estimated 4,000 GPs practising in Ireland. As of this month, there are 3,237 GPs with at least one HSE contract, an increase of 9% from 2020. The recent increase in GP training places and the ongoing recruitment of GPs under the international medical graduate, IMG, programme will see the number of GP practices across the country increase, while the strategic review of general practice will set out further measures to be taken to support and grow our general practice services over the coming years.

The Minister for Health and the Government understand the need to expand access to GP services and have undertaken measures that reflect many of those proposed by the motion. As already stated, the Government does not oppose the motion.

I ask that the other areas that I did not have an opportunity to deal with in my speech be read into the record.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Before I call the next speaker, I welcome to the Gallery Mr. Gerry Reilly, president elect of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors, and Ms Valerie Fitzpatrick, the vice-president elect. I call Deputy Cian O'Callaghan.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I thank my colleague, Deputy Rice, for all the work he has done on this motion.

Is minic a thagann Airí isteach anseo agus léann siad ráiteas atá ullmhaithe, gan mórán ionchuir ón Aire féin. Ar chúis éigin, shíl mé go mbeadh an tAire Stáit, an Teachta O'Donnell, difriúil ach bhí mé mícheart.

It is welcome that the Government is not opposing the motion. There are some very good ideas and suggestions in this motion that the Minister of State did not even address in his contribution. It is disappointing that he did not address them.

I want to read to the Minister of State from the survey that was carried out by Deputy Rice. It sums up a huge number of the problems in terms of the lack of capacity, solutions for which are in our motion and which urgently need to be addressed. One respondent said they filled out the survey for their 73-year-old mother who is suffering with chronic illness, such as heart failure and dementia. Two weeks ago, the respondent said, they found her crawling out of her room on her hands and knees because she had fallen and could not get herself up. When the respondent rang the mother's GP to ask for an appointment to get her referred to age-related care for physiotherapy and walking-aid assessment, the appointment given was for 18 March. The respondent rang on 13 February and the appointment given was for 18 March. The respondent's mother was recently discharged from her heart failure unit to GP care. If she has a future heart failure episode, she is meant to wait for five weeks for GP assessment to refer her back in. The respondent said they will end up back in the accident and emergency department to wait on a trolley or bed for another 56 hours.

That is the reality facing people in Ireland because of the chronic lack of investment to improve GP capacity and primary care. There are a number of solutions in the motion that the Minister of State did not address. One of the key measures put forward is the introduction of a salaried GP model so that GPs are directly employed by the HSE. This would remove the burdens of effectively running a small business. The motion calls on the Government to ensure proper cover in rural communities, on offshore islands and in areas of deprivation. It suggests the creation of a DEIS-like scheme for GPs to increase capacity. It suggests the expansion of locum cover supports and calls for investment in a national GP clinical lead role. It suggests investment in a primary healthcare equity working group and to establish same, with representation from front-line services and patients in deprived areas, similar to the successful Scottish model. It calls for the acceleration of the delivery of HSE-built primary care centres. The Minister of State did reference that part of the motion but did not go into any detail about what extra is being done in that regard.

The motion also calls for the development of a national strategy to attract, support and retain future GPs. It calls for students to get increased exposure to general practice in medical schools. It calls for accelerated implementation of the 2023 report of the Irish College of General Practitioners entitled "Medical Student to General Practitioner — An Urgent Call to Action". It calls for the provision of an additional 100 GP training places. Those are urgently needed. It calls for the alignment of the terms and conditions for general practice nurses with those of their HSE colleagues. It calls for an increase in the annual public health nurse training capacity from 160 places to 240 places.

Those are the concrete and detailed proposals we have put forward. The Government is not opposing them but the Minister of State has not told us in concrete terms what it is going to do to implement them.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Minister of State for his response. Like my colleagues, I commend the work of Deputy Rice in the lead-up to this motion and in presenting a motion which, as Deputy O'Callaghan said, is not opposed. We still have as many questions as we have answers about the implementation of the motion.

The irony, as we all truly know, is that you have to plan two or three weeks in advance if you need a GP appointment. That is the case throughout this country. You have to let your GP know or build into the timetable for your family at home that you might need an antibiotic, a consultancy, some advice or professional experience well in advance of actually having any symptoms. If you leave it until you are symptomatic, you will quite often not get an efficient appointment. That is no reflection, as we know, on the wonderful work of our GPs. If Kildare is a snapshot of what is happening around the country, there are upwards of 3,200 people per GP. That is simply unsustainable. There has been a population surge in Kildare over the past 30 years. It has increased from 120,000 or 130,000 to 250,000. The one thing we can all be absolutely sure of is that while the population has increased, the incredibly important services, such as GP access, have not risen in a similar fashion.

What we do not see from this response or in the Government's ambition is any sort of urgency. We are not addressing the root cause of issues. The Taoiseach, Tánaiste and everyone else have criticised us for not coming forward with evidence-based proposals, constructive dialogue and plans. Here we have concrete proposals. In ways, some of the aspects of the motion simply ask the Government to fulfil commitments it set out in Sláintecare nearly ten years ago. What we are doing is trying to match ambition to need. We are not seeing that from the Government's perspective. We need a comprehensive workforce plan when it comes to GP services. We need reform. It is not a siloed approach that is necessary. We need to see the Department of housing come in here. We need to see the involvement of the Department of Social Protection. We need to see an evidence-based approach whereby when housing developments are being planned, it is not simply a childcare facility that is stipulated. What else does a community need? There are people in Kildare right now who are queuing up overnight to buy homes for €500,000 on the assumption that alongside the homes that they buy, the services they need to raise their families will be there. They are not there.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I welcome that the Government will not oppose this motion. I want to recap Sláintecare for a moment, which my party is really proud of, and the work that Róisín Shortall did and her legacy. Sláintecare was about cross-party co-operation and longitudinal vision for a transformation of our healthcare system from a two-tier to a single-tier system. This Government downgraded it from where it should have been situated in the Department of the Taoiseach to the Department of Health, where it could never fulfil its vision and ambition. Since then, the Government has cherry-picked what it wants, and not what the public wants or what was in the cross-party agreement. That is really important to recall in this moment when we are simply asking the Government to fulfil some of the elements of Sláintecare.

We heard in the Minister of State's comments a great deal about progress, investment and reform. If that progress was real, people around this country would not be waiting for weeks for GP appointments.

We would not be here pushing a motion to implement the Sláintecare programme, and we would not be the only country in Europe without universal primary healthcare. The unfortunate

reality is that there is a two-tier health system here in Ireland and most people are paying on average between €50 and €90 for a GP appointment. For the 42% of people who have medical cards, healthcare is delayed, with appointments only available often after weeks or months, and that is if people can even get registered.

Last week, we ran a survey to gather perspectives on people's experience in this area. I will quote two of the damning responses which demonstrate the real impact that this Government's inaction has had. One stated that trying to get an appointment is like winning the lottery, and that they are always busy. Another, which is particularly concerning, stated that in the time it took the person to secure a GP, they timed out on a prescription for medication they used to take daily to treat depression and anxiety, and they just had to learn to live without them. That is just a sample of the 600 responses we received about the inadequacy of GP services in this country.

One of the key recommendations from Sláintecare was universal GP coverage by year five of implementation. This is a policy that the Government has already agreed to enact, yet eight years later, we are no closer to that goal. Our neighbours across Europe have proven that it is possible, and we have the path to get there. It is to create a new DEIS for GP scheme, develop a new GP contract, adapt to modern working needs, and expand free healthcare for children aged at least 12 years. We do not lack the solutions. We lack a proactive Government with the ambition and urgency to enact systematic change.

Last year, the Minister for Health launched the strategic review, but that review is just the latest delay in a series of delays from a Government led by two former health Ministers, who seemingly want Sláintecare to collect dust while ordinary people go without care.

Access to healthcare is not a policy to be debated. It is a fundamental human right to be respected. This motion is about fulfilling that right and addressing people's health needs in the community. I congratulate Deputy Pádraig Rice on his good work.

Deputy David Cullinane: I commend Deputy Rice on tabling this motion. GP care and GP services are an important issue. This motion is about something very simple but also important, namely, that when people need to see a GP, they should be able to see one, and they should not have to worry about whether they can afford it or not. GPs are the backbone of our health service. The GP is the first person most people turn to when they are sick, worried, pregnant, struggling with their mental health or managing a long-term illness. I am a great advocate for our primary care system and GP service. We all know that the family doctor, family GP and family practices we have in this State are really important. They work. They are a person's gateway into the health services. Everybody knows their GP and most people trust their GP. They are the referral pathway on to other services.

The problem is that we need more GPs, just as we need more staff in almost every part of the health service. I know from talking to recruits who have come out of training that it is sometimes daunting to be an independent general practitioner and, on occasion, maybe going in and working in a private practice, but working for that practice. The thought of being an entrepreneur, setting up a practice, being an employer, dealing with the bureaucracy, the paperwork, regulations and the HSE is daunting and a real challenge, while GPs are at the same time trying to provide services. That is why the notion of a public GP contract is important and needs to be taken up. We called for this strongly during the election campaign. It was in the

health plan that I launched before the election. The current Minister for Health, who was, for a short time, the health spokesperson for Fine Gael, said it was something she would look at. There are vague references to it in the programme for Government, but we need more because this is about choice. It is great if people want to become independent general practitioners. They should be supported and, as I said, I am an advocate for them. For those who want to work in the public system and simply want to be GPs, however, public contracts should be provided.

This is all the more relevant when it comes to the cost of GPs. We all signed up to Sláintecare. Most parties signed up to it, not just in principle but because we believed in it, ideologically but also practically, and we know that a barrier is the cost of GP care. I am not so sure the same can be said of the Government when we look at its track record on Sláintecare. In recent times, we have seen what is happening with the elective hospitals, and also with free GP care. The previous Minister for Health announced 400,000 additional GP-only cards. The process was so complicated and convoluted. I do not know if anybody has gone and looked at it. It is almost impossible to say to people whether they are entitled to the card or not. That needs to be simplified because many people who are entitled to a GP-only care do not have one because they are just not aware that they are entitled to it in the first place. That, to me, is crazy, but maybe it is intentional. An awful lot more needs to be done.

I raise a local issue that Teachta Conor McGuinness raised recently, namely, the need for a primary care centre in Lismore in County Waterford. Unfortunately, that is back to the drawing board. The preferred bidder, the contractor, pulled out because of the viability of the project, which means it is back at the starting block again. I ask the Minister to take that up with the relevant officials in the HSE. That project now needs to be seriously looked at. I visited the area with Deputy Conor McGuinness a number of times in recent years, and I know how much it is needed for the people of Lismore. There are also healthcare projects in Tallow that need to be funded too. There is a clinic there that has an application for capital funding which still has not been progressed. I could mention many projects in Waterford city too.

On the thrust of this motion, many areas of general practice are working well and I am a big believer in the relationship between GPs and community care. All of the supports and additional services now being provided in primary care centres and the chronic disease management teams mentioned in this motion are important and they work. Where things are working, we need to work with GPs so that they can deliver those services. I was dealing with one GP in Waterford city. Five years ago, the HSE told him it wanted more space to provide some of these services. He jumped through every hoop and over every hurdle and to this day, there has not been any finality to that. The bureaucracy is ridiculous and needs to be addressed.

I commend again the author of the motion on bringing it forward.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: There was a time when every town and village had a family doctor. They were rooted in the community and known to everybody across generations. Today, that model is under real strain in urban areas but particularly in rural Ireland. GPs are the anchor of our health system. They are the gateway into our health system in most cases. They provide long-term, continuous care from cradle to grave, yet successive governments have failed to plan properly for primary care. In 2001, the Future Together report warned about shortages in GP numbers and practice-based staff. Twenty-five years later, we are still playing

catch-up. The rate of GPs per head has barely improved in that time and is now moving in the wrong direction. The number of practising GPs fell from 4,583 in 2019 to 4,420 in 2022. One in four GPs is aged over 60, so there is another crisis coming. Only one in five practices is open to new public patients.

In County Waterford, the impact is really clear. In Dungarvan, people struggle to secure timely appointments. In Portlaoise, access is restricted during the week and there is no full-time availability. The issue in Lismore with the primary care centre that is now delayed has been mentioned. It is back to the drawing board and the starting blocks, through no fault of the people of Lismore or anybody practising medicine. The Government needs to get to grips with that and expedite that process. Across villages and country areas, older people and people with disabilities are travelling well beyond their own communities for routine care. That is creating an additional burden and barrier. People in Dungarvan, for example, have to travel a couple of towns away. It is simply not sustainable.

GPs work exceptionally hard. They are dedicated and committed. None of this is at their door. It is clearly at the door of the Government. GPs are under huge pressure. They are operating with the lowest levels of practice-based staff among comparable countries. They are increasingly expected to run complex small and medium enterprises while trying to provide front-line care. As Deputy Cullinane said, those GPs who we are talking to, whether here in Ireland or abroad, are telling us that they do not want to be entrepreneurs. They do not want to run businesses, by and large. They want to provide care. That is what they studied. One said to me that if they wanted to run a business, they would have done an MBA, not a medical course.

Our approach is really straightforward. We would increase GP training places from 350 to 450, lift the recruitment cap for front-line roles and expand the multidisciplinary primary care teams. Investing in primary care is efficient. It is probably the best way to spend money in the health service, so if we are serious about rural Ireland, access to GP care must be available in every town and village.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: Access to a doctor is a necessity and a basic right for people, especially when they are sick. However, a GP shortage in south Wicklow and north Wexford has reached crisis point. I ask the Minister to intervene. People are desperate. They are travelling more than 20 km but still cannot find a GP who will accept new patients. One practice in a small town in my constituency has a waiting list of 200 people and that list is currently closed. We have seen rapid population growth, particularly in north Wexford, the Gorey-Courtown corridor and parts of south Wicklow. I ask the Minister to consider introducing interim measures immediately to ensure people can access basic care.

I had a recent case of a woman with a high-risk pregnancy. She came in desperation to my office because she could not secure a GP anywhere. This should not be happening. It is crazy. As a result, hospital accident and emergency departments are being used as a stopgap. It is unsafe, unsustainable and places even greater pressure on emergency staff, contributing to longer waiting times.

Private patients currently have no mechanism for GP assignment through the HSE. Families are unable to register infants, creating risks for children's health. I have constituents in south

Wicklow who are registered with one GP but must register their infant with another, in some cases, on the far side of the county or even across the county boundaries.

As has been pointed out, Ireland has one of the lowest GP-to-population ratios in western Europe but Wicklow and Wexford are officially designated by the Government as pressure zones for GP practice and capacity. We are not training enough GPs to replace retiring doctors and their conditions need to improve if we want to keep graduates here in Ireland. We are losing them rapidly. For those with medical cards, the HSE may be able to arrange a GP but private patients have no such support. They must navigate an overstretched, largely private system on their own. This system has to change because lives will be lost. I ask the Minister to personally intervene.

Deputy Thomas Gould: For six years, SouthDoc, which provides the out-of-hours service in Cork, has done everything to remove its offices from the northside. In 2021, following a very strong public campaign, we got SouthDoc on the northside reopened. However, in the past number of years, services have been reduced. In January, a miracle happened. SouthDoc in Blackpool reopened. The reason was that the tender is due at the end of this month, so it was reopened because SouthDoc wants to get the tender again. The service is not going out to public tender; it is being renewed. I want a guarantee from the Minister that SouthDoc in Blackpool will remain open and will not be shut down next month.

Another out-of-hours service, a private one called NorthDoc, has opened. My wife and daughter had to use it last weekend. They got an appointment within half an hour and they were in and out within 20 minutes after my daughter got what she needed. They were private patients. The service is not open to people with medical cards, who have to wait weeks to get an appointment with a doctor. They have to travel over to the Kinsale Road on the southside if they cannot get an appointment in Blackpool and then they cannot get access to NorthDoc because they are on medical cards.

This is not good enough. People should have a right to attend GP services out of hours. Does the Minister know what else is happening? Some people cannot afford to go over to the southside and have told me they could not afford a taxi. What did they do? They went to the Mercy University Hospital accident and emergency department, which is the one place the HSE do not want people to go because accident and emergency departments are out the door already with overcrowding. This Government's inability to tackle SouthDoc and keep the clinic in Blackpool open is driving more people into accident and emergency departments.

The people of the northside deserve to have an out-of-hours service. People are waiting weeks to see a GP. People with a medical card should not be treated like second-class citizen. Everyone has a right to attend a GP. I ask the Minister for that commitment today.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I commend the Social Democrats on bringing this motion forward. I am very happy to support it.

The shortage of GPs in my constituency of Louth has been long flagged, yet the issues remain. Last year, my party colleague flagged that County Louth was currently facing a critical shortage of general practitioners, with reports indicating that it had the highest number of medical card holders in Ireland waiting to be assigned a doctor. Prior to that, a study by the

Irish College of General Practitioners showed a 2.8% reduction of the number of GPs in Louth. This is at a time when we are seeing huge population increases throughout the county, in Drogheda, Dundalk and Ardee.

Because people cannot access a GP, we have seen several calls in recent months from the management of Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda for the public to avoid emergency departments unless absolutely necessary due to the severe overcrowding and, in some cases, extremely high patient numbers. What a great country we have when we cannot provide timely medical care.

The ratio of GPs to population is estimated at seven per 10,000, which indicates slow progress. As outlined by my colleagues, the number of actively practising GPs is falling year on year. It is estimated that one in four of these doctors is over 60 years of age, which poses a huge problem coming down the tracks. It is just not good enough.

Consistently, in our annual alternative budgets, Sinn Féin has offered costed solutions to all of these issues. The Government's response is to do something, if anything, but not the right thing. To begin to solve this crisis the Government needs to immediately increase the number of GP trainee entrants from 350 to 450 and support the Irish College of General Practitioners to expedite training, where appropriate. We need to increase training places across medical, nursing and allied health and social care professions, lift the recruitment cap for front-line roles and double the recruitment target for 2024 to expand the multidisciplinary, primary and enhanced community care teams. The solutions are there but, unfortunately, the do-nothing approach by successive Governments is having a detrimental impact on people's lives.

Deputy Ann Graves: I thank the Social Democrats for bringing forward this motion, which we fully support. It is an issue we all deal with every single day.

For most people, their GP is the first port of call when they have illness in their family. However, GP practices are struggling to deal with demand. We have situations where people have to plan to be sick before they can get an appointment. The primary healthcare system has to support quality, scheduled and urgent access to clinicians in order that patients and their families can build a trusting relationship with their GPs. However, the policy implemented by the Government has broken down these relationships over the years. We have people who become eligible for medical cards because of their advanced age being removed from their GP practice list because the quota has been reached. Then, at 66 or 67 years of age, they have to look for a new GP to sign up with. They are finding that difficult because all of the GP practices are oversubscribed.

I am dealing with an 85-year-old man from Swords who requires blood tests every two months. The next fasting appointment he can get is in Beaumont Hospital to which he would have to take two buses while fasting. His second option is the Mater Hospital, which would require him to take one bus. While that is more manageable, the hospital has no available appointments. The man in question used to get his blood test done in St. Joseph's Hospital in Raheny but that facility is no longer available. There is a walk-in service in St. Vincent's University Hospital, which again means taking two buses and a Luas, but this is too far for him to travel. We are talking about an 85-year-old man who has a requirement for blood tests. He can avail of a blood test with his GP but he only has a GP card, so it would cost him €40 every time he has one done. He is struggling with the cost of living and he cannot afford to pay this.

We have a population of 41,000 in Swords, of whom 10% are aged over 65 years. There should be a free blood testing service in place for people in Swords. The Government should ensure the new public primary healthcare centre in the town, which will be accessible to people in the wider Fingal East area, will have a free blood test service for people.

Epilepsy Ireland works with over 45,000 people living with epilepsy across the country. It is a common condition, and while some people will need continued access to special care, others can be appropriately managed by primary care closer to home. Epilepsy Ireland is asking the Government to expand the chronic disease management programme to include epilepsy. I fully support that request.

Deputy Mark Ward: I will start with some good news for a change. However, it is good news that is tainted by bureaucracy getting in the way of progress. The Government needs to look at the process for having new GP services take on medical card patients. The bureaucratic red tape within the HSE makes this really difficult. I have had this experience over the last couple of years in trying to help a new GP service in Rowlagh. I have been working with Dr. Kumar and his team from day one to get approval from the HSE to allow the practice to take medical card patients. That process took over 18 months.

11 o'clock

The clinic was able to see private patients since opening but could not take on medical card patients. An 18-month wait to be able to do so is unacceptable. It needs to be looked at as a matter of urgency. I was delighted to see it finally being approved. It will allow the Rowlagh Medical Centre to take on an initial 1,000 medical card patients. It also has capacity for more. At a time when GP services are in short supply, this is wonderful news for the people of north Clondalkin and beyond. The centre opened its doors in 2024. Since then, it has seen over 10,000 patients. It has a walk-in service, which also needs to be looked at. You do not need an appointment to see the GP. You can just walk in. Other GP surgeries in the area do not offer that service. The centre also provides an out-of-hours service. It is open from Monday to Sunday, seven days a week. People have said that other GPs might be a bit put out by this competition but my own GP, who is listening to this debate, is quite happy to see this service because it is taking pressure off them. They are inundated with people seeking to access their services.

As I have said, this is a good news story for the people of north Clondalkin and the surrounding areas but there is also a bad news story. We have been promised a primary care centre in Rowlagh for over 15 years. At the very start, there was an issue with a land transfer between the Department of education and the Department of Health. This saga has been going on for way too long. It is an area of high disadvantage. The Pobal index will tell you that; I do not need to stand up here and say it. The area has been crying out for this centre for a long time. The last response I got from the Minister was very disappointing. It basically said that plans are on hold. We have been waiting for 15 years and the plans are now on hold while the Department looks at the needs of the area. I can tell the Minister of State the needs of the area. I live there. My constituency office is in the heart of the area. I know the people who come to me looking for access to GPs, mental health supports, physiotherapy and all of the other things offered as primary care. We need to see this primary healthcare centre in place as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I move amendment No. 1:

To insert the following after "and investment in analytical capacity":

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further recognises that:

— the inverse care law and unequal access to GPs is giving rise to stark inequalities, delayed diagnosis, poorer health outcomes, and increasing upward pressure on the hospital system;

— recent extensive research by the Labour Party on GP-to-patient ratios has highlighted significant inequalities, and found that there is one GP per 1,390 of population in Clontarf in Dublin 3, yet in Cabra in Dublin 7, the ratio is one GP to 3,060 of population;

— suburban areas of significant population growth are struggling with a lack of GP services, with East Meath having one General Medical Service GP for every 5,090 people, a divergence of 3,331 from the national average; and

— the 2025 Economic and Social Research Institute projections, of national demand and workforce requirements for general practice in Ireland, also show there will be a demand increase of at least 23 per cent by 2040, requiring up to an additional 761 to 868 General Practice Nurses, alongside increased GP numbers; and

therefore, further calls on Government to support the passage into law of the Health (Availability of General Practitioner Services) Bill 2025, to provide for a direct statutory link between the HSE's assessment of the level of need for primary care services in specific areas, and the level of service provided."

I thank Deputy Pádraig Rice and the Social Democrats for bringing forward this really important motion. This issue has been very close to my own heart for a number of years. It is something we have spent a lot of time talking about over recent years. While there has been a little bit of progress with regard to the chronic disease management programme over recent times, the fact remains that the Department of Health does not have a consistent overview of the first point of access to the healthcare system in this country, that is, the GPs. That is wrong. It is an anomaly we see in hardly any other country across the European Union but we see it in Ireland because we have a public system of hospital care and an effectively private system of GP care. The Government has been promising a strategic review of GP care for a number of years now. It was supposed to be published last year but we have yet to see it. Where is it? Will the Government please publish it?

I will move onto a second key thing. At the height of our rushing through of Covid-related legislation, back in 2020, I stood in this Chamber as a Senator when the then Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, legislated for free GP care to be expanded to those under the age of 12. That is still not in place six years on. Billions of euro have been generated for our public finances and yet the Government has not managed to get its act together on this. Expanding access to free GP care is one thing. We in the Labour Party are passionate about it. The then Minister of State, Kathleen Lynch, introduced free GP care over ten years ago. That was the

starting point. At that time, free GP care was provided for those under four or six. If we do not increase the number of GPs on the ground along with expanding universal access to GP care, which is at the core of Sláintecare and which we are passionate about, we will end up replicating the inequalities of our hospital system. People will end up paying to leapfrog the GP system. We need to make sure we have more GPs on the ground.

There have been initiatives on the part of the HSE and the Department of Health such as the arrangement with South African doctors and the increase in the number of GP training places. However, it is incredible that the Department of Health still does not have a clear idea of the unmet need for GPs or a precise picture of where GPs are located across the country. Last year, my office spent six months trying to get information on the number of GPs across every community health network area from the HSE. It was shambolic. Some areas were really on the ball. Other areas did not know. It took six months to put that data together. I am delighted to hear that the Social Democrats are using that data. I am sure anybody with intellectual integrity in the party will credit the source of that data. The key thing is that the Department does not know where the unmet need is and does not have an ongoing overview of where GPs are located across the country. That is wrong. That is why we brought forward that Bill last year and why it is scandalous that the Government is now opposing our amendment, which would ensure that the HSE would take responsibility for at least looking at where GPs are located across the country. We can have all the motions in the world about the need to improve GP services but we will not ensure we have a proper number of GPs in place for the communities I represent in Dublin Central and for communities in Kildare, Limerick, Cork city and elsewhere if we do not change the legislation to ensure the HSE takes direct responsibility.

The reality is that not every community is the same. The Pobal deprivation index states that people in some of the most deprived communities are four and a half times more likely to have poor health outcomes compared with the average community. Part and parcel of that is access to GPs. In the community I represent in the north inner city, there is one GP for every 3,500 people. In Cabra, there is one for every 3,000 people. In other parts of the country, it is not an issue. If you ring up to look for a GP appointment you will get one within a few days. I know of a 50-year-old woman who went to her pharmacist and was told she had shingles. She rang her GP for an emergency appointment and was told she would get one the following week. A man came to me last year who should have presented with very worrying symptoms of prostate but, because he was being given appointments two weeks out, he kept on putting it off because of work and other commitments. He should have been able to pick up the phone, say he had a problem and be seen in a timely manner. This is a real issue in certain communities, although not in every community across the country. The key thing is that, if we have more people on the ground, we can begin to resolve all of the issues we have with regard to our acute hospital system, including the Mater being the GP service for many people in the inner city because they cannot access a GP.

The other key issue I will raise today has regard to the GMS scheme. It is effectively weighted towards women of child-bearing age and the older population. The national average life expectancy is about 82 but, in one GP practice in my constituency, Summerhill Family Practice, part of the GP Care For All network, it is just under 60. That speaks volumes about what is happening on the ground.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I thank the Social Democrats and Deputy Rice for bringing this motion forward. I will primarily focus on one aspect of the motion. The motion calls on the Government to "expand the ... [chronic disease management programme] to include severe and enduring mental health difficulties, epilepsy and other conditions as appropriate, in consultation with GPs delivering the service". I am an epileptic. That is something I have learned to live with but that would not have been possible without the support of my consultant, the epilepsy nurses in CUH and, very importantly, my own GP. Early last year, I attended and spoke at an event in UCC organised by Epilepsy Ireland. There was a section titled "Is it time for Epilepsy to be added to the Chronic Disease Management Programme?" I played a very minor part in the event. There were healthcare professionals, advocacy groups and people living with epilepsy there. The resounding answer to that overall question was "Yes".

Epilepsy is an incredibly common condition. While some people need access to special care, others do not. However, it is still important that we have continued access to health services. A study conducted by University College Cork and Epilepsy Ireland investigating the relationship between people with epilepsy and their GPs found that GPs and people with epilepsy described a limited role for GPs in epilepsy care. There were varying levels of engagement from people with epilepsy with their GPs and *vice versa*. Limited knowledge of epilepsy was cited as a challenge for GPs working in family practices.

It is a strongly held belief that if epilepsy were to be added to the CDMP, it would help improve these attitudes by encouraging GPs to upskill their knowledge of epilepsy and, ultimately, this would help to relieve pressure on already stretched specialist epilepsy services, leading to better health outcomes for people with epilepsy.

Deputy Mark Wall: I welcome the Minister of State to the House today. I thank the Social Democrats for raising this very important motion. The average GP to patient ratio in south Kildare - the area I represent - is 1: 3,163, the fourth highest in the country. Not a week goes by that I do not get somebody in my office asking for a GP. A lot of this has to do with people who have come from Dublin and other parts of the country and who cannot find a local GP. One of the biggest problems is that, in the main, many of those people retain their GP in Dublin and when an event arises and they have to bring a sick child or even present themselves, they travel 60 km to Dublin to visit their GP because the GP quota in Athy, Kildare town, Monasterevin and Newbridge is already full. It is simply not good enough. The Minister of State can imagine putting a child into a car to visit a GP. As a result, in the main people are now going to the outpatients department in Naas and Portlaoise hospitals, which is causing more congestion in those hospitals.

I want to raise the out-of-hours service with the Minister of State today. I have been consistent in calling for the KDOC service to not alone have an outlet in Naas, as it does, but also to have an outlet in south Kildare. There is no doubt we have an absolutely fantastic primary care centre in Athy. We are very proud of it. There are lots of services there, but at the moment KDOC does not administer services through the centre in Athy. We have been told it will be an on-demand service. That is simply not good enough. I ask the Minister of State to go back to the HSE and the Department once again to ask for an extension of the KDOC service, as I have called for in this House before, to the town of Athy. GP services are so important for the social infrastructure of this country, particularly in Kildare South.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Early access to primary medical care GP services is a fundamental basis for a good quality, safe and effective health service. GPs play a very important role in looking after patient care, ensuring early intervention and providing care in the community. I compliment the excellent service provided by GPs, practice nurses, therapy staff and administrative staff in GP practices right across the country. GP services are under severe pressure. Many GPs are overworked, burnt out and increasingly find it difficult to take annual leave. The service needs support and it needs reform.

The Economic and Social Research Institute suggests that 1,200 new GPs will be required by 2040. The Irish College of General Practitioners put that figure much higher, at 2,000, due to an ageing population and population growth. The World Health Organization recommends a ratio of one GP to 1,000. The ratio in this country is almost double that, at 1:1,750. In some areas, as has already been said, it goes as high as 1:3,500.

Rural areas and areas of deprivation are worst served. A third of the population of the country live in rural areas but only 10% of GPs work in those areas. A substantial number of GPs are now heading for retirement. There are something like 600 over 65, with half of those - 300- aged over 70. As a result of all that, as was recently shown in a report, it is difficult for new patients to be registered. Two thirds of practices in rural Ireland are not accepting new patients and, generally speaking, it is about half. I see that almost every day in my constituency office where people are coming in saying they cannot get registered with a GP. Increasingly also, patients are finding that it takes a week or more to get a consultation. The situation needs to be tackled.

Anything up to 200 additional GP training places must be provided through an expansion of the current scheme in hospitals, training in GP surgeries and on GP training schemes. That will not solve the problem. In particular in rural and deprived areas we need GPs to be directly employed by the State through the Health Service Executive. That service should be rolled out initially in rural areas, where it is almost impossible to get replacement GPs. We have regularly seen in south Tipperary that when a single-handed GP retires, the vacancy is almost impossible to fill. In one case I recall it took over 18 months to fill a vacancy. The roll-out of that type of direct GP service must increasingly focus on areas that are underserved, such as deprived areas. Many GPs are now finding it difficult to take annual leave and that is something that needs to be tackled as well. A national locum panel should be established to address the situation.

All health services should be provided free of charge at the point of use based on medical need. A two-tier system does not serve the public well. As a start to that process, free GP services, at least for all those under 18, should be introduced immediately by the Government.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome these timely proposals from the Social Democrats. We must accept that the bedrock of any health system is having good primary care in place, and to have good primary care we need GPs. The ratio of GPs in this country is completely out of kilter with what it should be. The World Health Organization says there should be one GP per 1,000 of population. In County Laois, we have one GP per 1,700 population. More than 60 GPs are practising at any one time. In south Laois, the ratio is 1 per 2,300. The population in the county continues to rise. The impact of that is obvious. While existing GPs do good work, access is problematic, people are not getting a timely diagnosis and in some cases people do

not get the treatment they need. When patients develop more complex medical problems they then have to go to hospital.

Cost can be a barrier for some as a large number of working class and low-income households do not have a medical card and may not be able to afford it. Some practices cannot accept new clients. When the booklet on entitlements came out after the budget it showed that the income threshold for a medical card is €186. If a single person is on more than €186, he or she cannot have a medical card. This is 2026. We have had the same figure for more than two decades. I cannot understand why it has not changed.

We have a reliance on GPs who operate private businesses. That is fine. Most of them are doing very good work. In fact, they are overworked. We are the odd one out in the European Union because we do not have salaried GPs working in primary care community centres owned by the Health Service Executive like they have in other countries. Most young newly qualified GPs do not want to set up a GP practice because they need a premises, staff, insurance, administration, utilities, etc., and then they face working an 80-hour working week for life. That is the situation that we have. They want to work in a nine-to-five job like everybody else.

The Sláintecare plan was agreed by all parties nine years ago. Central to this was the provision within five years of free universal primary care at the point of delivery. Everyone was agreed on that, but we are moving towards it at a glacial pace. A range of services should be provided at primary care level.

That should be expanded to include occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech and language therapy, mental health services, diagnostics and so on.

What is needed now? It is nine years since we agreed Sláintecare. We need a determined effort by the Government and the HSE - I think everybody in this House would support it - to increase the number of training places for GPs, to expand those numbers and the facilities. In addition to private practices, which we accept and which are doing good work, we need directly employed GPs. Some Ministers have talked about this in the past but then it dies away and is buried. Salaried GPs need to be employed and a scheme needs to be established. I appeal to the Minister of State to try to take a lead on this as a Minister of State in the Department of Health, to work alongside others and to have GPs in primary care centres and in the local HSE health centres, similar to the rest of the European Union.

We need to set a target date for the full implementation of free universal primary care. We all know from our own work that if we do not set a target, we will not get there. We should set a target to do that. I know it will be challenging. We cannot wait and we have to start sometime. In the short term, we should expand free GP care to all workers on or below the median wage. This is really a problem, in that people who are working hard tell me that when their children get sick, they go to the doctor but that when they or their wives get sick, they cannot afford to go. That is not acceptable. Younger children, because of free GP care, can go. The fact that we do not do that means people are winding up in hospital with chronic illnesses.

We need proper premises. I am going to say this to the Minister of State as a Graiguecullen person. We need a new or vastly expanded health centre in Graiguecullen. We need the same in Rathdowney and Mountrath. A new primary care centre needs to be built in Portlaoise. If we improve primary care, it will bring not just a healthier population but it will lessen the burden on the acute services because, as has been said by others, people wind up there. I know

that from staff working in the accident and emergency department in Portlaoise. We have to stop the problem. It is like we are mopping the floor and the pipe is still leaking. We can deal with this at community level. This would reduce the demand on nursing home places. We would have a more efficient health system.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I am aware that GP training places have increased over the years but, as my colleagues said in the House, it has not matched the population increase. I come from a constituency that has a huge deficit of GP services, especially in rapidly growing strategic development zones, SDZs, areas like Adamstown and Clonburris, and in rapidly growing areas like Citywest and Saggart. While GPs historically have been self-motivated private operators, they have not got the assistance for the modern age. I am talking about buildings they can actually move into. Historically, the GP was in a house. They lived in the house with their family, and had a separate area where they built up their practice. If they had to move out later on, they were able to do that. There are no supports in SDZs in terms of finding affordable premises. Those sorts of supports need to be provided. Equally, there are GPs who want to work within the health service and have regular hours, even if that is weekend rosters and shifts.

We need to focus on employing more GPs directly. A lot of GPs are emigrating. That is a serious issue in terms of the money spent on them and getting a return. It is also a huge brain drain. We are bringing in well-qualified imports. While we would not have a service without a lot of foreign doctors, it does not make sense to be shipping out Irish people. In that context, we need to look at improving the working conditions, providing incentives in terms of training and trying to address housing. As I have mentioned in regard to gardaí and nurses, there should be some sort of short-term gap where people can live in the area where they are trying to set up a practice as part of a shared scheme with others. Otherwise it is going to be financially unsustainable. We also need proper career pathways which they have in places like Australia and New Zealand. We do not seem to have that in Ireland. We need to look at an awful lot of the administrative paperwork as well.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This is a well-meaning motion and universality sounds great but I have problems with it. It often redirects funds from low-income families to rich families. Approximately 629,000 people are in poverty in this country. While those individuals are in poverty, I do not think we should be using taxpayers' money to pay for Michael O'Leary's children's healthcare. A woman came into my office recently with a low income. She is waiting months for an operation on her neck. She is losing the function of her hand and her leg. If she does not get this operation soon, she will have to go into care, which is an incredible situation. The funds that we have in this country should be focused on people on low- and middle-incomes.

One of the reasons universality is often popular is that there is a welfare cliff and a support cliff in this country. Where we do offer supports, often the threshold is far too low, and therefore middle-income families who are struggling often fall off that cliff very quickly. If we were to do anything in terms of these funds, it is to focus on low- and middle-income earners and to raise those thresholds in terms of free access to GP services, so that there is not, in a practical sense, anybody who is not accessing healthcare because of an economic reason.

The other point in this is that we are in a slow-motion car crash in terms of what is happening to GP access in this country. A total of 70% of GPs cannot take any more people onto their lists. People come into my office on a regular basis who tell me that they cannot get a doctor's appointment. I know of an individual who called a doctor at 10 a.m. By 3 p.m., he decided to go into accident and emergency. He got treated and came home. The doctor called him and said he could deal with him in ten days' time. I know of another person who spoke to 18 doctors and could not get on their lists on the day they were sick. If you increase universality in terms of access of doctors and GPs at the moment, it will reduce access to GPs currently in this system. There is no doubt about it. If you look at the figures, when GP consultations for children under six were increased, there was a 28% increase in first-year use of that system. The ESRI estimates that free GP care would lead to an additional 2.3 million GP visits annually - a 12% increase. When you do not have an increase in supply in the system, that is going to create major problems.

There are two problems in terms of doctors. A total of 442 doctors were issued with temporary work visas in 2022. Doctors are voting with their feet and leaving this country. This is a fact that nobody is talking about other than Aontú. Some 51% of students in medical schools in this country are from outside Ireland and the EU. They are training here and are likely to return to their home country to practise. We need to make sure that we provide extra GP places but also for people who are likely to work in this jurisdiction.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I think we all have to admit that we stumble from disaster to disaster in this House. We had the SNA disaster last night. We have the disaster of housing with 17,000 people who are homeless in this country. Now we are talking about the disaster of GP care. There are seven GPs per 10,000 people in this country. There is a falling rate of GPs, with GPs retiring. A total of 70% of GPs cannot take on additional clients. Our population is out of control because we are ten years ahead of where we thought we would be. We have not predicted that. We are now in a situation where most of our medical students, from doctors to nurses, are leaving this country because there is nothing there for them. They cannot afford to buy a house. They do not want to be in business in this country, and rightly so. People who study medicine want to be carers for people; they do not want to be in business. We have forced GPs into that business mindset. Now we have this disaster ahead of us. Our successful Irish people in the medical profession are mainly working in the United Arab Emirates if we look at it closely. We are producing medical students but they are leaving our shores because there is nothing here for them.

I want to highlight something in Cork North-Central in my constituency, and that is SouthDoc. SouthDoc has been closed from 2021 to 2026. It opened in January in order for its licence to be renewed, which is an internal renewal. If you want to go to SouthDoc on the north side of the city, you cannot get an appointment there. They do not answer the phone or will tell you the GP is out on call, so there is no point in turning up. They tell you to go to the south side of the city. Many of the constituents I represent cannot afford a taxi to go to the south side of the city for SouthDoc. That is the reality of life in this country, and certainly the reality in my constituency.

Thankfully, somebody called Colin Tobin in Gurrabraher opened NorthDoc, a private practice that is facilitating people throughout the north side. He does not take medical card patients as of yet. I believe there may an application to the Department. I would hope to see

that application being rushed through and being accepted so that it will be able to take medical card patients.

The reality is that it is a disaster. I welcome the motion from my colleagues.

I do not see it being passed or implemented. I cannot see it being implemented because the reality is we are not at the races when it comes to GP care in this country. We are way behind everywhere else in Europe. We need to move to the European model.

Deputy Michael Collins: Our GP system is at breaking point. Every community in the country feels that. People cannot get appointments. Many cannot afford to see a doctor when they are sick. We need more GP training places, fairer supports for struggling practices and real action to keep doctors in local communities. If we want to fix healthcare, this is where we should start.

I will highlight a very serious issue affecting newly qualified paramedics. For years, when paramedics completed their training with the National Ambulance Service, they moved straight into permanent positions. That is how it worked for every class before this one but, without warning, the practice has been changed. Graduating paramedics are now being kept on 16-week contracts, with no information about a permanent post or recruitment process. These are people who have worked for years on temporary contracts serving the public and believed they would have job security when they qualified. This sudden change is causing huge stress. West Cork alone stands to lose six front-line staff. I ask that this unfair situation be raised with the highest Minister in the land and resolved urgently.

While we are talking about health, we have a major health crisis, whether it is in mental health or ordinary physical health. I spoke last week about Perrott House in Skibbereen but I have received no reply yet from the Taoiseach. He said he would be back to me. Hopefully, that will happen. Perrott House is down to two patients. I was told I was scaremongering when I raised the same issue last year. It had 13 patients only a few years ago, but it is being closed by stealth. The HSE is trying to do it behind the scenes. I do not know what kind of sneaky carry-on it is.

It the same with the ambulance service. I raised that, and the SouthDoc service in west Cork over Christmas. The ambulance service is bypassing Bantry hospital on a regular basis because it is full. We now have a crisis situation. People are going up to Cork University Hospital, CUH. I do not want to blame any of the management at CUH or Bantry General Hospital because management and staff are breaking their butts. I saw it with my own eyes last Monday in CUH. There is a chronic situation there with patients flying in from every direction. The bottom line is patients should be looked after as much as we can and as good as we can locally. If people from Castletownbere, Mizen Head and Sheep's Head, and from Kinsale and Clonakilty, are all tearing up into CUH, we have a problem and a bottleneck. Most of them are being kept in an ambulance. When I raised that, and the SouthDoc service being closed over Christmas, all I got from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael politicians was that I was scaremongering. I was telling the truth. I am not a fool. We know what is going on and it is not being publicised. Bantry hospital has been closed to the public on numerous occasions. It is not good enough.

Deputy Gillian Toole: As a proud member of a primary care team for 36 years, I greatly value the relationship among the primary care community of GPs, practice nurses, administration teams, OT, gerontology teams, etc. I am wary though of an increase in access at this point in time. The investment recently is most welcome. The additional places for GP training are absolutely most welcome, but if we refer back to Sláintecare and the tenets of that, there is more than just the GP piece. We have already seen a commencement and advancement in the community pharmacy agreement. Health promotion is another area, encouraging wellness and well-being, and a co-creation where we move from "I am sick. You fix me" to "I am not feeling well. Give me the tools to empower me to heal myself". A lot more work can be done in that space. That has to be explored.

I worked through previously when the different age cohorts received free access, and witnessed first hand the absolute pressure that was put on GP practices and their front-line staff in trying to juggle. Coming from a commuter area such as County Meath, particularly where four GPs are retiring this year in an area with an approximate population of 28,000, I can see that pressure mounting as it is. It highlights the importance of encouraging wellness, and more investment and participation, in tandem with investment in the general practice area and in the community pharmacy agreement space.

I pay tribute to those four GPs: Dr. Ursula Keane of Meadowbank in Ratoath; Dr. Paddy Tierney in Dunshaughlin; Dr. Marina Bruton; and Dr. Tom Feighery. Combined, they have approximately over 100 years, at least, of general practice service to the community of south-east Meath. In light of that, and the shortage that will be in their practices and in the towns of Dunboyne, Dunshaughlin and Ratoath, those other areas I referred to - well-being, health promotion and the community pharmacy agreement - are where we will pick up the slack, although that is probably an inappropriate word to use. That is where front-line care, accessibility, and an open door 54 hours a week, on average, for nine hours a day six days a week, augmented by North East Doctor on Call, is the gateway to primary care. In conjunction with general practice investment going forward, that is where universality will be achieved and delivered.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: From listening to speakers across this House, there is clearly huge pressure on our national GP system. I acknowledge the extent of the work by Deputy Toole during the formation of the Government. The knowledge she has from her first-hand experience in healthcare is something we need to listen to. Whether it is our SNAs, teachers or any sector, the workers and the people who are on the ground know what is best. Too often, we see they are not being listened to. The clear solutions Deputy Toole has constantly raised in this House are admirable. I can definitely learn more and more. I am an engineer and do not know much about healthcare but she does.

On the system, time and time again, we need to listen to those who are on the ground. I am constantly raising the issue of access to GP care in north Dublin for my constituents, who are not getting in the door as quickly as they would like. Patients are waiting way too long for appointments. I welcome the Department of Health's announcement yesterday of €26 million for north Dublin. We see accident and emergency at Beaumont Hospital finally progressing. I raised that with the Minister recently. It went to design phase in 2025-26 but it needs to go to tender and to market as soon as possible. People who cannot get their GPs are then forced to wait 14 hours in accident and emergency. It is really holding people back. I raised the recent

case of Patricia Anderson, who I visited. Her husband went to accident and emergency, was there for 14 hours and, after that, was deterred from going back there. He was looking for a GP and was going into the system but, sadly, he has now passed away. The deterrent for him was the fact the wait in Beaumont's accident and emergency was too long. The announcement yesterday is welcome but we need to make it a reality, deliver it, get in there and do, with a Covid-level response, what the Government has done in the past.

People in this House mentioned the ambulance service. I brought some of the members of the Marino branch of the Order of Malta into the Gallery on the previous occasion. They are hard-working men and women volunteering their time, and there is also the National Ambulance Service, who bring an emergency patient to accident and emergency. Until that patient is brought through the systems of the hospital, the ambulance team is waiting there and the ambulance is lying idle. In other countries, they have adopted a system where, while that team is admitting a patient, the ambulance can be used to go to another emergency. I would love that to be looked at.

Early access to GPs prevents hospital admissions, as I mentioned, and reduces the pressure on accident and emergency departments, such as at Beaumont, but the continuity of care and personal touch of a GP improves the outcome for those with chronic illnesses. We are not opposing, and I welcome, the increase in GP training places and retention measures, but these incentives for practices are underserving a fast-growing industry. The expansion of access to general practitioners is one of the most effective reforms we can deliver as a Government. I urge the Government to, as I said, have a Covid-level response and bring this in now because the people of north Dublin and Ireland as a whole need this now.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Social Democrats for this very worthwhile motion. I also thank the Government for the large amount of funding that was provided for services in Kerry, including an ambulance depot for Cahersiveen, which is much needed. People there struggled in the past to get an ambulance. University Hospital Kerry received quite a lot of money to increase beds and services there. I very much welcome a minor injury unit for Killarney, where the population sometimes doubles and trebles in the summertime. The mind boggles at the amount of money for its design - over €800,000. What will it cost before it is finished? Nevertheless, we want to get it finished and we need it very badly.

The story about GPs in Kerry is no different from that across the rest of the country. Killarney's population has increased and it is desperately hard for new families and others who come to the area to find a doctor to care for them. We need more doctors there.

In rural areas, it is not possible to have GPs in the way we used to. They are not provided with enough funding to operate surgeries of their own, to have secretaries of their own or to have their own people running their practices. It is just not happening. The only chance that doctors get is to join an existing group of doctors, and that only happens in the very big urban areas, which means rural areas are left without a GP, especially at night-time.

SouthDoc does great work, but Kerry is a massive area. Faraway places like Lauragh and Eskadawer, which is west of Lauragh and only a mile from Ardgroom, are 50 miles from Killarney. Invariably, people there cannot get a GP or a SouthDoc doctor cannot get to them, so all they can do is ring for an ambulance to be taken all the way to University Hospital Kerry, which is in Tralee. We need to see what can be done to bring the GPs nearer to the people,

because people, including children, get sick at night. I remember on a Friday being told the story that my granddaughter had stopped breathing. The family failed to get a GP and an ambulance landed an hour and a half later. It was very worrying. The child is all right and grand now. It is very worrying for a first-time parent to see this happening and to have to wait for so long. These are the kinds of things we must avoid.

If vulnerable people, especially the elderly, are so far from a doctor when something goes wrong, the only option I see for them is to be taken to the university hospital in Tralee. They may not need that. I am pleading with the Government to look into this because in the bad times when the country had very little, Kilgarvan had a doctor's surgery. The doctor lived there. It was the same all over, including in Kenmare, Sneem, Lauragh and other such rural places. The GPs worked all hours, day and night, and did great work. We need them back again. The country had nothing at the time but it had doctors.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank our colleagues in the Social Democrats for raising the matter of expanding access to general practitioners. The Government acknowledges that there are issues regarding access to GP services in some areas, including certain rural and underserved areas. GP availability is limited and GMS GP vacancies have been difficult to fill. Others have spoken about this today.

To improve access to GP services, we need to increase the number of GPs practising across the country, improve the support provided to GP practices and incentivise more GPs to practise in areas where service provision is most challenging. There are challenges and we acknowledge that today. We are aware that there is huge pressure on general practices. Our population is ageing and growing. In recent years, we have expanded free GP care and introduced new services, such as the chronic disease management programme. All this increases demand on general practice and we need to increase our GP workforce to ensure we can meet the need for GP care in the future.

It is important to note that the Government's expansion of eligibility for free GP care means 190,000 more people have access to the service today than before the expansion to six- and seven-year-olds and those earning no more than a medium income. We believe many more are eligible and can apply. We have run a publicity campaign to encourage them and we are looking at other ways to improve uptake. However, the number availing of free GP care is increasing.

In line with this and as set out in Sláintecare, we need to expand our GP capacity to facilitate the additional demand on GPs and their teams. It is important to compliment them. We all know how hard they work. We need to consider this area and the demand the expansion of eligibility is creating. The Government has made significant efforts to increase capacity in general practice to improve patient access and has undertaken measures that address most of the points raised in the motion today.

Investment in general practice has been significantly increased since 2019. This investment has provided for increased payments to GPs, new supports for practices and new services for GMS patients. Other GP services, such as the free contraception scheme, have also been established for patients regardless of GMS eligibility.

The number of new entrants to GP training places is to increase to 400 from this year. This is almost double the number of new places available in 2019. The total number in training to

become GPs has increased by more than 60% over the same period and will continue to increase over the coming years. Despite the increase, however, there are challenges.

Trained GPs are also being recruited from abroad under a joint HSE and Irish College of General Practitioners international recruitment programme. The recruited GPs are placed in practices in rural areas and work in general practice while completing the programme, providing an immediate increase in service provision for those in that area.

Under the GMS scheme, supports for practice staff have been significantly improved. Practice staff subsidies have increased and new supports for additional staff were provided under the 2023 GP agreement. Supports for eligible rural practices were increased and new supports were introduced for practices in urban areas of social deprivation. Supports are also provided for maternity leave and locum sourcing.

A strategic review of general practice is due to be completed soon. The review is examining a wide range of issues affecting general practice, focusing on five important themes. We hope to have it quite soon. The five important themes are GP training, GP capacity, ehealth, out-of-hours reform, and the support model for general practice. The issues being examined reflect many of those raised in this motion. We can see the challenges. I totally understand what the Deputies have spoken about today and can see where their concerns are.

We are examining the potential provision of HSE-employed GPs, as raised in the motion. When completed, the review will report on its findings and set out recommendations to provide for a more sustainable general practice. The findings of the review will help to determine what is needed from our next GP contract, to the benefit of both GPs and patients.

Progress has also been made in other areas referred to in the motion, including in respect of primary care centres, which are essential to expanding healthcare provision in our communities. They are really important. We are looking at them all around the country. They are purpose-designed buildings that provide a single location for primary care services, including GP services. There are 180 centres open nationally, with 51 new centres having opened since 2020. The Government has committed to speeding up the delivery of more primary care centres. Many TDs spoke about primary care centres and the excellent work they do. Seven centres are currently under construction and 23 more are at planning stage. Therefore, there are many more to come.

Funding has been provided to expand the GP chronic disease management programme to include additional conditions, including chronic kidney disease. Work is currently ongoing to provide for this expansion. However, further expansions of the programme would require careful clinical consideration and consultation with GPs and stakeholders to ensure any expansion can be rolled out effectively. This involves all of us working together.

Work is also under way to develop a comprehensive women's health programme in general practice in line with what is in the programme for Government. That is our commitment.

With regard to general practice nurses, while practice nurses are employed directly by GPs and are not employed by the HSE, the HSE, as mentioned, does provide significant financial support towards their employment. The HSE also supports general practice nurses with continuing professional development by providing access to its online training platform,

HSeLanD; centres for nursing and midwifery education; and library services. There is therefore a lot of other work being done as well.

While 160 postgraduate education places are available in the student public health nursing programme, these places are filled based on the number of public health nurse vacancies and predicted vacancies that exist each year, and to date there has been no need to increase the number of places available on this basis. However, the higher education institutes concerned have agreed to increase the number of training places in 2026 if there is an increase in demand.

To speak to some of the other matters referred to in the motion, with regard to universal primary and GP care, the Department of Health is reviewing the current eligibility framework to see how existing eligibility arrangements for health services align with patients' needs. The outputs of this work will feed into a broader multi-annual strategic review programme which will contribute to the development of evidence-based policy options for a future eligibility framework to support the move towards universal health coverage.

The common conditions service, CCS, developed to enable community pharmacists in Ireland to provide advice and treat eight common conditions, is a private service delivered in person in registered pharmacies. The CCS is accessible to all patients regardless of GMS eligibility. As the CCS is a private service rather than a State-funded service, a consultation fee determined by the individual pharmacy does apply.

In relation to the amendment tabled by Deputy Sherlock, I recall the remarks made by the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, earlier in this debate. We are, of course, committed to the equitable provision of health services across the State. That commitment extends to all health services. For the reasons set out by the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, the Government will oppose Deputy Sherlock's amendment.

The Government has undertaken measures that already address many of the issues referred to in the motion. Accordingly, the motion is not opposed. I thank all my colleagues again for raising for discussion the important issue of access to GP care. Around the country we see the valuable work of our GPs and their teams. Within our own clinics we see the challenges, but with the review and all of us working together I am sure we will get as much done as possible, and as soon as possible, to address this.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I thank my colleague Deputy Rice for bringing this motion forward. It is a really important motion and is core to the Social Democrats. Why we are here and what we are about is ensuring that people have access to universal public healthcare as a human right and as a public service, regardless of where they are from and regardless of their income, that they have access to that most basic and fundamental need. Is ceart daonna í an tsláinte. Ba chóir go mbeadh rochtain ar sheirbhísí ardchaighdeán phoiblí, an tsláinte san áireamh, ag gach duine. Caithfidh an iomarca daoine íoc go príobháideach as cóireáil, áfach.

Unfortunately, too many people have to pay to access healthcare in this country. In my constituency, in areas like Ballymun and Finglas, which are some of the most deprived areas in the country, they do not have access to GP care, in particular in the area of Finglas west and south, which, as I said, has some of the highest levels of deprivation and poverty in this State, with a population of upwards of 20,000 and not one GP. GP Care For All has been trying to set up there. We are still waiting on support from the HSE and the Minister on that, and I hope

the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, will come back on that. In other parts of the constituency, in Whitehall and Beaumont, we have an ageing population with complex care needs and, again, inadequate access to GP care. The workload for GPs is higher in disadvantaged communities, with patients presenting with more complex needs and developing chronic diseases much younger, yet our public health system does not reflect that. We need the changes put forward today in that regard.

In 2019, the then Minister for Health, Simon Harris, committed to extend free GP care to children under 12. "We are extending free GP care to children under 12 years but on a phased and careful basis," he said. That was seven years ago. There is still no sign of it. Most people's understanding of a phased introduction is a year or two, not seven years. Contrast that with the way in which Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have rammed through billions in VAT cuts to developers overnight. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael do not wait around to remove rent controls, which will push thousands of renters into poverty, but when it comes to delivering public healthcare that would give real help to working families, they delay year after year.

I will give a sense of that cost of GP care for families. I have a six-, a ten- and a 12-year-old. Before Christmas, my ten-year-old son had bad asthma. We had to go to the doctor a few times. My 12-year-old got a virus around the same time. Between doctors' visits, prescriptions, the multiple bottles of Calpol and Nurofen that parents know well, it cost me upwards of €350 within two weeks. Most families cannot afford that. We need genuine public, affordable healthcare.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: When the former joint leader of my party Róisín Shortall founded the cross-party initiative that resulted in the Sláintecare report, there was a real sense that the ambition that people hope for but rarely see in the political system, a real effort to deliver a transformative change in healthcare, would be founded on enhanced State capacity and international best practice. While delivering such change might involve shifting timelines, one thing we should never shift is that ambition, which is why the Government's approach to implementing Sláintecare has been so disappointing. There is no sense of ambition in this Government in any area as it continues to rely on models which prioritise eligibility rather than rights and which fail to deliver the change needed in our healthcare system. The plans to introduce free universal GP care seem to have disappeared. This is in spite of it being identified as a core target within five years of the Sláintecare implementation phase. That means we should have had free universal GP care for every person in this country by 2022, four years ago. It is now 2026, and it is not even in the programme for Government. This means that we remain total outliers in a European context, where GP visits are mostly free or cost less than €10.

A local GP noted to me this week that the current GP contract was developed in 1972. Since then, while remuneration rates for GP services have adjusted, the terms of service have not, with some areas of care - for example, antenatal care - being deprioritised financially versus others. We need an updated contract that aligns with modern clinical best practice. It is important to acknowledge that we train many more GPs than we did previously, and I welcome the work done in workforce planning. A publicly driven system would also allow for the development of a national locum bank, which would improve working conditions for GPs, ensuring they can take their leave entitlements, including long-term sick leave. The current

environment, in which GPs deliver services through small isolated organisations, means the loss of a GP, even temporarily, can have huge effects on the delivery of care locally.

I thank my colleague Deputy Pádraig Rice for bringing this motion to the House. I urge the Government to support it.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I thank Deputies from across the House for their support for the motion. GP services need more than a quick fix; they need an overhaul. This morning's debate makes that clear. I also thank those we engaged with on this motion: Deep End Ireland, the IMO, the Irish General Practice Nurses Educational Association and Doctors for Universal Healthcare, all of whom we met to discuss these proposals. I also thank the Rural, Island and Dispensing Doctors and the Irish College of GPs, whose research has informed the plan we put before the Dáil today. I also thank my own staff, Jake and Juliet, and the staff in the Social Democrats for their support.

I want to respond to some of the comments made by the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell. He said the Government will not oppose this motion. That is welcome, but will the Government do it? Will it implement the 20 points we have set out in detail, and will it do so straight away? What we have in the Government, in particular from Fine Gael, is failed commitment after failed commitment. Fine Gael has now been in government for 15 years. That is almost my entire adult life. Back in 2016 it promised to roll out free GP care for children. We still do not have that and we are still left waiting. I therefore do not trust that the Government will do this, despite not opposing this motion. I urge the Government to get on with this and roll it out, fulfil the new programme for Government commitment for under-12s immediately and then set out a plan for universal healthcare for everybody by 2030.

Sláintecare was mentioned, but the Government is not implementing it. The report was published nine years ago. We were meant to have free GP care by year five. Trust is broken, and it is up to the Government now to restore that, to get back on track and to deliver Sláintecare for the people.

12 o'clock

The deprivation grant was mentioned. We are calling for something different. It is not a one-off grant. We are calling for a change in the system, a weighted capitation, because we know the current system is not working. The new concentrated grant is not even being provided to some of the core GP services like GP Care For All, which did not receive the grant in the latest round. While the chronic disease management programme expansion is welcome, it needs to go further. We would like to see epilepsy included there. We would like to see severe and enduring mental health difficulties included. It needs to go further and faster. The Minister of State fails to recognise the real crisis in GP services. People are waiting weeks to get access to services and paying huge amounts out of pocket. There is constant mention of the GP review. That is now seven years old. We are waiting seven years for that and still the Minister of State comes in today and says we will get the review soon. Why does everything this Government does take so long?

The common conditions services provided by pharmacists was also mentioned. The Minister of State said that is accessible to everybody. That is clearly not the case. You have to pay €30 or €35 to access that service even if you have a medical card. The most basic thing

the Minister of State could do is remove that charge to make it free for everybody because at the moment not even medical card patients can access that new service. That ultimately needs to change. There is also mention of the primary care centres. Roll out of primary care centres has been so slow with just six due to open this year. The C and AG estimates it will take another 13 years to deliver the primary care centres listed for delivery in 2012. That is a shocking rate of delivery and it really needs to speed up.

I also address some comments made by Deputy Tóibín from Aontú, which seems to be the first party in the Dáil to depart from Sláintecare. That is notable. He should also read the report from the Department of Health, which says that while uptake increases when you provide free GP care that will level off. I also wonder whether Deputy Tóibín is happy for half the population to continue paying huge sums of money out of pocket just to see a GP. It is up to €100 to see a GP. I wonder if the Aontú leader is happy with that. I ask him if he is on the side of the private insurance companies as opposed to ordinary people. What we have heard in this debate and from people across the country is that they want better access to GP services. They want the Minister of State to remove the cost barrier. They want her to make it free as promised, starting this year with under 12s and for the entire population by 2030. They do not want to wait weeks to access a service. We should increase capacity and the number of GPs. We have set out a detailed plan on how the Government can do that, and we urge it to implement this plan in full starting today.

Amendment put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is deferred until the weekly division time this evening.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: In just four days the Government's rent hike Bill comes into effect. Its legislation allows landlords to hike up rents to the market rate and renters will be hit with massive rent increases, the likes of which we have never seen before. We know that corporate landlords and vulture funds are rubbing their hands in glee, popping champagne corks at the thought of the huge profits they stand to make as a direct result of your legislation. They are not even hiding it. It is in black and white. In a presentation to its investors by I-RES REIT, the largest corporate landlord in the country with thousands of properties, it sets out what it can now do as a result of the Government's new rent hike Bill. It has told investors it will be able to increase new rents by a staggering 25%. It is predicting a 25% potential rental income uplift "with minimal added costs". That is a direct quote, Taoiseach. This paints a frightening picture of the size of the rent increases coming down the tracks due to the Government's decisions. The property funds are set for a bonanza. This company is telling its investors that it stands to make an extra €21 million in rents every year once the Government legislation flows through. Just imagine what that means for renters faced with a 25% hike in rent. What would this mean for somebody paying the average rent? It means having to find more than €5,000 extra per year. That is just to cover this increase. Does the Taoiseach know any renter able to afford that kind of increase on their already extortionate rent because I certainly do not? Two weeks ago, I warned that his legislation would give a big pay day to corporate landlords

and the Taoiseach said that I was wrong. He said that this was all about providing stability for renters. How in the name of God is allowing renters to be hit with a 25% increase providing them with stability? Of course, the Government's legislation was never about stability for renters. It was always about feathering the nests of the big property funds and now the Taoiseach has been found out. Now we see the proof straight from the horse's mouth. The biggest corporate landlord in Ireland is saying out loud the very thing the Taoiseach denied. It will make a fortune from his legislation all on the backs of renters. This is a recipe for disaster in the lives of workers, families and our young people. He is doing it with his eyes wide open with all the proof of who will benefit on the table for all of us to see. Ní fhéadfadh leis an tiarna talún is mó sa tír a bheith níos soiléire, gur féidir leo cíos a ardú 25% mar thoradh ar reachtaíocht an Rialtais. Caithfear stop a chur leis na harduithe ollmhóra seo.

Does the Taoiseach accept what the largest landlord in the country is saying? It will be able to hike new rents by 25% as a result of the Government legislation, an increase that will be a breaking point for so many. This is what the rent hike Bill is facilitating. He simply cannot allow this to happen. Will he now intervene to stop renters being crushed by these massive increases?

The Taoiseach: All those renters in existing tenancies will have their rents increased by 2%, not 25%. Existing tenancies will not be impacted negatively as a result of the changes. The changes arose out of an analysis undertaken by the Housing Finance Agency. Why did it do an analysis? It did an analysis because the Housing Commission said we needed to create certainty, clarity and stability in the rental market for the long term and that there would be clarity around that. That is the fundamental issue. However, the Minister has balanced that with greater security of tenure for tenants with the six years, essentially ending no-fault eviction where a landlord can end a tenancy without the tenant having done anything wrong. That is a significant protection for tenants. There is security of tenure and the national regulation extending RPZs to the entire nation. Those involved in social policy and the academic world have acknowledged and articulated that this is a significant increase in rental protection. The Housing Commission called for this. The ESRI called for this. It was looking for a 4% cap on rents. That is what they recommended. We said no, and that we would go for 2% on that.

This Bill will give far more legal protection to renters than they have ever had in the history of the State. That is the bottom line. It was interesting that quite a number of people representing property interests threatened constitutional action with regard to this Bill. They do not like the security of tenure and protections that are provided to renters. There has been a lot of disquiet among many representing landlords around these changes. That has been articulated on quite a number of occasions.

About 513,000 are people renting now in different categories, from the public to the private sector, but the tenancies of the more than 290,000 people who are currently renting will not be affected, and the Deputy knows that. That is the key element of this. Yes, we want to bring investment back into the market because we have not been building enough apartments to date. Supply is the key instrument we have to moderate rents in the medium term. Let us be under no illusion; we need more apartments and more housing. We got 36,000 houses built last year and we need to get to 50,000 per year. The State, which is allocating about €9 billion, is the main actor in the market at the moment, through supporting cost-rental and affordable housing

and the building of public housing. The State is the main player in house building at the moment.

The Department of Finance estimates that we need to spend about €20 billion per annum, between public and private sector investment, to get to that figure of 50,000 houses that the ESRI says we need. Some say we need even more. We have to have a balanced approach to protecting renters, particularly those in existing tenancies, and giving them greater protection in terms of security of tenure, but also then facilitating a far greater degree of construction, particularly in cities, of apartments because our density is not where it should be, in brownfield sites in particular. I would have thought everyone in this House was agreeable to greater investment. Is é atá i gceist againn ná i bhfad níos mó tithe a thógáil sa tír seo agus tacaíocht agus cosaint a thabhairt do thionóntaí na tíre.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Is waffle atá i gceist anois. This is on the Taoiseach. There is no balance here. The biggest landlord in the country could not be clearer. It knows that it can hike rents by 25% as a result of the Government's rent hike Bill. It knows that it will make an extra €21 million in rents each and every year. That means millions going into the pockets of corporate landlords and thousands coming out of the pockets of renters - security of tenure my eye. Those are the hard facts and the Taoiseach knows it. It is here in black and white. We are talking here about the biggest rip-off of renters in a generation. This sends a shiver down the spine of every renter across the land and it is directly because of the decisions and choices of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The Government's legislation is causing this to happen and I have asked the Taoiseach to take responsibility for that. I have asked him before and I will ask him again. Will he intervene, now that the writing is on the wall, to stop these massive rent increases?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy's party has had a fair degree of engagement with the property industry over the past while. Deputy Ó Broin has been very active in meeting with IBEC, on behalf of Property Industry Ireland, with Hines real estate Ireland, the Construction Industry Federation, Glenveagh Homes, Vulcan Consulting and so on, and Property Industry Ireland.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Answer the question.

The Taoiseach: It is interesting. What were the matters discussed in his meeting with IBEC on behalf of the property industry? They were the introduction of incentives for investors to capitalise apartment construction-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Not to screw renters.

The Taoiseach: -----to extend the existing permissions, to legislate to prevent issues and, of course, promising the sun. It is like the meeting with Davy Stockbrokers a year or two ago. Supply is the key. I am sure the Deputy would agree that supply is the key.

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: I did not interrupt Sinn Féin's leader. I just want to make the point that supply-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Answer the question.

The Taoiseach: I am answering the question.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Eoghan Kenny.

The Taoiseach: I want to finish my point. Supply is the key issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up.

The Taoiseach: It has to be noted that the Deputy has objected to 3,000 apartments in the past while. That is her contribution to renters in this country and people who need housing. She has objected to 3,000 apartments.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up. Have some respect for the Chair.

The Taoiseach: I respect the Chair but I also ask that she respect my right to reply. It is not being facilitated.

An Ceann Comhairle: They did not listen during the time that was allowed. We have moved on to Deputy Eoghan Kenny.

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

An Ceann Comhairle: There is no point of order. The Taoiseach's time was up.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: The Chair should be respected.

Over the past two weeks, the Government has let down children with additional needs, special needs assistants, parents, school communities and now special educational needs organisers, SENOs. That is why tonight, across the country, these very people will take to the streets and protest outside the Dáil at 5 p.m. At every opportunity, the Labour Party has welcomed developments in our education system. I welcomed new special classes, new special schools, new SNAs and the proposed roll-out of therapy supports but when something is not right, I will call it out for what it is, and this was plainly wrong. The Government was pitting one child's needs against those of another. The political wind changed and the Government felt the pressure, scrapped the policy, went to the kitty and got money. This is a clear indication that either the Taoiseach had no faith in the policy that his Government created or he had some sort of realisation that those working within our schools might actually be right. In any case, the Taoiseach and his Government colleagues are doing their best to spin this as a win. It is in fact another case of announce, backlash, retreat and re-announce.

Deep down, this question must be posed. How much damage has the Government done to special education in this country? Every year, there is fear, anxiety and worry on the part of parents across the country who wonder if their child will have an appropriate class and resources, SNA support and enough special education teachers. Parents should not have to carry that burden. As a State, we must get special education right. It cannot be *ad hoc*. It must take a long-term approach where we are not scrambling every year to get the basics right.

I want to clarify two points. First, in his response to my party leader yesterday, the Taoiseach stated the Government "did not sign off on this" initiative. What did he mean by that? His Government created this policy and got the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, through the SENOs, to implement the policy. They did as they were told. They informed schools of the decisions based on the policy the Government created. The Taoiseach said the Government did not sign off on this. Will he clarify what he meant by that? Did he agree with the policy? Did he not know the letters were being sent out? Was this the Taoiseach attempting to place the blame on SENOs and the NCSE?

Second, the Taoiseach said yesterday that the role of the SNA is primarily for the child and not for the school. The 2014 circular clearly states in section 10 that SNAs are not allocated to individual pupils but to schools as a schools-based resource in the same manner that teachers are allocated to schools. Can the Taoiseach clarify what he meant by that? Is it a lack of understanding or another opportunity to deflect from the reality that the Government was taking resources off children?

The Taoiseach: Government policy has been to increase investment in special needs education and increase the number of SNAs. That is the policy. The manifestation of that policy is as follows: in 2020, 16,420 special needs-----

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I welcome that.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach is answering. Deputy Kenny should not interrupt him again until it is his turn.

The Taoiseach: The manifestation of that policy is that there were 16,420 SNAs in 2020, 17,921 in 2021, and this went up to 18,831 in 2022, 20,805 in 2023, 22,000 in 2024, 23,870 in 2025, and to over 25,000 in 2026. That is Government policy. That is what I signed off on. That is what all of us in Government signed off on in the Estimate that was agreed.

In addition to that, staffing overall has gone up by about 27%. There are now 22,465 special education teachers in our system. In the past five years, we have provided an extra 16 special schools when there were none for the seven years prior to 2020. The story is one of expansion. The Deputy should at least acknowledge that. That is the point.

Equally, the population identifying with a disability is growing.

We need to expand to deal with the growing need. In the census of 2022, close to 11% - 10.8% - of children in Ireland were reported as having a disability. That compares to 6.4% in 2016. Those are significant factors and we acknowledge those. There is a lot of pressure on the system and we need to expand. When I said we did not sign off on this, no memo came

before the Government saying we were going to cut SNAs in individual or specific schools. No memo came to the Government. None. It did not. Those are the facts.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Did the Taoiseach not know about the levels?

The Taoiseach: No, not the overall impact.

An Ceann Comhairle: Wait, Deputy Kenny.

The Taoiseach: Again, the Deputy is interrupting. The Government did not sign off on any memo or memorandum or any note saying that "X" hundred SNAs are going to be cut off. That is the reality. I established the system of SNAs and, yes, when I brought it in, the SNA was allocated to the child. The system grew and we brought in school-based allocations. I know all about that, but the school-based allocation is based on the need and particularly the special education need. It is based on the number of children that require a need and then there is a decision on the number of SNAs that a given school will get.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I do not need lectures from the Taoiseach on the role of an SNA---
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The Taoiseach: No, the Deputy asked about-----

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I do not need lectures from the Taoiseach on the role of an SNA. I know what they are about. I said at the beginning that I welcome the development of SNAs. I did not need the figures. I know the figures and I welcome them. As a State, we have to accept the reality. The level of resources did not keep up with the level of need. That is the reality.

We were able to get €19 million overnight. Was it penny-pinching all along? Was it the Taoiseach's deputy leader, Deputy Chambers, keeping the money away from the Department of education? How were we able to get €19 million overnight?

Will every single child who is entitled to a special class be given a place in a special class for the next academic year? My understanding is that the level of applicants means we now require 600 special classes. We have funding for 400 special classes. Will the Taoiseach put it on the record that every single child who is entitled to and needs a special class will be given a place?

The Taoiseach: The only reason I replied to the Deputy with numbers was that he made a false assertion in terms of Government policy on special needs assistants.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: That is completely untrue.

The Taoiseach: Again, the Deputy is interrupting. I did not interrupt him.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: You are telling untruths.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please accept that you have to wait.

The Taoiseach: He did make a false assertion in terms of Government policy. I wanted to make it very clear to him and to the public that our story has been one of expansion in special education. Earlier this year, we brought forward the application date for schools and parents who require special education places for their children. The numbers have increased exponentially this year. Perhaps it is because of the earlier date or there may be other factors. It is over and above anything that was contemplated and, in particular, many more have come in post the October deadline.

There is a constitutional right for every child to have a place in education. Our objective and obligation as a Government is to provide that place. There will be a need for more special classes. There will be huge challenges because of the exponential rise in children this year, compared to last year or previous years, in the data that has come in, both for those who went before the deadline date and those after.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Will every child get a place in a special class?

Deputy Paul Murphy: This Saturday, disabled people and the Affordable Ireland campaign will be on the streets demanding an emergency payment after the Government took over €1,400 from them in the last budget. So far, the Government has refused to concede. There is no money for disabled people. There was no money for SNAs until people power forced the Government back. There is no money for electricity credits.

What is there money for? There is money to develop an Irish arms industry and to give to the French arms industry. The French media is reporting that we will spend €1 billion of public money on armoured vehicles, tanks and a Howitzer. The Thales Group, which supplied weapons to Israel for the slaughter of Palestinians, will be the main recipient. It is part and parcel of an agenda of militarisation and dismantling neutrality. If we look at the maritime security strategy launched this morning, it is a shameful abandonment of any independent foreign policy. Instead, it commits us to deep military co-operation with the old colonial powers of Britain and France, advocating further integration with NATO and using huge amounts of public money to defend the infrastructure of big tech companies.

The strategy refers to "our responsibility and commitment to support the security and defence of Europe". When did we sign up for that? That sounds awfully like a mutual defence pact, when the protocol associated with the Lisbon treaty explicitly stated that there would be no common defence agreement involved.

Again and again, the document refers positively to NATO. It says, "Ireland can play a positive role in supporting greater EU-NATO co-operation". Action 4.6 states that Ireland should "foster relations with North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, NATO, in the maritime security space". Action 4.8 states that Ireland should "pursue opportunity to participate in Joint Expeditionary Force+, JEF+, activities." The Joint Expeditionary Force, JEF, is ten NATO countries led by Britain. Is that one of the reasons the Taoiseach wants to abolish the triple lock?

As a neutral country, why should we support greater co-operation between the EU and NATO? NATO is made up of states that overwhelmingly supported, armed and financed Israel's genocide in Gaza. It is led by Donald Trump, who just in the past two months kidnapped the president of a sovereign country and threatened to invade Greenland and is trying to dismantle the UN and replace it with a so-called Board of Peace, with himself as the chairman for life.

This is a strategy written for the big tech companies that want us to pay to protect their cables, by the arms lobbyists who want our money for their weapons and by Britain and France. Action 2.1 refers to developing "a trusted network of critical underwater infrastructure stakeholders", which is to include industry. Who is the Taoiseach talking about? Is he talking about big tech companies or arms companies?

This State was born out of a struggle against British imperialism. It is why people have a deep connection to an independent foreign policy, a consistent opposition to all imperialism and support for neutrality. Why is the Taoiseach throwing all of this away?

The Taoiseach: The ESRI was very clear that the two lowest deciles in income terms benefited most from the recent budget. In terms of the supports for children and those with disabilities, embedded policies and allocations in the social protection budget and investment in disability services, education and health were all designed for the long term to support those with disabilities.

The idea that there is no money, as the Deputy said, is a complete untruth. Some €13 billion has been invested in education alone this year. This idea that there is no money for children and people with disabilities and that we are now going into full-scale funding for the arms industry is hyperbole and exaggeration beyond belief. The Deputy needs to cop on with this kind of nonsense and propagandising on what are very basic necessities for an island nation---
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Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is all in the national maritime security strategy.

The Taoiseach: -----to protect itself and to protect vital economic infrastructure. I do not know what the Deputy has against big tech in terms of its employment content. He seems to hate companies that employ thousands of people in this country. He seems to have an agenda against major companies that employ thousands of people. I do not agree with him. Last week, I was at Apple in Cork. It employs 6,000 people. I was a student in Cork in the 1980s when there was 17% unemployment. I witnessed all the companies-----

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Fianna Fáil was in power.

The Taoiseach: -----like Ford and Dunlop closing, the Verolme dockyard closing and the Sunbeam-Wolsey plant closing. Thousands of jobs were lost. It was a very difficult decade. I have never lost the memory of what it was like in the city of Cork and many cities across the country. Part of the renovation and rejuvenation of this country - even if the Deputy might not like it - was the fact the likes of Microsoft came to this country in 1985. It has been here more than 40 years. Apple came in 1980 and it has grown. It is workers who have benefited.

Ordinary people, who have career opportunities, have benefited from that. We can be critical, and we have to stand back and analyse the agendas, etc., but these are the basic facts for the ordinary people that the Deputy is supposed to represent.

When we say that we want to protect critical undersea infrastructure, if anything happened to cables or the gas connectors with Britain, we would not have an economy in ten days, in terms of the gas interconnection.

Is the Deputy saying we should not co-operate with Britain to protect the gas interconnectors with the United Kingdom and we should just ignore it? Is he saying we should ignore all of our European partners in protecting critical undersea infrastructure such as subsea cables and the interconnector with France, which will be completed in the next year or two and will guarantee energy security for our people?

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. Deputy Murphy to respond.

The Taoiseach: What planet is the Deputy on that he would deny the ordinary people of this country-----

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

The Taoiseach: -----jobs, energy security and an opportunity to have economic participation?

Deputy Paul Murphy: The planet I am on is a planet where the Taoiseach introduced a budget that cut income for disabled people by €1,400. Absolutely shameful. The planet I am on is where he introduced a budget that, according to the Parliamentary Budget Office, significantly increases the rates of child poverty and poverty among older people, and decreases the income of the poorest people in this country by 4.4%. That is the planet I am on. They are all facts from the Parliamentary Budget Office. This is the same planet where the Taoiseach is scaremongering to justify giving €1 billion to the French arms industry, the same people who have facilitated, enabled and created the weapons for the genocide. Yes, we think the Government should not have military co-operation with big, Western imperialist powers. We should not have military co-operation with NATO, Britain or France. Of course not. We should be neutral. The best defence we have is a consistent position of neutrality whereby we call out imperialism and attacks on human rights no matter where they take place. We have the position that Connolly put forward, "neither king nor Kaiser", which today means neither Washington nor Moscow-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Murphy. The Taoiseach will now respond.

Deputy Paul Murphy: -----neither Brussels nor Beijing but instead, stand up for ordinary people in this country.

The Taoiseach: We have been involved in peacekeeping in Lebanon with Poland. Poland is a member of NATO, by the way. Is the Deputy saying we should not be involved in peacekeeping in Lebanon with Poland, and PolBatt? Interoperability is key.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is a battlegroup.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please.

The Taoiseach: They must use the same equipment and weaponry. The idea that we would be involved in a peacekeeping mission with different countries and have different systems and equipment makes no sense.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I did not say that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Please.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy did say that.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Is the Taoiseach calling for EU and NATO battlegroups-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, it is not-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: It is in the document. Deal with it.

The Taoiseach: Again, the Deputy is interrupting. When he does not like the answer, he interrupts. That is what Deputy Murphy is saying because, according to him, we should stand alone in isolation, talk to nobody - talk to nobody at all, apparently - and we will be able to procure, we will have all the in-house expertise and so on. The truth is, Deputy Murphy does not believe in having an army at all. That is actually the truth. I asked him that some time back here and he was silent in response to it. His concept of militarisation is that we do not need armies. That is his view.

Deputy Paul Murphy: You cannot describe my views. I will describe my own views.

The Taoiseach: That is his view-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry now, time is up. I call Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice.

The Taoiseach: -----and therefore, to take that to its logical conclusion, I see where the Deputy is coming from: that we should not buy weapons at all-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up, Taoiseach, thank you. Deputy Fitzmaurice is on his feet.

The Taoiseach: -----and we should go back to the hurley sticks.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The Taoiseach spoke earlier about the need for housing and everyone right around the Dáil here agrees on the urgent need for more houses. He spoke about

50,000 houses and it is welcome that he has that aspiration and the policy to try to back it up but I would like to go to the nuts and bolts of this. At the moment in Ireland, a person with a small quarry will be four to five years trying to get planning and will have to spend a minimum of €300,000 on reports and getting through the planning process. The Minister of State, Deputy Grealish, is beside the Taoiseach. From Galway city to the Atlantic Ocean is probably 50 miles at least and there is not one quarry in that area now because they are all being blocked.

Looking at the cost, a load of stone and six-inch down in 2013 was €4 a tonne ex-pit; it is about €12 a tonne now. This is what you call costs rising constantly. Then we talk about muck away. On 1 March this year, for the small operators that take away muck from housing sites, €10 a tonne is going onto a load of muck. That is €200 a load. Some €3,000 for a semi-detached is going onto a load of muck and each house being built, and the Government talks about cutting costs. Then, the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, and the Department are going to say, "Ah well, sure there is way out" and there are Articles 27 and 28.

I will give the Taoiseach the facts of Article 27. First, under Article 27, if I buy new stone off a quarry - if I bring it in for what we call a haul road, where it will be taken away again - to take that new stone away from that site, I have to employ a person and get a report done for €1,500 now, plus €250 each for the two samples. That is €2,000 more to take the stone out as per the new regulation that has gone in under Article 27. Article 28 is where - I will explain it to the Taoiseach - if you had a house down the country that needed knocking, and you basically knocked it down, put it in a crusher and crushed it up, you would have to spend the same money on that house to be able to move that stone. That is what we are doing at the moment.

In relation to concrete, in 2020 concrete was about €70 to €80 per cu. m. It is gone to €130 at the moment and is going up again by €10 because of carbon taxes, they will tell you, electricity costs and obviously the defective blocks are going to be part of it. They are saying very clearly it is because of what they call the greenwashing that is going on in this country. How does the Taoiseach propose, in the line of planning for quarries, to reduce that figure and keep them in the game? Is he going to allow stone shifted from site that was bought new to be exempted?

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Fitzmaurice. The Taoiseach will now respond.

The Taoiseach: Coming out of the weeds, or the mud, maybe, what the Deputy is talking about is the overarching planning framework that governs development in the country, the extraction of stone from quarries or the creation of quarries, or indeed other environmental legislation, but I am not quite clear on the specifics of what he is actually seeking. Let us start from the fundamental premise that we do need a planning framework. We need a sustainable planning framework and we need sustainability. That is the basic position we come from. We then have to be pragmatic, balanced, efficient and effective in the deployment of those planning laws. There has to be timely consideration of planning applications and we have to do everything we possibly can to reduce costs.

The biggest cause of the inflationary pressures of the past number of years was the post-Covid period where supply chains had broken down and there was an inflationary surge, and the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent energy crisis that emerged.

We had very significant inflationary pressures which then impacted the construction industry in particular.

We have resourced An Coimisiún Pleanála very significantly and it would acknowledge that. It has now created timelines for any planning applications. In many cases, it is now beginning to get close to meeting those timelines. We have also substantially resourced the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, in respect of its obligations. The European Union directives on the habitats directive and on environmental law generally and consents are there. They are real. They can be judicially reviewed at any time and they can be contested. The role of the planning authority is to make sure that when decisions are taken, both at local authority level and at An Coimisiún Pleanála level, they are robust, resilient decisions that can stand the test of any potential legal challenge. That is a reality. You cannot take shortcuts in respect of the EU directives.

The European Union is looking at simplification of those directives and of the environmental obligations. It is examining those. I have made the case to Europe that we need to be far more pragmatic in terms of how some of these apply. The balance has to be struck between a responsible approach to sustainability and a pragmatic one as well, and best practice from observing what is going on in other jurisdictions close to us as well to make sure we are doing it in a balanced and effective way. I have not had a submission from the quarry industry. Perhaps others in different Departments have but I would gladly receive one and engage with the industry to discuss it.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: What I am saying to the Taoiseach is that the facts are, if I am a small quarry operator, it is going to cost me €300,000 to do the reports that those planners need. That is not sustainable for the small guy. Does the Taoiseach realise that at this minute - I will put it on record here - we are heading for four quarries in Ireland because the big guys are mopping up? I would urge the Taoiseach to get someone to research, through the Land Registry, who owns the quarries in Ireland.

Four of them are buying up everything around them because they have the legal eagles, the accountants and the funds behind them, and the small guy is being pushed out of it. Those are the facts of what is going on. I understand about the habitats directive, but look at what is going on in this country in relation to that. Also, the Department of the environment has brought in recycling under Article 27 and Article 28. Does the Taoiseach realise who is setting up those plants around Ireland, because it is €12 million to set that up?

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up. I call the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: What will the small fellow with three or four lorries do in some small town when he is trying to build? He has to bring his muck away.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up. I call the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Have a look at what is going on. Open your eyes to what is happening.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: We are heading for four quarries in this country that will own recycling, and own the quarrying of this country.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, the time is up. I call the Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: We cannot see what is happening. You know what happens then - up with the price.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Fitzmaurice, the time is up.

The Taoiseach: First of all, recycling works in construction. I can recall that in advance of the London Olympics, and how many years ago is that-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: England has different rules.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, you are no different from anybody else. Do not interrupt the answer.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy did not even let me finish, or begin, actually.

Prior to the London Olympics, I was Minister for enterprise when many construction companies in Ireland wanted to see if they could submit, tender and so on. The objective was up to 80% or 90% recycling for all the demolition and everything in respect of that. That was not law. That was their objective and their vision. Recycling is very important.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: It is a different system.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: We should do it.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Yes, but it is a different system.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, stop.

The Taoiseach: It can be done, and it is being done.

On the competition issue, the Deputy is saying that it is going to be reduced to four. We have the competition and consumer authority. Its job is to make sure there is competition in the market. If there are any complaints or if people have concerns about any unsavoury practices developing, then please submit that to the competition authority.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: We are burying our heads in the sand.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Brian Brennan: I want to speak to the Taoiseach about coastal erosion, which is an extremely pressing and urgent issue for coastal communities right across Ireland. It is estimated in recent reports that up to 20% of the coastline of Ireland is at risk. This is a particular problem in the south east due to the composition of the lands, which are sand and clay-based. Some areas in the south east are losing up to 8 m to 10 m from their coast each year. It is estimated that, in Wexford alone, over 1,400 houses are at risk, and in Ireland, it is estimated that almost 100,000 people's homes are in danger from coastal erosion.

The severity of recent storms, the increased frequency of these storms and the rising sea level due to climate change are the main factors involved. I have been inundated with calls and visits to my office from constituents along the entire coastal length of my constituency. This was ongoing well before Storm Chandra, but it has multiplied since that storm. People are in genuine fear of losing their homes and land. In County Wicklow, Arklow has regularly seen significant damage due to intense storms. Areas such as Clogh and as far up as Brittas Bay are facing significant loss and damage to their coastal defences. This is having a huge impact, not only on the land and housing, but also on beloved community amenities.

We must also look at Irish Rail. There is a stretch from Dublin to Wicklow town that is under severe threat due to coastal erosion. This line faces significant and ongoing risks that threaten the stability of the infrastructure. I am aware that the East Coast Railway Infrastructure Protection Projects are conducting a comprehensive study, but continuous disruption or any long-term closure due to erosion on this line will close the clinical link between Rosslare and Dublin, isolating communities and towns, such as Gorey, Arklow and Rathdrum and putting even further pressure on an already overcapacity motorway.

I note and commend the investment in coastal erosion, but I am here today to point out that this problem is increasing due to climate change, increasing sea levels and the frequency of storms. This is simply not going away. Houses that have been in families for generations are now on the verge of dropping into the sea, farmers are losing land and we are losing walkways along our coastline. I call for a comprehensive approach to tackling this and for significant further investment in this area.

I have met people face-to-face in my office. I have seen grown men and grown women cry. They are literally playing out a horror movie. In front of them, the sea is eating into their land and their gardens. They literally have to take out their goods before a storm, go to another house and then come back the following morning to see if their house is still there. This should not be happening. It is going to increase. I ask the Taoiseach to treat this as a priority.

The Taoiseach: First, I thank the Deputy for raising what is the very important and pressing issue of coastal erosion across the country, but specifically in the south east. The Government is committed to progressing a co-ordinated, long-term approach to managing coastal change. I know there have been a variety of coastal works and funding at specific points, particularly in Wexford, in terms of the coastal protection scheme and minor flood mitigation, which is done by the OPW.

As the Deputy knows, a report was published in 2023 by the interdepartmental group on the national coastal change management strategy. It establishes the strategic framework and identifies the priority actions required to underpin a national coastal change management strategy. To date, in essence, the OPW has allocated funding of about €650,000 for coastal protection works at Seaview, for example, including strengthening rock armour to counter ongoing erosion. Further moneys of about €300,000 were allocated before that, in 2024, making some €2 million overall in that area.

The more fundamental point that the Deputy makes is the need for two things. I agree with him that climate change is causing this. We need a more co-ordinated structure. I had a meeting recently in the context of the recent storms. I raised this issue at the climate meeting on coastal erosion. I am not satisfied that we have the necessary infrastructure from a structural point of view in terms of decision-making within the Government. Many people were leaving it to the local authorities, but I think that if we leave it to the local authorities on a local authority-by-local authority basis, that may not be sustainable. Adaptation, including ring-fenced funding for adaptation, is critical. I will be examining this further in terms of a more centralised approach to coastal erosion that is far more proactive than what we have had to date.

We know that, unfortunately, some local authorities are more proactive than others. There is inertia in others, and that is not sustainable, in my view. There has to be a far more direct approach from the centre to make sure that some of these works get done. To be fair, the OPW has done a lot of work, and I know the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, was in Donabate recently. It did exceptional work there on an interim basis to protect houses and households.

This is coming quickly. It is a very rapidly evolving situation. If we look at the climate change projections, the seas are going to rise, so we need stronger coastal protection, and we need to do it on a systemic and structured basis, with agencies clearly in charge and directing operations.

Deputy Brian Brennan: I warmly welcome the Taoiseach's suggestion of centralising this because it highlights the problem we are having. I do not want to be parochial, but if we just look at the Wexford coastline, 80% of the 260 km is under threat. That is a phenomenal figure. We are dealing with real people. In areas like Cahore and Glasscarrig, people are in genuine fear of losing their homes. I recently went down to Kilmichael and Castletown, which is a beautiful area. Some people there have lost 10 m off the front of their land. The next stop is that their houses are going to fall into the sea. Courtown was the beacon of the south east in the 1980s, but it now has little or no beach. It is not only the coastal erosion, but the effect this is having on business there as well.

We have a serious issue. I warmly welcome the Taoiseach's intervention on this. We have to make progress on centralising this. It is a huge issue.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy. The projections are there. There has been comprehensive surveying of the coastal area of the island. Climate change will have fairly significant negative impacts, particularly rising sea levels, but also the frequency and velocity of the storms we are witnessing on our coastlines, all of which creates a very challenging situation for us. We have to respond with proper structures and systems, and be far more

proactive. We need a ring-fenced approach to the adaptation issue because climate change is here and now, and its impacts will increase over time.

It will impact on food production systems. The extended rain season we have had now is already impacting on farming practice and what would ordinarily be happening right now. We are now facing another two days of intense rainfall. In front of our very eyes, food production systems and coastal areas are being challenged and we have to respond.

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

An Ceann Comhairle: There were 80 submissions and 30 were chosen. If you cannot ask your question within the one-minute timeframe, do not ask for a slot in Questions on Policy or Legislation.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I have heard the Minister and the Taoiseach say dozens of times that Ireland is military neutral but not politically neutral on Ukraine. That is a good position. I agree with it. There is no doubt in my mind that Russia is the aggressor in the conflict. Last night, the Taoiseach's office put out a statement that Ireland was committed politically, militarily and diplomatically. This comes at a time when the Government is dumping the much-valued triple lock neutrality protection. The Irish people believe in neutrality. Many wonder why the Government wants to get rid of this central part of our neutrality, the triple lock. Now for the very first time we have a Government saying that it is not militarily neutral. I want the Minister to tell the Irish people if the Irish Government no longer believes in Irish neutrality. I want him to give a direct answer to that question because the Irish people deserve an answer. Does this Government believe that Ireland should be militarily neutral?

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): The Government has set out very clear priorities in terms of the reform of the triple lock legislation, which is central to the world as it has been changing in political and geopolitical contexts. We have been very clear that we are absolutely militarily neutral but we are not----

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Why did we not say that yesterday?

Deputy Jack Chambers: We are not politically neutral.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I agree.

An Ceann Comhairle: Do not interrupt again.

Deputy Jack Chambers: To see Sinn Féin oppose the €90 billion going to Ukraine-----

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Why did that statement say what it said?

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----shows what side is Sinn Féin on when it comes to the aggression-----

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: You know what side we are on. I was very clear. Why did you make that statement?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, if you interrupt again, I will cease the answer.

Deputy Jack Chambers: ---and some of the votes it has had in the European Parliament and so on. We are very clear-----

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: You do not believe a word you are saying.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Laoghaire, respect the Chair.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----around our position and we should not have a veto on our deployment of troops by Russia, China or others. We want to ensure that this evolves in the context of the reforms we are setting out.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Why did the Government say that?

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: Figures released by Eurostat today show that households are paying twice as much as data centres for their energy in Ireland. Data centre expansion is putting huge pressure on our energy grid and soaking up all the new, renewable energy that we are generating. Not only that but they are not even paying their fair share for the pleasure. This is just the latest in a series of examples where this Government is bending the knee to data centres and big energy companies. It is costing the rest of us. It has failed to properly regulate data centres or energy providers. It wants to import fracked gas now from America, primarily so energy supply to 300 or so large energy users can be protected in the event of an emergency. It is pouring money into grid updates, not for the benefit of ordinary households but in order that they can cope with the huge energy demands of these data centres and large energy users. Ultimately it is going to be paid for by ordinary consumers. To add insult to injury, the energy task force the Government has held up as the answer to the ever-increasing energy bills and which will supposedly solve energy poverty has only met three times. What is it going to do about the cost of energy?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, is advancing the work of the energy affordability task force. We are engaging on it regularly at Cabinet committee level. Separately, the pricing system in the energy market is defined by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities. The pricing is not set by Government. We also need to ensure we protect overall economic investment into the country. Digital infrastructure will play a role in terms of job creation and overall employment growth for Ireland into the medium to long term. We need to have an honest conversation about that. Just attacking data centres and digital infrastructure would undermine our wider economic growth into the long term. The facts are that the pricing system is decided independent of Government. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien,

is advancing significant investment into our energy system and grid. We have the PR6, price review 6, which will allow for multi-billion investment into the grid and into our energy system over the next five years, all of which will help our wider renewable energy ambitions. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, will be bringing forth further actions around energy affordability.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental health condition. Eating disorder services in this country do not reflect the seriousness of this. Young people with eating disorders face a medical cliff-edge when they reach adulthood. Their care can simply stop. They are discharged from CAMHS and placed on a waiting list for adult services that are understaffed, under-resourced and, in 14 counties, are non-existent. Families describe it as being cut loose. The care stops dead and there is little to no continuity. With eating disorders, the gap in treatment can cause rapid regression. We know what works: early intervention and seamless transition, colocated child and adult mental health service teams, clear national pathways, stepdown care and mandatory handover planning before a young person turns 18. An eating disorder does not disappear on your 18th birthday. Our services cannot either. Will the Minister implement a mandatory standardised transition pathway from child to adult services?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank the Deputy for her question. In fairness, she has always been a strong advocate for supports for those with eating disorders. It is the most debilitating mental health illness that you can have. We have made progress over the past five years. Some 95% of all those with an eating disorder are treated in the community. We have 14 of the 16 teams funded; 11 of them are in place and we are recruiting the other five. Two more were announced in budget 2026. I know the Deputy will be happy to hear that yesterday, as part of the capital plan, a provision was made for adult eating disorder beds, 20 beds in total. We will base eight of them in St. Vincent's. We have agreement from the board of St. Vincent's to do that. Six will be in the south east, more than likely Cork, and six in the north west, maybe around the Roscommon area. We are making progress but I do appreciate that it is very difficult. We have looked specifically at children coming out of CAMHS teams into adult teams. That is a challenge in some areas where the teams are not in place. There are over 100 dedicated clinicians working in eating disorder teams now, with a ring-fenced budget.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Minister may have heard the case of a UCD medical student who was raped and had image-based sexual abuse used against her. As a result of being raped, she became pregnant. She had to have a termination and missed some of her medical exams due to having to schedule that. She asked UCD if she could resit her exams over the summer but UCD said no. It attempted to make her drop back a year, into the year in which her rapist was also a student. She was then forced to take High Court action to try to stop UCD putting her into the assailant's year. UCD fought the case, won and, two weeks after the second case of image abuse against her, it pursued the rape victim for a couple of hundred thousand in costs against her. She has not been able to continue her medical degree since 2023, as UCD has blocked her from doing so. Is it good enough that UCD is happy or okay to have a rapist studying medicine but not a rape victim? What can be done to make UCD help this student finish her degree as soon as possible, so she is not further punished for being a victim?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I have seen some of the reporting on this online and it is shocking what that particular student experienced. UCD or, indeed, any third level institution should work with a student who has undergone shocking circumstances. Any third level institution or education institution should be working in a way that allows such a student to finish her studies, in a way that would reflect all of our institutions in second or third level. I would call on UCD to work with the student to allow her to complete her studies. She has gone through enough. I was shocked, as indeed everyone in this House has been, about what she has been subjected to in the recent period. It is incumbent on every public institution to work with her, so she can complete her studies. She has gone through enough.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I had hoped to speak to the Taoiseach but he had to leave. Following up on an issue I raised with the Taoiseach on 27 January last, it appears that a lot of forensic psychiatrists in Ireland do not want to get involved in cases involving the killing of family members by loved ones. It appears to be related to calls for a review of processes and the whole uncertainty around that. This was reflected at a recent Central Criminal Court hearing where Mr. Justice Paul McDermott said there were serious deficiencies in obtaining consultant psychiatric reports, and repeated delays in seeking appropriate forensic experts, leading to situations where families were forced to return to court over a dozen times because the State could not appoint a suitable forensic specialist.

1 o'clock

He said this was completely unacceptable and I am sure the Minister would agree. Will he also agree to write or get the Taoiseach to write to the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions asking if it has a formal review mechanism for examining the processes by which forensic psychiatric opinions are compiled, whether consideration has been given to establishing clearer standards or oversight structures and to seek clarity as to whether the DPP is satisfied international best practice is being implemented in these situations?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I do not have the facts or background on the particular matter relating to forensic psychiatrists but I will ask the Taoiseach and his office to respond comprehensively to the Deputy. I know he raised the importance of this matter and the comments of the judge in the past month with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, in the context of forensic psychiatry. There is a Department of justice context as well. I will ask them to respond comprehensively to the Deputy.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I raise the local bus service in Cork city and suburbs and the failure of bus Éireann and the National Transport Authority to provide a reliable and dependable service. I should not have to raise this issue on the floor of the Dáil but I am forced to because countless efforts by me and other public representatives over many years are simply not being addressed in terms of the National Transport Authority and Bus Éireann. We are tired of excuses at this stage regarding the poor quality of the bus services in Cork city and suburbs. We all know the issues - buses running late, timetables becoming meaningless, a travel app showing a bus will arrive and then it disappears and so on. Passengers are sick and tired of the excuses. I ask the Minister to ask the Department of Transport to intervene to ensure the public bodies that have a responsibility to provide a dependable bus service fulfil their duties.

While I am raising issues about the bus service, I want to acknowledge the staff and drivers who are doing their level best. They are on the front line and dealing with very frustrated customers on a daily basis. We hear about BusConnects but we need immediate solutions. I ask the Minister to intervene.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I appreciate the huge frustration in the Cork community with this commuter service. People should expect, with a properly funded service, that it is punctual, reliable and frequent. The National Transport Authority has clear oversight responsibilities for bus operators to ensure that happens. There are various penalties and fines that can be imposed if a particular service does not run properly. I will ask our colleague, the Minister for Transport, to engage with Bus Éireann and the National Transport Authority to ensure the repeated issues the Deputy referenced are dealt with. We are funding our transport system at a record level but performance is critical. As the Deputy said, it is not necessarily a budgetary issue; it is an issue of performance. We will ask for strengthened oversight from the National Transport Authority and the Department of Transport relating to that issue.

Deputy Peter Roche: I want to put the spotlight on the primary certificate criteria. I understand there have to be criteria but they are very rigid. There are people with profound autism issues and sensory processing difficulties and people who are visually impaired. I dealt with a young gentleman recently who lost his arm as a consequence of a cancer diagnosis. To be refused the primary certificate is quite insulting. I ask for the criteria to be revisited with regard to those who would be eligible, taking into account all of the areas I mentioned.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I acknowledge for particular individuals there is a high threshold or bar for the primary medical certificate. It can be extraordinarily difficult. I think we all, as constituency TDs, deal with that frequently. I will ask the Minister for Health to respond to the Deputy on the feedback he has given and any changes that will come of it. It is important to have a framework and parameters. I know that can create difficulties for particular individuals but I will ask her to engage and reflect the feedback.

Deputy Pa Daly: Is it the case women's health is less of a priority for this Government? If not, why is there a delay in the delivery of a new maternity hospital for University Hospital Kerry which can offer safe access to theatre from the delivery suite? As it is at the moment, if a woman has a caesarean section, she is taken from the suite, down to the ground floor through a public corridor and up an unstable lift. It adds time to what is already an emergency procedure. There was an approved capital submission in 2018 which was put on hold to allow for a submission for a new maternity and neonatal unit. It was part of the development control plan but it has been removed from the priority list. What is the Government going to do about it?

Deputy Jack Chambers: What I agreed with the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, was that there would be record capital funding for healthcare overall over the next five years. That is to underpin significant investment and development for women's health, maternity healthcare and much more across the system. I am sure the Deputy is referencing the HSE capital plan. I do not have the specific feedback relating to University Hospital Kerry but we want to modernise our health infrastructure. A clear part of that relates to maternity

care. The Minister for Health can perhaps come back to the Deputy on that particular capital project. I do not have the detail about why it might not have received the level of funding the Deputy expects for 2026. We are clear that we want to advance a significant number of projects across the maternity system in the capital plan over the next number of years.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I have a constituent who worked in a healthcare setting during Covid, meeting patients face to face and taking care of them while others stayed at home. This was until she got Covid in January 2021 following an outbreak in her workplace. She ended up in hospital with clots on her lung and pneumonia. This lady is now 52 and she has not been able to work since 2021. There are many days when she cannot even leave the house. It is important that long Covid for healthcare staff who worked in our healthcare system during Covid is recognised as a critical illness. There are currently 159 healthcare staff who received the special leave pay until it ceased on 31 December last. On the public service sick leave scheme, this healthcare worker is experiencing a 71% drop in her net income per month. This is not right. Will something be done to correct this very unfair situation?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I acknowledge the contribution so many members of our health system made during Covid. The special scheme for long Covid which was established in July 2022 and extended on a number of occasions. As the Deputy knows, this entered into a Labour Court process which the Government accepted at the time. Following several extensions, the final extension in June last year meant the scheme concluded on 31 December 2025. It does not mean supports will end. Staff who remain unfit to work will move into the public service sick leave scheme. That provides for payment of 92 calendar days on full pay in a rolling one-year period followed by 91 calendar days on half pay. There is significant protection through the public service sick leave scheme. The Government accepted the recommendation of the Labour Court.

Deputy John McGuinness: Earlier the Taoiseach stated again that every child is constitutionally entitled to an education. What happens when the main contractors to the State for school bus transport fails to bring children from their local village or town to the school to get that education? That is this case in a number of places in Kilkenny, including Mullinavat and Ballyhale and in particular Gowran where 50 families are affected. The Minister sanctioned the bus service through Bus Éireann in 2024. To date, there has been a stop-start approach to the provision of that service. I ask the Minister to directly intervene to ask why the contract is not being operated. Why has it failed the children of Gowran? Will he insist that the contract be fulfilled? Will he put the overall scheme to tender?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I regret that the 50 students have not had their school transport provided for despite sanction to do so. This is a performance and management issue between the Department of education with Bus Éireann and whoever the particular operator is. I will ask the Minister for education to engage on that matter. Where a service has been provided for, it should be delivered. I do not know the background as to why that has not happened for the students the Deputy referenced.

I will ask the Department of education to follow up on that in the context of providing the particular service for the children involved.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: On wastewater infrastructure, planning permission has been granted for in excess of 60 houses at different sites in Mountbellew on the basis of the condition that they cannot be occupied until they are connected to the upgraded Mountbellew wastewater treatment plant. There is still no clarity on when construction on the plant will begin. In Craughwell and Clarinbridge, funding was announced for wastewater upgrades three years ago, but there has been no progress on these projects. As the Minister knows, we have a serious barrier to delivery of that infrastructure because the Department has told Galway County Council that it is expected to make a co-funding contribution of at least €2 million towards those projects. This is money that the council has not budgeted for. I have raised this matter with the Minister a number of times. It needs to be addressed. There are many more towns and villages I could mention where we do not have capacity and where there are no plans for investment. What is the Government going to do to accelerate delivery of this infrastructure and ensure that badly needed homes can be built?

Deputy Jack Chambers: There are two primary ways in which we are trying to accelerate the development of water infrastructure. The first is to fully fund Irish Water over the next five years by providing it with €12 billion. This is a record level of investment to unlock and deliver a lot of the wastewater treatment plants that have been on lists for too many years. The second way is to cut a lot of the process out of Irish Water's delivery system prior to construction, which we are doing, and out of many of the infrastructure reforms we are advancing. The Deputy raised this with me at the infrastructure committee. I wrote to the committee in recent days, but I do not know if it has received my letter. The letter makes specific reference to Clarinbridge, a matter to which the Deputy has referred previously. I will ask Irish Water to respond to him on the situation in Mountbellew. We will try to organise that.

Deputy Paul Lawless: There is a cost to having a disability, which is in the region of €15,000 per year. Despite this, payments to people with disabilities were cut by up to €1,400 in the most recent budget. I asked the Minister on several occasions why these supports were removed. The answer I received indicated that it was because there are further supports coming. When I speak to people with disabilities, they do not see this happening. It is a very curious form of compassion to make cuts today on the basis of promises of supports next year or the year after. The Minister has responsibility for the public purse. I ask him to prioritise people with disabilities. The Government failed them in the context of the budget. This matter was a priority before the general election. The Government has forgotten about that priority. That is a fact. It has removed up to €1,400 in payments from these people. However, it is promising them things for next year and the year after. This payment must be reintroduced.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Deputy will know that the Minister, Deputy Calleary, has set up a consultation process on a cost-of-disability payment and how that would be structured. We have not had a permanent payment of that sort in the past. We are trying to structure it in the context of negotiations for next year's budget. However, it is not only about direct income support; it is also about improved services. That is why there was a 20% increase in terms of disability service, which the Minister, Deputy Foley, secured. There was increased resourcing for the Department of education. Social protection payments increased significantly as well. Those payments would support some individuals with disabilities.

We are clear on working with the disability stakeholders on designing a permanent annual cost-of-disability support payment. That work is ongoing in advance of budget 2027. The Government is committed across all areas, including employment overall, the education sector and the Department of disability, on strengthening services and income supports over the period ahead.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: According to the annual report of PDD Holdings - the company that owns Temu, a discount e-commerce platform that I am sure the Minister is familiar with - its jurisdiction of incorporation is the Cayman Islands. On the same form, it is stated that the company's principal executive office is here in Ireland. A company incorporated in a foreign jurisdiction and managed from Ireland is tax resident here. The subsidiary which operates Temu, namely Whaleco Technology Limited, is also Irish registered. We need clarity about whether tax residency and incorporation arrangements like this impact the taxation of financial flows between large parent companies and subsidiaries. I am concerned that this structure of tax residence between two jurisdictions allows tax avoidance by multinational corporations in the same way that the so-called double Irish, which was discontinued in 2015, did. Is this being looked into? Are we applying a withholding tax on payments from Ireland to PDD Holdings, given that the company is incorporated in the Cayman Islands?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I do not have the individual taxpayer information, nor should I comment on any company's individual tax information in the Houses of Oireachtas. We have very clear legislation that sets out the tax arrangements for corporations, businesses and individuals.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: What about the broader picture?

Deputy Jack Chambers: If the Deputy has a particular question, both the Revenue Commissioners and the tax division of the Department of Finance can clarify any interpretation of general policy. Individual taxpayer information is a matter of either personal or corporate confidentiality. It is important that we uphold that principle.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Last week, the Government made announcements in relation to regional, national and local roads. In the context of County Tipperary, €57.7 million in funding was announced. Some €12.5 million was announced for Latteragh, which is a very important road between Thurles and Nenagh. That funding is welcome. However, Councillor Fiona Bonfield of the Labour Party and Fianna Fáil's cathaoirleach of the council got a breakdown of the funding. It turns out that €8.3 million is for local and regional roads. That is nearly €1 million less than what was provided last year. The cathaoirleach of the council, Councillor John Carroll of Fianna Fáil, was very critical of the Government and the allocation. He said that the county is going backwards. Is there a way in which the Government can do something about this? As we all know, the recent storms and heavy rain have destroyed local and regional roads, particularly those in north Tipperary. We have a large proportion of roads in the county. Will there be supplementary funding in this regard? It is desperately needed. When the cathaoirleach of the council, who is from the Minister's party, is criticising the Government, we know it is desperately needed.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I do not have the specific breakdown relating to the various counties in front of me. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has secured a record level of capital investment in transport-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: It has gone down.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----of €24 billion over the next five years. He has also sought to reprofile some of that funding towards investment in local, regional and national roads in order that we can build out our road network further. There is contingency in some of the funding allocations to ensure that some of the issues relating to storm damage will also be addressed. We are trying to have a wider assessment of recent storm damage in the context of potentially providing-----

Deputy Alan Kelly: Will there be more money?

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----additional funding from the overall contingency for road infrastructure that has been badly damaged. Obviously, councils have to be supported in remedying that damage. I will ask the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to come back to the Deputy on the annualised figures. I do not have them here.

Deputy John Clendennen: I concur with Deputy Kelly in relation to roads and the condition they are currently in. Roads have taken an absolute pounding in recent months as a result of relentless bad weather. We received funding last week, which is very much welcome, but the pace of the provision of funding and the pace of deterioration are at two very different levels. Will the Government consider a special supplementary allocation in light of the level of damage that has been done? Damage has been done to roads the like of which I have never seen before. It is not just local county roads; it is all categories of roads. I ask that more discretion and autonomy be given to local engineers. There are far too many programmes that have to be referred to Dublin for approval. It makes zero sense that a mason repair job of €10,000 on a boreen in the back-end of Offaly has to be referred to Dublin for approval. Give the money to the engineers. Challenge them at the end of the year to see if they spent it all and if projects came in under budget. Let us get more efficiency into the system.

Deputy Jack Chambers: On the latter point, I support more autonomy, as we have discussed at the infrastructure committee, and cutting out some of the process. If there are any suggestions from the Deputy's local authority as to how we can improve the turnaround time for decisions, I am more than open to hearing them. An overall assessment of the storm damage done to roads is taking place. We will obviously have to examine what that assessment finds and consider it in the context of the additionality that might be required. There already is contingency given to local authorities in their core budgets in this regard.

Some of the immediate work might involve temporarily remedying damage to roads. It might be next year before issues relating to the damage done by the storms will be fully rectified. There is work ongoing across Government to see what the amount required might be this year. We are engaging with local authorities as part of that.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: In October 2025, An Post wrote to the Department of communications requesting consent for an increase to pensions of 6% from 1 January 2025 and a further increase of 1% from 1 June 2025.

Last year, the Department of communications received a request for a pension increase of 2.5% for Eir, formerly Telecom Éireann, pensioners with effect from 1 January 2025. As both Ministers will know, these pensioners do not receive increases in the State pension. They rely on the agreed adjustment mechanisms. The pension schemes are private, well regulated and in strong financial health. Our retired An Post and Eir workers have worked incredibly hard to connect generations of people in this country. They deserve these increases. They are affordable. They need them now. When will the Government sign off on the pension increases for An Post and Eir pensioners?

Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): I acknowledge Deputy O'Meara for raising this matter. These are important workers who have given a huge amount of service to the State through the Department of Posts and Telegraphs, An Post, Eircom and, latterly, Eir, which is now a private company. The Department of communications has signed off on its element of this. The other element is with the Department of public expenditure and reform. We can provide a more comprehensive reply by email later on.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I signed off on the An Post one on Monday, so it should be concluding.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are out of time, but I propose to take the two remaining speakers offering. They will have 30 seconds each.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: What is the Government planning to do about the devastation of the coastline in north Wexford and south Wicklow? I am talking about Cahore, Glascarrig, Courtown, Castletown, Arklow and right up to Brittas Bay. There are few people in Dublin who do not have fond memories of Courtown. The beautiful and historic Courtown Woods have lost an area equivalent to 18 football pitches over the past few decades. The Kiltunnel walking trail is being swept away and the Arklow walking trail all the way up to Brittas is being devastated. These coastal walks are very important for health and well-being. They are being absolutely devastated. What measures is the Government taking?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I appreciate the Deputy raising this. I know the devastation that has been caused all across the south east, both to community infrastructure and to many people's homes. Significant work is ongoing across Government, led by the Taoiseach's office and the Cabinet committee on coastal erosion, to provide better support for areas affected by coastal erosion. We are working with the OPW. The Deputy will have seen the recent announcement in respect of Donabate. We want to make more interventions to support community infrastructure and address the damage that has been done. I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, to respond to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Will the Minister explain how it is fair for Irish consumers to pay almost double what data centres pay for electricity? At a time when energy costs are still a cause of real financial hardship for many households across the country, data centres are paying almost half what households pay per kilowatt hour of electricity. They also pay dramatically less in network standing charges, so householders are actually being done over twice. Will the Minister explain why it is fair that data centres get energy at such discounted prices in comparison with Irish households?

Deputy Jack Chambers: As Deputy O'Gorman knows, the pricing system is decided by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, which sets the pricing parameters for individual consumers and for large energy users, including data centres. We need to move away from this polarising argument regarding households and digital infrastructure. Ultimately, we need to support households more. That is the work of the energy affordability task force. The argument to which I refer really shows a degrowth philosophy to try to undermine digital infrastructure in our State. That will undermine growth capability in the longer term. AI and digital infrastructure will play a critical role in that growth. We need to be cognisant of that in the context of the attacks on digital infrastructure we see from some Members.

Special Needs Assistants: Statements

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): Over the course of a two-hour debate last night, I listened carefully to what colleagues had to say about the vital role played by special needs assistants, SNAs, in the lives of children and young people with special educational needs. Today, protests involving parents, teachers, SNAs and members of school communities will take place across the country. I know that people are angry and frustrated at what is being portrayed as the removal of essential supports for young people. That is why I want to restate this Government's position. We are fully committed to supporting children with special educational needs and we will implement our programme for Government commitments to deliver on this objective. No cuts are or will be proposed to the provision of SNA support to children and young people across our school system.

As a teacher, I know the value of our SNAs, teachers and special education teachers. I know that children thrive in school thanks to the supports provided by those dedicated and hard-working school staff. I know how vital these dedicated staff are in helping young people gain independence and confidence in the classroom and in their studies. As a teacher, I could not stand over changes to special education services, particularly at a time when we know the needs are profound and when Government has repeatedly stated that improving the lives of people with a disability or a special educational requirement is a priority.

That is why Government this week agreed a number of measures that will give clarity to schools, parents, young people and SNAs. These measures are that: 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 2026-27 school year; and the SNA redeployment scheme, the SNA workforce development plan and changes to the 2014 circular outlining the role of a SNA will be advanced before any further decisions are taken. Working alongside

almost 22,000 special education teachers, this September will see almost 25,000 SNAs in our schools playing a key role in supporting children and young people with care needs.

Working hand in hand with teachers, SNAs are paramount in helping children to achieve. That is why I fully understand why, over the last week, we have heard genuine concern and worry from SNAs, schools and parents about how they and their loved ones might be affected by any changes to school allocations. However, we have also heard a lot of misinformation about how the Government is supposedly cutting supports, undermining SNAs and failing to invest in our education system. It is important to bring clarity to these issues.

This Government has nothing but respect for SNAs, teachers, special education teachers, schools, students and their families. I fully appreciate, endorse and share my Department's insistence that special education policies are child-centred and designed to assist young people to thrive in school and to help them to reach their full potential. It would be useful to outline the resources that have been invested in special education over the past number of years. This year, we will invest more than €3 billion to support children. Funding has never been higher and now represents almost a quarter of the entire education budget.

Our ambition is that the vast majority of children will be educated in mainstream schools alongside their siblings and peers, with supports, including special education teachers and SNAs, where required. We also know that some children need additional help, which is why we now have more than 3,700 special classes in our schools across the country, compared with 1,800 just five years ago. This will increase again in September to over 4,000 special classes. The Government also appreciates that some children have more complex needs and require more intensive supports. That is why we now have 129 NCSE-supported special schools in this country, compared to 114 five years ago. Recognising the increased need we have seen in this country in recent years, more than 30,000 children are in specialist school settings today, compared with 18,000 just five years ago. That reflects the actions of a Government that cares about our children and young people with additional educational needs.

We are also mindful that more nuanced and specialist supports are needed. The summer programme, previously known as July provision, has gone from strength to strength in recent years. We now have funding of €62 million to ensure that as many schools as possible can take part in the programme. The number of children participating in the programme grew from 13,000 in 2019 to more than 70,000 last year.

A real game-changer is the new education therapy service, which was a commitment in the programme for Government that is now being realised.

Earlier this month, I was pleased to announce details of the roll-out, with the first speech and language therapists and occupational therapists due to begin work in 45 special schools on a phased basis from April. I am pleased to inform the House that the initial recruitment campaign for 90 therapists is now closed, with interviews currently under way. There was a very good response with almost 200 candidates applying for posts, and interviews will be concluded early next month with panels formed and jobs offered. Further roll out of the service will occur on a phased basis. It is envisaged that all special schools will have access in the 2026-2027 school year. This service will be expanded over time to include special and mainstream classes. Our ambition around special education is set out in the programme for

Government, which includes 20 separate actions aimed at supporting children. I am committed to delivering all of them.

I also want to put to bed the suggestion that the Government was proposing to make hundreds of SNAs redundant, a measure that would fly in the face of what we are trying to achieve. To be clear: 23,179 SNAs were allocated to schools for the 2025-2026 school year. Last year, 21,579 SNAs were allocated. Next September, the allocation will rise again to 24,896. The numbers do not lie. We are not cutting SNAs.

It is worth noting that budget 2026 provided that an additional 1,700 SNAs would join the education system in the coming September. By way of comparison, Sinn Féin's general election manifesto committed to providing an average of 1,000 SNAs per year, the Labour Party sought 1,200 in this year's budget and the Social Democrats sought 1,000. The Government is exceeding all these targets. Our decision this week adds another 500 SNAs to the system for 2026.

Managing these valuable SNAs is crucially important to ensure that resources are allocated to schools with the highest level of need. It is therefore important that I speak to the vital role played by the National Council for Special Education, NCSE. 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. This includes the allocation of SNA support to schools. I fully support the NCSE in its work. To allay any concerns people may have, it is important to give some context on how 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. They know our education system. Among their other duties, SENOs also undertake school reviews, which have been a feature of our system for many years. In the 2024-2025 school year, around 1,400 reviews were conducted. In the current school year, some 1,000 reviews were conducted.

Schools are notified of reviews in advance, and the NCSE undertakes a robust process to ensure they are based on the care needs of an individual school because - as Members of the House are aware - SNAs are allocated to schools, not individual children. The NCSE is not charged with cutting resources. It appreciates the complexities of young people and school life and deploys leniency in its outcomes, working to retain supports available to children.

Among the information the NCSE requires to conduct a review are student support files for each young person. These files are compiled by the teacher and are an individualised learning plan that documents the young person's strengths, interests and needs, as well as the priority learning needs that have been agreed - with teachers, parents and the young person - as the basis for targets and interventions. The targets can include socio-emotional targets, behavioural targets and language targets as well as learning targets. The progress young people make in reaching their targets should be monitored and reviewed regularly, with all developments documented in the student support plan.

The information contained is important not just to help assess progress or particular challenges that might arise - and the interventions put in place to assist the young person concerned - but also to help determine the level of need across the whole school. Last November, my Department's inspectorate published a report on the use of the student support

files. It found that in a small percentage of schools, no student support files were in place and in another small number of schools, no learning needs for the current or previous school year were recorded. While mindful of the pressures placed on our schools, it does not serve children well if these files are not updated and used to measure progress, particularly when they play such an important role in determining the provision of supports. I will work with my Department to assist schools on this matter and provide any supports required.

The NCSE is mindful that parents know what is best for their child, which is why SENOs ask that parents complete a questionnaire outlining the care needs of their child to help inform their reviews. Parents who may have a 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. This information from parents and guardians is vitally important to help young people successfully progress in their journey through school. To ensure that a full picture is captured, the review process also includes consultation with staff in the school, including class teachers, special education teachers, SNAs and principals. Only when all this information is gathered can a robust assessment be made.

As I previously said, the NCSE works to retain supports for children but circumstances can and do arise where the same level of SNA support is no longer required - such as where a student or students with highly significant care needs leave the school. There is also the ideal scenario where children gain more independence and more confidence in their learning and they no longer require the same level of support. These outcomes are what we all want, and what our system is designed to achieve. These are the measures of success for young people.

I reject the assertion that the NCSE operates, as one Member of this House has claimed, as an "unaccountable gatekeeper". Checks and balances are in place to ensure the review process is robust and stands up to scrutiny. Once a SENO has finished a school review, a national panel within the NCSE reviews the decision to ensure consistency and that care needs are being captured. If a school is not satisfied with the review, it can appeal. This appeal is adjudicated by NCSE staff who were not involved in the original review. If the 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 previously stated, the Government has agreed that three key documents must be finalised and published to provide additional clarity to our system of reviews. The first is the SNA redeployment scheme, which has long been 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 to be finalised is a review of a 2014 circular outlining the role of the SNA. This work will be advanced and completed as a priority. The third document is the SNA workforce development plan, which was developed following extensive discussion and engagement with SNAs and trade unions. Development of the plan involved 55 meetings across five working groups - each of which included two trade union representatives, one of whom was an SNA. There were also bilateral meetings with trade unions, and meetings with a dedicated SNA stakeholder group.

Last night, the Opposition urged the Government to "professionalise" the work of SNAs. We are already doing this. The SNA workforce development plan, which is near completion, has been co-designed with SNAs. They were specifically included in the working groups to ensure the plan captures and reflects their professional experience.

After these three documents are published, the NCSE will commence reviews of supports provided to schools for the 2027-2028 academic year, which will uphold the integrity of the process. Any school that believes it needs more support can request assistance from the NCSE, which can help with the effective deployment of SNA resources.

Schools can also request a review of their allocation if care needs change at any point during the school year.

I understand the anger and upset that arose this week, but I do not, as some have claimed, blame the NCSE for this situation. The NCSE did the work it is mandated to do. I have full confidence in the NCSE. It fulfilled its role to ensure that special education resources are allocated to the schools with the greatest need. I regret to say that some SENOs and staff have been subject to unwarranted abuse over recent weeks. This is completely unjustified. NCSE staff are doing the job they are mandated to do. Whatever anger people may have towards the Government, there is no justification for taking that anger out on dedicated, honourable and diligent professionals, and I regret that this has happened. I fully accept that the process and outcomes were not properly communicated. That is the fault of Government. I will work to ensure this does not happen again.

I will address a point made by Sinn Féin last night when it made the charge that SNAs had been "disrespected" by the Government. Just last week in Northern Ireland, teaching assistants - who obviously fulfil a different role from SNAs but which are nonetheless an extremely important support for many children - told the BBC they were "undervalued", in part because they are only paid during term time. For clarity, full-time SNAs here are paid from 1 September to 31 August, the full school year, reflecting the importance we attach to their role. Juliana Harkin, a classroom assistant for ten years, told the BBC her role was "undervalued" and that the "powers that be" do not realise that classroom assistants go "above and beyond". For information, the "powers that be" in Northern Ireland are the Government of which Sinn Féin is a member. Last night, that party claimed in this House: "We stand with every child with additional needs". In Northern Ireland it is a different story. There, it refuses to pay classroom assistants for the full school year and, as Ms Harkin said, does not understand their role.

This Government is committed to an education system where every child and young person feels and is valued, and is actively supported and nurtured to reach their full potential. We accept, however, that the system is not working as well as it could. We know that children do not want to feel different from their peers, and we need to talk about children going to school, rather than going to a special class or special school. We need to move away from using the term "special" education. Instead, we must strive to develop an education system which supports students of all abilities without attaching a label.

I was struck by a radio interview yesterday with Derval McDonagh from Inclusion Ireland. She made the point that what is needed was a much deeper and wider look at our education system to help shape a fully inclusive model. I completely agree, and work is progressing in this regard. Just last June, my Department published a review of the Education for Persons

with Special Educational Needs, EPSEN, Act. The review garnered more than 28,000 responses, and sets out 51 recommendations to help create an education system that is inclusive, equitable and fit for purpose for children and young people of all abilities. Separately, my Department will shortly complete a piece of work with Finland which will help inform the development of an inclusive education system, drawing on best practice internationally.

There is much work to do, and this work will be informed by consultation, meaningful engagement and co-design with education stakeholders, families and young people. I will be guided by the central premise and ambition that this Government is fully committed to supporting children of all abilities to attend school in their community and that their journey through the education system will be positive, nurturing and help them to achieve their ambitions, whatever they may be. I assure the House, the people protesting around the country, families, school communities and young people that this Government is listening. We are committed to doing the right thing and ensuring that supports are provided to those who need them.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to these statements. I want to correct the record of the Dáil. The Minister said that, by comparison, Sinn Féin's general election manifesto committed to providing an average of 1,000 SNAs per year. I think she was talking about special education teachers, not SNAs. When it comes to SNAs, the Minister has not provided 1,000 special education teachers-----

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: There are 1,700.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Sinn Féin is setting the yardstick in relation to that. When it comes to special needs assistants, there were 1,700 last year. Sinn Féin provided for 1,900. How many were there this year? There were 1,700 again this year. Sinn Féin provided for 1,850. Over the last couple of years, had Sinn Féin been in Government, we would have had hundreds more special needs assistants. I would like to correct the record of the Dáil in relation to that.

Last night, the Dáil sent a unified and powerful message. We unanimously agreed on the need for urgent action to protect SNA provision and, more important, to protect the children who depend on it. We laid out a clear motion. The Minister and Minister of State agreed to it. In agreeing to that motion, the Government agreed to abandon the disastrous 2025-26 review and reverse the cuts that have caused cruel uncertainty for families and the SNAs who dedicate their lives to supporting some of our most vulnerable children.

There is one part of the motion that I want to focus on today because it goes to the heart of the dysfunction that we have seen. It called on the Government to "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". For far too long, decisions about our children's care have been made behind closed doors. A point was made that the NCSE is being unaccountable gatekeepers. That is not a criticism of the NCSE; it is a criticism of the Minister and her predecessors. She has given the NCSE and the SENOs an impossible job. She has tied their

hands. That is the issue that has to be resolved here. As was said so many times yesterday, we must trust schools. The point was made yesterday that the Minister trusts principals to allocate SNA resources within their schools but she does not trust them to tell her how many SNAs they need. That is the conundrum and contradiction in all of this. There needs to be a change of path. In all of her contributions, the Minister has not, for one second, shown humility and I have not heard a recognition of the hurt and pain this has caused. Nor have I heard that there will be a step change in the approach to all of this.

There has been real concern about the Government's response to the 2014 circular. It is out of date and needs to be completely overhauled. We have just come from a meeting of the education committee that discussed this precise topic. What did we hear from the Taoiseach yesterday? He said we have to be very careful about expanding the role of SNAs and we have to think about it long and hard. I have thought about it long and hard, as have SNAs and everybody working with children with disabilities. They live with it every single day and they know the 2014 circular must be overhauled. We need to recognise the roles that SNAs play and resource them and allocate them on that basis.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Yesterday, the Taoiseach appeared incredulous, even dismissive, at the suggestion from my party leader, Deputy Mary Lou McDonald, that we need a new departure in special education. He might not be so shocked if he actually listened to those on the ground, the parents fighting for their children, the SNAs working well beyond their contracts and the schools trying to hold the system together. The central issue here is not the redeployment scheme, no matter how often Ministers repeat it. The real issue is that the criteria determining who qualifies for support are outdated and no longer reflect the evolving needs of children in our classrooms.

I welcome the Minister's confirmation that no further reviews will be undertaken until the workforce development plan and updated circular are published, but this is only the first step. It should have happened a long time ago, certainly before any NCSE review letters went out to schools. The Department's review of the EPSEN Act, published last summer, stated that the workforce development plan would be delivered by September 2025.

Its first pillar explicitly recognises the evolving role of the SNA. Had that role been properly expanded and recognised in policy last September, we might not be in this mess today. Instead, a State-wide review was initiated using criteria the Government itself had already tactically acknowledged were outdated. This is a serious oversight. It raises serious questions about accountability and the persistent buck-passing between the Department and the NCSE.

We also need a candid discussion of how reviews are carried out. SNAs have told me of SENO classroom visits where there was no engagement with the child and no meaningful consultation with the SNA. This is not a child-centred approach. It is bureaucratic box-ticking. This anecdote also speaks to the question of respect for SNAs and the expertise they hold as professionals accompanying children throughout their school journeys. In recent weeks, we have had an outpouring of public support for SNAs. People recognise their value. The real test will be in contract negotiations on full-time hours, pensions, the 72 additional hours, redeployment and formal recognition as public servants. The Government says it recognises their value but words are not enough.

Many of the concerns I mentioned were raised in the EPSEN review authored by the Minister's own Department. Why conduct reviews if absolutely nothing comes from their recommendations? That question must be asked. These challenges do not exist in isolation. Lack of SNAs, oversized classes, redesignation of mild general learning disability, MGLD, schools and the shortage of special classes and school places are all interconnected. They require proper sustained investment. It should be noted that no parent seeks an SNA support for their child if they do not need it. A new departure means ramping up investment in education, which is something that will surely yield a dividend.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I will focus on an issue I found in Roscommon and Galway. This time, it is not in relation to cuts *per se*, but a situation where schools do not have the correct or adequate number of SNAs in the first place. I will give one example. I provided a letter of support for a school that is appealing its SNA allocation. That school has two full-time SNAs and one part-time SNA. The two full-time SNAs are with two children who are a flight risk and have a number of primary care needs. Those children cannot be left unattended for the start of the school day, throughout and to the end of the school day. That is the two SNAs. The SNA who is part time is working with eight children, all with additional needs and a variety of needs. It is not possible for that SNA to do her job as a part-time SNA, yet that school has been told it has the required number of SNAs. The school looked for a review itself. It was half-terrified when it looked for it, but it was told it would hold what it has, which is what it is appealing now. We should not have a situation where a part-time SNA has to try to deal with the needs of eight children. It is not fair on the SNA and it is certainly not fair on the eight children. That is just one example of one school in my constituency.

I know of other cases where children have to leave school early because the SNA finishes at a certain time and has to go home. In 2026, it is a shame to have any child in a classroom not receiving the support they deserve and are entitled to simply to get them through the school day. We have a serious issue here and we need to resolve it. We need to ensure that every child in every school has the SNA they need - nothing more and nothing less.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Last week, I received a letter from 21 school principals across Donegal. I sent it to the Minister and the Minister of State. I ask them to meet with a delegation of these principals. They have asked that the Ministers meet them in the school to see exactly what they are talking about. I ask them to read the letter because it specifically deals with the issues. It is not just about these letters that cause great distress and anguish to schools across the State. The first I knew about it was when it affected one of my local schools, St. Oran's National School in Buncrana. The system that is in place and the outdated criteria just do not reflect what the special needs assistant does today, as we speak in 2026. It does not reflect the central importance SNAs have in schools. Teachers - in this case the principal speaking for the teachers - are struggling to deal with the existing criteria.

The big lesson for the Government to take is that the regulations that go back to 2014, as Deputy O'Rourke said, are just not fit for purpose any more. They have to be scrapped. The Government has to put in place a new framework for SNAs, one that is based on the real experience teachers and SNAs are seeing in schools. It is important that this is not just a case of kicking the can down the road and a review of the review. This has to mean a complete

change to the framework that is there. It is not working and does not reflect the reality. That is the lesson that needs to be learned.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I welcome the statements by the Minister and the Minister of State confirming there will be no cuts to SNAs across schools this year. From speaking to SNAs and parents, however, they are worried that this is just a pause. What will happen next year?

I listened to the Minister's speech. She spoke about SENOs knowing our education system. A lot of Deputies spoke today and yesterday about the 2014 circular that is totally outdated. When the policy was being developed, SENOs felt they were not listened to, but they are the professionals and the gang that live it every day in schools. I have certainly listened to that. We had an online meeting last Monday. There was well over 1,000 people at that. We listened to parents, teachers, SENOs and SNAs pouring their hearts out with grief and fear. One woman from Cork apologised before she even opened her mouth because she was so upset. These are not my words but this lady's words; she said she never felt so undervalued in her entire life. She never felt so broken for doing something that she loved and felt that there was no answer.

I welcome the July provision. I sat on the autism committee, which made 109 recommendations. I would like that to improve and keep going forward. The Minister also mentioned dialogue, the new platforms, the new policy documents that are coming out and the work between the Department and the unions. I will flag something the unions have told me straight out. They said that what would happen is they will go into a dark room, the unions and the Department will say their piece, but it will be the Department's way or the highway. I wanted to flag that because if we want to do the right thing, we should engage with every single body to get the policies right. If we do, we will never be back here again.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The Minister may want to try to deflect from her statement today but Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil are responsible for the SNA crisis. It is of their own making and is compounded by their chaotic, uncertain handling of the mess. Letters did go out. It would be something if they recognised the distress caused to parents, children and SNAs, held their hands up, recognised their mistake and apologised. They should not try to blame the NCSE. It is not its fault; the Minister is in charge. She should apologise and make clear to the schools facing cuts to their SNA allocation that these will not go ahead. However, the Government chooses to further compound the cruelty with a review of a review, with no date for when this will be completed. Parents, children, SNAs and teachers are expected to pick up the slack. They deserve better than the Government spinning a review to provide cover for a quieter climbdown in a few weeks or in the mistaken hope it might succeed in getting this over the line at a later point. What they deserve is to have the Government now clearly, categorically and without equivocation address and resolve the hurt the Minister and Minister of State have caused.

Sinn Féin's motion last night offered every Member of the House the opportunity to apologise to every school, SNA and family impacted. The Government should commit to abandoning the debacle-laden review, publishing a comprehensive SNA workforce development plan, developing a genuine partnership with SNAs and their unions, and implementing a fair and transparent SNA redeployment scheme to provide job security for existing SNAs to retain their invaluable experience within the school system.

2 o'clock

That is what recognition of hurt the Government has caused actually looks like, and it is so familiar to all the SNAs who are protesting this evening for that very reason.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I spoke on this last night here in the Dáil and again today with the Taoiseach. This has been an absolutely catastrophic number of weeks for so many people for whom this matter has caused so much stress.

I said last night that, as a Parliament, we have to take account of the fact that so many children, particularly those with additional needs, along with parents, SNAs and school communities, were deeply affected. We cannot just turn around on a whim all of a sudden and stop talking about this, because for two weeks straight schools were deeply affected by what they were led to believe was the taking of resources from children. Ultimately, that is what happened.

We had a policy in place. The Department implemented that policy through the SENOs and NCSE. Schools received letters stating they were to lose or gain SNAs. There was a huge outcry of support for SNAs and then, all of a sudden, the policy was scrapped. It was rowed back. The political wind changed and we were offered €19 million to save the day.

Last year, I stood on the streets of Cork city and outside this Dáil with parents who were trying to access special classes for their children. To be fair to the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, he worked extremely hard to get classes set up and make them available. We did that but this year again there is another issue. It relates to SNAs. It is a question of resources and classes, and it should not be the case that every single year it is the parents and children who are deeply affected by *ad hoc* decision-making by the Government.

Deputy Duncan Smith: The chaos this Government has inflicted on SNAs, parents and children countrywide has been absolutely appalling. I, like many, have listened to the Minister in this Chamber and on the national airwaves, but after a week of listening I am still not sure Ministers even know what their position was. Parents do. SNAs do. Schools do. They know that the Government rushed through a review with no real consultation, and seemingly no real understanding of the role of SNAs and definitely no real plan for schools. We know there was no real plan because we have heard this directly from the schools themselves.

Thornleigh Educate Together National School, which is in Swords in my constituency, had a full-school SNA review in December 2024, and an increase of 2.66 SNAs was granted in January 2025. In September 2025, it enrolled a large number of pupils with needs in junior infants and in other classes, which is exactly what we wanted schools to do. The school identified 15 of the children as requiring significant SNA support. It effectively had to use two SEN teachers in an SNA role as a result. This was intended as a temporary measure while it engaged with the NCSE. That engagement happened and a focus review was carried out in November where only paperwork related to the newly emerged needs was examined. To the school's horror, it received an email at the start of February this year stating not only that it would not be provided with an additional SNA allocation to meet the newly emerged needs but also that its existing allocation would be cut by one post. Can anyone explain how that works to me, the parents of the children, the children themselves or the SNA whose job was cut?

Thornleigh was not the only school in my constituency affected, of course. Donabate Portrane Educate Together National School was told it too was facing a cut to its number of SNAs. From start to finish, the handling of this was total madness.

There are also the cases of other schools. I have raised in this Chamber and directly with the Minister of State the case of River Valley Community National School, which had different needs in relation to providing a safe learning environment for children with additional needs. That was put on the back burner because of this absolute shambles.

We welcome the backtrack, but there has been an absolute crisis – one of the Minister's making.

Deputy Ged Nash: The announcement rushed out on Monday night was designed to do two things: quell the Dáil on Tuesday and silence SNAs and families on Wednesday. It has not succeeded. SNAs are not stupid. As Deputy Bacik said yesterday during Leaders' Questions, they know a pause is not a plan.

The Taoiseach's performance yesterday during Leaders' Questions was incredible. It showed signs of a Government in absolute panic mode. It was a shambles. It was the leader of a country throwing civil servants in the Department of education and the NCSE under the school bus.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Hear, hear.

Deputy Ged Nash: It was shameful for and unbecoming of someone who delights in telling us he is a former education Minister. It would serve him and the rest of the Government better, and would restore some trust in politics, if he, the Minister and the Minister of State just admitted that they all got this horribly wrong. Instead, they apologised for how things were communicated. It was absolutely shambolic. They did not apologise at all for the policy itself. That is telling.

I am aware that there are SENOs across this country whose very first job over the past two weeks was to go into schools, based on the letters received, and tell them they were going to experience cuts to their SNA complement. They did this because the NCSE was forced to introduce arbitrary cuts with no policy rationale whatsoever other than to help with budgetary overruns in the Department of education. That is the nub of it. The trust is broken between SNAs and the Government, and a pause will not cut it. There needs to be a new plan and, ultimately, SNAs themselves, families and young people need to be involved in framing that new plan.

The Minister is suppressing replies to parliamentary questions. She refused to release to me the names of schools in Louth that received NCSE letters prior to the first pause. These letters exist and they are a matter of public record. The shambles the Government has made for itself is demonstrated by the fact that it is simply refusing to do something it is obliged to do, namely send to me information already on the public record by way of replies to parliamentary questions. The Minister is obliged to answer and must confirm that she will.

Deputy Mark Wall: About two weekends ago, I took a call from an SNA who informed me they had been told their job was under threat following a letter the school they were employed in had received from the NCSE. The fear, heartbreak and anxiety in that call will stay with me for a long time. Not knowing if you have a job or how you will pay your mortgage and look after your family reflects the reality of what a Department has caused in sending out the letters. It is the reason I raised it with the Taoiseach the following Tuesday, the first opportunity available to me. The panic in the SNA's call has got to be a watershed moment for us all in this House regarding how SNAs are treated. They must not be left in a position where they will continue to dread the call to the principal's office. In some cases that I heard about recently, they were being offered limited-hours contracts that a part-time employee would have difficulty with.

I have been inundated by calls from families who have told me their children with special educational needs flourished because of the special bond they had with their SNAs. Those families cannot understand why a Government would have wanted to break that bond and jeopardise the progress their loved ones were making.

In my own area, three schools - Scoil Mhichíl Naofa, Athy, Patrician Secondary School, Newbridge, and St. Joseph's in Halverstown - received letters. The panic in the calls I received has got to be the watershed. The Government must not continue to treat SNAs like it has been treating them as a result of the letters.

We all hear that SNA numbers are increasing. The three schools that contacted me were to see cuts. That is the reality of it. They were losing their SNAs. The SNAs were losing their livelihoods and those children who needed them were losing the special bond. That is the reality.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: No forgiveness: that was the message I received from a parent yesterday about the attempted SNA cuts. On 6 February, the Minister proudly announced funding for 45 special schools. The announcement read, "Every child deserves to reach their full potential." Three weeks later, the Government moved to strip SNA support from thousands of children across the country. Is it a question of every child or only those children who fit the spreadsheet?

On 7 February, at the Fine Gael disability conference in Galway, the right words were spoken. After the applause faded, the photographs were taken. Was it intended to make the announcement, host the conference and quietly reduce the supports once attention shifted? That was a miscalculation. It did not rely on principles or reckon on teachers, SNAs and parents saying "No more cuts".

Here in the Oireachtas, if a Member has additional needs, support is provided without hesitation. No one is told to manage with less. Why is that not the same for the children in our education system?

Parents are already exhausted, fighting daily for basic services. The Government relies on that exhaustion. It hopes families are too tired to resist.

There was an effort to take away another piece of stability the SNAs had. We do not need cuts; we need planning, strategic and systemic change and respect for children with additional needs.

The next time the Government says "every child", I hope it means it. Families will not forget and will not forgive.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak on this. Stopping the cut to SNAs in schools was the right thing to do and I think it has given some people reprieve. I have been out to visit several schools this week, sat in staff rooms and helped schools with their appeals. I met parents and some students who benefit from SNA support. SNA support is a key enabler in Irish education. It allows people to fulfil their schooldays in a happy, supported way. To take that away can be devastating for the child and the parent, and then there is the uncertainty that brings for the SNA. Many feel that this is just a reprieve and they are looking for certainty beyond today as to what will happen next and what will happen in the new school year. I refer to timelines in particular. We want to know when all these reviews will happen and when Circular 0030/2014 will be reviewed. We need to hear those timelines. SNAs need certainty.

Before becoming a TD, I was a primary school teacher, and many moons ago I worked for a year as a special needs assistant. This has to be a reset moment where we define properly and put proper value on the work of SNAs in all schools throughout the country. The schools I have visited this week are in Flagmount, Feakle and Kilfenora. Many more are affected by this and they want certainty going forward.

Crucially, we need to deal with Circular 0030/2014, brought in by the Labour Government in 2014. It is not working and does not reflect what is going on in schools throughout the country. It needs to be overhauled, and I would hate to think that it would still be in existence this time next year.

Finally, SENOs do a fine job. Many of them are very good, but I have come across very many cases where SENOs are overriding the expert opinions of educational psychologists. That would not happen in any other sphere. Not one of us here would go down the street to one of the acute hospitals in Dublin, walk up to the surgical theatre and start telling the surgeon how they should be doing their job or overriding their expert opinion. That does not happen in any field. There is a legal point to this. We cannot have someone who is not an educational psychologist pick up a report and diminish what it actually involves. That is wrong, and that is a legal point the Government will have to grasp because it is central to this issue we find ourselves in.

Deputy Albert Dolan: When I speak about special needs assistants today, I want to do so in a fashion that is factual and considered because behind all the headlines and all the political noise over the past week there are real children, real families and real SNAs who show up every single morning to do extraordinary work. Special needs assistants are not an add-on to the education system; they are part of the foundation of inclusive education in Ireland. They support children with additional care needs, assisting with mobility, personal care, communication, emotional regulation and helping students participate safely and meaningfully in school life. Their work allows teachers to teach, schools to function and children to belong.

Over the past decade the number of SNAs has increased significantly in response to growing and more complex needs. The State now funds thousands of SNA posts annually through the Department of education, with allocations advised by the NCSE. The expansion did not happen

by accident. It reflects a policy decision that children with additional needs should be supported in mainstream education wherever possible. That is the right policy direction, but if we are being honest, the growth has presented massive challenges. Schools need clarity well in advance of each academic year that allocations are transparent and evidence-based, that SNAs themselves are recognised as skilled professionals within our education system and that communication with schools shall never create fear again.

The Minister has visited east Galway and has met with many different schools, but I want to highlight this. One of the biggest issues in our education sector in east Galway is the demand for SNAs and the need for more SNAs and for schools to be better supported. The need is growing but we need to rise to meet it.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: When the 2014 circular from the Department of education is updated, I hope it will clearly recognise something that every teacher and every parent already knows: that every school in Ireland has students with additional needs and, therefore, every school should be entitled to at least one special needs assistant. I welcome the recent news from the Minister that there will be no reduction in the allocation of SNAs for the upcoming year, but needs in schools do not always present as dramatic or highly visible. Yes, some students require significant support with care, mobility or medical needs, but there are many more children whose needs may be described as mild or moderate: difficulties with organisation, emotional regulation, social interaction, anxiety or attention. On their own these needs may seem small, but when you add them all together across an entire school they are not small at all.

I welcome the upcoming reforms to redefine the role of the SNA to include supporting non-physical needs, but in schools that are fortunate enough to have an SNA allocated for significant care needs, that SNA often becomes a quiet pillar of support for the wider school community. Once their core duties are met, they can help steady a child who is overwhelmed, support inclusion in the yard or assist a teacher during particularly challenging parts of the day. That flexibility benefits everyone.

Schools that do not have an SNA allocation, however, are at a clear disadvantage. The needs still exist. They do not disappear because there is no allocation, but instead the burden falls entirely on already stretched teachers and school leaders. This impacts not only the children with additional needs but the whole classroom. If we are truly committed to inclusion, then inclusion must be universal. Every school should begin with a baseline allocation of one SNA, and from that starting point allocations can be reviewed and revised upwards where the level of need requires it but never, ever down to zero. The only direction support should move is up, in response to identified need.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: To be quite straight about this, the heart of this problem is the 2014 circular and the recognition only of primary care needs of children. If you spend 30 seconds in this country talking to a special needs assistant about their job, you will know that circular does not even nearly reflect what SNAs do every day. It is a crucial part of the job, but they do so much more: breaks with children who are overstimulated or overwhelmed or who might need even to go for a walk for a few minutes, classroom assistance for other children, children who are a flight risk and children who are school refusers. Those children are not recognised in the same way when it comes to an SNA allocation as those with primary care needs. That is

wrong. In 2014 Circular 30 was introduced by a Labour Party Minister for education. It was wrong then and it is wrong now. Reviews are in and of themselves not necessarily bad. We see reviews every year when it comes to teacher allocations if the pupil-teacher ratio changes in schools, and they are not necessarily bad for SNAs, but as long as they are relying on the 2014 circular, they will not be fair on school communities, teachers, principals, SNAs or the children and families they support.

I welcome that the review has been paused. How the NCSE approached this is unacceptable and wrong, and I cannot shy back from that because I have spoken to principals who have faced those letters coming into their schools saying they will lose some SNAs. The individual who wrote the letter did not even put their name at the end of it for the principal to have someone to talk to afterwards. That is not an appropriate level of public service either.

Over the coming months the committee on education, of which I am a member, will do quite a lot of work on this. The NCSE and the Department of education will be before us, as I am sure the Minister and the Ministers of State will be at some stage too, and I will want to discuss the 2014 circular. It is essential. Next year we will have 25,000 SNAs in this country. That is brilliant, but let us have a circular that reflects the work they actually do.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: This is an important debate in that it focuses attention on those within our school system who need additional support. We need to acknowledge the very significant progress that has been made in the increase in the number of SNAs from 16,000 in 2020 to where it will be over 25,000 this year.

I also want to talk about the 16 new special schools that have been created since 2020, which are incredibly important, including one in Gorey, County Wexford. I know both the Minister and the Minister of State have visited it. It is already under pressure for space. I welcome in particular the fact that therapy-based services are now available in all those schools. Critical to this debate is that the focus has to be on the child and their family and on providing those supports. It cannot just be about the allocation of SNAs to schools; it has to be about the necessary support for the children specifically concerned.

I share colleagues' concerns about the National Council for Special Education. I think it failed in how it engaged on this issue with schools, and from a communications point of view it was a disaster.

I also want to express concern about the fact that in north Wexford we have been left without a SENO for some time. This is a concern.

SENOs are incredibly important in terms of being able to liaise with schools. As part of the review of the role of the SNA, we need to look at the role of the SENO in terms of the support they can give to the individual learner within the school system. The fact that we are now focusing on this issue is critical as we go on. It needs to continue to be remembered that the child has to be at the centre of this discussion.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Over the past number of weeks, I have listened intently to parents who are sick with worry. I have listened to special needs assistants who are lying awake at night wondering if they will have a job come September. These are jobs that they love and vocations they do with every fibre of their being. I have listened to children and their voices,

which are really important in this debate. They simply want to feel safe, supported and included in their own classrooms. What have they been met with over the past two and a half to three weeks? It is gaslighting. There is no other word for what they have been met with. They have been told there is no crisis. They have been told there will be no cuts. Then they were told that it would be paused. In Waterford, Government representatives were out in the space of one day with three different messages. The first was that it was all a conspiracy crafted by the Opposition. In the next couple of hours, it was that there were not cuts and what were people talking about. After that, it was that there were cuts but they were going to stop them.

The Government needs to listen to parents, SNAs and school leaders. If it had done that it would have heard what we in Sinn Féin heard when we had our public meeting. I know other parties in the Opposition have been engaging with SNAs as well. The depth of anger was striking. It was really astounding. The testimonies were raw and moving. The level of anxiety was so sharp. There is a real determination among these parents, SNAs and school leaders to ensure these children have access to an appropriate and proper education. We have to also be clear that there is a context here. The chaos did not come from nowhere. It came from Government decisions and policy. No matter how Government tries to throw Ministers, Ministers of State, the NCSE, schools and anybody and everybody they can under the bus over this, this is Government decision-making. This is policy writ large. Policy that has to be changed late at night by Government leaders is never good policy. It is the hallmark of bad policy.

Schools have been told of impending cuts and now what we have is a reprieve. It is not the reset that the sector desperately needs. While the review has stopped, the damage has already been done. Trust has been shattered. There will be protests outside this place this evening. There will be protests across the State today, tomorrow and Friday. Trust is gone. Parents are still anxious. They do not believe Government and what they have been told. SNAs do not believe the Government. We still do not know what September will look like in schools for these children. Will any child lose their SNA in September? That is the question. We need solid guarantees that will not happen. It should never have been a question in the first place.

One parent highlighted to me the difficulties with the circular and how it does not reflect the daily work they see done by SNAs for their child and other children in that class. It goes far beyond the narrow definition in the 2014 circular. This moment should be about properly valuing SNAs, understanding their work and updating the framework to reflect what they actually do. Here we have a broken system that needs to be changed. We have parents who are used to fighting for every therapy, support and piece of access they have for their child. They are going to continue fighting and mark my words, this battle is not over. People are going to hold the Minister and this Government accountable to what they have promised and said in the past number of days to ensure that no child is left without the support they need to secure an education.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I speak plainly about the role of SNAs and what they mean to children, families and schools and why the current situation has caused such anguish and confusion. What special needs assistants bring is “S” for security and safety, “N” for nurture and needs and “A”, they are advocates and assistants in our schools for our children who have additional needs. They are not add-ons to schools as somebody already said. They are not an extra that we might like. They are absolutely essential workers in our schools. I know the

Minister and Minister of State know that because we have had these conversations before. What has happened is that the actions the Government and its agencies have taken have eroded all of that trust. The difficulty now is that they will have to earn that trust back. I know they both want to do that.

What has happened is they have been forced to make announcements late at night to say there will not be any cuts. This is echoing Covid times, which is quite triggering for a lot of principals, when at five o'clock on a Friday there would be announcements saying they needed to action something by the next week. Announcements late at night are not great. There needs to be meaningful engagement and long-term planning. There are real challenges here with this focus on SNAs. If we move a bit from that, there is a number of things that are glaringly confusing about what is going to happen with special education. When there is no need for a diagnosis in 2027-2028, how is a school going to figure out what the needs will be for a child coming in? What will that mean for the mild, general learning disability schools? Will they no longer exist? Catch-all is no good for anybody because those students are thriving right now. When we take that service away, that is something that will be an absolute mess. That is something that will come up again in the future.

Last night on "The Late Debate" a parent rang in and said she had spoken to so many parents who feel lucky they get an assessment of need, a school place and that they have a SNA for their child. There should be no luck about this. This is a fundamental basic need and requirement that this State should be providing to any child who needs it. When we are not able to do that as a society, we are failing literally everyone, if we cannot look after the most vulnerable in our society. Tonight, there will be protests outside the Dáil and, as previously said, throughout the country.

There are three asks. The first concerns the circular from 2014. I know the Minister and Minister of State have accepted this needs to happen. We need to move on. The role has evolved. We need to let a new circular come out to explain exactly what that is and the limitations and absolute ability for what SNAs actually do in real life in schools. The second ask is that there needs to be consultation with all stakeholders by the Government. I am thankful to the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, for accepting that he will do that. I know the Taoiseach said that yesterday when I asked him during Questions on Policy or Legislation. If I can help in any way to facilitate that, I will. I know people want to talk about this with him. I know there will be respectful dialogue, so I look forward to that. The third thing is that the full redeployment model and the full role of SNAs needs to be moved out.

I reiterate the point I made yesterday. Redeployment for teachers works because they teach a curriculum, and they also have a relationship with young people. An SNA's role is relationship based. It is a skilled role. If you do not have a relationship with a child, the social and emotional regulation of that child will not happen. The relationship is fundamental. Redeployment is very important and needs to be nuanced. The Government cannot repeat the mistakes that have happened. It needs to learn from this. This is a really good learning moment. We need to bring humanity back into the classrooms and into the policies. I look forward in assisting in whatever I can with that.

Deputy Gary Gannon: It would be completely wrong to reframe this as some form of simple communication problem. This is a systematic policy failure. Successive governments have

designed a model that narrows how care is defined. It signed off on it and allowed letters to be issued. When the schools and the parents rightfully reacted, suddenly everyone seemed to be taken by surprise. Absolutely nothing about this was surprising. You cannot tighten SNA thresholds in overcrowded classrooms and pretend that nothing else will be impacted. You cannot remove complex need from the special education teacher allocation model and not expect the pressure to land somewhere else. You cannot speak about inclusion while refusing to deal with adult to child ratios in our classrooms. Inclusion is never just a slogan. Inclusion is done best when it is included as a staffing model.

Right now, teachers are managing classes that are larger and more complex than the structure was ever designed to support. Special needs assistants have become a pressure valve for a wider failure to invest in adequate teacher supply and class sizes. If we are being truly honest, this was not chaos caused by any school. It was chaos created by a system that in no way matches the reality of a classroom. If Government wishes to calm this down it must begin by stopping any conversation about narrowing supports and start rebuilding the architecture of our classrooms properly.

If the Government keeps trying to squeeze the system without strengthening it, the only people who will pay a price will be our children. We need to start valuing SNAs. Too often in this Chamber over the past six years, we have come in and spoken about SNA pay, their evaluation, the model from which they are accredited and how they are treated in classrooms. SNAs do an invaluable job. We need to start valuing them.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I will start local and then widen it out to the broader vision of inclusive education. Locally, we have been affected by this most recent debacle. Cliona O’Keeffe, who is the principal of Our Lady’s Boys National School in Ballinteer, made multiple media contributions in which she put it perfectly. She said that as a wealthy European country, surely we have enough money in our budget to pay for enough SNAs per school. Her school was told that its allocation would be cut from five to two, prompting waves of anxiety among the school community, parents, children, teachers and SNAs. I was canvassing in the area that week. Multiple people who answered their doors were distraught about what was coming down the line.

I will now widen it out and talk about the broader picture. In a brilliant op-ed in *The Journal*, Derval McDonagh said:

We owe it to this generation - and the next - to think bigger. To move from allocation debates to transformation. To ensure that every child can say with confidence: this school was built for me too.

My biggest frustration comes from listening to the Taoiseach defend, day after day, whether there is an increase or whether the allocations will be properly managed. This is all distracting from what we should be doing, which is implementing a fundamental systemic change in how we teach children in this country to one that is inclusive. We start by recognising the constitutional right of every child to an appropriate education and the State then going about realising that right. Tinkering with the number of SNAs and arguing about what the appropriate level is to completely underestimate the mammoth task the State faces to do exactly that, namely create inclusive education where no child is left behind, where no child is segregated and where we all benefit from a system that embraces difference.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The shambles we have seen over the past few weeks would suggest that either the Government does not adequately understand the crisis it is overseeing or the real meaning of inclusion for our children. The decision to cut the number of SNAs was a decision to cut, regardless of how the Government wants to spin it. It was a reduction and a curtailment of the duties on which an assessment would take place on the basis of a highly outdated circular. Nearly one third of the schools that were reviewed were told that the number of SNAs would be reduced. This was a cut. These reviews are clearly not fit for purpose. The question must be asked as to whether the NCSE is the appropriate body to carry out these assessments. Clearly, a change is needed in order to reflect the valuable work SNAs do so that they can provide the supports that are needed to children.

There is a better way forward. The review of the review is not good enough. We need to see the role of SNAs recognised properly and expanded to include regulation and communication. SNAs across the country, including those in my constituency, assist children with regulation, which is not mentioned in the 2014 circular, and communication, but this is not considered when allocating SNAs. The Minister must agree to an open and honest conversation with parents, unions, advocacy groups and school leaders, who we will see outside the Dáil later and who are rightly raising their voices because what they are doing is expressing that the system is not working for them. It is not working for SNAs, it is not working for children, it is not working for teachers and it is not working for parents. The Taoiseach states that there has been a huge increase in numbers, but the reality is that there is a need for this increase in order to make real inclusion in our classes work to support both children and the SNAs and teachers who are doing their best.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I thank the Minister and Minister of State for facilitating this debate. I thank them both for their efforts in recent days and weeks in securing the additional funding to ensure that SNA numbers in our schools will not be reduced. This will allow the space to plan for the future properly. We all know the important work that SNAs do. It has been referred to many times this afternoon during this debate. They play a vital role in school life building important relationships with students and becoming a central part of a student's life in school.

Unfortunately, the debacle in the past couple of weeks has resulted in unnecessary stress and anxiety for SNAs, teachers, parents and students. We cannot repeat these mistakes. Whatever the plan for the future is in terms of defining the role of the SNA and developing the workforce plan, we need to fully engage and consult with all those involved in the process to ensure that whatever resources are available are used in the most effective way possible so that each child is given the best support possible.

As a country, we need to be proud of the fact that we prioritise children with additional needs. We often hear figures. We refer to the increase in the budget to almost €3 billion this year, the fact that this represents 28% of the education budget and so on. These are facts we should be proud of. These figures are likely to increase in the years ahead and, again, we need to embrace that fact and welcome the fact that as a country, we are determined to ensure that each child is given the support he or she needs and has the potential to reach his or her full potential in life. We all know education is a game-changer. It can be life-changing for an individual. We all know that in this country and in many other countries in the past, children

were not given the opportunity to reach their full potential because they did not receive the support they deserved. I want to live in a country which celebrates the fact that additional needs get the spending and resources they need.

We will need to continue to increase the number of SNAs in our schools in the future. We have to plan and provide for this. There should be no more short-term, ill-considered reactions. This area is too important to the lives of too many people and we need to plan for the future in a considered and collaborative way.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I begin by acknowledging the scale of the Government's investment in special education. This year, over €3 billion is being invested in special educational supports. We will have nearly 25,000 SNAs in our schools in September - an additional 1,700 this year alone. The number of SNAs has increased by approximately 45% since 2020 and by 47% in my constituency of Tipperary. We cannot say that this is not significant progress. It reflects a genuine commitment by this Government.

Investment is not enough, however. What recent weeks have shown is that the framework underpinning SNA allocation, particularly the 2014 circular, may no longer reflect the realities of mainstream modern classrooms. The circular's emphasis on care needs has in practice created confusion and anxiety. Many children who do not meet a narrow interpretation of primary care needs nonetheless require structured support to access education safely and meaningfully. Teachers, SNAs and parents know this.

The pause in the review process should, therefore, be seen as an opportunity to modernise the criteria so that we clearly have a child-centred approach. It is an opportunity to put in place a coherent special education workforce plan that gives certainty to schools and SNAs. We must ensure that reviews are not perceived as resource-led exercises but are perceived as needs-led assessments grounded in professional judgement and the lived reality of classrooms. If we use this pause constructively to update policy, clarify criteria and strengthen planning, something positive can come from what has understandably been an upsetting period for many school communities. Let us match our record investment with a modernised framework that delivers certainty, dignity and inclusion school by school and child by child in order that every child will have the opportunity to reach the maximum of his or her ability.

Deputy John Clendennen: I will start by acknowledging the commitment of the Government to SNAs. Over €3 billion has been provided this year and there is a commitment to reach 26,000 SNAs by September. I also acknowledge all the other services and supports for education such as books, transport, uniforms or meals.

The role of the SNA has evolved so much in recent years and now comes with a level of complexity around behavioural, emotional and social care needs. In reality, they go above and beyond every day, are vital in the running of the classroom and are a conduit between teachers and children. Regarding deciding the best way forward, we need a root-and-branch overhaul of our education system, how we provide education and the impact not just on a special needs child but on the rest of the class and the teacher.

This should go beyond looking at human resources and should focus on financial support as well. In recent days, I reached out to every school in County Offaly. The feedback I received

was very constructive. They want to see a meaningful pathway forward to ensure that there is effectiveness. When a school like Dromakeenan National School tells me that it was waiting for a review and that this was cancelled at the last minute by the NCSE, or St. Manchan's National School in Tubber tells me that its allocation of SNAs was reduced from four to or Mercy Primary School in Birr indicates that it has been waiting a long time for an outcome, we have as questions about effectiveness of the NCSE and where that organisation stands in all of this.

There has not been enough ongoing engagement between teachers, principals and the NCSE. There has to be an understanding as to how these reviews are continuously pushed out, thereby creating a level of uncertainty and a lack of predictability for schools, particularly in the context of temporary SNAs. We need to take this opportunity and use it effectively to create a new platform that will operate in the interests of all our students going forward.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: This time two years ago, I was working as an SNA in a primary school. At the time, I was under no illusion as to what my job description was because my contract was in line Circular 0030/2014. I was employed, like all SNAs are currently employed, to assist in the care needs of pupils with disability in an educational context. The excellent class teachers who are qualified to teach are responsible, under that circular, for the education of all students in the classroom. That is the current SNA brief. On the ground, however, SNAs, myself included, worked way outside that brief to not just assist the child I was assigned to but also all of the other children in the classroom. Why? It is because SNAs, by their very nature, are kind, caring and helpful. We place children at the very centre of our days, just like teachers do in their teaching role. Classrooms in Ireland are positive spaces. It is important to put that on the record. The Irish school system is a good system whereby staff - be they SNAs, teachers, secretaries or caretakers - all care about the students that are in their schools.

In light of the SNA reviews, I know that people were worried, anxious, upset and angry at the process. To be fair to the SENOs and the NCSE more broadly, they are doing their jobs in line with the circular. It states that all SNA allocations are subject to annual reviews. That is their brief. To be fair, the Department of Education, the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, are fully aware that the circular is not reflective of the role of an SNA in 2026. A review of it has been ongoing for some time. The challenge relates to the difference in what an SNA is supposed to do versus what they actually do. I really look forward to the updated circular being published.

For parents, SNAs and schools, the fact is that no cuts are being proposed, nor will they be. Crucially, no review will happen until after the publication of three crucial pieces of information on the SNA redeployment scheme, the SNA workforce development plan and the updated 0030/2014 circular. What we really need to see when that review comes out is that the parameters upon which allocations are decided must be much more reflective of the realities of the needs that are present in an Irish classroom as we approach 2030.

My senior infant class sent me a lovely letter when I first got elected. They said that they hoped that my kind, caring and helpful SNA personality will help this country be better. Children, I am trying.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I listened to the Minister's comments yesterday. I cannot express how angry and frustrated SNAs, principals, teachers, parents and SENOs are. What the Government, including the Taoiseach, is trying to do is gaslight schools, parents and SNAs. The Government's policy is to blame everyone else. The buck stops here. I was in the Chamber two weeks ago when this matter was highlighted for the Taoiseach and the Minister. They doubled down at that point. Now, they are saying "We did not know the cuts were going to be this bad or that the review were going to be so severe." They did know, however, because we raised the matter. I raised it with the Minister two weeks ago. The Minister and the Taoiseach stated that they cannot understand the NCSE's approach. The NCSE is implementing Government policy. The Minister and the Taoiseach are quick to blame the NCSE for implementing the policy, but the Government wrote that policy.

I have correspondence from the Minister which states that the Department does not believe in giving SNA support to children in fifth and sixth class because they might be refused it in secondary school. I have that in writing from the Minister. The Minister and Taoiseach stated that this is not their policy and that they did not what was happening. The best one was the reference to bad communication. What a load of bluff. The Government is punishing vulnerable children on the off-chance that they may not have supports when they get into secondary school.

In the context of the cuts relating to SNAs, the Government is failing parents, schools, SNAs and, most importantly, children. It is making the job of SENOs impossible. A teacher's job is to lead a classroom and to ensure that the curriculum is taught. The job of the SNA is to ensure that children can follow. It is a simple system but it works, because SNAs are there to support the children who need it.

A child in fourth class spoke to me about his full-time SNA. There are five children in the class who have been diagnosed with autism and ADHD. The child in question said that his classroom was crazy when the SNA was out for one day. The students learnt nothing that day. The teacher could not bring them out on a movement break, spend time with them or teach properly. That was one day without an SNA. I know the cuts have been postponed and are being reviewed. They should be abolished. It is more SNAs that we need. Children need to be supported and this Government needs to be honest with people.

Deputy Paul Murphy: There are two very important lessons that we have learnt from the SNA debacle over the past couple of weeks. The first is that the Government does not care about the most vulnerable and, left to its own devices, will abandon them. The second is that people power works because the Government is now promising an extra €19 million for SNAs. The Government is also saying that no school will lose SNAs next year. The only reason that happened was because of a groundswell of protest on the part of parents, SNAs and teachers. It did not happen because some kind of logical light bulb went off in the heads of those in government. It happened because the Government came under immense pressure. Acting together, school communities forced the Government into an embarrassing climb-down.

The lesson in this regard that should ring out widely across the country on all sorts of issues is that people power works and that the Government can be defeated. Of course, it is true that what the Government has been forced to concede is nowhere near enough to guarantee every child their right to an education appropriate to their needs. That is why the protest outside the

Dáil at 5 p.m. is going ahead. It is important that the protest does go ahead because, as the organisers say, an extended pause is not good enough.

An SNA who has two autistic sons wrote to me last week. She stated:

I wish some TDs could spend a day in a school and actually see what is going on. We would be classed as having a lot in our school and it's nowhere near enough. The amount of children needing our supports is too much for us to deal with on good days.

[...]

The stress we face every day going to school is sometimes unbearable. Through no fault of their own, a lot of these kids just can't cope because they are in the wrong setting. Myself and my colleagues are daily hit, kicked, bitten, called all sorts of names but we continue to go to work because along with these distressing behaviours we also witness moments of magic when a child will engage, will integrate, will give you a smile and some eye contact, will begin to form letters while writing after our hand has been over theirs for years. We are important. We are good at our jobs. We deserve better and more importantly these kids deserve better. Inclusion without support = abandonment.

It is clear that the root cause of this is the failed approach of allocating SNAs on the basis of narrowly defined primary care needs. That is what needs to be stopped. Instead, the Department should trust schools and parents. They know what the needs are.

The Department should start forward planning based on realistic demographic projections with spare capacity built into the system. We need significant and sustained multi-annual increases in funding to reduce class sizes, train thousands more special educational teachers and therapists and guarantee at least one SNA for every classroom. There is so much more that can be done but what we have learned is the Government will not do any of it unless it is forced and that is why people continue to mobilise and will be on the streets in a couple of hours' time.

Deputy Charles Ward: There will be no SNA cuts next year and this is welcome but it does not undo the damage that has already been done. It is significant that public money was spent sending SENOs across the country trying to save money and making cuts. They were forced into it. It was wasted because this process lacks transparency and respect for staff, parents and children. How fiercely we protect the most vulnerable in society, and will continue to do so, was misjudged.

In cases where schools no longer needed SNAs and it came to a natural conclusion when the child moved on, they were willing to step aside. I have dealt with these schools but instead of careful planning, it was a chaotic, top-down process that was imposed on them. Accountability is essential and whoever is responsible for the wasted resources, the undermining of SENOs and the anxiety it has caused families needs to take responsibility. Does this lie with the special education section of the Department of education? That is a question that needs to be answered. The 2014 circular for SNA allocations must be revised explicitly to provide for children with emotional regulation needs. Any review cannot come before a pathway to reduction, or by stealth, which there was an attempt to impose here. When the Government says it was not, yes, it paused it but we all know that the SENOs had until 31 January to make sure the reports were in. They were in, and you could see what was coming.

It is only because the public and the Opposition stood up and said, "Enough is enough". This is the way it has to be. There has to be accountability and transparency.

The lesson is clear: without accountability and a circular that safeguards every child, this injustice will repeat itself and the Government will bear the shame. The Government has to take responsibility when it goes right but it also has to take responsibility when it goes wrong.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I do not know why anybody is surprised, if they are, at the ferocity of the backlash against this review. You are not paying attention if you were. We had the Green Paper withdrawn after a movement of disabled people. The referendum on care was defeated by disabled people. On school places, we have had a mini-social movement in this country for the past three to four years, led primarily by women. Anyone who is surprised is ableist and not paying attention. There is an anti-ableist movement out there. Look how this whole building we are in is completely anti-disabled people.

The Government saw an appalling vista. It saw the protests that immediately took place in St. John's school in Dublin and I commend those parents. Parents and workers working together is the solution here. I think the Government knew this was finished at that point.

The circular that has been mentioned in regard to SNAs only delivering primary care needs is not even implemented in schools because we all know that SNAs are used for neurodivergent and autistic students or people with anxiety, mental health issues or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, ADHD. I went back to teaching after losing my seat the last time and I could see the importance of having SNAs in the classroom with me.

I want to raise something controversial as well. I do not think SNAs should be moved around willy-nilly and redeployed. We should keep experience in schools. In regard to the idea that they will be filing their nails in the staff room if the pupil moves on, there is a massive shortage of SNAs as it is. There are 110 students in primary school in Dublin 15 who were classed as misplaced by the principals in the area. They could survive better if they all had SNAs. These SNAs, who are very often women but there are male SNAs as well, are, as usual, treated to insecure jobs, poor pay and moved around. That complete disregard for the work women do in our society has to change.

On the 200 schools that got the notice, that was only a fraction because the review was not even finished. Some were going to lose half their SNAs. We have heard the guff about rebalancing support, and the big one the Government was saying on the television was that is "increasing SNAs overall". The population is increasing - of course the Government is increasing SNAs but the awareness of neurodiversity and disabled people's rights has increased massively in society, with more people getting a diagnosis and so on.

We should also mark that the Government was willing to break with any sort of integration of students who are coping in mainstream with an SNA, and that it was diverting people towards special schools. That is a dangerous precedent. There is a need for special schools, of course, and I have campaigned for that but I refer to cases where it is not warranted.

I also have to flag that secondary education is woefully deficient in catering for people with additional needs. There has been a campaign in primary but we are now getting parents demanding it, quite rightly, because their children fall off a cliff when they go into secondary that they are suddenly okay and can cope with everything. I also want to flag that we need

occupational therapists, speech and language therapists and more teachers. People are talking about SNAs but there is a huge need for special education and learning support teachers. I want to raise a warning for the Minister of State that parents will not let the assessment of need go. The Government should keep its hands off them because I know the attempt is to dilute what they deliver and it will not be put up with.

Deputy Keira Keogh: Circular 0030/2014 states that an SNA facilitates attendance, minimises disruption to class and attends to primary care needs like feeding, toileting, medicine and mobility. On page 8, it says the role of an SNA is not to provide additional tuition. Show me an SNA in any special, autism or mainstream class around the country who is not providing additional tuition, especially if you go into a special class. You will see them providing one-to-one tuition.

This circular is outdated and that is the crux of this problem. It was outdated 12 years ago when it was implemented and in the 20 years I have been supporting SNAs in the classroom, it has been outdated. For all of those years, they have been providing learning, behaviour, communication, social and emotional support.

We have to acknowledge there has been improvement in those two decades. An SNA is no longer assigned to a specific student; they are now assigned to a full school. There has been a huge increase in support to now being 22,000 SNAs and in September, that will be 25,000. However, this past fortnight has been so confusing. It has caused uncertainty and trauma. The reviews should have waited for the SNA workforce development plan, the redeployment plan and the review but let us be positive. Let us use this as an opportunity to get this right, so that an SNA can look at their job description and feel that it reflects the work they are doing. They are the bridge between a child and their education and we have to use this increased funding at this time when the whole country has a sharp focus on this, to get the next circular right and ensure that an SNA's job description reflects the amazing work they are doing on the ground.

Deputy Emer Currie: Last week's outcry shows just how highly SNAs are regarded not just by families who rely on them directly but by all families. It would be a mistake to move on too quickly without exploring reform or we risk ending up back here again. Equitable access to education is a value we hold dear. That is why there is such strong public support for building an inclusive education system. Where barriers exist and difficult decisions must be made, let us have those conversations honestly and openly.

I visited a school in my constituency just weeks ago that was undergoing an SNA review. Staff spoke of their fear of cuts. My first instinct was to examine the figures that showed that at a Department level, there are no such cuts. Whole-time equivalents have increased from over 1,200 in 2024 to 1,700 in 2026. Yet, despite this growth in investment, supply is not keeping pace with demand. At a very basic level, if we open 300 new special classes in a single year with each requiring two SNAs, we need more than an increase of 117 whole-time equivalent SNAs to fulfil the needs of all children in our schools.

3 o'clock

At the same time, I recognise that every Department must operate within a budget.

At the Oireachtas committee on education in November, concerns were raised with the NCSE about the new guidelines. SNAs are allocated to schools rather than to individual children, yet surely resources must follow genuine need. The 2014 circular defines the role of an SNA narrowly as primary care, but SNAs support a far wider range of needs. We cannot rely on an outdated circular to bridge the gap between policy and practice. Review processes, redeployment mechanisms and workforce planning must form part of a broader inclusion strategy.

"Let us not waste a crisis" is the famous saying. Fixing the system requires change, processes and structures that work, so let us build them.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: My mother was a special needs assistant. I remember her coming home every day and telling me how much she loved her job and the value she got from what she did with the students she was working with. I know first-hand exactly the love that SNAs have for their jobs. I know first-hand exactly what value they bring to the classrooms. I know first-hand how transformative they are in the lives of the students they work with.

I also know, having visited many of the schools in my constituency of Dublin Mid-West, most recently Scoil Talbot in Clondalkin, that schools are evolving places. The vision set out in the circular from 2014 is not one that is visible on the ground in the schools that my colleagues and I visit on a regular basis. We need to reflect the fact there is now a diversity of needs in our classrooms that was not necessarily reflected in the circular of 2014. Access to an SNA is an enabler for many children in these situations, especially those with neurodivergent needs.

This week, in Clondalkin, a mother who came to one of my clinics said that the reason she was able to go back to work was that her son had access to an SNA to allow him to take two movement breaks to regulate him during the day. He did not need access to a full-time SNA, but because of that fact, she was able to go back to work. She was able to ensure that he has access to a world-class education and will be able to fully attain his potential. That is why it is important we get the circular right on this occasion, that we get the redeployment model right on this occasion and that we update the vision of education set out in these circulars, so schools in my constituency and around the country are set up to succeed.

It is also important we ensure, given the demographic pressures we are facing, that our secondary schools are set up with an adequate number of SNAs. We need to ensure that the new special schools we are establishing, including Lucan Community Special School in my constituency, have access to a number of SNAs to ensure a full school day, but also that schools have sufficient provision for incoming classes of junior infants, where they may not necessarily know the level of need. I look forward to reform in this area.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Cuirim fáilte roimh ráitis na nAirí faoin maoiniú breise de €19 milliún agus, mar aon leis sin, nach mbeidh laghdú ar líon na gcúntóirí riachtanas speisialta fud fad na tíre.

Reference has been made throughout the debate to the amazing work that SNAs do. Having friends and family as SNAs, and being close to the schools in Kildare North, I see it first-hand. What I think we need to acknowledge is the number of children in education, both in the past

and currently, who would not have gone through the education system if it were not for the SNAs they have. That is the critical importance of SNAs. They allow young people to reach their potential and, therefore, to contribute to society later on, and to have a full and fulfilling life.

The circular of 2014 was also mentioned today, specifically part 30 on the primary care needs of a child. I know this circular has been updated, but that needs to be expedited. As the Minister of State is fully aware, the reality on the ground is that the work that SNAs do is not primarily what is set out in that circular. We need that to be reflective of the reality that SNAs experience on a daily basis.

My speaking time is limited. My last point concerns the progression of SNAs from primary to secondary school. We have seen a huge amount of investment in SNAs, special classes and special schools at primary level. My fear is that we are going to come up against a crisis at secondary level in the years ahead. I ask the Minister of State to prepare for additional SNAs and special classes at secondary level.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Like my colleagues, I know first-hand the benefit that SNAs have had in my own family, and there are many others in my family who have worked as SNAs. That is why we, as Government TDs, when we voted for a programme for Government and for budgets, were pleased and proud to see increases in the number of SNAs. I can say clearly that we would not have voted either for a programme for Government or for budgets that saw a reduction in SNAs. Yet, last week, Government TDs and, it would appear, Ministers and the Taoiseach as well, were taken aback by correspondence from people who said their schools were losing large numbers of SNAs. I believe there is a question as to why the Government, a body of people who come into this House and support budgets, despite the implementation of that policy, found that the outcome was a reduction in SNAs.

Of course, the people who received those letters thought there was a reduction because they were losing SNAs in their school. There was no context or wider discussion. My understanding is that only a certain number of schools were considered for the review while other schools were not considered. I ask how there can be a review that does not take into account all schools when trying to balance the use of SNAs across the system.

There are serious governance and oversight issues here that we have to examine. How can a body like the NCSE issue letters to some schools that would see them losing multiple SNAs, and not realise the impact that would have? How could it apply the 2014 circular in the way it did? It would appear that in some parts of the country, it was very strictly interpreted, and in others, it was not. How could we have a situation where the NCSE would send out such correspondence, which has had such a profound impact on schools across the country, and the Government and those people who support the Government were taken by surprise? There is a serious issue around oversight and the operation of this review. The Government acted quickly, but it should never have happened in the first place.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Is cuid ríthábhachtach den phobal iad na cúntóirí riachtanas speisialta. Ceadaíonn na cúntóirí riachtanas speisialta do pháistí foghlaim agus fás.

Another fine mess that the Government has created. I am genuinely here in disbelief at the absolute hack of the Government backbenchers, rambling in, every single one of them, pretending to be shocked at the implications of the budget that they bloody well voted for.

I want to talk to the Ministers about a woman I know, Niamh, who is an SNA. I asked her how the Government made her feel because, ultimately, the Government is her employer. She asked me to tell the Ministers that they have kicked the can down the road. She is not stupid, and she knows what they are at. She asked me to let them know that this limbo and uncertainty is impacting, ultimately, on the students who need support, and on the whole classroom. This chaos caused by the Government has unearthed a problem that has always been there. There needs to be an overhaul. SNAs, teachers, students and families need certainty. A one-size-fits-all approach has not worked and will not work. There must be recognition for the actual work that SNAs do. They deserve respect. I agree with Niamh.

A parent in my family wrote the following to me:

We ALL know there is a serious lack of support for children with needs and their families in this country, so I cannot understand why more is not being done for them, never mind understanding the logic behind support being taken away! It is time to end the unrealistic idea that only children with significant primary care needs should have access to an SNA. My son could not function in school without access to his SNA (whom he shares with 4 other children) for his self-regulation, focus, helping with his peer/social relationships, essential movement breaks and [essential services within the classroom].

Another parent wrote:

After CAMHS ... deemed [my child] not severe enough to see [them] I like thousands of Irish Parents paid privately to get [an] assesment and recommendations in place for ... school. My [child] requires movement breaks which the SNA provides. My [child] doesnt need 1 to 1 care. How is a teacher meant to manage a big class and provide the extra requirements for children with additional needs?

I will address the remarks made by one of the Government backbenchers. She is not here now, but I am sure she will look back on it. She said - how does the phrase go? - "Let us not waste a crisis." You know what? Why does the Government not cause a bloody crisis in the first place? Do the Ministers understand the impact this has had on students, SNAs, teachers and the whole school community?

Then the Ministers come in here and tell us black is white and that they are actually increasing the numbers. The letters are there. Teachers and principals have seen them and they have contacted us. The letters are telling them that the SNA they have at the moment will be gone. That is a cut in any person's language. Stop cutting SNAs and start respecting them.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I noticed over the last few days that senior Ministers are very fond of coming out and making announcements. Between watching television interviews and different commentaries on it, I notice the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, is being rolled out every time. Where is the senior Minister from Galway? She was good at coming out when the decision was being reversed. That the Minister of State had to do the batting for the last few days is very notable.

This needs to be sorted. There are vulnerable children. Our Constitution says we will cherish all our children but, unfortunately, there seems to be a total disconnect in having this issue resolved. Once again, it is probably senior civil servants making decisions without having their eye on the ball. Do they have a child who needs an SNA in a school? A lot of them do not understand what they are doing. That is my honest opinion. We need to resolve the issue fast to give surety to parents around the country.

I have spoken to the Minister of State about this a few times. There are schools that are appealing decisions. A principal in a school does not ring up a politician and say "Michael, we are in trouble here, we need an SNA and we are put under appeal and they seem to be bashing back at us." Principals in schools have plenty to do besides trying to fight battles constantly to get what they rightfully should get. I have seen in the likes of Threen, and places like it around the country, that principals had to get involved, do up the paperwork and try to appeal. They are not into the business of looking for something they do not need. They genuinely feel the need for it to help the future education of children. Every one of us knows that if children, especially those with autism, get the help between the ages of two and eight, they can go on and live a very fulfilled life. If they do not get that help, they have been let down by the State. I have said very clearly over the last number of years that kids have been failed by the State because in the system of diagnosis the HSE has had until now, people have had to wait for assessments to provide the pathway forward and do what needed to be done. We should make sure we put the resources in to help all those children for the future.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The senior Minister had to leave earlier because she is attending a meeting with the Taoiseach regarding the next business, which is a State apology. She referred to that as she left the Chamber. I would like that to be noted.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: She was away all week.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: There has been great frustration, as articulated by my colleagues, felt in communities across the country following the recent announced reviews of the special SNA allocations. That includes many schools in my constituency. One of the largest reductions was to be in St. Andrew's National School, but quite a few other schools were affected as well. Thankfully, that has been halted for now.

The Government has repeatedly stated that the overall number of SNAs is increasing. In absolute terms, it is true that the national figure has gone up. However, that headline does not always reflect the lived reality in many schools that would have seen their allocations cut as a direct result of what appears to be a very arbitrary review which does not take the needs of the child into account. We can never pretend that a national increase is going to give that support on the ground. What matters to a parent or the child is whether the school has the staff numbers to meet their needs. Sometimes it is necessary to share an SNA and the nature of that sharing can change for day-to-day purposes. There are a lot of challenges for kids who require supports. Every time I have spoken with teachers, staff and parents, the same story is coming through. Children who previously had a dedicated support were being asked to share an SNA, were seeing the SNA being taken away or were being asked to do more with less, basically.

The question is whether this new model the Government is articulating really is more equitable and focused on the needs of the child. If we are increasing the numbers, there should not be anyone seeing a decrease or anyone having to scramble for cover. Children have many complex diagnoses. We cannot suddenly say that a child does not need that level of support any more. If a review results in vulnerable children losing access to support, the model is not working. Maybe this pause or stop until the bigger picture is looked at next year shows that.

In this context, I want to raise an issue. I am not absolutely sure how it is actually working. My understanding is that officials are going out and asking SNAs to tell them about their day. The SNA will say they put little Johnny's coat on, they had to bring little Jane to the toilet - just normal conversation. In doing so, it sometimes puts the school at risk because the reason a child requires an SNA in the first place is not taken into account. I would seriously question the reason SNAs are being asked about their day-to-day work when it is educational psychologists who assess a child's needs. The SNA is then allocated on the basis of the identified needs. SNAs, who have level 5 qualifications, often want to progress their career pathways but they are absolutely not educational psychologists. Interviewing SNAs is not the way to go, if that is the case. I call on the Minister and her colleagues in government to urgently revisit the allocations beyond 2027 so that nobody loses out the year after, and to engage meaningfully with the educators on the ground who understand the absolute and often urgent needs of the child.

Deputy Paul Lawless: SNAs are not add-ons in the education system. They are fundamentally important. They are enablers for so many children. They are the link to allow a student to access education, the bridge to get them over the barriers that so many students face. That is the reality. What the Government is doing, and what the circular and review have outlined, is reducing and narrowing the role of an SNA. The reality on the ground is that SNAs are providing many wonderful learning opportunities for children. To diminish that into just the primary and physical need, to reduce it to toileting and so on, is disingenuous and fundamentally unfair to the wonderful work that SNAs are doing. I urge the Minister to address the circular, refine the role, professionalise the SNA sector, and allow SNAs the training and opportunities to flourish in their role. It is a fundamentally important role and to reduce it is unfair to the children, the SNAs and indeed the entire school community. The review and circular do not take account of the student who has autism and may require additional regulation and sensory support. They do not take account of the student who has a specific learning difficulty like dyslexia and may need a little assistance in reading, writing and so on. It is the Minister's job now to ensure that the SNA circular reflects the job the SNA actually does on the ground. Any reduction or narrowing of the scope will not be accepted. It is incredible that it was the families and SNAs across the country who had to sound the alarm on this issue.

The week before this news broke, I asked the Minister of State about the budget and the timelines for delivery of more SNAs and special education teachers. I outlined the difficulty so many families and special educational schools are facing. It seems the NCSE is actually steering the ship here. I urge the Minister to get in control of that agency and ensure families and children with disabilities are protected.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: It has been a tough enough number of weeks for many families and school communities.

I, like other Members of this House, have heard from parents across north Dublin who had serious and understandable concerns that their children would lose essential care and support ar scoil. While I welcome that this matter has been resolved for now, we must do better. There are clear lessons for the Government. It is not acceptable that parents of vulnerable children are left searching for answers online, on social media and listening to the radio about the future of their children's education. Communication from the Department and the NCSE was very poor at times throughout this process. We must try to make sure that does not happen again. That essential trust between an SNA and a child is invaluable for that child. It is built up over time and forms a central part of that child's school experience and broader life formation. While it is essential resources are allocated to where they are needed most, this must be planned in a structured and considered way. I welcome the commitments from the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to engage directly with the school community on this. They are the people dealing directly with these realities every day. They must be central to any future decisions. We must ensure we get this right for children and families across the country.

Deputy Barry Ward: I do not need to tell the Minister of State the upset this has caused. He will have heard it from his constituents, as well as Members of this House. I want to address the circular. It is deeply disrespectful the role SNAs play. It does not properly define the spectrum of issues they have to deal with. It does not address the various issues that prevent children in our schools from achieving their best possible outcomes and does not outline the basis on which every one of them should be addressed, rather than narrowing it down to a small number of criteria. I have a real concern that what we have seen in the past couple of weeks is symptomatic of an official view that we should be restricting access to special needs assistants, not broadening it.

I asked questions in the House about how much it would cost to provide a special needs assistant in every classroom in the country. I am sorry to say I did not get the answer. The question was avoided in terms of how much it would cost. That is the level at which we should state our ambition as regards the provision we make for children.

We know access to educational equality is hugely important from the point of view of future outcomes. I will repeat what has been said by various speakers in this debate about the importance of access for children, not because they somehow deserve something beyond but because they deserve it to put them on an equal footing with children who may not have the same challenges with accessing education. If we fail in that role, the problems created will manifest themselves in ten, 20 or 30 years' time through reduced educational attainment and much more serious problems if people are left out of the educational system.

Let us make a serious and clear statement of intent. What we saw in terms of the resolution of the issue is not actually a resolution; it is a stopgap. I welcome that the Minister of State and the Minister listened to what Members of this House and people around this country had to say on this, in particular teachers. I had a meeting in my constituency earlier this week with perhaps two dozen principals of primary schools. These incredibly dedicated servants of their communities are delivering for all of us. One thing that came out of that meeting was they feel they are not believed or trusted. Some people in the room said they felt the Government does

not trust them. I do not believe that is the case but I think officials in the Department do not trust them. When teachers and principals - highly trained individuals dedicated to the cause - say this is what they need, instead of accepting them at their word, there is a burdensome, bureaucratic process to second-guess that they have to say. Let us trust teachers and deliver for children.

Deputy John Connolly: It is regrettable that the debate has come about in this manner. We have all expressed an opinion as to how valuable SNAs are to children and the school system. That has been worthy of recognition before today. I had the privilege in my career of working with many SNAs. I have seen children thrive through their intervention. If I go back to the start of my teaching career, I think there were around 1,000 SNAs in the system at that point, which was in the early part of the century. We have since seen a 2,000% increase in the number of SNAs. That is because we all want to see our schools be more inclusive and we all have a desire to see children attend the local national school and participate fully in the life of the school there. In recognising that, we have to recognise there has also been a dramatic change in the needs of children. If you talk to any junior infant teacher in particular, they will tell you the profile of children enrolling now is very different from what it was a decade ago. As we have heard from lots of Members, the SNA circular that defines the role must be changed to recognise that increasingly diverse range of children enrolling in our schools and who we want to see attend local mainstream national schools. We have seen that through the demand for other complementary services, such as speech and language therapy and CAMHS services, and in the demand for NEPS assessments. That changing demand has to be recognised by increasing the number of teachers and SNAs. We cannot forget that we made a commitment to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio to 19:1 over the lifetime of this Government. We need to make good on that because it will facilitate greater inclusion in our schools.

There has been a lot of comment Circular 0030/2014. I referred to this in the Chamber previously. We received a lot of correspondence from schools last September and October about this. I do not know if it is a circular. It is the NCSE guidelines for the review of SNA allocation. One thing that concerns me is NCSE reviews are conducted on a whole-school basis, combining a review of all SNA posts in a school. That rightly causes concern.

Deputy James O'Connor: Deputies from around the House have been speaking about the importance of what SNAs provide in education settings for our most vulnerable students. As Deputy Connolly noted, it is very regrettable that we have ended up in this situation, where there is such anger and hurt. As a TD representing the people of Cork East who is conscious of the very good work SNAs do in our schools, I saw at first hand in my time in secondary and primary school SNAs being rolled out. I was born in 1997 so I got to see this. They make an enormous impact. A Minister of State is present in the Chamber and I know he is fully aware of how important the work SNAs do in a school is. I appreciate the chance to engage and speak with the Minister of State over the past couple of days about the concerns my constituents have.

We heard the news, late in the day, that €19 million in funding has been made available. The communication errors that occurred and the stress this has caused for SNAs, school communities and those directly impacted, who are, of course, the children and their families, are unfortunate. We need to improve how we do these announcements and how these initiatives are taken. We also need to improve decision-making when it comes to who actually takes the

decisions. Are Ministers informed by departmental officials and the relevant State agency in respect of what is actually happening in their Departments? This has to be put to bed once and for all. It is happening not alone in the Minister of State's Department but in many others. It is causing huge hurt and political problems for the Government.

Deputy Peter Roche: Rather than adding to the contributions that have been made thus far, I will take the opportunity to read a letter from a child to an SNA:

I wanted to say thank you. When I walk into school in the morning, I look for you first. When I see you, I feel calm. I know I am okay.

Sometimes school feels very loud in my head. The classroom can be busy. The bell is noisy. People talk fast. Sometimes I don't understand straight away. You help me. You help me remember what to do next. You help me when the words are hard. You help me when I feel wobbly inside. You don't just sit beside me. You help me join in.

When the other children are working, you help me do my work too. When I get stuck, you don't rush me. When I feel sad, you notice. When I try something new, you smile at me like I just climbed a big mountain.

Because of you, I am in my class with my friends. I get to learn. I get to laugh. I get to be part of everything. Without you, I think school would feel too big for me. I might feel lost. I might feel scared. I might not be able to stay. But with you, I feel brave. You help me show people what I can do — not just what I find hard.

Thank you for helping me belong.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: It is very hard to follow the words of a child who knows and tells us how important their SNAs are.

That is why when we have this conversation and are having this debate, we need to thank our SNAs who are working tirelessly and often thanklessly to care for and support our children and children within our communities. SNAs are the reason children with additional needs can be educated with their friends within their communities in mainstream schools. The impact of a SNA's work is felt way beyond the classroom. We all have heard of the stories over the past number of weeks of the impact SNAs have had on so many of our constituents and that letter included. People have said they have been a credit to their health, happiness and success in adulthood. They credit their SNA for that.

The reality is that SNAs are skilled professionals who work unbelievably hard in incredibly difficult circumstances and who deliver for our children. Over the past number of weeks, they have been treated disgracefully. It has been completely unfair the way SNAs have been treated over the past two weeks - for example, drip feeding information about cuts, making U-turns and not being clear as who is saying what. I have been confused. This has caused unbelievable upset and distress for parents, children, schools and SNAs.

SNAs have been in touch with me. They have told me they are worried sick, not just about the future of their jobs, but the future of the children who they support. That is something that has been crucially important here. When we look at the mess over the past two weeks, we also need to look at the mess that has happened before this and the track record in relation to

supporting SNAs in their careers. The SNA wages are below the living wage. There has been non-delivery on schools' requests for additional SNAs. SNAs are financially vulnerable on insecure rolling job contracts. This all needs to be part of this conversation because it is a prime conversation right now. We need to be looking at all of this.

From those who I have spoken to, they are not satisfied with the pause, review or whatever it is called at the moment. It is quite clear a fundamental problem remains. We need everybody in this Chamber to step up and deliver the real change that gives SNAs the rights, job security and pay they deserve. They have been crucial to so many of our children's success in every aspect of their lives.

Deputy Gillian Toole: Like all Members who have spoken before me, I too wish to express my gratitude to SNAs and, indeed, the whole school community team members, including the special education teachers. As a granddaughter, daughter and niece of primary teachers, I understand very well the complexities of what is involved in the State and the school community trying to meet our objectives under Articles 42 and 42A of Bunreacht na hÉireann, that is, to create an environment to enable learning by all children in the State at their level. I thank the staff and the chief executive of the NCSE offices, who similar to the parents and to the school communities, have endured quite a lot of anxiety, phone calls, communications and requests for information. To try to get to the nub of everything, I sought a meeting with the chief executive. He afforded me one on Monday last. At that meeting, I learnt quite a few important points that are important to share. There has been a lot of misinformation in this space. One point I learnt was that the toolkit, which is the root of the problem, is up for review. There has been extensive consultation. There was commitment by all parties, such as unions, school representative bodies, etc., to support the toolkit at the time. The important thing is it is being reviewed.

The lessons that are to be learnt from this, and they are important lessons, are: accuracy of communication - establish the facts and make sure the facts are communicated accurately; ensure there is co-operation and collaboration by all parties - in this instance by the school community - before announcements are made; ensure the voices of all parties are heard; ensure the suggestions put forward are built into policy; again review policy on a continuous cycle; and then provide clear communication to the stakeholders.

I cannot improve on what Deputy Roche said about the voice of the child. I am concerned when I look at the current iteration of the toolkit, which focuses on primary medical needs. They are important, vital, very bespoke and specialised in many cases. However, it is about the softer skills. It is about removing the anxiety, it is the friendly face, it is the encouragement, it is maybe pointing out a line, it is assisting with the holding of the pencil or it is whatever is appropriate to the child at that point. That is the role and the delivery of the support. I have an issue with the title SNA. They are all needs assistants. I am grateful to them but we must establish facts and have clear communication going forward.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Aontaím go hiomlán leis an méid a dúirt an Teachta Toole ar deireadh ansin. Bheadh sé i bhfad níos fearr dá mbeadh "all needs assistants" an t-ainm ar SNAs. Bhí mé i go leor scoileanna i mBaile Átha Cliath thuaidh. Má tá tú i scoil ar bith sa tír, feictear duit go ndéanann na daoine seo gach rud. Tá sé sin soiléir dom ó mo chuid ama féin sa scoil nuair a bhí mé óg, agus leis an méid atá tar éis teacht amach sa dá sheachtain tar éis an

ruda seo. I welcome last night's confirmation by the Government but this should never have happened. The protest outside sends a clear message. A lot of SNAs in north Dublin are watching me now as I told them I would be speaking. They asked me to say the circular that still defines the role needs to change. That has been said across the House today. The Government committed to the update of the circular alongside the work force development plan. This work must be done properly and in consultation with SNAs and the voice of the child because they understand the reality on the ground.

Right now, families are stretched in north Dublin, particularly in Dublin Bay North. Schools are under pressure. Inclusion is something we talk about in this House and it must be visible in our classrooms.

I thank Minister of State again for his visit to St. Michael's House Special National School in Baldoyle yesterday. I have been to a few special schools across north Dublin with him. His hands on approach to children is commendable. He knows first hand this is needed. I wish him and the Department the best of luck getting this sorted as soon as possible. We owe it to the children to get this right. We owe it to the families who are fighting for the kids. Let us amend the circular. Let us reflect on the real scope of SNAs. Let us make sure every child gets the support they deserve.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank all Members who contributed to the debate over the past number of hours. It is a reflection of the commitment of all Deputies in relation to special education. The work in the communities was very much reflected in the contributions I have heard. Supporting children with additional education is very much at the core of the Government's values. We have put a huge amount of investment into it. Going back over many years, there has been huge investment in it. There has been unprecedented investment in special needs assistants and right across the education system. We have to make sure we are meeting the needs of the most vulnerable children. As I said on many occasions, whatever we invest in special education right across the special education sector, the State will benefit enormously in future life. We will be able to equip children with the best possible outcomes in life and they will be the best possible people they can be. It is important we continue to acknowledge that investment and make sure we are delivering it in the best place possible.

Deputies will know that after intensive negotiations over the past weekend, there will be no SNA reductions for this year. If any school has identified a need for next year, the resources will be made available to them. That is hugely important. There is an old Irish saying that, "It takes a village to raise a child". It is hugely important we apply that to the school communities as well.

School communities are made up of teachers, SNAs and other support staff. These SNAs provide absolute support for children. Many Members spoke about SNAs' dedication and commitment to their work. In talking to SNAs in the special schools and special classes I have been to right across the country, including St. Michael's House Special National School Baldoyle, which I visited yesterday, I thank them sincerely for the work they do. There is uniformity across the place in that they all say they love their jobs. We should acknowledge that and the role they play. Since my appointment last year, I have visited over 120 schools and I have seen the same level of commitment right across the country. The value we place on

SNAs is second to none, as is the respect that I, the Government and all of us have for them. They are a crucial piece of the jigsaw in ensuring that children have the best possible outcomes.

Three things came up constantly yesterday evening and again today. On the redeployment scheme, almost half of the Members who spoke mentioned the 2014 circular. We must be very mindful of the fact that the 2014 circular enabled us to grow the SNA workforce by 14,000 over 12 years. We must strengthen it and look at the concerns that are being raised but it is also important to acknowledge that there has been a huge expansion in the education system since that circular was issued.

Concern was expressed in relation to the redeployment scheme and SNAs. The scheme has been talked about quite a lot. There have been a lot of intensive negotiations between the Department and the various stakeholders. We must bring that to a conclusion and finalise it. That is another crucial piece of the plan. SNAs deserve that. It is a commitment in the programme for Government and has been committed to elsewhere. Of course, it was being worked on before but we now have to complete that piece of work.

There has been huge engagement on the workforce development plan between all concerned. There is a myth out there that there has been no engagement. We know what is happening in schools. We know the need that is manifesting itself and how we are going to meet it. I assure the House that Government knows and is working on it tooth and nail. In the context of all of the correspondence, the negotiations and everything that has been said over the week, it is important to note that we are increasing the workforce by 1,700 again this year. It is important that we understand and note that.

All of us bring a level of expertise from our own personal journeys to this House. During the debate today, a text came in, as it does every day at 2.35 p.m. It just says "great day" or "good day". That is the information the special needs assistant feeds back to our family. That is the information that every family who has a child with additional needs is getting. That is the respect the families have. I want to thank each and every one of the nearly 25,000 SNAs who work the length and breadth of the country for their commitment. We should look at how special education has been funded over the last 15, 20 or 25 years, at the commitment being given to teachers and SNAs and, more importantly, at the governments that have continuously invested in the area. There will always be challenges. This year alone, there is a challenge arising from the huge numbers that have come forward. However, as we did last year, we will work every single hour that God gives us to do the right thing by the children and the families and by the teachers and the SNAs who support them. If we do that right and if we put investment into special education, when we look at our society in 20 or 25 years' time, we will see that investment having reaped a positive reward. I assure the House that we get this. We understand it. We are going to make sure we have the best possible system of special education into the future.

Revised Estimates for Public Services 2026 - Message from Select Committee

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Disability Matters has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for public services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2026: Vote 40 - Children, Disability and Equality.

Apology Related to Childhood Abuse (Hunger Strikers): Statements

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before calling on the Taoiseach, I welcome to the Distinguished Visitors Gallery today Mary Dunlevy Greene, Mary Donovan, Maurice O’Connell and Miriam Moriarty Owens, all of whom are survivors of institutional abuse. I also welcome their friends, family and supporters who, alongside Patricia Carey, the Government-appointed special advocate for survivors, have joined us in the Public Gallery. They are all very welcome.

The Taoiseach: I too welcome to Dáil Éireann a group of survivors of industrial and reformatory schools who met with me and with the then Minister for education, Deputy McEntee, to discuss their concerns and to share their individual stories and experiences. As the Leas-Cheann Comhairle has said, they are Mary Donovan, Mary Dunlevy Greene, Miriam Moriarty Owens and Maurice Patton O’Connell. I pay tribute to them and thank them for their advocacy.

In May 1999, on the basis of a memo I brought to Cabinet, the then Government agreed to enact a series of steps to give victims of childhood abuse an opportunity to be heard. On behalf of the State and of all citizens of the State, the then Government made a sincere apology to the victims of childhood abuse:

On behalf of the state and all of the citizens of the state, the government wishes to make a sincere and long overdue apology to the victims of childhood abuse for our collective failure to intervene, to detect their pain and to come to their rescue.

I reiterate that apology today.

It was acknowledged then that the process of opening up and acknowledging failures to protect the rights of children would be complex, would take new directions and demanded a commitment to responding comprehensively. As a country and as a Government, we recognised that too many of our children were denied the love, care and security that should have been theirs. Abuse ruined their childhoods and remains an ever-present part of their adult lives, reminding them of a time when they were without support or protection. We recognised the gravity of this wrong and undertook to do all we could to overcome the lasting effects of their ordeals.

The first major step in a process of seeking full transparency and perspective involved the establishment of the commission of investigation into child abuse. Better known as the Ryan commission, its final report was published in May 2009. It detailed disturbing and significant levels of historic abuse of children who were placed by the Irish State in residential institutions, particularly industrial schools and reformatories, run by religious orders.

Ongoing reforms of our childcare laws are essential. The Child Care Act 1991 represented a fundamental change of approach to child protection in its comprehensiveness and scope. It prioritised child protection and modernised State services to protect vulnerable children. Irish child protection was significantly transformed and moved to a more proactive State-managed system focused on the rights and safety of the child. That Act remains the fundamental framework for protecting children. Since then and in response to the Ryan report and other reports, we have advanced further changes.

We now have a comprehensive approach to deal with the traumatic impact of previous abuse, to protect children and to strengthen structures and accountability for child protection in this country.

Following the creation of the new Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2011, the Child and Family Agency, now known as Tusla, was established in January 2014. The Thirty-first Amendment of the Constitution (Children) Act 2012 was signed into law on 28 April 2015. It mandated the courts to consider the best interests of the child as paramount in proceedings regarding custody, guardianship, and care. The Children First Act came into effect in 2015. It too broke new ground in vigilance against child abuse and neglect, with mandatory reporting by key professionals and improved child safeguarding arrangements. In 2017 *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* was published.

Addressing the effects of past abuse has also been a central part of the State's response to historical abuse in residential institutions, with important measures put in place including the establishment and funding of the HSE's national counselling service providing counselling and support to adults who experienced childhood abuse. Over €1 billion in redress payments have been paid by the State to individual survivors of abuse in industrial schools, reformatories and related institutions through the residential institutions redress scheme and the Education Finance Board. As part of the State's response, contributions were sought from the relevant congregations. Through Caranua, this fund provided €98 million in funding supports to approximately 6,000 survivors. We are now moving to a new phase of supports which I will expand upon later in this statement.

First, I want to say I fully recognise that for those who suffered institutional abuse the traumatic impact has been enduring. The deep personal toll that it has taken on the lives of survivors was brought home to me again in my recent engagements with the group that is here today. I was moved to hear each of your personal stories and I am deeply sorry for the harm that you suffered as a consequence of the abuse you experienced in State institutions.

When we met, you made me aware of the abuse also suffered by you in particular, but also many others who were boarded out from industrial and reformatory schools. The issue of how you and other children were treated when boarded out was examined in the Ryan report and is further detailed in chapter 11 of the report of the commission of investigation into mother and baby homes. Testimony detailed elsewhere in that report conveyed the harrowing experiences of many of those who were boarded out and the palpable sense of abandonment they felt.

In January 2021, on behalf of the Government, the State and its citizens, I apologised for the profound generational wrong visited upon Irish mothers and their children who ended up in a mother and baby or county home institution. I also acknowledged then that many children who were subsequently boarded out experienced heartbreaking exploitation, neglect and abuse within the families and communities in which they were placed. As I said at that time, and wish to reiterate today, regardless of the pathway from which individuals were boarded out, this was unforgivable. The Government recognised that there were many situations where children in boarded-out arrangements were wrongly and harshly treated. They were not raised as part of a family or given the opportunities they should have been in relation to their care and education. We know that some were physically, emotionally and sexually abused. I am very sorry for what was done to you. I apologise on behalf of the State for the abuse and neglect that you suffered. What happened to you was wrong, shocking and should never have

happened. The Government recognises the suffering and damage that this abuse has caused, and we will continue to support you as much as possible.

To support people who experienced abuse while boarded out, the Government established a boarded out practical support service for adults. It is a free and confidential service offering a wide range of practical supports to survivors. Provided by Barnardos and funded by the State, it delivers practical and therapeutic supports to adults who were boarded out as children in Ireland.

Support is also available through the special advocate for survivors, who amplifies the voice of survivors, including those who were boarded out as children. The advisory council currently being established by the special advocate has a number of pillars to reflect the diverse experiences of survivors. One of these pillars is dedicated to, and comprises, those who were boarded out.

Access to records is also a very important issue for many of those who were boarded out and have questions about their origins and early life experiences. The Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022 provides a clear legal basis for access to birth and early life information and records. This allows those who were adopted, boarded out, the subject of an illegal birth registration or resident in a mother and baby or county home institution as a child, to seek information on their own situation.

The national centre for research and remembrance will stand as a national site of conscience to honour equally all those who were resident in institutions and all those who have lived experience of Ireland's historical adoption and boarded-out systems. Survivors will continue to be at the heart of decisions in relation to the development of the national centre.

In 2023 the Government approved a new phase of ongoing supports to survivors of abuse in industrial schools, reformatories and related institutions, in areas including health, advocacy and education. This included an enhanced package of health services and supports for those who wish to engage in education and training and access to advocacy supports through a new independent advocacy service. Work is well under way on putting these services and supports in place.

I appreciate that there were concerns among certain survivors about the adequacy of these new supports and this has been the subject of the recent campaign by the group present here today. Following the conclusion of a mediation process to address the concerns raised, the Government has agreed to provide further improvements to these services. These include strengthened access to health services for survivors of industrial and reformatory schools through the appointment of dedicated health liaison officers and better access to counselling and physiotherapy services. Work is already under way to put these services in place.

The Government has also agreed to provide additional funding for education grants under the Supports for Survivors of Residential Institutional Abuse Act 2025. I recognise that there have been calls for a contributory State pension for this group of survivors. I discussed this with survivors, and we recognised the complexity of the issue. We agreed to explore ways to address this issue that would be more flexible and easier to access. On foot of this, the Government has approved the expansion of the education support payments scheme under the Act to include the provision of support for informal learning, self-development and well-being activities. These payments will be easy to access and will be introduced as soon as possible.

We have also progressed measures to ensure that survivors are prioritised for social housing needs and to ensure that community welfare services give them specific consideration and recognition for funeral costs and provide accordingly. The potential for local memorialisation proposals is also being explored. All of these measures are part of the agreement that I, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, and the Government arrived at with the group that is here today, by letter and mediation. I hope that these additional measures will help the ongoing process of healing for these survivors of institutional abuse.

Another matter which I wish to address relates to criminal records. Today I wish to categorically confirm for the record that the State did not, and does not regard individuals, by virtue of their detention in any industrial school as having committed a criminal offence, and that no criminal record is recorded against them.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: With regard to children who were detained in industrial schools and who were subsequently transferred to a reformatory school, solely by virtue of their detention in the industrial school, they are likewise not considered to have had any criminal record.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: No person and, in particular, no agency of the State should in any way regard these individuals as having committed a criminal offence or having a criminal record. A formal statement to this effect will also be issued today by the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration. Certificates confirming this for individual survivors will be provided on a case-by-case basis following receipt of records, including posthumously. The process for this will be put in place by the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration as soon as possible.

4 o'clock

Survivors have felt stigmatised - you made this very clear to me in our meetings - throughout their lives, and we must be clear and categoric in removing any taint of stigmatisation from public discourse and the public record.

I once again thank the survivors for being here today. Your commitment, resilience and struggle and the challenges that presented for you personally, as you again articulated to me today, is testament to your tireless commitment to shining a light into the dark corners of both our past and present. I unequivocally apologise to you and reiterate on behalf of the Government, the State, and all the citizens of the State, the profound sorrow for the terrible pain and abuse suffered by you. What you endured on a daily basis as innocent children was harrowing, heart-breaking and wrong.

The Tánaiste: I join the Taoiseach in thanking the group of survivors from industrial and reformatory schools for their presence in the Dáil today, and indeed for their campaign to highlight the ongoing legacy of trauma bestowed by this country's shameful history of cruelty towards children. Today we welcome Mary, Mary, Miriam and Maurice. I know you met with the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy McEntee, last year. I know you told your own personal

stories, which is a harrowing thing to do in and of itself. In doing so, however, you have brought about a renewed focus on the terrible experience of all survivors, and a further acknowledgement by the State of the dreadful harm that was done to children. The State has often compounded the wrongs of the past by failing to admit them quickly enough and failing to comprehensively acknowledge our part in them. I can think of too many examples where this has been the case. I hope today might serve another purpose in helping us to learn from that once and for all.

Today I am glad that we are recognising the hurt and the pain of those abused in childhood in State institutions. Every time the silence that once surrounded your suffering is broken is a moment of light shining in the darkness. We have heard, as we should, in this House on many occasions of the systematically cold and harsh treatment of children and the endemic culture of abuse which went unchecked in our State for far too long. It is right that we should hear these harsh truths in this House and it is right that we should apologise for them. In truth, we can never apologise enough for what happened.

In May 1999, the Government apologised to the victims of childhood abuse and recognised the acute pain and abuse that children suffered when they should have been cared for and protected by the State. Instead of love, care and protection, they were gravely wronged. In that apology, it was rightly accepted that abuse ruined their childhoods and remained an ever-present part of their adult lives. Although unable to escape the enduring and deep hurt that they carried with them down the years, survivors have demonstrated an extraordinary commitment to sharing their stories, their terrifying living nightmares, so that the State would act. As with the survivors here today, each one of you has your own unique experience of suffering but I know that through your efforts you are seeking to improve things for all survivors of institutional abuse. I am sincerely and profoundly sorry for the pain and suffering you were subjected to in and by the State.

Today we are building on that State apology of 1999 and all that has followed. Although not yet a Member of this House, I remember the Ryan report some ten years later and the appalling litany of abuse described therein. It is impossible to read the records of abuse reported by witnesses to that inquiry without feeling sick to your stomach. Not too long after I was first elected, I remember being present in this Chamber after the publication of the Cloyne report which, although a separate commission process to the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, again exposed the disgusting downplaying of the rape and torture of children, and a dangerous disregard for child protection practices. I recall being present in this Chamber in 2013 for the then Taoiseach's apology to the Magdalen women, as we visited again the cold and pitiless Ireland that was systematically punitive to girls and women. Of course, I remember being present in 2021 when the Taoiseach apologised to those who spent time in mother and baby homes in this country. So many occasions when we have had to once again unleash the national trauma of our past and expose again the wounds which never healed for children afflicted by a culture where indifference enabled violence, neglect and abuse. The dark past of this country is an abyss of misery for the children so victimised.

It is right, as I have said, that this House listens and apologises and, more importantly, it is essential we act. It is true to say extensive work has been undertaken to reform our child welfare laws and ensure that our structures and accountability for child protection are robust and effective. The country held a referendum and the people voted to enshrine the best interests

of children in our Constitution and in law. Mandatory reporting was introduced but we must also remind ourselves that when it comes to caring for and protecting our children, we must always be vigilant and always seek to improve services and safeguards. Child welfare concerns can never be seen as a thing of the past but must be an ever-present priority if we are to be true to the reforms we have made.

In addition to the experience of those who were abused while in institutions, the Taoiseach also spoke about those who experienced abuse while boarded out. The 2021 State apology rightly recognised the many situations where children who were boarded out were treated shamefully. Far from being placed into the bosom of a family, children were neglected, abused and exploited for labour. Today, we clearly and unequivocally on behalf of the State apologise to those who suffered abuse in these circumstances. Today, we confirm, on the record of this House, that the State did not, and does not regard individuals as having committed a criminal offence and that no criminal record is recorded against them by virtue of their detention in any industrial school.

I appreciate that with the Supports for Survivors of Residential Institutional Abuse Act 2025, we have entered into a new phase of ongoing supports for survivors of abuse. Today we seek to build on those concerns and supports as the Taoiseach has outlined. I welcome that. We hope that the actions we have taken to date and those we take now make some contribution to the healing process for survivors. I hope today's apology goes some way towards that and that the support of the State today can start to make up, in some small way, for the neglect of the State when you were at your most helpless and vulnerable.

I wan to conclude by restating again our deep sorrow for the grievous wrong that was done to you as children. We can never forget that the suffering deliberately imposed on the most blameless innocents is a stain on our nation. We can never stop trying to understand how, as a State and as a society, our most basic instinct - to protect our children - was warped into an appalling acceptance of abuse and abandonment. I think of a line from the poetry collection *The Poison Glen* by Annemarie Ní Churreáin – a collection informed by conversations with survivors of Irish institutions – in the poem "Creed". The line is "The Child, my sister, my brother, who was conceived out of darkness in a moment of light and placed into the care of Stone." We unequivocally apologise on behalf of the Government, the State and all the citizens of this State for all that you have endured.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The dark shadow cast by what was done to children in Ireland's industrial and reformatory schools is a horror with which our country has never fully reconciled. Indeed, it may be impossible to do so. The scale and depth of the abuse, violence, hurt and life-lasting trauma suffered by victims has rippled and reverberated for decades, sometimes as quiet as uncertain as a whisper, sometimes powerful enough to rock our collective conscience but always there. The industrial schools were a State-sanctioned system of abuse of vulnerable children, operated on the watch of successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments. Children who needed care and safety were instead met with the most unimaginable cruelty. They were criminalised and victimised, swept under the carpet of society, swept behind iron gates and swept into places of unspeakable brutality.

Responsibility for impoverished children was handed to the religious orders, and then a blind eye was turned to the extreme violence inflicted on them. Children, whose names were

erased with a number, whose innocence was crushed in dark rooms and grey cold courtyards, children whose cries for help were drowned out by a depraved cruelty. Not only did the State and successive Governments sanction this systematic abuse of children but it was then covered up, survivors dismissed, their experiences sidelined and their demand for truth and justice ignored. Survivors, for too long, were robbed of their right to say without fear or contradiction "I was there in that place. These awful things were done to me again and again. It was done to me." The way the State chose to look after vulnerable children was to batter, brutalise and dehumanise them.

The chosen setting was industrial schools. It would be easy to say that these children were forgotten but the State and successive Governments knew exactly where it had put them, knew the culture of violence that dominated these places and knew that children would be met with cruelty masked as care, which was the same broken philosophy that gave rise to the mother and baby homes and Magdalen laundries. We have heard the powerful testimony of many survivors, yet it remains hard to comprehend the gravity of the beatings, sexual abuse, emotional and mental torture and excruciating tension of not knowing when that next horror would come every minute of every hour of every day. Childhoods were destroyed, lives ruined and unspeakable damage done. The physical scars run deep. The mental and emotional scars are wrapped tightly around every heartbeat and every breath taken.

For survivors, this is not a chapter of history because the trauma is with them still today, hardwired perpetually into their lives. Twenty-seven years ago, survivors heard a State apology from then Taoiseach Bertie Ahern. Three years later, the redress board was set up to provide financial redress to survivors. In 2009, the Ryan report laid bare the shocking endemic nature of abuse in industrial schools. The Residential Institutions Statutory Fund Act was enacted in 2012 to manage very meagre contributions from religious orders in the areas of housing, health and education. Let it not be forgotten that survivors had to fight and wait years between each step of progress and reparation. Survivors are still fighting for full truth, full justice, full accountability and the supports they deserve. That is what brought the four survivors of industrial school abuse to the gates of the Dáil last September for 51 days. Miriam Moriarty Owens, Mary Donovan, Mary Dunlevy Greene and Maurice Patton O'Connell protested and went on hunger strike outside Leinster House. That is what it took for them to be heard by Government.

The demands of Miriam, Mary, Mary and Maurice for the State contributory pension and a Health (Amendment) Act, HAA, medical card to help address the lifelong consequences of the abuse they and others suffered were shamefully ignored by Government. They were allowed to go on hunger strike to the point where they developed real, genuine health concerns. They deserve an apology for that too. They called off their protest after proposals that were belatedly tabled by the Taoiseach. I can only hope and pray that the full package of measures is true to those proposals and that Government in full follows through on its promises.

Maireann an tráma ón mí-úsáid a d'fhulaing íospartaigh in áiteanna tionsclaíocha fós leo sa lá atá inniu ann. Tá an Stát agus rialtas i ndiaidh rialtais freagrach as an méid a tharla sna háiteanna seo. Ní cóir go mbeadh ar ár marthanóirí troid a thuilleadh. Today's apology is of course welcome and I hope it brings them some comfort, but an apology without justice is really no apology at all. No child belonged in these places. No child should have endured such suffering. To be beaten and abused only to know that it would happen again, to be demeaned

and know that this was allowed, and to cry out for help and know that help was not coming is the harrowing story of Ireland's industrial schools. It is a story crafted by the Irish State and overseen by successive Governments hand in glove with the religious orders. Today, however, the dignity of each survivor soars above all of that. They had to fight for far too long. They should never ever have to fight again.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Today's apology is historic, important and welcome. I acknowledge the survivors who have endured decades of harm, neglect and State failure. We are not dealing with an historic issue. It is very much live and present. It is the ongoing failure of the State to meet the basic needs of survivors of institutional abuse. I welcome the apology and the commitment in terms of supports. I encourage their being in place as quickly as possible, although it is already too late.

I say to Mary, Mary, Miriam and Maurice, and people talk about stigma, that they are an inspiration. You have achieved something. Less than a year ago, I stood here, and our current President, Catherine Connolly, sat over there. We brought forward proposals and amendments in line with what they were looking for. We lost. We were unsuccessful. We did not deliver, but you did. You have done that. It should not have taken your hunger strike, but your resilience and determination have been an absolute inspiration. You stuck it out and brought the Government to this position. You should be incredibly proud of yourselves. Your families should be incredibly proud of you, as should the whole of Ireland. It is an inspiration. We met and talked. You were incredibly tenacious. You did not let us or the Government away with anything.

There are commitments here from the Government. We need to see them realised. This is a wrong that has to be righted. I know you will, as will we, pursue it to make sure that you get exactly what has been committed to. As I said, what you have done is very inspirational. This relates to a very dark period in Irish history. Lessons have to be learnt. We need to see action on the part of the Government in the context of ensuring that the commitments which have been made are delivered. Once again, comhghairdeas libh. You should be incredibly proud of yourselves. I am inspired by you.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak for the Labour Party in today's important and historic debate. I welcome the Taoiseach's apology, which marks an important step in Ireland's recognition of our shameful history as a society and of our appalling treatment of women and children over so many decades. It recognises that far too many of our people were incarcerated in reformatories, industrial schools, Magdalen laundries, mother and baby homes and other institutions in what is a very recent and shameful history. We acknowledge that today. Abuse was systemic and known about. It was covered up and brushed under the carpet. It has taken brave and courageous survivors over many years to shine a light into that dark and shameful history. I acknowledge the mighty Ms who are here today, namely Mary Donovan, Miriam Moriarty Owens, Mary Dunlevy Greene and Maurice Patton O'Connell. I welcome them, their families and supporters. Many are in the Gallery and many are watching online.

I welcome Carmel McDonnell Byrne and so many more. I think of and acknowledge the late Christine Buckley. Carmel reminded me Sunday next marks 30 years since "Dear Daughter" was aired. It was in that ground-breaking documentary, made by the late Louis

Lentin, that Christine described the horrific abuse to which she was subjected in Goldenbridge. I had the privilege of knowing Christine, who died so sadly in 2014. Carmel reminded me that Christine said about her appalling experience of abuse that survivors needed a year's counselling for every day they spent in those hellholes. I had the privilege of representing survivors of abuse before the Residential Institutions Redress Board in a previous life as a barrister. I heard first hand from people about the utterly horrifying experiences they endured - the appalling abuse, the vindictive, systemic, sadistic abuse they experienced in those institutions. For any of us who have heard or spoken with survivors, it stays with us all. I thank them all for shining a light on what went on for far too long and, as I said, about what was known about, covered up and systemic in so many institutions.

It has taken great bravery. It has taken the courage of survivors to shine a light, and the campaign has taken far too long. The trauma we know was inflicted upon the survivors at such a young age will last a lifetime, and they should not have had to protest for so long in this latest stage of seeking justice. Meetings with survivors who were protesting outside Leinster House last autumn should not have been postponed or delayed, particularly as we know that delays magnify hurt. I am glad the protests culminated in the commitment from the Government to today's State apology, but the apology must have meaning and an impact.

I welcome the package of measures the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste have announced, to include financial assistance, prioritised access to social housing, trauma-informed healthcare and education supports. These measures are welcome but survivors tell me they are keen to get a timeline for when the services will be put in place. They and their families are understandably anxious to know when the commitments will be upheld and when the services will be made available.

Clearly, the first important part of continuing to right historical wrongs is the apology today. However, we must all collectively ensure that proper justice, full justice and redress are delivered to provide dignity and closure to a group of people who have suffered for so long. Thousands of children were subjected to systemic and sustained abuse in industrial and reform schools going back to the 1940s. I refer to physical, sexual and emotional abuse in schools operated largely by religious orders but funded and supervised by State entities. Neither the church nor the State intervened to prevent mistreatment.

The Catholic Church, in particular, is known to have acted as a sort of shadow welfare State, operating institutions on behalf of the State, with the State abdicating responsibility to vulnerable children. I am glad to hear the Minister for justice is going to make clear that there will be absolutely no criminal records. Far too many of the adults I represented had been sent through criminal courts. They were appallingly criminalised by the State and sent to suffer abuse at the hands of religious orders in institutions. It is utterly shameful that there are people, still living, who had those experiences. It is long past time that the justice element was dealt with.

The Taoiseach rightly described the publication of the Ryan report in 2009 as a watershed moment. I still remember people coming up to public representatives in the street and to so many others to talk about the experiences they had suppressed as children that were brought back into their minds by what the report revealed. That was an important step in uncovering State complicity as well as religious orders' complicity.

There was much that was wrong with the redress scheme I described, involving the Residential Institutions Redress Board. We have learned from that and we now know how much we need to ensure enhanced and substantive supports are made available to survivors. I welcome the progress to be made on the pensions point, in particular.

There are two forward-facing points that need to be made. The first relates to our duty as legislators. We need to identify and address gaps in child protection legislation to ensure our legislation is now robust and fit for purpose and that the State is no longer able to outsource or neglect the care of the most vulnerable in our society. I am thinking of those who are still in congregated settings, those children who come here as unaccompanied minors and who are in State care, and children in State care in many different settings in respect of whom we have a duty and whom we must not fail again.

The second call is to ensure the religious orders are made accountable. I have spoken before about how the churches, but particularly the Catholic Church, enabled a culture of secrecy and cover-up to develop for far too long, and how church authorities were very slow, also for far too long, to pay due redress, with the State paying a huge share despite having been promised that religious orders would engage in delivering justice. The Labour Party has introduced a Bill that seeks to address that imbalance. It seeks to facilitate civil proceedings against unincorporated bodies such as religious orders. It provides a mechanism for recovering damages from the associated lay-run trusts set up by many religious orders to hold their assets, so that those assets can no longer be shielded from unpaid redress.

Successive Governments have repeatedly failed to compel religious orders to pay their fair share of redress, and many continue to evade responsibility. The Labour Bill is now in the lottery for debate during Private Members' time. It is about ending the evasion and ensuring religious orders face accountability and that religious institutions that ignored abuse or enabled its perpetration are held accountable for the harm they caused. If we pass this legislation, the Oireachtas will have an opportunity to take a meaningful further step towards justice, dignity and truth for survivors. We cannot simply appeal to the moral duty of religious orders to ensure victims receive the justice they deserve. We have seen a slow pace of action, avoidance of responsibility and legal obfuscation for far too long.

We owe an enormous debt of appreciation and gratitude to all those brave survivors and victims who have shown such tremendous courage in coming forward to make disclosures and reveal to us all the true extent of abuse in religious-run and State-run institutions, which occurred for far too long. I hope that all survivors or victims and their families watching and listening today will find some solace in today's proceedings. I welcome the apology but we still need to do more to ensure true justice for survivors.

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I, too, welcome Mary, Miriam, Maurice and Mary to the House today, together with your family members and supporters. I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to meet you this afternoon. I understand that days like today are particularly difficult for you and your families because hearing an apology can bring back such painful experiences. I also recognise how important this moment is in acknowledging the harm that was done. It is an essential step in honouring your truth and supporting healing for you and those who love you. The abuse and mistreatment that you, as well as so many other survivors, experienced during childhood was horrific and

wrong. It is right that this historic wrong has been acknowledged by both the State and the Government and that it continues to be acknowledged.

It is also right that the State continues to provide supports to survivors to address the legacy of the abuse suffered. As the Taoiseach has already outlined, there has been a significant response by the State to this issue in recent decades, much of which has come under the remit of my Department. It includes the investigations undertaken by the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, the redress payments made to survivors by the Residential Institutions Redress Board, and funding supports provided by Caranua to over 6,000 survivors in important areas such as health, housing and education. In addition, the National Counselling Service continues to provide much-needed counselling and psychiatry services to survivors of childhood abuse. However, we are now moving to a new phase of the State providing ongoing supports to survivors to meet their key needs.

Last July, the Oireachtas passed the Supports for Survivors of Residential Institutional Abuse Act 2025, which will enable the delivery of ongoing health and education supports to survivors of abuse in residential institutions. With regard to health supports, eligible survivors will be provided with a medical card, which will enable them to obtain certain health supports and services through the HSE. This entitlement will be for life and will not be subject to means testing or review. The Government has recently agreed to strengthen this package of health supports through the appointment of specified liaison officers within the HSE and through improved access to counselling and physiotherapy services. I understand that the Department of Health is working closely with the HSE to ensure these supports, including the health liaison officers, will be in place as soon as possible.

The Government has also approved the expansion of the education support payment scheme, to be provided under the Act. This scheme, which will be administered by my Department, will provide payments ranging from €500 to €2,000 per year to survivors engaging in education, depending on the level of the course concerned. The scheme will also provide payments of €600 per year to survivors to support with informal learning, self-development and well-being. My Department is finalising arrangements in order that these important supports for survivors can be delivered as soon as possible.

In addition, Sage Advocacy has since November 2023 been engaged by my Department to provide advocacy supports to survivors. It has appointed regional advocates all across the country to assist survivors engaging with relevant service providers such as local authorities and the HSE. Information on the supports available to survivors will be published on the Department's website and will also be communicated to survivor and advocacy groups to ensure that as many survivors as possible will be made aware of their availability.

To Mary, Miriam, Maurice and Mary, I say nothing we do now can ever make up for the harm that you have suffered and that was done to you by others.

As children, you were subjected to horrific abuse while placed in residential institutions. It is vital, however, that this harm and its ongoing impact on the lives of survivors are addressed and acknowledged.

Minister for Justice (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I echo and confirm my support for the apology made by the Taoiseach today on behalf of the Government. I also endorse the words

of the Tánaiste and the Minister for education. I share my colleagues' deep sense of regret for the pain and suffering experienced by those who experienced detention in industrial schools. I now want to make an official statement, as Minister for justice, in respect of people detained in industrial schools. I know that this is an important official statement for Mary, Mary, Miriam and Maurice and that it will provide them with some solace.

As Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, I confirm that the State did not and does not regard individuals as having committed a criminal offence and that no criminal record is recorded against them by virtue of their detention in any industrial school. Children who were detained in industrial schools and who were subsequently transferred to a reformatory school, solely by virtue of their detention in the industrial school, are likewise not considered to have had any criminal record. No person, and in particular no agency of the State, should regard these individuals as having committed a criminal offence or having a criminal record.

I can also confirm that if individuals wish to have further confirmation that they do not have a criminal record arising from their detention in an industrial school or transfer to a reformatory school solely by virtue of their detention in an industrial school, that confirmation can be provided in the form of a written certificate, including posthumously. Each request for the issuing of a certificate will be considered on a case-by-case basis following receipt and review of records.

Again, I express my sincere sympathies to those who experienced detention in industrial schools. I hope that confirmation that the State does not consider these individuals to have a criminal record is a small but meaningful acknowledgement of the need to repair this harm.

Deputy Pa Daly: I just want to seek some sort of clarity on the statement, but before that, I congratulate, in spite of all the adversity they went through, the efforts those in the Gallery made against the tide and against the resistance they faced. They pushed on through and got it. Many of them came from Tralee as well but-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We appreciate that, Deputy, but this is for statements, not questions.

Deputy Pa Daly: Yes. I see in the Taoiseach's statement on behalf of the Government that he acknowledges and apologises for the generational wrong. He acknowledges that some children who were subsequently boarded out experienced exploitation and that many boys were sent to work on farms and many girls were sent to work in domestic service. He said in the statement at the time-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, I am sorry. I cannot permit you to ask a question; I can permit you to continue with your statement.

Deputy Pa Daly: Regardless of the pathway from which individuals were boarded out, the Taoiseach has acknowledged that it is unforgivable, and that is good. He recognises situations where children were wrongly and harshly treated. He stated: "The Government recognises the suffering and damage ... this ... has caused, and we will continue to support you as much as possible." However, people who were boarded out from county homes cannot "continue to be supported" because they were never included in any redress scheme. Former Taoiseach Leo

Varadkar said that promises would be made, but promises were broken. Something must be done, he said at one stage. Will the people who were boarded out from the county homes be included in part of any redress scheme? It is unclear, I suggest, what the Taoiseach says when he says the Government will continue to support them, because the people I speak to have not been supported initially. They have not been included in any redress scheme, so it is impossible to continue to support them when the Government has not been doing so, even though the Taoiseach acknowledges the wrong that has been done to them. This is important for the thousands of people who were boarded out because it was the State that abandoned, discriminated against and did not help those children at every step of the way. We cannot blame mother and baby homes or any segment of the Catholic Church or any other church for that matter. It was always the State. I ask Members opposite in their closing remarks to clarify whether those children, who are now in their 70s, will be included. A lot of them do not want counselling any more and do not need it, but they do want to be included as part of the redress scheme. It is important, and I want to know and they want to know whether they will be included.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I give a very warm welcome to all the survivors in the Public Gallery. We are here today because of their tireless efforts to get justice.

I welcome the State apology today for survivors of industrial and reformatory schools as well as the clarification on criminal records. I do, however, want to talk about what it took to get here. Survivors of these nightmarish institutions, Mary Donovan, Mary Dunlevy Greene, Maurice Patton O'Connell and Miriam Moriarty Owens, went on hunger strike for 51 days, sleeping on the street outside Leinster House, in the bitter cold and rain, in the winter, just to be listened to, to be taken seriously, to be heard. These are people who have already been repeatedly failed by the State, who were placed in these terrible institutions when they were just children, only to be beaten, starved and sexually abused, treated like prisoners and slaves, denied a childhood, denied compassion, denied care, denied everything a child needs. They were tortured for years by religious orders and a complicit State. The State knew this was happening and did not stop it and did not help - quite the opposite. It continued to send children to these awful places. These children had suffered trauma and needed love and support and were denied it. Instead, all they received was brutality and terror. Every waking minute was marked by fear, anxiety and horror. Lives were destroyed. We are still in this Chamber failing them today, decades later, forcing them to beg for supports that should be easy to access, forcing them to jump through hoops just to get the basics, making them feel like they have no other choice but to go on hunger strike. These are survivors of depraved abuse, forced to endure further trauma and pain, just to get what they should already be entitled to.

Today's apology marks the fifth time the State has apologised for what children and women endured in institutions run by religious orders. Those apologies now stretch back nearly 30 years. They started in 1999, when Bertie Ahern apologised to children who had been abused in residential institutions. At the time Mr. Ahern lamented the "piecemeal approach" the State had taken to protecting children and commended the "bravery of individual victims determined to tell their stories and seek justice". Back then, the current Taoiseach was education Minister and chair of a Cabinet subcommittee tasked with designing supports for victims. Since then, there have been apologies by a further three taoisigh: Brian Cowen, Enda Kenny and, in 2021, Micheál Martin himself. Here we are again today, still forcing victims to go public, to advocate

and to fight the State for recognition and services, still taking a legalistic approach to redress, in which the overriding priority is limiting access and eligibility, once again trying to protect the State's finances rather than trying to protect victims.

The redress scheme for survivors of mother and baby homes is the perfect example of this. It limits support and services to as narrow a group as possible for entirely arbitrary reasons that have no scientific or logical basis, causing further pain and trauma to survivors, who have already suffered so much, in the process.

The State did not do this in the dim or distant past. It was a decision by the previous Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Green Party Government. It excluded children who had spent less than six months in one of these institutions and children who had been boarded out, even if those children had been forcibly separated from their mothers, illegally adopted or treated like slave labour and abused in the places they were boarded out to. They got nothing.

I hope the brave people who went on hunger strike are not failed by this Government too. I know they feel very angry and let down that supports they were promised have not materialised. To have survivors consulted about the apology 30 minutes beforehand and to have the dates of their coming and going from the institutions wrong today is insulting. It is disrespectful and the very least they deserve today is respect. I hope this does not continue beyond today.

Deputy Jen Cummins: Mary, Miriam, Mary and Maurice should never have had to fight this hard to hear the words they did today. We should never have met outside Leinster House when they were outside on hunger strike, in the cold and dark alone, as they were so many times as children. That should never have happened. They should never have had to endure that. I thank them all for entrusting me with their stories.

It broke my heart the first time I met them, and it still breaks my heart today. I am sorry for getting emotional, but it is on their behalf. What they endured as children and what they are enduring today is just heartbreaking. As Deputy Cairns has just said, to know that their entry and exit dates were incorrect is wrong. The other thing that is wrong is the fact that they all have to go home tonight because they were not put up for the night in Dublin. They have far to travel, and this is an emotional day. That should not have happened to them either.

I congratulate them for the work they have done. They have been amazing. As Deputy O'Rourke has said, they were inspirational. I hope they find some peace today for the remainder of their lives and that the things promised to them are delivered in a timely way. It is three months since they came off the road outside and they have still not been delivered. I wish them the best of luck and I hope today has helped them heal in some little way.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I pay tribute to all industrial and reformatory school survivors and to those who have not lived to hear today's State apology. It is one apology in a series to those who suffered terribly in State institutions. It will ring hollow if it is not followed quickly by the enactment of commitments the Taoiseach made to the hunger strikers last November. I connected with Mary Dunlevy Greene, Mary Donovan, Miriam Moriarty Owens and Maurice Patton O'Connell during their 51-day protest outside Leinster House, in particular with Mary Dunlevy Greene through our shared County Limerick roots. I look forward to meeting Mary in Kiltelly, County Limerick, in the coming months.

I was deeply struck by the determination and commitment to justice shown by these survivors on behalf of all who endured our hellish industrial and reformatory school system. We may have moved on from the savage abuse and abject deprivation that defined our industrial and reformatory schools, but too often this has given way to a cold bureaucratic system that meets survivors not with respect and compassion, but with delay, resistance or indifference when they try to access healthcare, basic financial supports and measures that would bring a modicum of comfort to their lives. I implore the Taoiseach to act on the commitments he made to the survivors last November with the greatest urgency.

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): Today is an important moment in facing up to a traumatic time in our history. This State was established with the intention of moving away from the cruel and harsh regime that vulnerable children experienced in workhouses. However, after independence many of these vulnerable children remained in the workhouses, which were renamed as county homes. Others were put into orphanages, industrial schools and reformatory schools or boarded out to families. Successive tribunals and commissions of investigation have established that many of the children did not get the love, care and security they deserved. Worse again, many experienced severe abuse. This legacy of abuse and neglect of children has caused deep trauma, which is still with survivors today.

I have met with Miriam Moriarty Owens, Mary Dunlevy Greene, Mary Donovan and Maurice Patton O'Connell on a number of occasions, including during their time outside Leinster House, and I am truly conscious of the trauma they and other survivors have endured and continue to endure. As they are aware, the issues were raised directly with an Taoiseach and the Minister for education. I welcome the fact that mediation talks coupled with the genuine personal commitment of an Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, and, most especially, the determination and courage of the group of four survivors paved the way for today's outcome. On that note, I do not believe we should ever underestimate the determination of Miriam, Maurice and the two Marys and their absolute commitment to achieve today's success, not just for themselves but for all the others who experienced what they experienced, lived what they lived and live what they live today. From the outset, I was struck by that sense of solidarity and generosity that drove Miriam, Mary, Maurice and Mary on. I think all in this House thank them for that.

I welcome the apology the Taoiseach has made in the Dáil to survivors of institutional abuse and those who suffered abuse while they were boarded out. This apology builds on the 1999 apology to victims of institutional abuse and aspects of the 2021 apology to survivors of mother and baby homes. From speaking with survivors, I know many worried that they may have a criminal record just by virtue of having been in an industrial school or a reformatory school. The Taoiseach and the Minister for justice have restated the official position that no such criminal record exists. This reassurance is important for survivors, and I welcome it.

Today is a day when the State rightly says sorry for the failings of the past. Every day, we must work with dedication and determination to ensure those past failures are not repeated in the present and into the future. There has been huge reform of our child welfare and protection system over past decades. There are vetting procedures and avenues of support in place that did not exist in the past. However, we cannot shy away from the fact that there are still some children in our society who remain at risk. As a State and a society, we must continue to do

everything in our power to protect and support all children, especially those who are most vulnerable. I conclude by again saluting the courage of Maurice Patton O'Connell, Miriam Moriarty Owens, Mary Dunlevy Greene and Mary Donovan. To them, we say thank you.

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): Like my colleagues, I am pleased to have the time to contribute to this State apology. I acknowledge the words of the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and many of my colleagues in apologising for the great harm that was done to so many young people and families over a prolonged period of time at the hands of the State.

The Taoiseach's apology today rightly built on the 1999 apology on behalf of the State and its citizens to all survivors of childhood abuse, taking into consideration the 2021 apology to survivors and former residents of the mother and baby institutions. Today in particular, we reference and relate to those who were boarded out from the various institutions, many of whom were children who suffered unimaginable abuse at the hands of those who were meant to protect and support them.

Today, we refer to the criminal records and make it clear that no person has a criminal record by virtue of having been in an industrial school. I know this is an important element of the apology today. We make reference to the important initiatives that have taken place in recent decades, including the work of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, improvements to child protection and the provision of redress and other supports. It is important to recommit to and acknowledge the new and necessary ongoing supports that will be delivered to survivors.

I acknowledge four people who have brought us to this point and made today happen. They are Mary Donovan, Mary Dunlevy Greene, Miriam Moriarty Owens and Maurice Patton O'Connell. I know they represent many other survivors of institutional abuse and our industrial schools. I met all four in my previous role as Minister for education. I thank them for the time they afforded me in our engagement and during our time. I am conscious that I am not the first person they had to relay their story to. I am also conscious of the horrors that were inflicted on them, their siblings and their family members, and the intergenerational trauma that has been inflicted on them and their communities.

We are here only through their bravery and determination to ensure not just that the wrong that was inflicted on them is recognised here today but that the wrong that was inflicted on so many others is also recognised here today. We must all take this opportunity to restate our absolute commitment as legislators and public representatives working together to make sure that these kinds of abuse do not happen again and that no young person or family will ever be subjected to the kinds of abuse we know were inflicted on so many young people through no fault of their own. Again, I welcome the Taoiseach's apology and the Tánaiste's apology here today and join with colleagues in thanking in particular Mary, Mary, Miriam and Morris for what they have done and what they have achieved on their own behalf but also on behalf of so many others.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Miriam Moriarty Owens, Mary Donovan, Mary Dunlevy Greene and Maurice Patton O'Connell are four courageous survivors of abuse in industrial schools who undertook a hunger strike for 51 days outside this very building. They did not do that lightly. They did it as a last act, a last resort. These survivors, who had already been failed in childhood

by the State and religious authorities, felt compelled to place their own health at risk simply to have their voices heard, and all for very modest demands, including a HAA card so they can access medical care without additional financial hardship and a contributory State pension acknowledging the years of their unpaid labour carried out in the institutions.

Government after Government acknowledged wrongs but failed to implement fully comprehensive survivor-centred redress. In reality, the Supports for Survivors of Residential Institutional Abuse Act 2025 was a half-measure that ignored the unmet need of all survivors. Sinn Féin brought forward amendments at the time seeking to make that Act equal for all survivors of residential institutions but all of our amendments were struck down by Government. The 2025 Act failed to guarantee universal access to that HAA card; did not provide a contributory State pension in recognition of that unpaid institutional labour; created eligibility thresholds that excluded survivors based on technicalities; and introduced layers of bureaucracy that placed undue burden again on survivors to prove their suffering. A survivor-centred scheme would have ensured the universal inclusion for survivors regardless of what institution they were in or the institution's religious ethos. That was not survivor-centred; it was bureaucracy-centred. It created a hierarchy of pain based on arbitrary lines.

Survivors of institutional abuse were failed as children by religious orders and by the State - by the very systems that were meant to protect them - and they carried the consequences of that for a lifetime. Enduring trauma, an indelible mark was put upon them by those in authority and they were criminalised. The State now has an opportunity and an obligation to move beyond symbolism and deliver concrete, equitable, survivor-centred supports and a timeline for the delivery of them. All commitments must be delivered. Justice must be delivered but an apology has to be the beginning not the end because an apology without justice is hollow and empty and those four people sitting in the Gallery today and all the others like them deserve so much more than that.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: All the bigwig Ministers are here. A few things have to be stated very honestly. Those four survivors were left outside there for over 40 days and, but for Miriam Moriarty Owens, Mary Donovan, Mary Dunlevy Greene and Maurice Patton O'Connell suffering and putting their health at risk, nothing would have been given. I remember raising this on the floor of the Dáil. I think Catherine Connolly, who is now the President, raised it during Leaders' Questions. I think I raised it during Questions on Policy or Legislation on the same day. The answer we got back was that the Government was not giving into emotional blackmail.

I want to clarify what has been conceded to the survivors. I put my glasses on a couple of times to check this. Instead of a pension, they are being given a yearly payment of €600. Is that correct? That is €4 per week and we are expected to think that is okay, bearing in mind the free labour that was done in reformatory schools. A host of things that seem to have been discussed and asked for by the survivors have not been given. They make the point that there are 4,000 other people who are looking for lifelong supports that they still have not got. The Government goes on about one-off payments during the cost-of-living crisis but these are all one-off measures so that they do not exist for other people as well. A figure of €600 per year is an insult and should be looked at again.

I pay homage to them for their determination and consistency in raising this issue. I acknowledge once again people who have been the victims of the church-State nexus. First cousins of my mother were in reformatory schools. We all only found out about it much later in life. We did not know anything about them and they had lifelong suffering and torment as a result of what they experienced there. The damage to people's psychological and physical health has not been fully acknowledged at all by what has been given. Once again, the Irish State is covering up its role in past abuses.

Deputy Paul Murphy: These are the words of Mary Dunlevy Greene, one of the hunger strikers who fought for redress from the Government for the State's part in their abuse:

We were child slaves. We got very little portions of food. We were deprived of every human right. A capitation grant was paid by the State to the religious orders to keep us there. They gagged us. We weren't allowed to speak afterwards or name an institution or a perpetrator.

The horrors cannot be overstated. I remember going out to meet with them when they were bravely on their hunger strike, not seeing any road in terms of justice and just the horror these people went through for which the State was responsible. Therefore, it is welcome that the State has given an apology but it has to be followed by action. We cannot forget how long it took to get to this point, not just in years but in terms of the 46 days of the hunger strike it took for a mediator to be put in place and the 51 days for the Government to commit to work with the hunger strikers regarding their very simple demands. These were the award of a Health (Amendment) Act card and a State contributory pension for the abuse that they suffered in their childhood, in line - this is the point they always made - with what had been offered to other survivors of similar institutions.

It is good that the Government has announced supports for survivors. It has been a very long process and they are not all in place but they need to be put in place. If they are not, we will be putting very significant pressure on in here to make sure that they are and that survivors are not forced to contact us to say that they keep hearing that things are going to be resolved but things do not seem to be resolved. There are around 4,000 living survivors of abuse in industrial schools. They cannot be made to wait. They have to get this. It is the very least that they are entitled to.

I also want to raise a related issue of abuse that has been ignored. This is the historic abuse that occurred in psychiatric hospitals. I have been speaking to Mary Donovan about her mother Margaret Mary Donovan, who was institutionalised for nearly her entire life. She spent over 50 years in both State-run and religious institutions across Ireland from the age of 16. In 1966, nursing notes said there appeared to be very little wrong mentally with her, yet she remained institutionalised. Included in the allegations against these psychiatric institutions are mistreatment, rape and forced labour. The abuse also severely impacted the life of Mary's brother Christopher, who spent over 20 years in a psychiatric hospital and died there in 2007. The abuse he suffered saw him go from what was described as a big man to a skeleton and develop numerous other issues, including schizophrenia. There is no inquiry in place regarding psychiatric institutions and no redress or apology has been offered. This issue is coming and the Government should get ahead of it, address it, order an inquiry into it and not force another group of people to have to protest for a basic recognition of the wrongs the State did to them and an apology.

5 o'clock

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I very much welcome the Government's apology today to the survivors of abuse in residential institutions. This apology builds on the State's apology to all victims of childhood abuse made in May 1999 and also takes into consideration the 2021 apology to survivors and former residents of the mother and baby institutions.

This apology comes as we reflect on one of the darkest chapters of our history - a chapter we must look back on and learn from. On 22 September last year, a number of brave, determined and committed survivors began their hunger strike outside Leinster House, including a courageous lady from my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny, Ms Mary Dunlevy Greene. When I met with the group of survivors while they were on hunger strike in September, I was deeply impacted by their accounts of their childhoods and struck by how they had been strong enough to carry on, yet also recount those horrific times in order to tell their stories again and again.

While I am glad the Government has issued this long-awaited apology today, I hope it can bring them some level of comfort. I am under no illusion that it can never undo the horrific experience of their pasts and the harm each of them sustained in the hands of the State.

Following engagement with the Taoiseach and the then Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy McEntee, the group ceased its protest on 10 November. The mediation process concluded in December. Arising from this mediation process, the Government also approved proposals to strengthen education and health supports for survivors which are to be delivered under the Supports for Survivors of Residential Institutional Abuse Act 2025, which was signed into law last July.

A very important aspect of today's apology is that it relates to those who were boarded out from relevant institutions. This apology underlines the fact that those who were victims of this industrial abuse, and who were criminalised for so long, do not have a criminal record and will not now be viewed as criminals by the State. A number of other issues, including housing and funeral costs, are also being addressed by the relevant Departments so that survivors can be provided for. Work is ongoing to deliver on commitments given and further details will be provided to survivors as soon as possible. It is nothing less than what you deserve. I commend you all on your determination and resolve. What happened to you was wrong. The suffering you endured as children was wrong and the impact that this has had on your entire lives is wrong.

Deputy Barry Ward: I welcome this apology. Our State was founded on very lofty principles. Many of them have been delivered but so many of them have not. During the last century, the State fell short in terms of delivering for its citizens. This is one example of that.

I met these people in September outside the Dáil. I acknowledge the courage it took for them to take the steps they did, and I am glad that it has resulted in a conclusion or a closure of some sort for them. The apology is merited and appropriate and I welcome the fact it has come.

I do, however, think that we are sometimes too slow to apologise. As a State, I understand there are legal considerations, liabilities and all the rest. However, at the end of the day, we know there are instances in our past which constitute as a stain on the history of this State for which we should be sorry, and for which I think we are genuinely sorry, yet bureaucratically we are slow to apologise for. We should not be. When we know something is wrong, we should be willing to stand up to say as much whether that is as a Government or as an individual citizen. We should be able to acknowledge the harms done by the State and by our society in the past. We should be quicker and swifter in acknowledging that because it is only then that we can start to heal the damage that was done.

While I welcome this apology, there are many other instances where apologies have been sought and are not yet forthcoming. One group - and I do not propose to talk about them now - are the thalidomide survivors who are also awaiting a real solution. However, I acknowledge the work that has been done by the Taoiseach and Tánaiste in meeting them. I hope they progress that process quickly.

The most important thing about what we are talking about today is that we, as a polity and as a State, genuinely take on board what has been done in the past that was wrong, hurtful and damaging, acknowledge it with a proper State apology that has been received today and not just the survivors to move on and live their lives, but we, as a State, cannot move on until those apologies are made. I applaud and welcome the fact that the apology has been made. I welcome the package that has been put together and I congratulate those who put it together but when this issue comes up as it will again, let us do it more swiftly. Let us be fair to the people who were wronged by the State and make sure they get what they need and deserve.

Deputy Paula Butterly: Childhood memories should be nuggets of joy and flashbacks of events evoked by the smells, words or actions of others and of happier times. They should make us laugh and smile when we remember. They should be a guide for us, if or when, we are lucky enough to have own children. They should wrap around us like a cosy duvet on dark miserable days.

Some of us can point to a teacher who was inspirational, stern, strict, batty or just simply kind. I remember Mrs. Bell who handed out Silvermints when trying to get us prepared for our first communion or Mrs. McKeown who would take us outside to do our lessons on sunny days. Not all days were great days but they were certainly nowhere near the experiences of these brave people who have shared their stories and experiences of horrid abuses.

Their childhood memories are mired in darkness as a result of the abuse inflicted on them by the very people who should have had their best interests at heart. They were abused by people who had no regard for their duty of care to these children. They were abused by people who feared no repercussions for their actions. They were abused by people who were possibly admired and respected for how they handled unruly or problematic children or for how they ran their schools. They abused children. Children who were seen but not heard. Children who would not, or could not, dare utter a word of what was happening to them. Children who were not believed. Children abused by monsters.

That we, the State, offer an apology is not only right, it is long, long overdue. To those who have suffered, I am sorry. I am so sorry that you had to not only experience these abuses but that you had to wait so long to be heard.

Deputy Ann Graves: From 21 September to 10 November 2025, Mary Donovan, Mary Dunlevy Greene, Maurice Patton O'Connell and Miriam Moriarty Owens were forced to go on hunger strike outside this building for 51 days and nights in an attempt for justice. They slept on the streets outside this House in appalling conditions and weather. Their meagre possessions were stolen in what is supposed to be safe Dublin. They did it to represent other survivors.

I had the privilege of supporting them by raising their case in this House at the beginning of last November. During my contribution, I pleaded with the Taoiseach to go out, meet the hunger strikers and agree to their reasonable demands. The survivors have been deeply traumatised by the institutional abuse they suffered, and they were retraumatised by the Government's lack of engagement and response. They then faced psychological and health issues following their hunger strike. Their courage, strength and sacrifice in undertaking a hunger strike was not for themselves alone but for all survivors. They undertook the process not just for them but for the 4,000 survivors of residential institutional abuse.

Their demands were simple. A State-contributory pension to acknowledge the years of unpaid labour carried out in institutions where children were forced to work without remuneration, education or protection and a Health (Amendment) Act card to help address the lifelong consequences of the abuse they suffered in these industrial and reformatory schools.

While the Taoiseach's apology is very welcome, survivors have experienced decades of lip service. Successive Governments have recognised the wrongs, while failing to implement comprehensive survivor-centred solutions. Trust in government and the powers that be have been eroded by decades of inaction. Only decisive action can now change this.

The Supports for Survivors of Residential Institutional Abuse Act 2025 was introduced by this Government.

The Act is a half measure that ignores the needs of survivors. Sinn Féin brought forward amendments which sought to make the legislation equal for all survivors but they were struck down by the Government. Our amendments included a universal health card, a contributory State pension, educational bursaries, financial contributions from religious orders and equal access to all supports under the Act, regardless of whether survivors had received an award of settlement. That is the very least survivors should expect.

Significant concerns remain that the legislation is incomplete and does not fully address the lived realities of survivors of institutional abuse. The State continues to shield religious orders from their financial responsibility. It is unacceptable that the State alone should foot the bill for crimes committed by both church and State. Justice delayed has already been justice denied. For survivors of institutional abuse, immediate and decisive action must follow tonight's apology in order to make it valid.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I want to address Mary Donovan, Mary Dunlevy Greene, Miriam Moriarty Owens and Maurice Patton O'Connell who, over 51 days, became more than just acquaintances. We almost became friends as I passed by every day on my way to my office in Agriculture House and stopped for a cup of coffee. Many times I witnessed ambulances pulling up outside to take one of them away. For 51 days, people who are 70-plus years of age on average had to go out on the street to fight for what was theirs. That these people are survivors.

They have proven, over and over again, that they can rise from the ashes because they have gone through it all their lives. They have fought all their lives against sexual abuse - and I am talking about the 4,000 others as well - child slavery, mental abuse and physical abuse.

People who I had never met rang me from all over the country to tell me that they were victims of this abuse and recount their stories. They told me how they had planned to travel to Australia when they were in their 30s or 40s or how they planned to travel to the United States. They were afraid to even apply to do so, however, because they feared they may have criminal records. Today, in 2026, when the best of years are behind them - that is the truth - they are being told that they do not have criminal records. The first apology was issued in 1999. However, 27 years later, we are here issuing another apology because we did not do it correctly in the first place. It beggars belief that we are not apologising for things we got wrong in this State.

Nobody is blaming the Taoiseach or his Government directly. These are things that happened in the past. We have to be able to say that this is what happened and that we need to take responsibility for it and correct it. Yet, here we are, 27 years after the first apology in 1999. That should not be the case. These people should have been able to go out the door in 1999 with the apology, accepted it and had all the necessary redresses due to them.

I listened to comments being made earlier. I am going to address those comments because some of them made by stomach churn. I say that because I got to know these people very well. These are honourable and trustworthy people. These are people I could tell my darkest secret to. We have known one another for quite some time over the phone, chatting back and forth. These are people I could tell my darkest secret to because they are trustworthy and honourable. When they tell me that something happened to them or that something was said to them by an official in a room, I believe them.

One person stood up here and issued their apology, but, at a negotiation, that individual went outside the door and made jokes about and laughed at certain people's conditions and said, "A bit of a hunger strike wouldn't be too bad for one or two of them". I have to salute these people because they shook her hand today. I could not. The comments that were made here today disgusted me, because I know the facts from listening to these people and I know the trustworthiness of these people. When they tell me that story, I have to salute them because they shook her hand today as she went out the door. I could not do it. Well done. That just shows you the honour and decency in these people, and they should never have been treated like that.

The Taoiseach used the word "explore" twice on page 8 of his address. Please do not explore any more. Give them what they are entitled to and give them fairness and honesty. Let them go on and have some sort of quality of life and put this awfulness behind them.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I stand today to add my support to the State apology to the victims of horrendous abuse in industrial and reformatory schools. There are not enough words to outline the abuse and absolute horror suffered by these survivors and all victims of abuse.

Many of those have lived and suffered in silence. They suffered the stigma for decades and have struggled with pain and anguish. These were children placed in these industrial schools.

We know they suffered the most horrendous mistreatment but they had courage and conviction – especially those who undertook a lengthy hunger strike outside these gates – to ensure their most awful experiences were finally heard. They shared their lived experience and still share their living experience. I hope today is one of the better days of their living experience.

I want to mention Mary Donovan, Mary Dunlevy Greene, Miriam Moriarty Owens and Maurice Patton O'Connell. I met Maurice a few years ago. He is the parent of Jason, who is upstairs looking down. I met Maurice when his son was overprescribed medication in south Kerry child and adolescent mental health services. Maurice has outlined Jason's lost years as a result of the overprescribing, and during really difficult times for himself, Maurice put his family first to advocate for them. I will always remember his powerful advocacy in relation to children who were harmed in Kerry. I hope the Government's response to what happened in Kerry will deliver for Jason and others and they can go on and have better years.

I can only imagine the horror that Maurice is enduring in having to fight the State on two fronts. As Minister of State, I am committed to doing whatever I can to right the wrongs of mental health services in Kerry. The Government is determined to recognise the trauma of what Maurice, the two Marys and Miriam all endured with the apology and the package of supports for survivors.

We are committed to a strengthened suite of supports, extending access to tailored health services, counselling, physiotherapy, education payments and compassionate assistance in housing and funeral costs. We are totally committed. I hope these measures can meet the very real needs raised by survivors and reflect the State's responsibility to respond meaningfully. The State has also affirmed that no survivor should ever be regarded as having a criminal record simply because they were placed in an industrial school, and the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, has clarified this and will issue formal certificates to confirm it.

As these commitments are implemented, this moment must represent more than an apology. It must be a turning point, one grounded in dignity, justice and a continuing duty to ensure survivors receive the compassion and support they deserve. What happened to them was wrong and I hope today brings some small comfort to them all.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): It is very clear from today's contributions that in the past this country has often failed to treat people equally and it has failed to look after the most vulnerable, especially vulnerable children. In sending vulnerable children to State institutions run by religious orders in many cases, we left them unprotected and open to abuse at the hands of those who are supposed to help and protect them.

The Ryan report outlines to a full and heartbreaking extent just how much these vulnerable children suffered abuse and neglect under the harsh institutional regimes. I know that nothing can ever be said or done to unravel the pain and suffering that ensued from these abuses.

I previously stated my vision for Ireland as a place where our children and grandchildren can build a decent life for themselves, where all people are treated equally and where our society looks after the most vulnerable.

To the survivors present here today, I want to say that I understand how much this past has had a real and lasting impact on all stages of their lives. In reality, in the vast majority of cases, children ended up in these institutions simply because they and their families were poor. In

more recent times, we have recognised the hugely detrimental impact that poverty can have on children's lives. I welcome the concerted efforts across the system to tackle child poverty. The importance of this focus was recognised in the establishment of the child poverty and well-being programme office in the Department of the Taoiseach in 2023 to prioritise actions across government in areas that will have the greatest impact for children and families experiencing poverty. This is important work and, as a Government, we must continue to focus on our work to make significant positive changes for families and children who experience poverty.

The Taoiseach and the Tánaiste have spoken today about the many ways in which we have extensively changed and improved our childcare and child protection systems. It is important that we acknowledge the progress made while recognising the importance of continuing vigilance for vulnerable children. Today, we also again recognise the plight of those children who suffered abuse while boarded out. The abuse and neglect that some children experienced while boarded out was truly unforgivable, and the State rightly apologises to them today for what they endured.

It is also fitting that we are clearly and unequivocally clarifying the position that the State did not, and does not, regard individuals as having committed a criminal offence, and that no criminal record is recorded against them by virtue of their detention in an industrial school. Likewise, any children who were detained in industrial schools, and subsequently transferred to reformatory schools solely by virtue of their detention in industrial schools, are not considered to have a criminal record.

The full range of additional supports being put in place for survivors of institutional abuse has been outlined today. I especially welcome the fact that access to health services for survivors of industrial schools will be strengthened through the implementation of bespoke arrangements for this specific group of survivors, including access to counselling and physiotherapy services. I note that many of the services provided under the HAA card are already available under the enhanced medical card for survivors of residential institutional abuse. It is also welcome that additional health liaison officers will be put in place to support this group of survivors. I understand that arrangements are in train to have these additional supports in place as soon as possible.

In conclusion, today is another important chapter in facing up to our past, and in our ongoing efforts to address the terrible impact of institutional abuse on survivors.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 5.23 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 6.25 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 5.23 p.m. and resumed at 6.25 p.m.

Estimates for Public Services 2026: Messages from Select Committees

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Transport has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2026: Vote 31 - Transport.

The Select Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community Development has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for Public Services for the

service of the year ending on 31 December 2026: Vote 37 - Social Protection and Vote 42 - Rural and Community Development.

The Select Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2026: Vote 16 - Tailte Éireann; Vote 23 - An Coimisiún Toghcháin; Vote 34 - Housing, Local Government and Heritage; and Vote 39 - Uisce Éireann.

International Protection Bill 2026: Committee Stage (Resumed) and Remaining Stages

NEW SECTIONS

Debate resumed on amendment No. 15:

In page 26, after line 30, to insert the following:

"Community impact assessments prior to location of international protection accommodation

14.(1) Prior to the establishment of any new accommodation centre under this Act, the Minister shall ensure that a Community Impact Assessment is prepared and published.

(2) A Community Impact Assessment shall be carried out by—

- (a) the relevant local authority, or
- (b) such other competent body as the Minister may appoint for that purpose.

(3) A Community Impact Assessment shall include—

- (a) the projected capacity of the proposed centre,
- (b) an assessment of local service impacts,
- (c) community engagement plans,
- (d) proposed mitigation measures, and
- (e) an analysis of the Pobal Deprivation Index for the area concerned, including consideration of whether the proposal would contribute to a disproportionate concentration of accommodation centres in disadvantaged communities.

(4) The body carrying out the Assessment under subsection (2) shall conduct a statutory consultation with—

- (a) the relevant local authority (where it is not itself the assessing body), and
- (b) community stakeholders.

(5) A centre shall not commence operation until—

- (a) the consultation period has concluded, and
- (b) the Community Impact Assessment has been published."

— (Deputy Matt Carthy).

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Gabhaim buíochas as an deis labhartha ar an ábhar agus ar an reachtaíocht seo atá os comhair na Dála anocht agus muid ag plé le Céim an Choiste. Is mór an trua é, mar atá ráite ag mo chomhghleacaithe, go bhfuil seo á bhrú chun tosaigh agus nach bhfuil deis ag an gcoiste dlí agus cirt féin mionscrúdú a dhéanamh ar seo. Mar a dúirt daoine eile an tseachtain seo caite, tá sé soiléir nach mbeidh go leor ama againn dul tríd na moltaí agus leasuithe uile atá curtha chun tosaigh ag mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Carthy, agus ag daoine eile sa Fhreasúra mar níl go leor ama á leagan amach fá choinne seo. Léiríonn sé sin an cinneadh contráilte atá déanta ag an Rialtas seo gan cead a thabhairt don choiste dlí agus cirt mionscrúdú a dhéanamh ar an reachtaíocht seo.

Díreoidh mé isteach ar an bpríomhleasú atá curtha chun tosaigh agus atáimid ag plé anseo, leasú Uimh. 14. I ndáiríre, is é an rud atá á lorg anseo ná giota beag réasúin agus giota beag céille, agus go mbeidh pleanáil mar is ceart déanta ó thaobh cén áit a mbeidh ionadaithe cosanta idirnáisiúnta á lonnú sa Stát. Tá sé soiléir go dtí seo nach raibh aon phleanáil fá dtaobh de seo mar go raibh na haonaid seo oscailte cibé áit a raibh siad ar fáil, gan aon díriú isteach ar an deacracht a bheadh ann ó thaobh na gceantar sin. B'fhéidir, mar a chuala muid, gurb é an teach ósta deireanach a bhí sa bhaile. B'fhéidir go raibh fadhb ann ó thaobh ganntanas áiteanna sna scoileanna ná ó thaobh dochtúirí agus a leithéid sin. B'fhéidir gur lonnáiódh iad i gcorráiteanna nach raibh na fadhbanna sin, ach an rud atá a fhios againn ná ní raibh a fhios ag an Aire ná an Rialtas dóigh amháin nó dóigh eile mar ní raibh sé sin mar pháirt de na coinníollacha fá choinne na hionaid seo a lonnú mar ní raibh scrúdú ar bith á dhéanamh ar na ceantair sin. An rud atá á rá ag mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Carthy, ná sula mbeidh aon ionad úr oscailte ar fud an Stáit go mbeidh measúnú déanta ar an impleacht ar na pobail ina bhfuil siad lonnaithe.

Mar pháirt de sin, ba chóir go mbeimis ag amharc ar cé mhéad duine a bheadh san ionad seo agus cad iad na seirbhísí áitiúla atá ar fáil. Dá mbeadh impleachtaí ann do na seirbhísí áitiúla sin, ba chóir go mbeadh plean ann le dul i ngleic leis an phobal agus a chomhairle agus a thuairimí a fháil. Ba chóir labhairt leis an phobal óna thaobh seo. Lena chois sin, ba chóir go mbeidh measúnú ag an Roinn ar an leibhéal de mhíbhuntáiste sa cheantar. Mar atá a fhios againn, níl achan pháirt den tír mar an gcéanna. Tá codanna den tír buailte níos troime. Tá níos mó míbhuntáiste i roinnt ceantar ná mar atá i gceantair eile. Tá cinneadh le déanamh ag an Stát. Ar chóir na hionaid seo a bheith lonnaithe i gceantair a bhfuil fadhbanna míbhuntáiste acu? Is é ár dtuairim nár chóir. Sula mbeadh aon mholadh á chur chun tosaigh ó thaobh ionad mar seo a lonnú i gceantar, ba chóir go mbeadh an measúnú seo foilsithe agus próiseas comhairliúcháin ann leis an phobal. Níor chóir go mbeadh aon ionad nua oscailte sula mbeadh an próiseas comhairliúcháin sin thart agus an tuairim sin foilsithe.

Mar a dúirt mé, is leasú réasúnta agus polasaí réasúnta é seo. Muna nglacann an Rialtas leis seo, tá sé ag rá gur cuma leis cad iad na fadhbanna sa cheantar, gur cuma leis muna bhfuil spásanna scoile ann do na páistí a bheadh lonnaithe san ionad agus gur cuma leis faoin bhrú a bheadh á chur ar sheirbhísí dochtúra agus a leithéid. Tá go leor brú ar na seirbhísí sin cheana. Nílím ag cur locht ar dhaoine atá ag cuardach cosaint ón tír seo ach caithfear é sin a chur san áireamh.

Má tá tú ag iarraidh amharc ar shampla maith den dóigh ina dhearna an Rialtas brachán de seo, ba chóir amharc ar Dhún na nGall. Is é Dún na nGall an contae is mó atá faoi

mhíbhuntáiste sa tír. Is é Dún na nGall an contae is mó sa tír a bhfuil ioncam íseal ag a dhaonra. Is é Dún na nGall an contae is mó a bhfuil cártaí leighis ag daoine. Léiríonn sé sin arís an ráta míbhuntáiste. Is é Dún na nGall an contae nach bhfaighidh tú ciliméadar de dhébhealach, mótarbhealach, iarnród ná líne gháis ann. Níl a leithéid againn sa chontae mar go bhfuil infreastruchtúr an chontae iontach olc. Is é Dún na nGall an contae a dhéanann suas 3% de dhaonra an Stát ach, nuair a tháinig slua mór daoine ón Úcráin agus ó thíortha eile ag cuardach cosaint ón tír seo, rinne an Rialtas cinneadh níos mó daoine a chur isteach i nDún na nGall ná i gcontae ar bith eile. Cén réasún atá leis an pholasaí sin? Cuireadh duine as gach aon dosaeen a tháinig ón Úcráin isteach i nDún na nGall. Dá ndéanfaí an rud céanna i mBaile Átha Cliath, bheadh thart ar 110,000 duine as an Úcráin sa chontae. Ní sin an rud atá ag tarlú. Ní hamháin daoine ón Úcráin atá i gceist. Má amharcann muid ar IPAS agus ar na daoine atá ag teacht ag cuardach cosanta, caithfidh siad dul trí phróiseas. Tá a fhios againn nach bhfuil cead fanacht sa tír ag an mhórchuid de dhaoine a théann tríd an phróiseas. Arís, is é an cinneadh a rinne an Rialtas seo ná an líon is mó daoine in aon chontae ar bith taobh amuigh de Bhaile Átha Cliath a chur isteach i nDún na nGall. Ní dhéanann sé sin ciall.

Is é sin an rud faoina bhfuil an leasú seo ag caint. Tá sé ag caint faoi phleanáil cheart agus faoi ghuth an phobail agus comhairle an phobail a bheith lárnach in aon pholasaí atá ag an Rialtas ó thaobh ionad nua a lonnú i gceantar ar bith.

This amendment is sensible. I commend Deputy Carthy on tabling it and the other amendments he tabled on behalf of Sinn Féin. The only pity is how the Government has dealt with this legislation. I raised the issue of the committee not being able to scrutinise the Bill in the detail it wanted to. This has left us in a position where we will not be able to scrutinise all of the amendments to or all sections of the legislation because the Government is playing to the tune of Europe, having signed up to a pact which was never in the interest of this State, or at least not in its entirety. It is now caught by the timeframes and we have legislation we cannot properly scrutinise. Outside of that, if we forget about the timeframes and the lack of scrutiny, the key issue in this amendment makes perfect sense. It is about ensuring that new accommodation centres will only be established in the State after a community impact assessment has been done. That does not mean there is a block on a centre; it just means an assessment has to be carried out. There are places in the State that are under more pressure than others and places where services are more plentiful than in others. There are also places that have issues, perhaps with the number of people already there seeking international protection or temporary protection, as applies to Ukrainians.

The Government seems to be talking about rejecting that sensible proposal. I do not understand why. By rejecting it, the Government is basically saying it rejects the idea that we should consult with communities, listen to them, have any notion of services or the impact a new centre would have on services, the impact of the level of deprivation that exists in an area and the impact a centre may or may not have on that level of deprivation. What the Government is talking about doing makes no sense. When one looks at what has happened heretofore, it is just a complete and utter mess.

I come from County Donegal. The facts unfortunately tell us that Donegal is the most deprived county in the Twenty-six Counties. It has the highest rate of unemployment and deprivation, the highest concentration of medical cards and the worst infrastructure in the State. You will not find a kilometre of motorway, dual carriageway, gas pipeline or train line because

they do not exist. We are a county under serious pressure and the most deprived county in the State. What did the Government decide to do to deal with an influx of people who came from Ukraine seeking refuge, and need support and refuge, and those applying for international protection? It was not the case that Donegal, even though it was the most deprived county, would take what could be argued is its fair share. One in 12 people who came here from Ukraine under temporary protection ended up in Donegal, the most deprived county in Ireland. If the same statistics were applied to Dublin, there would be 110,000 Ukrainians. To have 8% or one in 12 makes no sense.

Even if you look at a more granular level, some of those were concentrated in certain parts of the county. It makes no sense because there was no planning and no recognition that it is a locality that might be under serious pressure or, with the numbers already there, that additional numbers would put pressure on services, places in schools or, indeed, social cohesion. There was no reference to that. The Department, the Minister and the Government were fixated on one thing, namely, which person who wants to become a millionaire overnight is offering a property. That was it. No other questions were asked. Community engagement was a nonsense. They phoned up, told you there was a contract signed for a centre and no matter what, even if you thought it was not the right place, it did not matter. That is how the Government handled where individuals who came from Ukraine are to be located.

The same thing happened again with IPAS. Donegal, out of all the counties, has the highest number of people applying for international protection. Of all those who have come here, 7% have gone to Donegal. This is nuts from a planning point of view.

From a planning point of view, it is as if the Government was to sit down and just say it has an issue of where to locate people and that it will put most of them in the most deprived county in the country; in the county that does not have rail, does not have motorway and that has so many different challenges. It made no sense from a planning point of view. There are other issues there, which should have been taken into account in relation to any assessment that would be carried out here. An assessment is not a block. An assessment is just about looking at what is on the ground, what is there already, the numbers that are there and the services that are there, whether they already under pressure and if maybe a bit too much has been done there and so on. In my county of Donegal, I live in a region that is linguistically rich in terms of the Irish language. The Gaeltacht is tobar na Gaeilge. We will not have an Irish language in this country if we do not have Gaeltacht communities and places that speak Irish on a daily basis. That does not mean to say that people cannot come in and live in relation to Gaeltacht areas. I am not saying that, but that would be part of an assessment that would be carried out regarding this.

If we look at it now, we have social housing development in the Gaeltacht. In every single social development in the Gaeltacht in Donegal, 80% of the houses have to be given to Irish speakers who are fluent in Irish and can reach a certain standard in terms of Irish. That is one of arm of government saying that for those people who have a housing need, and there are people in the Gaeltacht who cannot speak Irish and have a housing need who also need to be accommodated, the policy, which this Government supports, is that there are criteria there. Why are there criteria? It is because there are so many studies telling us that the Gaeltacht is dying and will not survive and one thing we need to do is to protect the Gaeltacht in terms of a hub where Irish is spoken as much as possible on a daily basis. How do we dilute that? It is

more people coming into the area who cannot speak the language or are not willing to speak the language. I met with the Polish ambassador earlier on. I said that many of my young son's friends are Polish who have gone to his school. They speak Polish at home. They speak Gaeilge to their friends. English is the third language, which is beautiful to see. That is the same with some of the Ukrainians who are here as well.

These are things that should be captured in relation to any assessment. Why under God would we not carry out an assessment? If the Government says that it will not carry out this assessment, then it is reverting to this chaotic situation where it was just left to those speculators and people who wanted to make millions overnight. Some people went in and provided accommodation. Let us be clear, they provided accommodation because people were seeking refuge and people needed to be housed. I take that on 100%. I am not tarring everyone with the same brush. But by God I will tell you there are plenty of people, and we know their names, who were unscrupulous and who were just talking about making millions on the back of the misery that has happened. They did not care in relation to the impact of local communities, or indeed, the places, the conditions and some of the treatment of those people within the centres that they facilitated. I use Donegal as an example of how the worst planning has happened in the last while. I spoke to the previous Minister in relation to this many times. In my community in Donegal and in Gweedore, we had a centre for decades. There were no issues whatsoever. There were no issues for a long time. It kept on going and more and more pressure was put on individuals, services and areas. Even though we were telling the Government that social cohesion and these issues were causing strains, it did not matter.

This amendment is sensible. It is the appropriate thing to do. We are dealing with this amendment in relation to centres of international protection. It is not Ukrainians, but I used the argument of Ukrainians to talk about the actual additional pressure that has placed in relation to regions. We could talk about other regions as well, but Donegal is probably the one that is the most acute. At the heart of all of this is the issue of the failure of the Government. That cannot be taken away from this. Why is there an accommodation crisis in relation to international protection in this State? It is because the Government still has not done its job. It still has not got a handle in relation to processing times. No harm to the Minister, the one thing about him is that he has been on the media talking about this quite a lot, but the fact unfortunately is that processing times have got worse in the past year. From application time to appeal, it is now longer than it was last year. What is it now?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Stick to the amendment, Deputy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is the amendment. IPAS accommodation in the numbers that are required would not be required if processing happened. The vast majority of people who have applied based on past experience are not entitled to protection here. Therefore, if processing time was quickened up, then they would not need the accommodation that is here. The Government does not need a European pact to get its act together in relation to this. There was nothing stopping the Government in the past year to fix the processing time. The evidence is now that it is 14 months from initial application and 12 and a half months for appeal. It is 26 and a half months from initial application to the end of an appeal which is longer than it was in 2024. The Government is going backwards in relation to this. This is at the very core of it. It is about fixing a process that has been broken for many years. People who have applied here

for international protection are not given the decision that they are entitled to protection in time and then supported and integrated into our community. They have to wait and wait and wait. There are others, which is unfortunately the majority of cases according to the statistics, who were never entitled to protection here anyway, but it has taken two and a half years for a decision to be made in relation to the initial application and the appeal that they may lodge. That goes to the core of what is there.

I commend the amendment. It is sensible. The Government should not fear the voice of the public. It should not fear engaging with communities. It should not fear carrying out an assessment in relation to any type of centre that is being located and whether this is the best place or maybe it is within boundaries of countries that there is another place that is more suitable.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: In here last week for several hours, a number of TDs took up the Government on some egregious things that it is bringing in, particularly in relation to children being detained and some really negative attacks on human rights that this Bill represents. Regarding this amendment, I cannot support it as it is currently worded. I do not agree that before any accommodation is provided for the IPAS services that there would have to be this, this, this and this. For example, there was an IPAS centre in Blanchardstown. Nobody even knew about it. It was working perfectly well. The people there were working with the Blanchardstown Tidy Towns on a Saturday morning making the village look good. It was an outlet for them. They were trying to integrate into the community. The far right councillor in the area got word of it and whipped up a storm. This is a recipe for the far right to build in areas. It is disappointing to see this coming from Sinn Féin. The party knows that this would be a recipe for creating new far right councillors, to be frank. It is not just that, we should have a discussion about community engagement. I have no issue with that because there has to be a level of community engagement. To suggest that this would have to be done before any new accommodation could be provided is adding to the negative feeling around any international protection applicants.

I raised a case last week of an international protection applicant. They were people in a local Blanchardstown hotel. They were being moved to Mayo. I raised it with the Minister.

To give an example, the woman whose case I raised whose child has special needs actually had a major panic attack. She is also diabetic and became so ill that she could not be moved. She ended up being transferred to Dublin. What I am saying is that there are real live human beings and families, ordinary people from other countries, in international protection. This just further demonises people.

The Government is responding to the far right by moving in a much more overtly racist direction but other parties are also responding in different ways. How to take on the far right and racism is the most important political issue in the world right now bar none. We have to call it out wherever it is. This amendment is a recipe for stoking up fear in communities. We do need discussions and community engagement of some kind. You could have discussions with different groups and different individuals in a community but to suggest that no IPAS accommodation can be provided for people just adds to the racism and fear that is operating in communities.

I have a couple of things to say on this. On its own, this amendment could look quite innocent but I have seen a leaflet given out in Dublin Central that says that Sinn Féin will manage migration. To be honest, the leaflet uses some racist far-right talking points. It talks about profiteering. That is all a lot of Sinn Féin's speakers have talked about. I have heard them several times over the last week talking about people being made into millionaires and about global market forces deciding our migration policy. These really are far-right talking points. It is conspiracy stuff. There are words that are not mentioned at all in the leaflet. Racism is not mentioned at all in the leaflet distributed in Dublin Central.

Deputy Matt Carthy: That is not true.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The fear being experienced by minorities in this country, people who are working and living here, is not mentioned. None of Sinn Féin's speakers have mentioned it either. If Sinn Féin were to be fair, it would concede that most of the party's speakers have used their time to talk about profiteering and all of the other problems but have never focused on the racism being generated in society. All of the facts and figures show a rise in racism. To be very clear, I primarily blame the Government. Deputy Simon Harris has tried to blame minorities and refugees for the housing crisis. That is pitiable and abominable but it is really not surprising. If Sinn Féin thinks this is going to push back against its supporters leaning into racism, it really is not. It actually just lends credibility to those ideas. Any honest assessment of a leaflet like that in conjunction with this amendment would agree.

We have to point to the wealth that exists in this society. This Government has a record budget surplus but it has never used it to resolve the housing crisis. We have had a housing crisis for 12 or 13 years now, since way before the recent migration. Migration has also gone down. I have heard different speakers in the Dáil talking about deportations. Being the subject of a deportation order does not mean a person is a criminal. Some of what Sinn Féin has put in this leaflet is not in line with some of its TDs' views. Some of those TDs have taken up this issue quite well in different areas. However, this leaflet is totally disingenuous stuff. Putting this out in communities just feeds into the whole narrative of refugees being a major problem. There are 18 billionaires on this planet who control half the wealth. There is huge wealth in this country that could be used to build homes, to sort out the healthcare system and to provide the schools that we need without scapegoating minorities and people who have fled countries for the most difficult reasons.

There are other parties and individuals in here who do nothing but demonise people every time migration comes up. I helped members of the Indian community organise a march last summer following attacks on Indian members of our community. Every single one of them reported a climate of increased racism in this country. All of this feeds into it. It is just very unfair.

We have to call out racism wherever it is. I say to those who are meant to be standing on the left that racism is a key issue for the left. If you do not take a firm stance against it and if you start using some of the arguments of the far right and racists, you will not fight them off. I think Sinn Féin believes it will and that is why it is doing this but I cannot support this amendment. It is completely and utterly a recipe for the far right to stoke up fear and to grow in every single community in the area. If we looked through the record and counted up the words of most of the Sinn Féin TDs, we would see that they have spent their time complaining.

I am not saying there are not issues in different communities and areas. There obviously are but the Sinn Féin speakers' whole thing was just an attack on Ukrainians, blaming them for a great many issues. Donegal has been a deprived county for decades.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I did not blame Ukrainians. The Deputy should withdraw that. I did not blame them. The Deputy should have listened to what I said.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am sorry; Deputy Doherty did not blame Ukrainians. Donegal has also suffered massive emigration so it could do with people coming in, but only if the investment is put in. However, Deputy Doherty never mentioned that. He never mentioned that communities could get together and demand massive investment if IPAS centres are provided. I did not hear him say that at any point.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is about proper planning.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Address your remarks through the Chair, please.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The last thing I would say is that-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: If you are against that, it is fine, but it is about proper planning.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We have had debates here previously about supports for Ukrainians being reduced and I also participated in a debate on the radio about that issue. We know the position of different parties in the Dáil. Sinn Féin thinks they are affecting the housing crisis. The statistics came out and showed that most of the people who were taking Ukrainians into their homes were not landlords and would never be providing accommodation.

Deputy Matt Carthy: There are no statistics to that effect.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: There were loads of statistics to that effect. I spoke in the debate at the time.

Deputy Matt Carthy: There are no statistics to that effect.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: They do not exist.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: If Deputy Doherty does not mind, his party has loads of TDs and I am sure they will all-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Will the Deputy address the amendment please?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What you are saying is not true but carry on.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: What I am saying is true.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It actually is not.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: These statistics were provided by the Red Cross. I debated this with Sinn Féin's housing spokesperson on RTÉ radio. There is an implication that refugees are affecting the housing market. That has been said lots of times. It has been said about Donegal. They are not. Sinn Féin needs to point out the source of the housing crisis. It is Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael handing things over to vulture funds. We should not blame minorities.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Last week, I sat in and listened to much of the debate on this particular amendment. I agreed with a lot of it. I agree that Government made an absolute mess of this entire issue. There was a lack of preparedness. The Government did not take on board repeated warnings and repeated recommendations as to what it and the country needed to do to house and process asylum seekers. I absolutely agree that what the Government has done is to funnel huge profits to developers rather than build the public services and public facilities that we need. I agree that the lack of communication we have seen caused huge problems in communities. It could have been handled much better.

7 o'clock

Once an IPAS centre went into an area, there was a real opportunity to bring in supports for that area, but that did not happen. That certainly would have assisted.

A lot of the difficulties that we saw within communities were fuelled by the Government - public representatives who did not back the Government's policy and spent most of their time out in communities arguing against it and creating division. They really did not show any leadership in this. There was also a big problem with misinformation, whether online or in public forums. That was never countered either by the Government or by those public representatives. There were a lot of problems in how the Government has handled the issue.

There was a lot in what the Sinn Féin representatives said last week. When you are trying to communicate something, you do not just communicate by what is written down and what you actually say; you are communicating by your tone. You also communicate your message by what you do not say. What was not said last week by Sinn Féin was that in many areas the communities came out and supported those centres and they really got behind them. If I was someone who had been through the asylum process or who was currently in the asylum process, the impression I would get from TD after TD who spoke on it was that having asylum seekers in your community is the worst possible thing to happen to a community. That is the message I would have picked up from what Sinn Féin was saying. It was being seen and represented as a blight, putting huge pressure on communities. What Sinn Féin failed to do was to understand that, in many situations, a community can take on and really open their arms to people within the asylum process and to IPAS centres. If I look at my own county, I see the number of people who were quietly, often secretly, working in the background because they were afraid when there were really heightened tensions in the community. There were so many people working quietly in the background providing English classes and lifts, collecting clothes, and setting up the Sanctuary Runners.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Hear, hear.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: People were working with those within the IPAS system and getting them involved in Tidy Towns. They were out painting railings. There were groups like Bray Welcomes, Wicklow Welcomes, Blessington Welcomes and Newtown Together - so many groups and people within communities who recognised that this situation was a difficult one and that there was no perfect answer, and that actually the best thing to do was to just try their best despite the Government making such a mess of it and making it the worst possible start for people. A lot of people in the community tried their best to make things better for those people in asylum centres.

Something that was also not mentioned last week by the Sinn Féin TDs is that the people who are coming into our communities seeking asylum bring a lot to us. They bring a lot and they are working in our communities. A lot of the people who are in the IPAS centres began to work the second that they could apply for their work permit. Before they could get their work permit, they were out volunteering. They wanted to get involved in their new home. They wanted to participate and to contribute. Many of them are still working and living in Wicklow. They have built homes for themselves, started families and made lifelong friends, including the friends that they made among the locals who taught them English. They are still in contact with those people. These people who are coming into our country seeking refuge bring a lot and add an awful lot of value. I did not hear that last week from Sinn Féin. What the party was communicating last week was that IPAS and asylum seekers are nothing but a big problem and communities cannot be expected to integrate people or to work with them. That is wrong, because it sends a very clear message to many people. We know that a lot of people are going to take that message and run with it. They will terrorise and carry out racist attacks. The words that are spoken in here carry weight. We have to be so careful with the message we send.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Yes.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I am really disappointed with the message that was sent by Sinn Féin.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Well said.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The reason Sinn Féin can get away with sending that message is because the Government has failed. It failed to prepare. It failed to respect people's dignity, and it continues to do so. The Government created this situation where there is a vacuum of information and supports and that is feeding what we are seeing now. When we talk about social cohesion, the Minister is absolutely right, there is a real risk to social cohesion here but we can get this right now. We really can, but the debate we are having on this Bill is not the answer to getting this right. I ask the Minister to reflect on that. We all need to reflect on what kind of leadership we are showing here, the message that we are sending and what we would like to see in our communities. Some of us need to be more responsible in how we are dealing with this issue.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I listened carefully to the debate on this set of amendments last week on the concept of a community impact assessment. During the debate most speakers

discussed the very real challenges they experienced in their own constituencies when faced with decisions to open emergency international protection accommodation - decisions that were made, for the most part, when I was Minister for integration. I wanted to come in on this amendment in particular to speak about how the State makes decisions about where IP accommodation is located and the speed with which it needs to make those decisions during a crisis situation. That is really important.

I have read the provisions set out in this particular amendment. On the face of them, they appear neutral, but my concern with this amendment is that ultimately what a community impact assessment is about is achieving a clinical, reasoned decision that IP accommodation cannot be located in a particular area. My concern is that it is about finding a reason for a "No". I completely understand that. I completely understand the difficulties that political reps are faced with when they get a call from the community engagement team telling them of plans to locate international protection accommodation in their constituency or local electoral area. Ultimately what a Minister has to do, and what the State has to do, is find a "Yes". It has to find accommodation, particularly in emergency situations. The Minister has to meet the State's legal obligations. Those legal obligations were reiterated by the High Court in judgments again only last week. But the Minister also has to meet the State's moral obligations - not to leave vulnerable people on the streets, not to have families and children camping in tents, in the same way that male international protection applicants were left on our streets for far too long. The Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, now face the challenge of accommodating people who are seeking international protection.

That challenge has been made slightly more manageable by the decrease of about one third in the number of IP applicants who have been arriving seeking international protection since October 2024. Prior to that month, there was an average of approximately 1,500 people seeking international protection every month. Since then, on average, give or take, the average has fallen to about 1,000 people per month.

It is still an incredibly difficult job. If there is one piece of agreement across this Chamber, it is this: the State has to move away from the huge reliance on the private providers of international protection accommodation. I had wanted to do that in my term. I had set out to do that in my term in office but I was not able to achieve that in light of the huge increase that we saw in the number of people seeking accommodation. In 2020, it was 1,500 people. By 2024, it was 18,500. We were dealing with that dramatic spike in accommodation need at the same time we were accommodating over 100,000 Ukrainians. I urge the Ministers, where now the numbers they are seeking accommodation for are slightly more manageable, to implement the accommodation plan that was agreed by the Government in 2024.

The Ministers should use this time to begin that vital switch toward significant amounts of State-owned accommodation. They should put the same energy that they put into the deportation flights, into creating that charging regime for international protection applicants and making citizenship and family reunification that bit harder, into driving forward State-owned provision. By doing that, we do two really important things. We start to address the very fair critique of the level of money going into private providers. We start to address those key financial concerns. As well as that, the State will actually have control over where accommodation is located. That will allow the State to proactively plan where international protection applicants are housed, and, in doing so, it will actually allow the State to start to

address the concerns that are probably at the basis of this particular amendment. They are concerns about capacity within communities and pressure on services. It will allow the targeting of additional supports. Driving forward State-owned provision of international accommodation has to be at the centre of this debate. I do not feel, whether it is in this discussion that we are having on this legislation, or the wider discussion about migration that we have been seeing since the new Government was appointed, that issue, which is key to addressing the concerns that this amendment is about, and wider concerns, that issue is not getting the attention it deserves.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): Can I start by making a political point? The debate on amendment No. 15 has been an unusual one. The reason it has been unusual is not just because it has gone over for over 2.5 hours but obviously, a very concerted decision was made by TDs from Sinn Féin to speak, in many respects from scripted statements, in respect of this amendment. There were 11 Sinn Féin contributors to this motion. All of them spoke about the same issues in terms of IPAS. I agree there are many issues of concern in respect of IPAS but the standard language that we heard from all of the Sinn Féin contributors was that IPAS was about profiteering, that people were being ripped off, that local communities were being upended and there was no proper consultation. They are perfectly legitimate points of debate that can be made by Deputy Carthy, who is well able to make those statements in respect of this amendment, but the fact that they were repeated on 11 occasions makes me wonder what is the political purpose behind this from Sinn Féin. My own view is that Sinn Féin is very comfortable talking about IPAS because of the significant amounts of money that are being spent on it and because it can also be presented in a way that this is profiteering and in criticism of the Government. The main reason I suspect that Sinn Féin is comfortable speaking about IPAS, however, is they do not want to speak about the other important issues in this Bill.

I will highlight this point briefly because I want to try to get on with the rest of the amendments here. I know what Deputy Kelly's argument will be in respect of amendments I have put down and what this Bill is. I know the same in respect of Deputy Gannon. When it comes to the broader issues of asylum applications and reforming the asylum laws, however, I do not know what Sinn Féin's policy in respect of it is. I know the policy of Deputies Coppinger, Kelly and Gannon when it comes to amendments I have put down. I do not know what Sinn Féin's policy is. I think they do not know themselves. Part of the reason there is such focus on IPAS is because it is an area where they are comfortable and do not have to make difficult decisions in respect of it.

I will now deal with the substance of the amendment put down by Deputy Carthy. I want to make a couple of introductory points. Everyone in this House has an IPAS centre in their vicinity. The vast majority of them operate very peacefully, very successfully and without any trouble. It is also important to point out what IPAS centres are. They are places that accommodate human beings and it is important to emphasise that. There are obviously challenges when a local community is told that a new IPAS centre is coming into their community but that has happened in respect of all of us. It happens in my constituency, near the area where I live and there are no issues in respect of the IPAS centres in the vicinity. There have been in respect of some. Notwithstanding that, I do acknowledge that it is difficult and can be very challenging for elected representatives and local communities if they are told that

there is a new international protection accommodation centre opening in their vicinity. People do not like change. They talk about change. Some people are fearful of change but, in general, my assessment is - notwithstanding that in politics we all use the word "change" - a lot of people do not like change and the unknown. That is not a legitimate reason, nor is it an acceptable reason for accommodation centres not to be put in certain areas and within certain communities.

When you look at the substance of what is in the Sinn Féin amendment, it is suggesting that there be a community impact assessment before any IPAS centre is put in a community. That is all the amendment requires. It does not require that there has to be an agreement or certification by a community impact assessment stating that yes, this area is suitable for an IPAS centre. It does not require that there can be a veto in respect of it. All it says at the end of it in subsection (5) is that an IPAS centre cannot be opened until the community impact assessment has been published. Looking at the substance of it, what is the purpose of that? Why are we going to have this detailed process, and, at the end of it, all that is required on behalf of the State is that we publish the impact statement?

I have no doubt that if that happened and the State went ahead with the statutory process set out here by Sinn Féin, and, at the end of the process we simply published the community impact assessment and opened the IPAS centre, there would be further objections on the basis that we were not taking on board what was stated by the community in respect of this particular IPAS centre. We all know that we cannot give a veto to individuals in a community when it comes to whether the State is going to open international protection accommodation centre there. In respect of community engagement, there is a community engagement unit within my Department, formerly in Deputy O'Gorman's Department when he was Minister. It does excellent work. It engages with public representatives. I have heard many Deputies here talk positively about the engagement they have had from community engagement. We need to recognise, however, if notification is put out that there is a plan to open an IPAS centre in the community and to ask what are your views in respect of it, we all have a fairly obvious understanding of what is going to be the predominant view of people who go out of their way to respond to it. For those reasons, I am not accepting the amendment.

I also want to deal with the issue in terms of the drivers of IPAS and the "profiteering", as Deputy Carthy referred to it, in respect of IPAS. We have a legal obligation to provide accommodation to people who seek international protection. If people say that is wrong, they should say it. I do not think it is wrong. It is an obligation upon us that we should seek to fulfil. If Sinn Féin or Deputy Carthy thinks we should not provide accommodation to people seeking international protection, I am sure he would have put it down in a motion. He has not, so I assume Sinn Féin accepts that there is an obligation on the State to provide accommodation in respect of those seeking international protection.

The main driver of the number of accommodation centres we have around the country - at present there are approximately 330 - is the number of people coming into the country claiming international protection. I want to reduce the spend of the State on international protection accommodation services. I have managed to reduce it from last year to this year. The budget last year was €1.2 billion; the budget this year is €1.1 billion. Since 1 May, I have managed to make savings of €80 million. The Deputy may say that is small in the context of a budget for this year of €1.1 billion, but it is heading down. The primary way I am going to be able to

reduce the spend on international protection accommodation centres is by trying to speed up the process. If an applicant can be processed in six months, for first instance and appeal, all we are going to have to spend is accommodation costs for the period of six months, or maybe seven or eight months, in processing them at the end of the process. That is the mechanism to reduce the cost.

I empathise with Deputy O'Gorman when he held the position that I hold now. As he said, in 2024, 18,500 people came to Ireland claiming international protection. That was an unprecedented number. We had never seen it before and it was a crisis situation. As a result of that crisis situation, Deputy O'Gorman, when he was Minister, found himself having to go around looking for accommodation centres. There were tents on the streets and pressure on him coming from the political establishment to open accommodation centres. I am now trying to ensure I am not in the business of opening more international protection accommodation centres. What I am seeking to do is to tell the officials, the first instance people and the appeal body that we need to process people much faster and get people through the system much faster. That means we can get them out of the system and work with the 33,000 spaces we have. It is also a central part of my policy, and I have put huge energy into it as well, in the same way I have put energy into the other things Deputy O'Gorman mentioned, to ensure we get the State to own more accommodation for international protection accommodation. When I started, we only had 900 places; we now have 4,000. I am committed to trying to get that up to 14,000.

On the profiteering Deputy Carthy consistently talks about, as I said to him at the justice committee, in 2024, when Deputy O'Gorman was the Minister entering into contracts, he was in a situation where he desperately needed to get accommodation centres wherever they were available. Obviously, the bargaining power and bargaining strength rested with those who had the accommodation as opposed to the person seeking to rent it. That has changed. It has changed in that for people who wanted to get accommodation centres open, these centres are predominantly not being opened.

I am conscious there are more amendments and people want to discuss them. I will not be supporting this amendment. We need to get to the substance of what this Bill is about in terms of asylum applications. The accommodation aspect of it is one thing in terms of reception conditions, but it is only one small part of it. It does not deserve the level of speeches from Sinn Féin, with 11 Sinn Féin Deputies speaking for two and a half hours on one amendment. Let us get on with the other stuff. We can discuss IPAS in the committee room any day with Deputy Carthy. I have been down there before and will be again but let us get on with the other amendments.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the amendment being pressed?

Deputy Matt Carthy: I am speaking in response to the Minister. He is the one who wanted to bring this to the floor of the Dáil. He is the one who refused the opportunity provided to him by the Oireachtas justice committee to have deliberations across every single amendment and section where these should be discussed - in the committee chamber. He was the one who wanted to allow it to take place on the floor of this Dáil, which means that every Member of this House is entitled to come in and speak to whatever amendment they wish to speak to. The Minister does not get to pick and choose and decide what amendments Opposition Members decide to speak to. They are absolutely acting within their right. The reason this amendment

has garnered so much discussion is it goes to the heart of the failures of the Government, including the Minister's party, Fine Gael and the Green Party in government, over the past five years. This issue, more than anything, is the issue that has caused division, frustration and anger within communities. If the Minister or any Member does not accept that, they are absolutely deluding themselves.

The Minister has been a year in office. He managed to spend €1 million last year on communications and staff, so he has had good PR. He managed to set out the narrative that he is delivering, but even though fewer international protection applicants are coming to the State, processing times have got longer. The money the Government spent in 2025 versus 2024 has increased. Those are the true facts about the record of this Government in dealing with this. Every single ounce of effort by the Department has been put into adhering to an arbitrary deadline because his predecessor signed us up lock, stock and barrel to the EU migration and asylum pact. Therein lie the failures and problems we now have. We are dealing with guillotined legislation. It is being guillotined by the Minister, yet he is decrying that people will not get to discuss in the detail that is warranted other amendments that are coming down the line. Spare me, Minister.

This amendment being put forward in my name on behalf of Sinn Féin is crucially important. For all the failures, the single message the Minister could allow to come out of this Chamber is that at least the Government is listening and hearing about the experience. Sinn Féin Members, from right across the State, gave their experiences. They did set out positive experiences of integration where accommodation centres were located and had positive impacts, where the groundwork, planning and engagement were done. Well within their rights, Members set out where none of that happened. What happened was the absolute turmoil that many local communities were thrown into at no service whatsoever. Nobody will tell me that was in the best interest of any applicant for international protection who was put into an accommodation centre on that basis.

The Minister can try to talk about fluctuations in demand and supply and all the rest but the truth of the matter is that for a long period, the only criterion that applied as to whether or not a building was used for international protection was the availability of that building and the willingness of the owner to use it for that purpose. Nothing else mattered, including whether that building happened to have been a resource for the community for another purpose. Homeless accommodation was closed down to be turned into international protection accommodation. Countless hotels and countless other community resources were taken away from those communities. That is not good enough. What this amendment is about is acknowledging, on behalf of the Oireachtas, that we recognise that is a bad way of going about it. If anything led to resentment or fed into the hands of the racists and those other nasty actors who were trying to create divisions within our communities, it was the approach to accommodation that fed into all those narratives.

There seems to be a little confusion around what this amendment sets out. I remind Members it sets out that a community impact assessment would be carried out by a local authority or another body as the Minister sees fit. That assessment would analyse the projected capacity, carry out an assessment of local service impacts and would include community engagement plans, any mitigation measures that might be required and an analysis of the Pobal deprivation index for the area concerned. The amendment states that report would be

published. The Minister is right to be cynical as to whether this Government would heed a community impact assessment but he also knows that had I put a further stipulation on the amendment, it would have been ruled out of order, just as many amendments have already been ruled out of order. Therein lies the fact.

I will respond to some of the other points that have been made. As a point of principle in all my political life, I am avowedly anti-racist. I do not tolerate racism. I do not believe racism should be tolerated within any section of society. Where I see it, I will call it out. I have a track record of that in my constituency. I imagine most Sinn Féin TDs are able to point to very proud work in respect of their anti-racism activities over many decades.

To suggest there is a linkage between being racist and having a policy on managing migration is a complete fabrication. Every state in the world has rules around migration. The variation is only in what those rules are, how they are implemented and whether they are actually enforced. Different governments have different levels of success in that regard.

To suggest this is a left–right issue is completely false. Managing migration is the same as managing any other area of public policy. In fact, if you look around the world, you will see that some of the strictest immigration rules ever were implemented by some of the most left-leaning governments ever. One of the reasons, of course, is that a core basis on which left-wing economic policy can evolve and garner popular support is the need to build social cohesion and a sense of social solidarity. Large increases in population in a short space of time can disrupt that. Left-wing governments have recognised that throughout history. None of that is ever to suggest that it is the people themselves who are the cause of some of the challenges that arise. Nobody, certainly nobody in Sinn Féin, would contend for a second that the housing crisis in this State is as a result of somebody from outside Ireland coming here in search of a better life. The only foreigners you could possibly accuse of being responsible for the housing crisis are the vulture funds and other international financiers, but primarily the fault lies with successive Governments that decided to stop building social and public housing.

There was a suggestion that Sinn Féin said having an IPAS centre in an area is a big problem and that this was the tenor of the Sinn Féin contributions last week. I absolutely dispute that. I listened to party members on this. They are people who are rooted in their communities and have been for all of their political lives, and they are avowedly anti-racist and have track records to back it up. They pointed to both positive and negative experiences and also to the need for this amendment.

I have a contention that sometimes gets lost. I am really surprised there has been a suggestion by left-wing parties that we should reject an amendment that is simply calling for a community impact assessment before a development takes place. I would have thought it good politics to state locals should be involved in the conversation if anything is to be developed in their community. This is not to say any single person or group of people can stop a development taking place. The reason we have planning rules and so many of us have been so resistant to some of the Government's moves on planning is precisely because it has attempted to circumvent the need for local communities to have their say. This amendment is simply stating local communities should not be an afterthought when a development is taking place in them. It is not an adjudication as to whether a development in itself is good, bad or indifferent; however, as with every single development, there are places where any given development would be more appropriate. That should be respected.

As a spokesperson on migration who has had a lot of engagement right across the country, not only with Sinn Féin supporters and members but also people who disagree with Sinn Féin's position, who come from every possible angle you could contend with, and, crucially, local communities, I believe fervently that the vast majority of Irish people are not racist. Are there racists in our midst? Absolutely. Were there always? Yes, there were, but to contend or suggest people who have raised concerns about the locations of IPAS centres are universally racist is doing a disservice not only to them but also to us, because it is exactly that type of attitude and suggestion that feeds into the narrative of the nasty actors I was talking about. If the genuine concerns people are raising are shot down and if people are accused of being racist, fascist or something along those lines, they will shut up and we will not hear from them again. We will not hear from them on election day. Most of them will just not show up. The real winners will be the very nasty actors, who do not represent communities and a huge proportion of the Irish people at all, as far as I am concerned.

What I ask people to do in respect of this amendment is vote on what is actually in front of them. On the one hand, the Minister is saying it will not really make any difference at all and, on the other, Opposition parties are saying it will be a recipe to stop every single development. It is exactly as it is written down. It is about carrying out a community impact assessment. I contend that anybody who votes against that would have serious questions to answer in their local community. How can you actually refuse to allow communities to have some real semblance of a say? Whatever about the merits or otherwise of individuals within the community engagement section of the Minister's Department, the truth of the matter is that the notion that there has been genuine community engagement on the locations of IPAS centres is laughable. It does not reflect the reality of anybody who has dealt with this issue.

Members should read what the amendment states. It is eminently sensible. Members should listen to what people have said and not just interpret the amendment. They should note what we have said about the reason it is so important. If the Minister wants to make a proposal tonight that we should lift the guillotine and go down to the committee room to go through every single amendment and section at the level of detail I believe is warranted, I will happily second it for him.

Deputy Mark Ward: I spoke last week about this legislation and how a vacuum leaves a space for bad actors, racists and misinformation to come in. Such a vacuum is caused by the lack of information going into our communities.

In my area, Clondalkin, we have what is probably one of the longest running direct provision centres in the country. It has been there for over 20 years. The fact that we have a direct provision centre in the community for that long is a stain on the Government. It has failed with direct provision and is now failing people in IPAS accommodation and accommodation for Ukrainians.

About ten years ago, there was a move to move people from the direct provision centre somewhere down the country, outside Dublin. The good people of Clondalkin – I was with them – rallied to keep the direct provision centre in their area. The reason is that those in the centre had benefited the community. They went to school with my kids, played football for the local GAA club and football team and became part of the community. Over the next couple of years, several other forms of accommodation were introduced, including IPAS accommodation

and accommodation for Ukrainians. Centres seemed to be popping up from the Red Cow and Dulcain House to the Ibis Hotel without any communication or consultation whatsoever. It was Sinn Féin members who spoke to people at the doorsteps to inform them as to what was happening and let them know there was nothing to worry about. The Government should have been doing that but it was not. We had to fill a vacuum in our community. Having no communication leads to misinformation. I spoke last week about how misinformation can allow the ground to be planted for bad actors.

I spoke on the Social Democrats motion this morning on GP services. A GP service was to come to my area – this was fantastic as it was absolutely needed – but a rumour went around that the building was going to be an IPAS centre. People came not just from Clondalkin but also from all over Dublin and threatened to burn it down. That is because there was no communication. That is why we are asking for community impact assessments and for information to be circulated.

I also spoke last week about how TDs and others in my community found out through the national papers that the Citywest centre was going to become a public international protection centre. That is no way to communicate to people. During Questions on Policy or Legislation, I stood here and asked the Taoiseach for clarity on whether Citywest would become a public centre. He gave me no clarity whatsoever. At the same time as I was speaking to him, the Minister was outside on the plinth making an announcement on it. The Minister can check the timeline. The Taoiseach could not even give me an answer in here while the Minister was making an announcement outside. That is no way to communicate to people.

As regards this amendment, I heard some of the criticism and I would say the Minister is sitting over there delighted to see people over here having a go at other people over here. That is what he wants because it takes the eye off him and the Government's failures on this. To criticise us for coming in here and speaking on something and taking up time when the Government has put a guillotine on this tonight is absolutely disgraceful. As Deputy Carthy said, we on the justice committee said we would give the Government as much time as it needed to discuss this in the committee room. We would have done so five days a week if necessary just to get through all of this. The Government, however, declined that offer and decided to come here and guillotine the Bill. The amendment we are talking about is about just a community impact assessment. It is not about a veto. It is about finding out if a community can take on extra vulnerable people in a situation where there are already a hell of a lot of vulnerable people. How do you look at that? You use the Pobal index of deprivation, and we spoke about that last week. If we can fill that vacuum with a community assessment and proper communications, it will stop the vacuum and will actually stop racism and misinformation getting out there.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: For me, this is about listening to the people and that is about uniting rather than dividing people. We need to communicate with local communities. It is disappointing to see the Government and fellow colleagues on the left, when we are tabling sensible amendments which are about good planning, making this issue about Sinn Féin, which it should not be. I absolutely despise racism. I have been to many of these centres, sat down and drunk tea with the people there. As a councillor, I have been involved in integration days, lots of different collaborations, cultural evenings, etc.

This is about planning, really. It is about a policy that is sensible and sustainable. We have roughly 320 centres, I believe, across the State. Seventy-eight of them are in Dublin. How diverse is Dalkey? How many centres are in Dalkey or in similar places? They always seem to be in working-class and rural communities that are isolated and which lack services. I would assume that any progressive-minded person, whether on the left or on the right, would want to call out greed and speculation. I am looking at €1.2 billion given to private providers last year. I am looking at people who did not have much money becoming millionaires overnight, people speculating and people running a train through planning laws. I look at Blessington and Kippure, in Wicklow. Seefin Events has been through the courts numerous times. Wicklow County Council had to order it to demolish 65 units because apparently it did not follow planning laws. It is about sensible planning. I look at Dundrum, County Tipperary, and a manor house. Often there is a speculator and international finance capital involved in this. More people were put into this centre than was the population of the village. How is that good planning? My colleague, Deputy Doherty, mentioned the Gaeltacht area of Gweedore. The whole idea was supposed to be about developing Irish speakers in the Gaeltachtaí, which are basically dying. How would Gweedore be a suitable area? How would Carna, in Connemara, be a suitable area? In my own county, Rosslare is an area which is probably the most welcoming in Ireland. You could not find a more welcoming area or village. They had two IPAS centres. There was a fantastic response to the Ukrainian war. They organised a €100,000 fundraiser in the first couple of weeks. They were due to have a nursing home in the Great Southern Hotel. What happened then? It was flipped by a big speculator - finance capital again. They were looking for planning to put 400 into the Great Southern Hotel in this tiny village. Luckily, people stopped it because it was not sensible.

This is the way to oppose racism. It is about uniting people and listening to people. That has not been happening so far. I could mention numerous other examples all across Ireland, like Achill Island, etc. There are just so many of them. I think of Seefin Events, the company in Blessington that I mentioned, and Kippure. They received €5.6 million during last summer. Then we have Wicklow County Council telling them that they have to demolish because it was done in breach of planning regulations. How could that be good policy? Why would anybody on the left support that? Why would my colleagues to my right support people making €1.2 billion, finance capital groups-----

Deputy Gary Gannon: Get to the vote.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: Who is supporting that?

Deputy Gary Gannon: Who is supporting it?

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: You are calling out our amendment. That is what we are saying.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: What are you talking about?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Deputies, please.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: We are saying we should not be playing to these. We should not be giving into this agenda being driven by speculators and finance capital-----

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: That is not in the amendment.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: -----because they are the people who are driving this into these areas.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): You are next, Deputy Farrelly.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: At the end of the day, for me, it comes down to the best way to unite people, which is just to listen to the people, listen to local communities and try to have fair planning policies. As I said, how many centres are in Dalkey? How many centres are in Foxrock? It is about fair planning. That is the way I look at it.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: My thoughts on this amendment specifically are on the record from last week and, unlike others, I will not repeat them here tonight just because I have another opportunity to take the microphone. Tonight this Government is about to make history by legislating for the ability to detain innocent children for doing nothing wrong. As it stands, at the pace we are going at this evening, irrespective of why we are here in the first place, we will not have an opportunity to debate the amendments put down to remove that provision because of the disproportionate amount of time we have spent on this amendment. I ask colleagues to think about the number of really worthwhile amendments that need a thorough conversation this evening. The time spent on this amendment has been disproportionate at this stage, with the greatest of respect to everybody here. We have gone through it all. I ask Members making a point for the second time to please think it through and let us talk about something that is really meaningful.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): I was not here for the whole debate. If there was repetition, it was not on my watch, as they say. Members need to be reminded that they cannot continuously repeat points of view that have been put across. Brevity is always good in a debate, but the rules on Committee Stage allow for exchange back and forth. There is nothing to prevent that and there are no time slots on Committee Stage. That is why Committee Stage usually happens in the committee rooms.

Anyway, how stands amendment No. 15?

Deputy Matt Carthy: Pressed.

Amendment put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 53; Níl, 88; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Bennett, Cathy.	Aird, William.	
Brady, John.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Buckley, Pat.	Bacik, Ivana.	

Byrne, Joanna.	Boland, Grace.	
Carthy, Matt.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Brennan, Brian.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Brennan, Shay.	
Cronin, Réada.	Brophy, Colm.	
Crowe, Seán.	Browne, James.	
Cullinane, David.	Butler, Mary.	
Cummins, Jen.	Butterly, Paula.	
Daly, Pa.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Devine, Máire.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Calleary, Dara.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Canney, Seán.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Clendennen, John.	
Gannon, Gary.	Collins, Niall.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Connolly, John.	
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	Cooney, Joe.	
Gould, Thomas.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Graves, Ann.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Cummins, John.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Currie, Emer.	
Hearne, Rory.	Daly, Martin.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Lawless, Paul.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Dillon, Alan.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Dolan, Albert.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Fleming, Sean.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Geoghegan, James.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Grealish, Noel.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Harkin, Marian.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	Healy, Seamus.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Heneghan, Barry.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Heydon, Martin.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Higgins, Emer.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Kelly, Alan.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Keogh, Keira.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Lahart, John.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Lawless, James.	
Quaide, Liam.	Lawlor, George.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Lowry, Michael.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Maxwell, David.	
Stanley, Brian.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	McCarthy, Noel.	

Ward, Mark.	McCormack, Tony.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	McGrath, Séamus.	
	McGreehan, Erin.	
	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
	Moynihan, Michael.	
	Moynihan, Shane.	
	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
	Murphy, Michael.	
	Murphy, Paul.	
	Nash, Ged.	
	Naughton, Hildegard.	
	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Dea, Willie.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
	O'Donovan, Patrick.	
	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghail, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Sheehan, Conor.	
	Sherlock, Marie.	
	Smith, Duncan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Wall, Mark.	
	Ward, Barry.	

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

Amendment declared lost.

8 o'clock

Deputy Matt Carthy: I move amendment No. 16:

In page 26, after line 30, to insert the following:

“Transparency of accommodation contracts

14.(1) The Minister shall publish all contracts, subcontracts, financial schedules, performance reports, and compliance assessments relating to accommodation or services provided to international protection applicants.

(2) Publication shall occur no later than 30 days after the signing of the relevant document.

(3) Information may be withheld only where strictly necessary to protect commercially sensitive material, as defined by regulation, and such withholding must be justified in writing.

(4) All documents published under this section shall be made available on a publicly accessible website maintained by the Minister.”.

This amendment is an attempt to finally bring some level of transparency to IPAS contracts. It is fairly simple and states that the Minister shall publish all contracts, subcontracts, financial schedules, performance reports and compliance assessments relating to accommodation or services provided to international protection applicants. It also states that publication should take place no later than 30 days after the signing of any relevant document and that information may be withheld only where strictly necessary to protect commercially sensitive material as defined by regulation and that such withholding must be justified in writing.

The Minister may not like this, but any discussion of Ireland's international protection system is pointless unless we have a conversation about the massive profiteering that has evolved from the provision of IPAS accommodation. I do not know why or how any such statement should or could be controversial. The Minister has essentially told the House that the owners of properties essentially held all the cards in terms of the contract negotiations that took place. When discussing the previous amendment, we talked about a lot of the concerns, frustration and anger within many communities. Nothing has intensified that anger more than the reality that while communities have been completely cut out of the process with no engagement whatsoever - and the Minister's position on the previous amendment is that this will basically continue - the profits some companies have made have been obscene. What is worse is the fact that the conditions in which many international protection applicants have been living are unacceptable.

A small number of private operators have made millions off the back of the Government's dysfunctional approach. There has been no transparency regarding what qualifies certain individuals to get contracts like this. Across the country, we have seen people who are predominantly failed businessmen all of sudden become millionaires because they hit the jackpot and managed to get a couple of accommodation contracts. Every other business operation these people touched turned to dust, but we entrusted them with the care of human beings with no analysis of whether they were qualified or what made them qualified. We have seen countless examples where contracts have been entered into in respect of properties, people have been residing in those properties for years in some cases and then it turns out there is no fire certificate never mind any other building regulations being complied with. One scenario involved an IPAS centre that had been operating for a couple of years but that did not even have running water. It had to bring in water in tanks on a daily basis.

It is not just Sinn Féin that is saying this. In his annual report last year, the Comptroller and Auditor General was as scathing as I have ever seen him, and I am a former member of the Committee of Public Accounts. His report confirmed people's worst fears about the lack of due diligence and overcharging. The Comptroller and Auditor General has found an absolute disregard for the use of public money, and there is no sense that anybody is being held accountable for it. The Minister has repeated a couple of times during this debate that he has spoken to Deputies about IPAS contracts on a number of occasions. However, he has not answered any questions about any specific contracts because it is all being done behind a veil of secrecy.

One company that had been operating as a coffee shop made profits of €2,992 one year. That was the annual profit for the whole company. It segued into international protection accommodation and within a year its two directors were paying themselves €4.6 million in wages. Nobody seemed to be bothered about it.

One beneficiary of a lucrative IPAS contract was subsequently named in CAB documents as being involved in gangland crime. We found out that the quality of the accommodation being provided was wholly unsuitable. However, when we put questions about it to the Minister, he told us that it was all sorted and would not happen today, but we have no way of knowing any of that. That is what this amendment is about because ultimately this is public money. It is being spent on the mechanism that this Government has decided is going to be used to meet its obligations under international law to provide accommodation for people seeking international protection. Some €1.2 billion was spent last year - over €3.2 million every day - and there is no transparency whatsoever.

Sinn Féin is calling for every IPAS contract to be reviewed. I refer to the cases I mentioned that the C and AG highlighted. His office analysed just a small sample size of IPAS contracts and found huge issues in terms of due diligence and overcharging. The Government was overcharged by people who were in receipt of these contracts. It is bizarre that the C and AG found such blatant wastage of public money in a small sample, but nothing has been done. There has not been a comprehensive analysis of every contract, so we can only assume that if we extrapolate that across the sector, there is a whole range of other issues. The cases that I mentioned have caused uproar in terms of the expenditure of public money on contracts with people who were not suitable as they had no track record or had dubious backgrounds. We did not find any of this out because of the Minister's Department or because he divulged it. We found that out because of journalists doing their job and informing the public.

The lack of transparency has allowed what I have described again and again as massive profiteering. The Minister told this House that we were in a very difficult situation and if someone came forward with an offer of property, they held all the cards, but it is not too bad now because the numbers have reduced. He is essentially telling us is that if the numbers increase again substantially, we are going to be back to square one and we will see the exact same thing happen again.

I want to remind Members of some of the weaknesses the C and AG found. They included overpayments, incorrect VAT charges, poor invoice verification, inadequate due diligence on providers and weak monitoring of accommodation standards. That report concluded that financial controls were insufficient and the system allowed significant compliance failures and potential profiteering.

This amendment might not be able to address every inadequacy in every contract, but at least we will be able to say to the people that there will be a little bit of transparency and then they can adjudicate the success, or otherwise, of the Minister of the day. Again, I look forward to seeing how the Minister argues against supporting this amendment. There is nothing in the amendment that anybody should be afraid of. The notion of commercial sensitivity is a veil behind which the Government hides its huge level of squandering of public money. We see this across public services.

There is nobody seeking accommodation for international protection other than the Department of justice. It is not as if it is in competition with somebody else. The only reason the Minister is still hiding a lot of the detail is that there are some companies which are absolutely milking it in terms of the price they are getting paid per bed per day and the stipulations they have to adhere to regarding the quality of the accommodation or whether they are required to have the accommodation completely filled on an ongoing basis. I hope to have the support of the Minister and the House for the amendment.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I am not opposed to this amendment at all. My point is probably more relevant to the next amendment, but heaven knows if we will ever get there. Of course, we should have transparency in relation to contracts, but that should be the lowest bar. Our position is that we should be moving towards State-owned reception centres. I fear that supporting an amendment such as this enshrines privatisation into the system, which is something I absolutely could not support.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: We have to have transparency. There is the example of the two directors of a cafe which had a profit of €2,992. Three years later, they paid themselves €4.6 million. There is something very strange there. Looking at my area of County Wicklow, €1.3 million was spent on security for the vacant site of a failed IPAS centre. It is just a site sitting there. Deputy John Brady brought it into the public domain at a recent meeting of the public accounts committee.

The Comptroller and Auditor General's report has raised serious concerns about all of these things. There is very poor compliance and safety. For example, a demolition order was granted for 65 units that were built illegally by Seefin Events in Blessington, according to what I have read. There is huge profiteering and overcharging. We had an instance of a VAT overcharge of €7.4 million by one company to the State and the taxpayer. There is a complete lack of due diligence. No one in their right mind can oppose transparency in these contracts. There has to be transparency.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I have no issue with the amendment *per se* but, as Deputy Gannon said, I am concerned that we are going down the road of enshrining the use of private accommodation. We really need to get to a point where this is all publicly owned. We said this last week. All of the Opposition have argued that we should have the infrastructure for the provision of accommodation. If we go down the road of putting in amendments like this, it could be a get-out clause for the Government to not provide such infrastructure over a period of time. I know it is impossible to have it done to a certain point today, this week or this year because in the emergency scenario they had to go down certain roads.

I have serious concerns about how these contracts were given. I have serious concerns about how the Department handled this issue. I know there have been changes in the Department. This was with the Department of children and then it came across to the Department of justice but the same sections came with it when it came into justice. I see no consistency in relation to how contracts were awarded.

There were constant personnel changes in the Department. You could not talk to anybody. They never gave contact details on their emails and eventually they did not even give names as regards who you could deal with to find out what was going on. Some of the decision-making in relation to contracts was downright stupid. Giving a contract to the last hotel in Roscrea was absolutely stupid. Another €150,000 was then spent pretending that a second hotel that had been closed for a decade could be opened. This was a consequence of giving the contract to the owners of the Racket Hall Hotel in the first place. It was stupid. I am sorry. There are massive learnings in relation to this.

I am concerned about enshrining this amendment in legislation because we are going to be dealing with this issue on a huge scale for many, many years. We need to have the proper State infrastructure in place. That should be our priority and that is where we should be going in relation to the provision of accommodation for those seeking asylum.

Deputy David Cullinane: Previously and over the course of a number of hours last week, we spoke a lot about the asylum application process itself and the need for transparency in that area. We spent a lot of time today and last week as well on the previous amendment that was taken in relation to the community impact assessments, which the Minister did not accept. Again, that was about transparency and making sure communities were at least consulted and had a voice in relation to what was happening in their communities.

We have a similar amendment here in regard to contracts, subcontracts, financial schedules and so on. At the heart of this is a small number of people who have become very wealthy on the back of providing IPAS accommodation. I agree with Deputy Kelly. It is not that we want more private accommodation; it is happening. I certainly support more public provision. That is where we should be and it was something the Government committed to before. The Minister has talked about this in the past himself when he said some progress is being made but I can tell him that people see it themselves. They know what is happening in their own communities, where they see people who are making huge amounts of money out of this. It is accommodation that, in some cases, is hotels in areas where we know that is not the best way to provide IPAS accommodation. In other areas, it is accommodation that is not really fit for purpose but somebody saw an opportunity to make money. There is anger about the level of profiteering and the scale of profits being made by these individuals.

Notwithstanding all that and whatever views we might have of using such accommodation - and I agree with previous speakers that public provision is always best, rather than lining the pockets of these wealthy people - unfortunately it is happening. Unfortunately, it is a feature of this Government providing IPAS accommodation and there is no transparency. What an Teachta Carthy is trying to do through this amendment is to bring some level of transparency whereby we and the public are aware of exactly what is being paid. As the amendment states, "The Minister shall publish all contracts". Is there a reason that cannot be done? On subcontracts, is there a reason that cannot be done? On financial schedules, is there a reason

that cannot be done, or in regard to performance reports and compliance assessments relating to accommodation, which would surely benefit everybody?

In life and politics, we know that transparency protects everybody and a lack of transparency is our enemy. We have seen that on this and other issues. If the Government is not transparent in what it is doing, or is not seen to be transparent, that causes more difficulties and challenges for the political system and more damage within communities. For that reason, I ask the Minister to support the amendment.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I will start by saying that, contrary to what Deputy Cullinane said about there being no transparency in the area of international protection accommodation services, there is in fact a very high degree of transparency. My Department publishes figures detailing the numbers of residents and centres, with a breakdown of numbers of emergency accommodation centres, on a weekly basis. There is full transparency from my Department in regard to providers who receive payments, with details of all payments over €20,000 and the recipients published quarterly online at *gov.ie*. That is why Members of the House have such detailed information on the amount of money being made by companies that are providing accommodation to the State.

There is also transparency in respect of inspection reports. Inspection reports from all IPAS accommodation centres are published either on the Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, website or on *gov.ie*. The only time there is a restriction on publication is when that is based either on residents' security - I am sure people here will appreciate residents' safety or privacy - or on commercially sensitive information, the publication of which would damage the State's ability to achieve good value for money. It is obviously a competitive market and the amount of money the State is paying on a per person, per night basis is information that should not be given out because it will provide a commercial advantage to other persons seeking to secure contracts.

In regard to the issue raised by colleagues, I agree that we want to get out of private accommodation but when we have over 30,000 people who need accommodation, the State does not have the accommodation to provide that to them. Because of that, the State obviously has to contract with private contractors-----

Deputy David Cullinane: Which is why there should be transparency.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: -----in order to get accommodation for individuals who are applicants. I am pleased to say that the State has been increasing the amount of accommodation that is State-owned. When I took over responsibility here on 1 May 2025, we only had 900 spaces owned by the State. We now have 4,000. I want to get to a situation where we have 14,000. A large part of that is going to be achieved through the State buying units, which we can then use for the State for the purpose of accommodation. If the State is required because of the high numbers to contract with private contractors to provide accommodation to applicants, of course it is the case that we are going to have to buy it. Nobody is going to set up accommodation or fit out units and then just hand it over to the State. We have to buy it and I am pleased to say that significant savings have been made in the past number of months.

Since 1 May, we have saved €80 million on contracts that have been renegotiated. That is a real saving and it is part of the reason the budget for IPAS is going down this year.

The amendment is not necessary. There is a lot of transparency in respect of IPAS already. People can go online and get information on who is getting the money for IPAS, provided they are receiving over €20,000.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I have to say, the Minister talks a really good game.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The problem is that the facts do not back up what he is saying. He has spoken a number of times tonight about how he has increased State-provided accommodation. That was through the purchase of one centre. Let us be absolutely clear about it. It did not actually increase the capacity at all because it was a centre already in use at Citywest. I would argue that the way in which that purchase was handled *vis-à-vis* the local community and indeed the residents leaves a lot to be desired in respect of the potential success for future purchases.

If anyone was listening to the Minister, you would actually think, "Jesus, that is a lot of information". You get to know exactly how much someone is getting in contracts if it is over €20,000 but you do not actually get to know how much somebody is getting. You get to know what a company is getting. You do not necessarily know who the owner of that company is.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: They are contracting with companies.

Deputy Matt Carthy: In fact, I asked the Minister in committee if he would ensure that the beneficial owners of a company in receipt of potentially millions of euro in State money would be divulged to the public. He said that is not the way this Government does business.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I did not say that.

Deputy Matt Carthy: That is what he said. Words to that effect. The Minister does not publish the beneficial owners of companies. He does not let us know whether there is a number of companies who are perhaps getting less than €20,000 per annum that could be owned by the same people.

Crucially, what the Minister does not divulge is that while he tells us how much the company is getting paid, he does not tell us what we are actually getting in return and how many people individual companies are providing accommodation for and where they are providing it. He does not tell us if complaints have been made against any accommodation by residents or anybody else. He gives us the macro figures but he does not actually give us the detail.

The Minister says it is because of his information that we have all the detail we have here. I am after saying that we got detail from the Comptroller and Auditor General and from journalists. None of the really obscene scandals we have seen in respect of IPAS accommodation contracts were actually divulged by the Minister's contract.

The Minister tells us that in the second half of this year alone, through negotiations, he saved €80 million, and he said that without blushing. He should be embarrassed for his predecessor or whoever negotiated the original contracts. What he is saying is that for those contracts alone, we overpaid the equivalent of €80 million for a six-month period. How long were those contracts in place? Did we actually overpay over the past three or four years for those contracts? Will the Minister divulge that? I think that is in the public interest. It is €1.2 billion spent last year and over €3.2 million every single day, predominantly on private contracts.

To answer Deputies Gannon and Kelly, I absolutely believe we should not only move towards State-provided accommodation but we should have been there a lot sooner than now.

None of that negates anything I said earlier about community engagement for those places, by the way. I am on the same page. However, even the Minister, in the most optimistic scenario, outlines the current proposal as a wish to get to 14,000 in State-provided accommodation. Even with those figures, there is a very high chance there will be some need for private contracts, given the current trajectory.

Let us not try to find excuses not to support what are very important and clearly set out amendments. The amendment proposes, for the first time, allowing the Irish people to know where their tax money is being spent, who is benefiting and what the State and international protection applicants are getting in return. The Minister just says he does not see the reason for it, but he has not actually given an argument against this amendment. Therefore, I hope that, even at this stage, there might be a change of heart to let people know that we are going to provide a bit of transparency in this regard. It is the very least that people should expect when we are spending so much money, and when the Minister is overseeing such a dysfunctional system. At the very minimum, if we are spending €1.2 billion, people should have a right to know exactly how that is being spent and who is benefiting.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It has been said multiple times before, but I must refer to the anger out there about those who have coined it in the IPAS disaster that this State has stood over. I agree with Deputy Carthy. We would all have preferred to see what would have been a lot cheaper from the point of view of the State's coffers, that is, the public provision of necessary accommodation. I accept there were issues of State failure with regard to processing times, which we have constantly brought up in the House. However, the fact is that people saw a chance to make money, and they went out and did it. I will admit that some of them may have run better outfits than others. Some were absolute chancers, however, providing sub-par property at high-bar prices, and the State paid.

What we are talking about here is transparency in order that we would see who is making the money and how much money they are making. It would have made a lot more sense for the State to go in the direction suggested by Catherine Day, namely, State provision. Again, as Deputy Carthy said, it is also about ensuring that when that happens, no more than when any of this happens, there should be proper, real engagement with the community. There has been an abject failure in that regard.

When talking about contracts, we could talk about the D Hotel and the fact that nobody did any element of due diligence on that. Drogheda lost the D Hotel, where many weddings and functions took place. It was a necessity from the point of view of the tourism business, but it was taken away. There was an awful lot of talk with the Government, over and back, about

how we would be able to use it for dual purposes, but that never came to anything. It was just another load of waffle, conversation and time wasted. Then we discovered that the fire certification was only for 240 beds, while the State had entered into a contract for 500. That just sums up the farce that IPAS was.

We are all in agreement that what we need is public provision. It will take a considerable amount of time to get there, particularly because we started on the journey too late, but beyond that, there needs to be transparency. I ask that due diligence is done. It is proposals like this amendment that we need to see in operation. We then need to ensure that it is not the case of many a fly-by-night operator who thought they could buy a hotel without even really needing to know how to run a hotel. In the case of the D Hotel, they would only need to half-run it, and they could make an absolute fortune. People literally set up tiny businesses that became huge businesses that were all about delivering IPAS accommodation. That is a failure of the State, and the cost has been astronomical. I ask for sense and for the House to support Deputy Carthy's amendment.

Deputy David Cullinane: I think the Minister is confusing providing information with transparency. He said earlier that there is a high level of transparency. It depends on what information he is providing. If the information is vague and does not provide what should be provided, I am afraid the transparency is not there.

In relation to the profiteering that we certainly see in this area, I will get to the Comptroller and Auditor General's report shortly, given that it was very clear about what it uncovered. There are also issues in relation to the suitability of some of the companies or individuals providing this accommodation. Do they have experience in this area? Are they the best people? Are the companies the best companies to provide the service?

I remember that some 15 years ago, I was invited to a direct provision centre in Waterford city. A private company runs the service. There were about 80 families living in the accommodation at the time, and they invited me out because they had issues they wanted to talk about with their local public representative. When I got there, the manager of the centre would not allow me in. She said that I would have to make an appointment and come back again. I said that was fair enough and asked to make an appointment, but she said that, no, I could not meet them there. I was eventually barred from that centre. I certainly raised that with the Minister for Justice at the time. What really struck me was the "out of sight, out of mind" approach that was in place. There are genuine issues of transparency with regard to companies providing a service where over €1 billion is being spent and tens of millions are being made. We want to make sure that the highest levels of transparency apply.

That brings me to the Comptroller and Auditor General's report. If all of those checks and balances that the Minister says are in place were in place, why is it that the Comptroller and Auditor General, in his report, found major weaknesses in IPAS contracting? Why is it that he found overpayments, incorrect VAT charges, poor invoice verification, inadequate due diligence on providers and weak monitoring of accommodation standards? The report concluded that financial controls were insufficient and that the system allowed significant failures and potential profiteering.

Those are not my words or Deputy Carthy's words. They are the words of the Comptroller and Auditor General, who looked into this area and found there were problems left, right and

centre. If there were problems left, right and centre that the Comptroller and Auditor General found, was he wrong? Is the Minister saying he was wrong? Deputy Carthy rightly called the Minister out when he said he saved tens of millions of euro. That only adds to what we are saying. He is making the argument for us that what we are calling for is what is needed.

In the conclusion to the Minister's earlier comments, he said that this amendment is not necessary. That is what troubles me. I think the Minister believes what is there at the moment is robust, and he believes what is there at the moment is the level of transparency that I, the Members of this House and communities should have. I do not buy into that, and I do not believe it. I believe in much higher levels of transparency.

I will finish where I started. There is a big difference between providing limited information, as the Minister does, and transparency. I think communities out there see it. They are calling the Minister out on it. They are calling the Government out. They are hoping that the Minister will make the changes that are necessary but, given his response to the previous comments made by Deputy Carthy, I and others, I think they will be waiting a while for that to come.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 46; Níl, 98; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Bennett, Cathy.	Aird, William.	
Brady, John.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Buckley, Pat.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Boland, Grace.	
Carthy, Matt.	Brennan, Brian.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Brennan, Shay.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Brophy, Colm.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Browne, James.	
Cronin, Réada.	Burke, Colm.	
Crowe, Seán.	Butler, Mary.	
Cullinane, David.	Butterly, Paula.	
Daly, Pa.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Devine, Máire.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Byrne, Thomas.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Calleary, Dara.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Canney, Seán.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Gould, Thomas.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Graves, Ann.	Clendennen, John.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Collins, Niall.	
Healy, Seamus.	Connolly, John.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Cooney, Joe.	
Lawless, Paul.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Cummins, Jen.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Cummins, John.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Currie, Emer.	

Mitchell, Denise.	Daly, Martin.	
Murphy, Paul.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Dillon, Alan.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Dolan, Albert.	
Nolan, Carol.	Dooley, Timmy.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Feighan, Frankie.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Fleming, Sean.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Foley, Norma.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Gannon, Gary.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Geoghegan, James.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Grealish, Noel.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Harkin, Marian.	
Stanley, Brian.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	Hearne, Rory.	
Ward, Mark.	Heneghan, Barry.	
	Heydon, Martin.	
	Higgins, Emer.	
	Kelly, Alan.	
	Kenny, Eoghan.	
	Keogh, Keira.	
	Lahart, John.	
	Lawless, James.	
	Lawlor, George.	
	Lowry, Michael.	
	Maxwell, David.	
	McCarthy, Noel.	
	McConalogue, Charlie.	
	McCormack, Tony.	
	McEntee, Helen.	
	McGrath, Séamus.	
	McGreehan, Erin.	
	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
	Moynihan, Michael.	
	Moynihan, Shane.	
	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
	Murphy, Michael.	
	Nash, Ged.	
	Naughton, Hildegard.	
	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Dea, Willie.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	

	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
	O'Donovan, Patrick.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Feargháil, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Quaide, Liam.	
	Rice, Pádraig.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Sheehan, Conor.	
	Sherlock, Marie.	
	Smith, Duncan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Wall, Mark.	
	Ward, Barry.	
	Whitmore, Jennifer.	

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

Amendment declared lost.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I move amendment No. 17:

In page 26, after line 30, to insert the following:

“Matters concerning minors

14. The best interests of the child shall be primary consideration in the application of this Act, and the Minister shall have due regard to this principle in respect of all matters concerning minors.”.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 67; Níl, 79; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Bacik, Ivana.	Aird, William.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Brady, John.	Boland, Grace.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Brian.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brennan, Shay.	
Carthy, Matt.	Brophy, Colm.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Browne, James.	

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

Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
Quaide, Liam.	Murphy, Michael.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Naughton, Hildegard.	
Rice, Pádraig.	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
Sheehan, Conor.	O'Connell, Maeve.	
Sherlock, Marie.	O'Connor, James.	
Smith, Duncan.	O'Dea, Willie.	
Stanley, Brian.	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	O'Donovan, Patrick.	
Wall, Mark.	O'Meara, Ryan.	
Ward, Mark.	O'Shea, John Paul.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Feargháil, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	

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

Amendment declared lost.

9 o'clock

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): Amendment No. 18 is ruled out of order.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Why has it been ruled out of order?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): It is a potential charge on revenue.

Deputy Matt Carthy: That is stretching it.

Amendment No. 18 not moved.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I move amendment No. 19:

In page 26, after line 30, to insert the following:

“Cap on daily expenditure for international protection accommodation

14. (1) The Minister shall, by regulations made under this Act, prescribe a maximum amount that may be paid per person per day by the State in respect of accommodation provided to applicants for international protection.

(2) Regulations made under *subsection (1)* shall specify—

(a) the monetary cap applicable to all forms of accommodation procured or funded by the Minister for the purposes of this Act,

(b) the methodology used in determining the cap, including consideration of value for money, regional cost variations, and the avoidance of excessive reliance on emergency or *ad hoc* accommodation arrangements, and

(c) the date on which the cap shall come into operation.

(3) The Minister shall review the cap prescribed under *subsection (1)* at least once in every 12 month period and may amend the cap by regulation following such review.

(4) Regulations under this section shall be laid before each House of the Oireachtas as soon as may be after they are made.”.

I am surprised in respect of amendment No. 18. It would have been very complementary to this amendment. It called on the Minister to ensure that any company seeking to enter into a contract with the State for the provision of IPAS accommodation or services would be subject to mandatory due diligence and vetting procedures prior to the wording of the contract. Such measures would have included the verification of the identity of the directors, partners or the people exercising control, full appraisal of the beneficial ownership and confirmation of things like tax compliance, checks for prior regulatory sanctions and any other checks that the Minister would consider to be necessary. I do not know if the Minister is going to give any clarification at all in respect of these conversations as to any additional measures he is bringing forward that will ensure that we have proper oversight and public oversight in respect of these contracts.

Amendment No. 19 provides for a cap on the daily expenditure for international protection accommodation. The Minister's responses to the previous amendment will crystallise for all Members the need for this. This is not an endorsement of the private provision of IPAS accommodation. It is an acknowledgement and a recognition of the reality. It is bizarre that Members of the Opposition voted against the previous amendment, which called for transparency on contracts. There was a very far-reaching suggestion that by suggesting having transparency in respect of private contracts in some way means that it is an endorsement of private contracts. The amendment sets out that there will be a maximum payment rate per bed per day. That is again to ensure that there are proper checks and balances and oversight.

I do not know if the Minister will tell us tonight, but we have not been told up until this point, what the maximum payment paid per bed per night in any accommodation centre is. He certainly will not tell us where that is being paid, which is the crux of the problem we discussed earlier. When we are talking about expenditure of €1.2 billion in a year, there is no capital expenditure in that. That is money that is spent. That in itself was an increase of almost €200 million on the year before. For all the rhetoric of the Minister of improvements, the only thing

the Minister and Department can be adjudicated on is one financial year versus the next financial year. There was an increase of €195 million between 2024 and 2025. That represents expenditure of €3.28 million per day. Those are astronomical and amazing figures when we think about it. As a result of the information that we gleaned from the Department, we know that the average rate per bed per day rose by 68%, or almost 740%, between 2022 and 2024. That is nothing to do with the numbers of people coming. Costs are going to increase when we are accommodating more people. That is a given. That is profiteering. I will use term again unapologetically when we have a situation where there is a 70% increase, not in the overall costs but in the cost per bed per day. As the Minister essentially conceded, people saw an opportunity and took full advantage. That money did not result in a better service or better accommodation for the people who are housed there. It certainly did not result in better value for the taxpayer. That money has gone straight into the pockets of those private providers. We can only assume and deduce quite reasonably that it was a 70% increase on profits because the cost base between 2022 and 2024 did not increase by 70%. It did for the taxpayer, not the actual provider. There was a lot of discussion in respect of the pre-legislative scrutiny of the general scheme. The pre-legislative scrutiny report highlighted serious concerns about the escalating and unsustainable cost of IPAS accommodation. It noted that the Bill contains no mechanism whatsoever to cap costs, no strategy to control provider pricing and no reforms to prevent the State from becoming increasingly dependent on expensive private contracts. That was at the pre-legislative scrutiny stage.

True to form, Ministers just ignored that aspect of the report from the committee just as they ignored everything else. The only thing that has decided the Government's approach to all of this is an absolute pigheadedness to adhere to the deadline that been set in place by the EU migration and asylum pact. To hell with democratic oversight, to hell with the position of the justice committee that undertook comprehensive pre-legislative scrutiny and to hell with all of those who gave up their time and prepared substantive submissions and came before the committee to give their oral submissions and take questions from the members of the committee who then went to the point of compiling the pre-legislative scrutiny report. This amendment is requiring the Minister to set a daily maximum rate. I am not even trying to tell Minister what it should be. We have set out that the maximum daily rate should be €71, which is the average rate. A total of €71 per bed per night is a good return for anybody within that business if that is what they are doing. It would set out parameters to which the Department would adhere. It would define how the cap should be calculated.

It mandates annual reviews and ensures all regulations - this is crucially important for accountability and a bit of democratic oversight - are formally laid before the Oireachtas. What is the alternative? The Minister has basically told us that if it comes to a point where the system is under pressure again, we will be back to the same situation. Who knows what could happen internationally that would result in the number of people seeking international protection growing very quickly in a very short space of time, putting pressure on services? The providers will once again hold all of the cards in the negotiations and, because the Government has rejected any semblance of oversight or transparency, the Department will be doing side deals again. A couple of years later, we will find out through another report of the Comptroller and Auditor General that somebody else who owned a coffee shop and was barely breaking even has become a multimillionaire on the back of a crisis situation and the inability of the Government to manage public finances effectively. I have moved the amendment. I hope that,

in this instance, the Government will say that this is as reasonable as an Opposition amendment gets, that it is about having a little bit of financial and democratic oversight and that it therefore makes absolute sense to incorporate it into the Bill.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I did not know I would be the next speaker. I thought there were others. Sinn Féin is advocating introducing a limit per day per asylum seeker. Does Deputy Carthy have any idea how much that would be? It could not be changed for 12 months. That is my reading of the amendment. There is profiteering in a lot of fields. Should we introduce the same amendment in terms of homeless accommodation for Irish citizens because there is profiteering in that area as well? I am a socialist. I call out profiteering all the time. I advocate for multinational corporations paying more in corporation tax than they are paying. No other party in the Dáil agrees with that but profiteering has suddenly been of central concern for the last several hours, although just on the issue of international protection. Does Deputy Carthy not see a problem with that?

There are quite a lot of things that people would like to get to, such as family reunification, warrants and powers. There is a whole load of stuff here. Sinn Féin is the biggest Opposition party. It has all the TDs. If it wants to do it this way, it can. However, I ask the Sinn Féin Members to consider that there is loads of other stuff here that really deserves to be aired in the next hour and three quarters but we are not going to reach it because it seems Sinn Féin wants to have a bunch of TDs who can tell people they raised the issues of IPAS profiteering and transparency and all of these things. It is a little bit disingenuous, especially if the Deputies are going to call themselves anti-racists. There is very racist stuff coming up here that we would like to reach but all of the discussion in the last few hours has been about this issue.

I cannot agree to a limit per person per day. You could very easily end up impoverishing people and leaving them living on subsistence payments. It is a very dangerous power to give to the Government.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: I will briefly reinforce Deputy Carthy's points. Two years ago, the Secretary General of the Department of integration gave out the figures for payments per night. He highlighted how the State was paying the private accommodation providers over twice the amount that was being paid to house asylum seekers in State-owned accommodation. That just reinforces the contradictions within this system yet again.

Deputy Gary Gannon: We voted against the last amendment because we feared it would enshrine privatisation in the system. We make no apologies for that. We are dealing with a Bill that enshrines the detention of children in the system. When we talk about introducing a per person cap, we present the image that asylum seekers are somehow being kept in the lap of luxury. There is rightfully a lot of talk about profiteering. From the foundation of the State, it has always monetised other people's poverty and oppression. However, we are not talking about the fact that thousands of men are given sleeping bags and sent to the canal. That is one of my problems with the conversation that is going on at the moment.

We are reiterating the failure of a badly designed State system. I do not want to enshrine the means by which that can continue. I fundamentally believe in State reception centres. Best practice, as laid out in the Catherine Day report, was to have seven. That was updated to nine.

At the moment, we have one, and that one was dubiously purchased. While we are so far away from that, I do not want to enshrine the means by which we can keep privatising this system and seeing it as the norm and something to be managed rather than something we are seeking to eradicate, as we should. I have reservations about placing a cap on the amount of money paid per individual. I do not know exactly what that cap would be. It would be useful to have a sense of that. I understand Sinn Féin had previously said €71 but that is not contained in the amendment in front of me. I have reservations. I am interested in hearing the Minister of State's response before we decide how to vote.

Deputy Colm Brophy: We are obviously not accepting this amendment. I do not know if Sinn Féin fell asleep in 2024 but its members have gone assiduously out of their way - I know they would not do so deliberately - not to mention the new rate card introduced in May 2025 or acknowledge that this rate card is delivering €83 million in savings to the State. It has been applied across 147 centres and the process of putting in place these contracts has been overhauled. The State's objective is always to ensure we have a robust system that delivers value for money when we are signing these new contracts, ensures centres are inspected and properly regulated, and has transparency built in with payments over €20,000 fully recorded. The value of a rate card system is that it allows the best deal to be struck. That system is now working well and it will continue to work well.

Deputy Matt Carthy: First of all, in respect of the debate-----

Deputy Colm Brophy: The Deputy mentioned 2023 to 2024 three times. He never said anything about 2025.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I will come to that. The Minister of State should not worry. In respect of the debate, the Government decided the format of this debate. Because it tied us into the EU migration and asylum pact, in respect of which there was a deadline, everything else in terms of the consideration of this Bill has been put to one side. We are now in a situation where this debate is being rushed, guillotined and taken on the floor of the Dáil. The rules within that system are being adhered to. We have all been in situations when dealing with guillotined Bills where there have been amendments of ours or parts of the Bill we would like to discuss but we just do not get to that point. Those people who happen to have amendments they want to speak to earlier on cannot be blamed for that. Blame the Government. It is frankly bizarre that Deputies Jim O'Callaghan and Ruth Coppinger are making the exact same argument and saying that we should not talk about an amendment on transparency or community consultation because there are other things further down the amendment list that people would like to speak to. There are lots of issues in this Bill that I would like to spend time deliberating on. I submitted 50 amendments to this Bill across a whole range of policy areas. I would like to deliberate on each of them.

In respect of this amendment, to be very clear, the contracts are set out on a per person per day basis. That is how the contracts are set out. The language just reflects that. The Minister of State can confirm that the contracts are usually set out in three-year terms.

What this amendment is saying is that there would be a maximum amount that the Department would agree to for contracts in a given year and that new contracts would be

reviewed annually. At the moment, the system is that a contract is signed for three years, and that is the contract in place. That is why we still have God knows how many situations whereby, as the Minister has acknowledged, there is overspending.

It was mentioned that this could impoverish someone, but the only person it could impoverish it would do so by making sure that the people who pay themselves €4.6 million in profits might only be able to pay themselves €3 million or €2 million. They certainly would not be impoverished by all of that.

I invite the Minister of State to come back in, because he mentioned the rate card for 2024. This is a big Government scheme. Will he inform the House what the rates in the rate card are? He will not, because there is damn all transparency in this. He is telling everybody that there is a rate card and we are making great savings, but he will not actually tell people what the rate card says. Seriously. That is his argument for rejecting this amendment, namely, that there is a rate card that is hidden in a filing cabinet somewhere in the Department and that every operator of an IPAS centre knows what it is. The Minister of State knows what it is, but the people who are actually ponying up - the taxpayers - do not know what it is. There is no transparency in respect of this. This is such a simple amendment to ensure that a Minister would set a maximum rate and let the people who are footing the bill know what that maximum rate is. It is so simple that I find it hard to believe that we even have to have a discussion on this or the fact that it is not in place already.

The rate card is a secret document. The Minister of State cannot tell us whether the rate card has been breached in the event of additional pressures. Has anyone gone above the rate card? We do not know. The Minister of State will not tell us. What is the difference between the highest and the lowest rate paid according to the rate card? The Minister of State will not tell us why there is a difference between the highest and the lowest rates on the rate card.

He should not talk about the rate card as if Sinn Féin has conveniently forgotten that it exists. Sinn Féin has never been told what the rate card comprises. More importantly, the people who pay have never been told either. This is about transparency and recognising what emerged from an absolutely damning report by the Comptroller and Auditor General. I find the Minister of State's arrogance bizarre. There is a sense of the Government is spending the money, never mind how it is actually spent, we would not understand, the little people would not understand how the Government is spending the money, and it is doing all of these great things. The only independent appraisal of Government expenditure in this area was carried out by the Comptroller and Auditor General, an office for which most people would have respect. We could not accuse the Comptroller and Auditor General's office of hyperbole. If it says something, there is an issue. It has set out in very stark terms in a sample look at the contracts that there were huge issues - overspends and tax returns that were wrong, including VAT returns. I could go through the list again. We have that evidence. We have no evidence to suggest that all of those issues have been sorted out. The Minister was asked multiple times by Sinn Féin to carry out a review of every single IPAS contract. I do not see any reason for the Minister not to do that. Tonight, when we bring forward an amendment that simply says that there will be a maximum payment available under the terms of these contracts and that the Minister will tell people what that is, I would have thought that would be something that would be welcome because it would bring clarity and a little bit of transparency across the board.

Deputies Gannon and Coppinger said they did not know what the rate was. I said what Sinn Féin previously set the rate at, but what we have said is that, under this Bill, the Minister would prescribe a maximum amount in regulations and that those regulations would be brought back to this House so that, for the first time ever, we would have a little bit of democratic oversight of how public money is being spent in this area. Is the Minister of State going to give us the details on the record?

Deputy Colm Brophy: The purpose of having a rate card and delivering those savings, which are in the millions of euro, while having a transparent process under which payments of over €20,000 are recorded is to have a system where people can see what has been paid and we have an ability to negotiate and deliver the best value for money for the taxpayer. When every contract comes up, and there are 147 of them so far since the summer of last year, it goes through a process that appraises it and looks to deliver the best value for money and, obviously, all the quality assurance standards we want. That is the best way of doing it. I do not agree with the Deputy's analysis of how it should be done, so I cannot accept the amendment.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Is the Minister of State going to answer the question in respect of the rate cards?

Deputy Colm Brophy: I have given my answer to the Deputy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: No, the Minister of State has not. He did not answer a single one of the questions I put to him there. The question is about what is in the rate card and what the maximum payment within it is. I assume if it is a rate card that there is a maximum and a minimum. What is the maximum the Government is willing to pay? On what basis does it reach that decision?

Could the Minister of State please not give us this façade that there is transparency? Transparency is not just knowing how much somebody receives. It is knowing what they are delivering in return. It is important that we know if somebody is in receipt of a public contract worth millions of euro so that we know precisely what they are providing. How many people are they accommodating? Have the premises they provide been inspected? If so, what were the results of that inspection? Has the building a fire certificate? All of this stuff is just basic transparency and accountability and the Minister of State is avoiding it at all costs. I will ask him again to divulge the details of the rate card. If he will not, then he cannot rely on it for an argument against an amendment that is about bringing forward transparency and accountability.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I will rely on a rate card that is delivering millions in savings to us in this area. It is delivering value for money, which we wanted to see, and I believe it is working for us. I will stand over the fact that there is transparency in the payments that are being made. We will not agree, I am sure, but that is the case.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: To clarify, obviously, I would love us to continue talking on this Bill for as long as possible. My comment was in the context that we had a guillotined Bill. I have spoken in many debates before where we judiciously picked and chose what we were

going to try to be allowed to reach in the context of a guillotined Bill. It was just a bit of a silly comment. We have an hour and a half left and I just made the point that there were other things.

I do not know if it is a good idea to be voting for maximum payments for homeless accommodation or for asylum or IPAS accommodation. I do not think that Sinn Féin would introduce this for homeless accommodation, for example, and there is profiteering in that as well. I just think it is quite a dangerous one and we should be moving to a nationalised sector and the State providing this in any case.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I am just going to respond to that very briefly. We can only deal with what is in front of us. We are dealing with the International Protection Bill. We are bringing forward an amendment that is aimed at tackling something that has been clearly identified by the Comptroller and Auditor General, and by several journalists who have tried to ascertain some of the scandals. There are many scandals within IPAS contracts in terms of the services being provided to residents, the value for money provided to the State and the profiteering that has been at the heart of that. We have to bring forward measures to deal with that, and that is what Sinn Féin has done. The amendments we have brought forward are very fair and transparent. I do not think anybody who values democratic oversight and, in particular, parliamentary oversight would have any issue with this amendment.

Amendment put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 61; Níl, 78; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Bacik, Ivana.	Aird, William.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Brady, John.	Boland, Grace.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Brian.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brennan, Shay.	
Carthy, Matt.	Brophy, Colm.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Browne, James.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Burke, Colm.	
Crowe, Seán.	Butler, Mary.	
Cullinane, David.	Butterly, Paula.	
Cummins, Jen.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Daly, Pa.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Devine, Máire.	Byrne, Thomas.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Calleary, Dara.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Canney, Seán.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Clendennen, John.	
Gannon, Gary.	Collins, Niall.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Connolly, John.	
Gould, Thomas.	Cooney, Joe.	
Graves, Ann.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Cummins, John.	

Hearne, Rory.	Currie, Emer.	
Kelly, Alan.	Daly, Martin.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Lawlor, George.	Dillon, Alan.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Dooley, Timmy.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Feighan, Frankie.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Fleming, Sean.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Foley, Norma.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Geoghegan, James.	
Nash, Ged.	Grealish, Noel.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Harkin, Marian.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Healy, Seamus.	
Nolan, Carol.	Heneghan, Barry.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Heydon, Martin.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Higgins, Emer.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	Keogh, Keira.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Lahart, John.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Lawless, James.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Lowry, Michael.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Maxwell, David.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	McCarthy, Noel.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	McCormack, Tony.	
Quaide, Liam.	McEntee, Helen.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Sheehan, Conor.	Moynihan, Michael.	
Sherlock, Marie.	Moynihan, Shane.	
Smith, Duncan.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
Stanley, Brian.	Murphy, Michael.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	Murphy, Paul.	
Wall, Mark.	Naughton, Hildegard.	
Ward, Mark.	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	

	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	

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

Amendment declared lost.

Section 14 agreed to.

SECTION 15

Deputy Gary Gannon: I move amendment No. 20:

In page 28, between lines 32 and 33, to insert the following:

“(14) The best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in the carrying out of procedures in respect of a minor under this Part, in accordance with Article 14(1) of the Eurodac Regulation.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Question proposed: "That section 15 stand part of the Bill."

Deputy Matt Carthy: May I speak to the section?

An Ceann Comhairle: You may, Deputy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Section 15 concerns Eurodac. It is the first section to deal with the Child and Family Agency, Tusla. The Minister of State will know that we have a number of amendments in respect of the ability of Tusla to do the job it is asked to do. Last week or the week before, Judge Conor Fottrell of the Dublin District Court hit out at what he called profiteering by private operators that are providing unregulated placements for the most vulnerable children, describing it as "wrong and shameful". At the time, he was dealing with a 13-year-old boy who remains missing from an unregulated placement.

This legislation is putting additional responsibilities onto Tusla. Last week, I asked the Minister of State, on a number of occasions, what additional resources Tusla would be provided with. What additional staff will be put in place? How can we have any confidence whatsoever in respect of this legislation that Tusla, a body that many people argue is unfit to do the roles already assigned to it, can do this? A recent report in *thejournal.ie* stated that a quarter of staff working in special emergency arrangements last year did not have the required documentation to work with vulnerable children. We know that Tusla has referred five emergency childcare providers to the Garda over vetting concerns. These concerns keep coming up. Stories in respect of children in accommodation who are unaccompanied minors in respect of

international protection keep coming up, yet we are expected to pass this section and endorse legislation that is adding a substantial amount of workload.

As I said last week, the pre-legislative scrutiny report was very critical of the capacity of Tusla to deal with the additional workload that will be put on it, yet the Minister of State has not had any answers to any of the questions he has been asked in respect of the capacity of Tusla. In fact, last week, he said he could not answer about Tusla as it is under another Department, but he is happy enough to introduce legislation that is putting responsibilities and will inevitably put an increased workload on Tusla. Will the Minister of State give assurances to the House this week that he was not able to provide last week?

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: Similarly, and as I have a background in primary teaching, I am quite concerned at giving Tusla more of a role. Many people would certainly question the merits of this because over the past five years, there have been 7,000 recorded cases of children going missing from Tusla care. I remember Tusla came before one of the committees, when it acknowledged that 33 separated children or unaccompanied minors who were seeking international protection are now officially missing. They are still missing today. That is 33 separated children; God knows where they are. With the amount of sexual exploitation and trafficking going on in the world at the moment, who knows where they are? I certainly have concerns about giving an extra role to a body that seems to already be overburdened and under-resourced.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I will be very quick in relation to this. We have had Tusla in front of the children's committee numerous times.

It will talk about its new operating model. I do not take away from the complex cases but we are talking about putting a greater onus on the organisation. It has stated quite explicitly – I have brought this up with the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Deputy Norma Foley, in particular – that on the basis of its figures, it is 300 social workers short. It is at least 100 social care workers short. We all know there is an insufficient number of foster carers; it is probably upwards of 500 short. We are therefore putting pressure on an entity that is already under severe pressure. I agree with Deputy Carthy that there need to be some sort of utterances from the Minister for justice on accepting this proposal and some means of dealing with the matter. There is not much point in putting an already-under-pressure organisation under more pressure or setting it up for failure. The latter is not acceptable either. There has to be an element of fairness and recognition. Again, we are dealing with a timeline that has been thrust on the Minister because of the agreement in respect of the EU migration and asylum pact. I do not believe any of this is conducive to coming up with a real solution to dealing with the issues regarding international protection.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I refer Members to the conversation we had last week. It is the Government's intention to ensure the system is fully resourced to deal with the outcomes of this legislation.

Question put and declared carried.

Sections 16 to 21, inclusive, agreed to.

SECTION 22

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 21, 27, 29, 79 and 83 are related and may be discussed together, by agreement.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I move amendment No. 21:

In page 32, to delete lines 14 to 18.

In the first instance, I will speak about amendment No. 21. Let me quote the subsection of the Bill I am seeking to remove so we will have a sense of it. It provides:

Where a member of An Garda Síochána, an immigration officer or an officer of the Minister has reasonable grounds for believing that it is in the interests of public policy or national security for an applicant to whom *paragraph (a) or (b) of subsection (4)* applies to be subject to the obligation referred to in *subsection (1)*, the member or officer may give the applicant a direction referred to in *subsection (2)*.

The direction refers to detaining and screening.

Striking out the subsection would mean officers cannot direct people with lawful residency permission to attend screening centres on the basis of vague, undefined grounds. It also cuts off the path to grounds for arrest and detention. By definition, the people in question are not international protection applicants and as such, the State has no business arresting and detaining them under this legislation. It looks like illegitimate arrest and detention on the grounds of racial profiling.

I am very cautious about how we legislate for detention in this country. It will be the defining part of this Bill. We are steamrolling through something that has monumental consequences and, while not looking to the future, we do not seem to be particularly reflective about our past. I think about the apology the Taoiseach made today in the Chamber and other apologies that have been made. We have a gruesome history of institutional incarceration in this country. I am really apprehensive about how this Bill will legislate not only for continuation but also for enhancement. We are legislating, in the subsection I am seeking to strike out, for the detention of people who have committed no crime at all. Our history demands that we tread more cautiously than we are at this point, which is why I am seeking to strike out the subsection.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I support Deputy Gannon on this amendment. It is incredibly sad that we are moving towards this system of detention not just in Ireland but also across Europe through the EU migration and asylum pact, particularly because it took the State so long to untangle international protection from pursuing people through arrest. The courts had to achieve that through a series of cases to eventually try to meet our commitments under the EU reception directive. The worst part is that we have never done international protection well. We were just about starting to get to the point where we would do that but then we had to deal with crises that hampered any well-intentioned efforts by the Government to address the matter.

To take, lock, stock and barrel, what we did not have to take from the EU migration and asylum pact is concerning. It is often forgotten that we could have taken a modular approach

to this but chose not to. Instead of taking that approach, we are moving towards a system that will detain people. The subsection is an example of an unlawful detention proposal that we cannot stand over as a State.

Deputy Gannon is correct in that we have a history of this. We know what happens. This is a trend across multiple countries and we cannot stand by it. Therefore, I support amendment No. 21 and ask the Government to do the same.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I want to hear the Minister of State's response on amendment No. 21 before I speak about it directly. Before that, I want to speak about amendment No. 79, which is grouped with amendment No. 21. I am not entirely sure why it is grouped because it relates to ensuring that in the statistics compiled by the Department, we include information provided by applicants for international protection regarding any prior immigration status or permission while in the State. I found it quite bizarre and very surprising that this information is not kept at source and compiled annually. I am referring to the number of people who apply for international protection who will have previously been in the State on another permit, whether it be a student permit, employment permit, other work-related permit, a short-stay tourism visa, a family reunification or dependant permit, or any other immigration permit.

It is important that we get that information because it fits in with the conversation we were having last year. Assumptions are made all the time. I repeated on a number of occasions last week that we have had different Ministers saying different things in respect of the proportion of people who enter the State via the common travel area. Some Ministers have referred to a proportion of 80% and others have given other proportions. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy McEntee, said at one stage it was up to 90%. That makes for a good headline, the implication being that since the 90% are coming across the Border, there is nothing the State can do about it. When you delve into the statistics, you realise there is no way Deputy McEntee or any other Minister can know the proportion because the Government has been assuming that every single person who presents for international protection but who has not presented at a port or airport has entered the State via the common travel area. However, we know from international experience and from states that compile the relevant figures that there are numerous other categories. Sometimes a person who has permission to be in the State will apply for international protection subsequently. To be clear, such people are entitled to apply and to have their applications adjudicated upon on the same basis as anybody else.

If we are serious about having a comprehensive policy and a set of proposals on how to deal with these things, we clearly need to have the relevant information to hand. It would be helpful if the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, gave us an indication of his position because the chances of our getting to amendment No. 79 before 11 p.m. are fairly slim. We will have no Report Stage in the Dáil, which is bizarre. Either way, it is unacceptable. Could the Minister of State indicate whether, in the Seanad, the Government will be introducing an amendment on this matter?

10 o'clock

Deputy Alan Kelly: We will support this amendment. We in the Labour Party have some similar amendments later, some of which we may get to and the rest of which I guarantee we will not. The power of arrest and detention is something we have to be very careful about.

How we prescribe this in law, making such definitions in the Bill in the catch-all manner in which we are doing so, brings me to the view that there is in a kind of underhand way profiling going on of those who can be detained as to why they are detained. As a country, if we are going to go down that route, we are really letting ourselves down because we are better than that. We should be treating people with respect. We obviously have to have a rules-based system for doing this, but we have to be very careful of the manner in which we bring in arrest and detention for individuals. While there are quite a number of amendments later detailing those who are trafficked, those who are vulnerable and a number of others, we need to start with this amendment because we may not get to the rest of them. That is why I will certainly support the amendment brought forward by my colleagues in the Social Democrats.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: Many of the points have been already made in support of Deputy Gannon's amendment. I truthfully cannot believe we are here legislating for the detention of innocent children. It is shocking that they can have committed no crime and done nothing wrong, yet we are legislating for their detention apparently if it "is in the minor's best interests", despite the fact that we have heard from every corner of the expertise on this that it is never in the child's best interests. I am fascinated to hear what the Minister of State will say as to the justification for this. How can this be explained on the day when the Taoiseach, sitting where the Minister of State is right now, made an unequivocal apology to those who have suffered? In ten years', 20 years', 30 years' or 40 years' time, the State will once again apologise to the children in respect of whom it is legislating tonight for holding them against their will. I have serious, significant concerns about the determination of this; the decision-making. Who has the capacity? Who has the competency? On what grounds will these decisions be made? For how long? Where? The Government has told us in the legislation where this will not happen but it has not told us where it will happen. It will not tell us who will do this and on what grounds but it says it will ultimately always be in their "best interests". It is never in the best interest of a child to detain them, never mind the fact that it is proposed to detain them simply for existing.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I thank Deputy Gannon for bringing forward this amendment. I am deeply concerned to listen to the contributions here and what is being put forward and proposed by this Government. The use of violence by the State - detention is a form of violence - should have a very high bar. It should be taken extremely seriously. I have very real concerns about not just the thoughtfulness that has gone into this but also the direction of travel and what it means for human rights and natural rights and the concept of justice in this State.

To be light-hearted in my contribution, I am reading fantasy novels these days. There is a conflict between various tribes in this book I am holding. It is an international bestseller-----

An Ceann Comhairle: As long as it is relevant-----

Deputy Eoin Hayes: It is relevant, a Cheann Comhairle. In this book they start closing the borders and detaining people from one tribe going to another. They start saying the refugees are no longer valid refugees. They start digging their heads into the sand. I read fiction to try to escape the non-fiction of our work, but sometimes there are certain echoes in fiction that tell a really important story. There is a real question here about a Government and a State that are

putting their heads in the sand as to their human rights obligations, even just on a human level. It does not necessarily need to be international law. It does not even need to be concepts of justice. Even on a human level, a compassionate level and an empathetic level as to what people are experiencing, are we to say to those who are fleeing war and persecution that they will not be given rights to natural justice, human rights or any form of empathy when they come here? That seems completely out of character with the Irish State.

I want to be very clear here: I do not believe that evaluating and reforming the immigration system is inherently racist, although many outside of this Chamber who are seeking reforms are. They are, thankfully, a minority in this country. While racism and systemic racism in particular must be condemned in all its forms, I fear that with the shift in immigration policy to the right, and it is a shift of immigration policy to the right, and in particular with this erasure of natural justice, natural rights and human rights, there is actually something more dangerous, more disastrous and, frankly, more terrifying.

I am a big believer in democracy. I am a fervent believer in it. I am a fervent believer in the wisdom of the electorate. There are, however, times when the public get things wrong. We saw that in the UK with Brexit - buyer's remorse. We see it across the water, in the United States, with an Administration that is deeply unpopular, despite doing the things it promised to do. One of the reasons I am standing here today and why I am in politics is that I was in New York in 2016 when Trump was first elected. You could feel the sorrow on the streets of New York among New Yorkers. You could sense it. I could sense it in the offices as I went to work.

I was speaking during the general election to a young man about why I went into politics and challenging what the Government is trying to do here: the rightward shift on things like immigration policy, the erosion of human rights and the erosion of the concepts of justice. I will say to the Minister of State what the young man said to me. He agreed with me and we had a very long conversation. He said the lessons of the 20th century are being forgotten. There were people who came here in the thirties, in the forties and in the fifties to escape the persecution of the forces of Europe. They came here to escape the Nazis. There were Jews fleeing the abomination of the Holocaust that Hitler created. There were people who were not Jewish who were fleeing the Nazis, fleeing Mussolini and fleeing Franco, and we gave them refuge and we gave them shelter. One of them, my constituency colleague's grandfather, started Waterford Crystal. It is a really important part of who we are and it is a really important lesson of the 20th century. I really fear that there are many states across Europe and across the world that are stridently repeating this mistake, going towards an ethnonationalism and a use of the full force of the state to enforce it. I do not think the Government is doing that here but I do think it is following a path that leads to that. The use of detention in this way is deeply concerning and deeply problematic for that reason.

Deputy Colm Brophy: I propose to take amendments Nos. 21, 27, 29, 79 and 83 together and I will reply to each one. I just want to say, though, before I begin that reply to each individual one, that I am a true believer in democracy. It is very important that we respect democracy and democratic outcomes. We have a Government, and this Government is committed to reform. That is what this legislation is about.

I believe it is important to acknowledge that we are trying to reform a system that needs reform. At the end of that process there will still be international protection. There will still be a process that allows for people to come to our country.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: But not human rights.

Deputy Colm Brophy: There will be a process. We have a refugee process as well and we have people who come here to work. All of them remain. It is very wrong to portray what is being done here in a particular way when what is actually being done is a process of reform.

Amendment No. 21 proposes to delete section 22(5). That subsection provides that a member of An Garda Síochána, an immigration officer or an officer of the Minister may direct an applicant who holds a valid registration certificate under section 9(4)(a) of the Immigration Act 2004, or a minor exempt from registering under that section, to travel to a screening centre where it is in the interests of the public policy or national security. This is a necessary provision for ensuring that all international protection applicants undergo screening in those circumstances. This provision only applies to international protection applicants and not to persons registered under the Immigration Act. Therefore, I do not intend to accept this amendment.

Amendment No. 27 seeks to remove the possibility that person given a direction under section 22(5) may be arrested and detained. I point out that these cases involve persons who may constitute a threat to public order, national security or both. It is important we have the possibility to identify such persons from the outset. It may be necessary to be able to arrest and detain such persons as a last resort for the purposes of verifying their identity. This is part of a coherent and well-functioning international protection system and, as such, I am unable to accept amendment No. 27.

It appears that the purpose of amendment No. 29 is to remove the possibility that a person arrested under section 24(2) could be detained in a screening centre. For operational purposes it may be necessary for such a person to be detained in the screening centre while their identity is being verified. I remind Deputies the allowing of such detention is intended to be short term in nature until the applicant's identity is verified and in any event may not exceed two days. For that reason, I do not propose to accept amendment No. 29.

I do not propose to accept amendment No. 79 because the entries into the screening form are standard across all member states. This is so relevant authorities can share the information regarding persons who have made previous international protection applications in the European Union before arriving in the State. The matters to be included in the screening form under section 31 are intended to align with the screening form provided in article 17 of the screening regulation. While it is not my intention to deviate significantly from the contents of the form as provided for in that article, the Deputy will note that there is a regulation-making power that enables the Minister to prescribe additional categories of information. I will keep the categories of information under review in light of the operational experience.

The purpose of amendment No. 83 appears to be to provide that an additional applicant can be considered in the accelerated examination procedure if the preliminary health assessment and preliminary vulnerability assessment are not carried out. The effect of the amendment

would be that any applicant could effectively prevent their application from being considered in the accelerated examination procedure simply by refusing to consent to their preliminary health assessment. It is likely that this could result in some applicants who would have been subject to the accelerated examination procedure refusing to undergo assessment. This would negate the benefits of having both a preliminary health assessment and the accelerated examination procedure in the first place. As such, I do not propose to accept amendment No. 83.

Amendment put and declared lost.

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 22, 28, 53, 57, 177 and 179 are related and may be discussed together.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I move amendment No. 22:

In page 32, between lines 34 and 35, to insert the following:

"(f) an applicant who is a presumed or identified victim of trafficking."

These are grouped amendments along similar lines across the legislation. Amendment No. 22 inserts "an applicant who is a presumed or identified victim of trafficking". This is obviously critically important if added to amendment No. 28 as it exempts presumed and identified victims of trafficking from any legal obligation to travel to a screening centre and from related criminal penalties. This corresponds with what I spoke about earlier about people who are vulnerable, the profiling of them and the manner in which they are being treated. The Labour Party does not see any obligation as to why, as a country, we are going to treat them in this way. The fact they will not be exempt from this legal obligation really is a stain on our country if it proceeds. In tandem with that, amendment No. 57 is to ensure that vulnerability assessments take account of whether a person may be a victim of trafficking. Currently in this section it is not clear. In fact, it needs to be made clear that vulnerability assessments take account of whether a person could have been the victim of trafficking. It needs to be stated in the legislation. Amendment No. 177, which is also grouped, is again along the same lines and exempts victims of trafficking from the accelerated procedure. Throughout the Bill, we are exempting those who are victims of trafficking from going through what, unfortunately, many others are being put through as a result of this legislation. Amendment No. 179 ensures that the victims of trafficking will have special procedural guarantees not to be subject to the accelerated procedure.

Throughout all of these five amendments we are ensuring that those who are, unfortunately, victims of trafficking, which we can see from recent reports continues to be a huge issue in this country, are treated in a dignified, humane and compassionate way and are not dealt with in a manner that will be a stain on our society if we allow this legislation to go through. This tries to ensure that those victims who have had their lives turned upside down are treated well by this State.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Before the Minister came in, the Minister of State talked about being a true democrat and about the Government having a democratic right to legislate. Nobody is refuting that. However, if the Minister knocked at any door in this country, as all of us across

the Chamber do, who would ask that a victim of trafficking be compelled to go to a screening centre? There is no obligation on that. Screening procedures are not designed to ensure early trafficking detection. There are no clear referral pathways in the Bill to the national referral mechanism framework to identify and support victims of human trafficking and modern slavery. None of that exists in the Bill at the moment. We add a simple amendment where, if an applicant is presumed to be or is identified as a victim of trafficking, they will not be compelled to go to a screening centre where they can be detained. The Minister said it is for a potential maximum of two days, but there is no guarantee of that. Two days for a person who has been a victim of a horror unimaginable to all of us is a lifetime. It compounds trauma. It is unnecessary by any measurement. I would be interested to hear the Minister's reason as to how he will not be supporting a simple amendment such as this.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Human trafficking is a horrendous scourge on our society. It is a multibillion dollar crime that is carried out by organised crime gangs.

The delicacy with which we have to treat victims of human trafficking cannot be overstated. I referenced earlier how long it had taken us, essentially driven by the courts, to untangle international protection from allegations of crime. The case I was referencing directly relates to these amendments because in 2019, a Vietnamese woman was found in a cannabis growhouse and it was her case that unlocked the fact that even though she had been trafficked, she still had to fight a prosecution against her and it took that case, after years of so much work from so many civil society organisations and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, which I used to work for, to force this State to recognise the way that international protection and human trafficking are intertwined. To think that this Government is sleepwalking us back into a situation where people who are victims of human trafficking are going to be prosecuted, penalised and detained is head-in-the-sand stuff of the highest order. International protection is messy. Getting your documents ready to travel from a situation of persecution, conflict, war and torture is virtually impossible. The vulnerability that you put yourself in and the way that you make yourself so susceptible to exploitation by bad actors are off the charts, so to think we cannot see that nuance and intricacy within the process and legislate to effectively deal with it shocks me to the core. I support this amendment.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: Human trafficking is a problem that needs to be eliminated. I believe Ireland is ranked in tier two in terms of international comparisons, which means we are not really doing what we should be doing or can do to eliminate human trafficking. In the region of 67 victims of trafficking were formally identified, including five to ten children, and in many cases they ended up being subject to labour, sexual and other of forms of exploitation. It is clear the State is not doing nearly enough in comparison with other countries to eliminate this pernicious form of exploitation.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputies Gannon and Kelly for putting down this amendment. It is important to put it in context. What we are discussing here is chapter 2 of the provision that entitles me as Minister to designate a certain centre as a screening centre. That is provided for in section 21 of the legislation.

The next section we are dealing with, which is under discussion here, is the obligation to travel to a screening centre. There are provisions set out in this section 22 that place an

obligation on a person applying for international protection to travel to a screening centre. Subsection (6), however, sets out a number of individuals whom I exempt from travelling there. Where he or she considers it appropriate, the Minister may exempt an applicant to whom one of the following paragraphs applies. The six paragraphs I have set out there all concern individuals who verifiably come within the categorisation set out in the paragraphs. For instance, it applies to an applicant serving a term of imprisonment, an applicant detained in a children detention school or an applicant in respect of whom a warrant has been issued under the Extradition Act or who is subject to committal under section 29 of that Act or who has consented to surrender or subject to surrender under that Act. It also applies to an applicant in respect of whom a European arrest warrant has been issued or an applicant considered by a registered medical practitioner to be incapable for medical reasons of travelling to a screening centre.

Deputies Gannon and Kelly want me to put in a seventh exemption, which would be an applicant who is a presumed or identified victim of trafficking. That is not a specific categorisation of person. Who is going to presume whether or not a person is a victim of trafficking? If it is the case, and I would be interested in hearing what Deputies say in respect of this, that an international protection applicant arrives in and says he or she is a victim of trafficking, does that mean that I, therefore, have to exempt that person from travelling to the screening centre? If that is the case, I am sure Deputies will recognise the fact that the obligation set out under the provisions of sections 21 and 22 could easily be circumvented if all an individual had to say was that he or she was a victim of trafficking.

The other term used here is an applicant who is a presumed or identified victim of trafficking. Again, I ask Deputies Gannon and Kelly to tell me who will do that identification. How is this going to work in practical terms whether it is at the centre where somebody is applying or at one of our ports? How will it be presumed or determined that a person is a victim of trafficking?

I propose to discuss amendment No. 22 along with amendments Nos. 28, 53, 57, 177 and 179. The Government is firmly committed to protecting and supporting victims of human trafficking, recognising them as a particularly vulnerable cohort. Screening is an important mechanism for recognising potential victims of trafficking, routing them for further assessment and ensuring they can access the supports they need. I also want to clarify that a statement by an individual that he or she has been trafficked does not in itself confer presumed or identified status. A formal assessment is required and must be undertaken by the designated competent authority responsible for formal identification under the existing national referral mechanism, NRM, namely, An Garda Síochána. Careful consideration is needed to ensure operational and legislative alignment of the NRM with the new asylum and migration procedures introduced by this Bill. My officials will continue to examine the matters raised in these amendments with a view to establishing what, if any, ministerial amendments will be necessary.

One point deserves further emphasis. Many times individuals may not be aware that they are the victims of trafficking or that they are being trafficked and the screening process is an important mechanism for recognising potential victims of trafficking. I understand the basis on which Deputies Gannon and Kelly put forward this amendment but it is not specific in terms of how is it going to be presumed or who is going to identify the person as a victim of trafficking. I would appreciate if the Deputies would tell me how that would be done. It is

also important to point out that there is a benefit in the screening process for the purpose of seeking to identify somebody who is a victim of human trafficking.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The answer to the Minister's question about how we would do it is that if we are seeking to detain people, we have an obligation to determine whether they are victims of human trafficking. The Minister mentioned the NRM but that extends well beyond An Garda Síochána. There are supposed to be civil society groups that are available through the NRM and are compelled and empowered to identify victims of human trafficking. One of the criticisms of this Bill going through pre-legislative scrutiny was that there was too much ministerial control. This is an amendment that gives more oversight to the Minister to allow for this as a ground and I cannot understand why he would push back on it.

The Minister asked how we are supposed to tell whether somebody is just claiming to be a victim of trafficking. This betrays the level of mistrust this Government has regarding people in the international protection system if the starting point is always that people are here to cheat the system, to game it and to take advantage of our systems. That is what is coming through in this kind of thinking - how do we police it? Through this legislation and through being a signatory to the migration and asylum pact at EU level, we are placing multiple barriers in front of the right to claim asylum, which is an internationally upheld right. We do not agree that we should be doing those things but if we are going to go down that path, then we have every obligation to protect people who are trafficked. I agree with the Minister that many people do not know that they have been trafficked and that it is messy and hard but that is all the more reason those people need to be protected at every stage of the process. The vulnerability assessments have got to a place where they are a box-ticking exercise. The only way we can identify these things properly is by actually working with people and listening to them over a long period to make sure they are being given the services they need to support them at the most difficult time of their lives.

I am afraid that the questions that the Minister is putting forward do not hold water. They simply belie this attitude of mistrust when we should be extending our offer of support to people when they need it most.

Deputy Gary Gannon: In the first instance, a victim of trafficking will be identified by their vulnerability assessment. That is provided for under the special reception conditions. I am surprised the Minister did not know that.

Given the day that we had today in the Dáil when another State apology was made, I cannot help thinking of the words of Christine Buckley. I am sure most of us around the Chamber remember the incredible work of Christine Buckley, who shone a light into one of the darkest corners in this State and finally delivered a State apology for victims of institutional incarceration. Christine had a phrase which she used constantly: "I believe you before you open your mouth". That was Christine's line. We are now standing in the Chamber processing potentially the most important legislation of certainly the next five years and it factors in detention. We are having a discussion about why should we believe a person when they come forward and say they were a victim of trafficking.

We have talked about categories. What category of person does the Minister think would stand in front of another person and falsely say that they had been a victim of trafficking or

modern slavery? I do not know that individual. I have not met that individual. I do want the Minister to legislate for that individual. I want to legislate for a humane and compassionate system in which we actually build trust into our legislation. The Minister might say that this is some sort of nonsense on my part, but I know what the opposite looks like, and it does not look like the type of system that is reflective of a republic that has learned the lessons for which it previously apologised for.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Even though we have disagreed on quite a bit and despite the way he is guillotining this whole debate, the Minister has conducted himself in a fair way but his previous response smacked of a different tone. He let himself down. I do not know; maybe he was going back to his barrister days. It almost came across like a challenge to us. Who cares whether it is perfectly prescribed, as the Minister sees it, in this Bill. It goes beyond all of that. If he does not like our wording, he can table another amendment. He should bring it through the Seanad and then back to this House. However, if we, as a country, cannot have a system whereby within this legislation whereby there is a vulnerability assessment done and we cannot say that we know or believe that somebody is being trafficked, then we are letting everything we stand for as a country down. There are many professional organisations and people who can work with the State to help deal with this matter. It is not a debate about how we decide whether somebody is trafficked. That is being done every day of the week. That is not the debate. The debate is around whether the Minister has the will to do it, whether it is by accepting these amendments or bringing forward his own. If the Minister stood up and said that he is willing to bring forward his own to deal with the matter, that would be something.

When it comes to the issue, the fact is that we are not treating people who are in a very vulnerable state in the manner in which we should. We are not practising what we preach. As a State, we have not learned from past issues, and we are going very close to bone given what was apologised for today. The Minister needs to reflect on this because if he does not deal with this, there will be a situation whereby we will be looking back at this in the future and saying that we pointed out that it was wrong thing to do, but the Minister ploughed on with it and we now have all these situations. We do not want to end up in that scenario. By reply, he might say that he might deal with this. If he is not happy with my amendment or Deputy Gannon's, he might say that he is going to deal with it in the Seanad. Either way, the first amendment is mine and I will press it.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I want to respond to Deputy Kelly's point. I listened very carefully to what Deputies Kelly, Gannon and Gibney had to say. I take it seriously and I am fully aware of what political objective they are seeking through these amendments. They are perfectly legitimate, and I respect them.

We are talking about an amendment to section 22. It is headlined, "Obligation to travel to screening centre". I have not designated any areas as screening centres yet but if, following enactment, I designate Citywest, which is a well-known example, and I ask someone, who comes into Ireland and claims international protection, to go to the screening centre in Citywest, part of the reason an applicant is asked to go to a screening centre is to enable the preliminary and vulnerability assessment to be done. That is part of the process of asking somebody to travel to a screening centre. It is not unreasonable on the part of the State to put

an obligation on an individual who has come in claiming international protection to travel to a screening centre. It is not an excessive burden on that person.

The amendment that Deputy Kelly wants to make is that if somebody is a presumed or identified victim that the Minister of the day could decide that they do not have to go there, but I do not understand why I would not want them to go there if that is the place where they are going to have their vulnerability and preliminary assessment carried out. That is an integral part of it.

I am sorry if I sounded like a barrister. I do not intend to.

Deputy Alan Kelly: It is okay.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: However, I do sometimes consider legislation from the point of view of how it will be determined if it is before a court or a judge. The amendment the Deputy wants to insert relates to an applicant who is a presumed or identified victim of trafficking. I am not trying to make a legal point, but I need to know, and a court would need to know with precision how the Minister knows if somebody is a presumed victim of trafficking, or how he knows if they are an identified victim of trafficking.

Deputy Gibney may disagree me with on this, but it cannot just be that if the person says they are a victim of trafficking, that is it. In that instance, why are we going through the whole process? When people come in and say they are fleeing persecution, why do we not tell them they are entitled to international protection because they said they are fleeing persecution? It would be completely inconsistent to say that a person is a victim of trafficking simply because they say so. We do not automatically accept that. I do not think any Member is suggesting that if a person arrives and says they are entitled to refugee status, they should automatically get it.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The Minister presents to us a hypothetical scenario where someone comes in and is sent to Citywest. This is the system he is presenting to us. We are trying our best to fix parts within it, which we believe will make it a humane and fairer system. Given the Minister presented one hypothetical scenario, here is another one. Let us say a government of the future is even harder on migration than this one is and has even more right-wing views on international protection, which penalise people for being in the system at all, and there is a screening centre that is a set of tents in a field in the middle of the country.

We are going to send somebody there who, coming off the boat, is pleading with officials that they are a victim of international trafficking. The Minister cannot just present one hypothetical and expect to say this is going to work for it. It is the Minister's responsibility to build in the processes that will identify victims of trafficking so they are not treated in ways that retraumatise, penalise and prosecute them in ways that are just not humane within this system.

That is what we are saying. We appreciate that there is a system to deal with international protection that allows for people to put forward their claim for asylum and for it to be treated. Within that system, there are also people who have been trafficked and who have experienced incredibly egregious crimes against them. We are trying to allow for those people to be treated differently within this cohort of people looking for international protection. That is what this amendment tries to do and that is what we are trying to resolve with it.

Deputy Matt Carthy: This is a product of the process we were left with because of the approach the Minister has taken to this Bill. We are now 20 minutes away from cut-off. I know the Minister had an issue with the number of TDs who spoke to a particular amendment but, realistically, we have not had a proper engagement on any amendment up until this point or on any section. As the Minister knew, when he insisted he was going to bring it forward on the floor of the Dáil, it is not conducive to having a proper conversation and deliberation.

In respect of this amendment, I support it. The Minister can argue that the movers of the amendment should have brought forward a particular definition and clarifications on how the presumption would be made and what the basis of that would be in law. I made the point that we were nearly being criticised earlier for having too many TDs, but one of the benefits of having a larger number of TDs is the fact that, as tough as it is, I and one member of staff can spend our time going through a piece of justice legislation and, even then, cannot go through all the material that comes from the Minister's Department, to be quite honest about it. However, when you are dealing with other, smaller parties that do not have the same wherewithal, we see individual TDs dealing with multiple portfolios. Our party was in that position before and it becomes much more difficult.

The question for me, when we are dealing with an Opposition amendment, is the principle of the amendment. Of course, the Minister could decide he is going to accept the principle in respect of people who are identified as victims of trafficking. Then he could go to his officials and say let us figure out how we get this done, in the same way he has done for all the measures he wanted to cater for. In that regard, it is the principle of the amendment I am supporting and I am doing so as somebody who does not necessarily have an issue with the concept of screening centres or the obligation on people who are applicants for international protection of presenting to a screening centre. I have an issue with regard to the legislation, where it simply says that the Minister may designate a premises once he is satisfied the premises is suitable. That is even less clear than any amendment the Opposition has put forward in respect of what exactly will constitute an appropriate location, what the basis will be, or whether there will be provisions in regard to the distance somebody will be expected to travel. We talked about applicants being all over the country, whether they will all be expected to go to Citywest and if it is not happening. The Minister is shaking his head but we do not know because the legislation certainly does not say.

In respect of amendment No. 22, I want to put on the record that we support it on the basis that we support the principle of it. If the Minister really wanted to have a teased-out discussion on how all of this would work on a practical basis, the point has been made but I will make it again: we should be having this conversation in the committee room.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I reiterate that the screening procedures, as designed, are not designed to ensure early detection of human trafficking and modern slavery. There is also no clear referral pathway in the Bill in regard to the national referral mechanism. That is really important because I think something that has not really been understood yet in the 13 hours we have given to this Committee Stage is that this Bill comes into law on 12 June. The Minister does not yet have the multi-annual national referral mechanism set up for victims of trafficking. That is an extraordinary gap. I hope we will get to vote on this amendment so I will be quick.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. Does the Minister wish to respond?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: No.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 63; Níl, 75; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Bacik, Ivana.	Aird, William.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Brady, John.	Boland, Grace.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Brian.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brennan, Shay.	
Carthy, Matt.	Brophy, Colm.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Browne, James.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Burke, Colm.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Butler, Mary.	
Crowe, Seán.	Butterly, Paula.	
Cullinane, David.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Cummins, Jen.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Daly, Pa.	Byrne, Thomas.	
Devine, Máire.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Calleary, Dara.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Canney, Seán.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Clendennen, John.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Collins, Niall.	
Gannon, Gary.	Connolly, John.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Cooney, Joe.	
Gould, Thomas.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Graves, Ann.	Cummins, John.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Currie, Emer.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Daly, Martin.	
Healy, Seamus.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Hearne, Rory.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Kelly, Alan.	Dillon, Alan.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Lawlor, George.	Fleming, Sean.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Foley, Norma.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Geoghegan, James.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Grealish, Noel.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Harkin, Marian.	
Murphy, Paul.	Heneghan, Barry.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Heydon, Martin.	
Nash, Ged.	Higgins, Emer.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Keogh, Keira.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Lahart, John.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Lawless, James.	

O'Donoghue, Robert.	Lowry, Michael.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	Maxwell, David.	
O'Hara, Louis.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	McCarthy, Noel.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	McCormack, Tony.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	McEntee, Helen.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Moynihan, Michael.	
Quaide, Liam.	Moynihan, Shane.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Murphy, Michael.	
Sheehan, Conor.	Naughton, Hildegard.	
Sherlock, Marie.	Nolan, Carol.	
Smith, Duncan.	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
Stanley, Brian.	O'Connell, Maeve.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	O'Connor, James.	
Wall, Mark.	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
Ward, Mark.	O'Meara, Ryan.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Alan Kelly and Gary Gannon; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment declared lost.

11 o'clock

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: As it is 11 p.m. and the time for the debate has concluded, I am required to put the following question in accordance with the order of the Dáil of 24 February: "That the amendments set down by the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration and not disposed of are hereby made to the Bill; in respect of each of the sections undisposed of, other than section 141, which is hereby deleted, that the section or, as appropriate, the section, as amended, is hereby agreed to; the Title, as amended, is hereby

agreed to; the Bill, as amended, is accordingly reported to the House; Fourth Stage is hereby completed; and the Bill is hereby passed."

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 74; Níl, 65; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Boland, Grace.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Brian.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Brophy, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Browne, James.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butler, Mary.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butterly, Paula.	Crowe, Seán.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cullinane, David.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cummins, Jen.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Daly, Pa.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Devine, Máire.	
Calleary, Dara.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Canney, Seán.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Collins, Niall.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Connolly, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Cummins, John.	Gould, Thomas.	
Currie, Emer.	Graves, Ann.	
Daly, Martin.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dillon, Alan.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kelly, Alan.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Foley, Norma.	Lawlor, George.	
Geoghegan, James.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Harkin, Marian.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Heydon, Martin.	Murphy, Paul.	
Higgins, Emer.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Keogh, Keira.	Nash, Ged.	
Lahart, John.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Lawless, James.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	

Lowry, Michael.	Nolan, Carol.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Murphy, Michael.	Quaide, Liam.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Connor, James.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Ward, Mark.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Matt Carthy and Gary Gannon.

Question declared carried.

Commission on the Future of the Family Farm Bill 2024: Second Stage (Resumed) **[Private Members]**

The following motion was moved by Deputy Martin Kenny on 19 February 2026: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "That" and substitute the following:

"Dáil Éireann declines to give the Commission on the Future of the Family Farm Bill 2024 a second reading, on the basis that:

— its objectives are already being comprehensively addressed through existing policy frameworks, in particular Food Vision 2030, the CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027, and the ongoing work arising from the Commission on Generational Renewal in Farming;

— the family farm model is central to Ireland's agri-food sector and rural economy, and supporting its viability, sustainability and continuity has been a consistent priority of Government policy, reflected most clearly in Food Vision 2030, Ireland's stakeholder-led strategy for the agri-food sector;

— issues such as generational renewal, succession planning, gender balance, farm incomes, diversification, farmers' position in the value chain and climate action are key issues for the sector and are already central pillars of Food Vision 2030, and these issues are being actively progressed through the existing structures and funded policy instruments;

— Food Vision 2030 provides a long term, integrated and non-statutory framework, addressing the economic, environmental and social sustainability of farming, including the future of family farms, and the distinct advantage of Food Vision 2030 is that it was developed by the sector, for the sector, through extensive stakeholder engagement and continues to be implemented collaboratively, and it is underpinned by a robust governance, monitoring and reporting structure through a High Level Implementation Committee chaired by the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine;

— a mid-term review of Food Vision 2030 is currently underway, to ensure continued relevance and responsiveness, and this review, which will include full public and stakeholder consultation, will ensure that it remains ambitious, focused, and responsive to evolving challenges and opportunities; and

— the agri-food sector has experienced significant policy change in recent years, and Food Vision 2030 provides a stable, agreed framework, with the non-statutory nature of Food Vision 2030 allowing Government to adapt policy responses more efficiently, including through the current mid-term review."

- (Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Noel Grealish)

Deputy An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to Second Stage of the Commission on the Future of the Family Farm Bill 2024 which took place on Thursday, 19 February 2026. On the question, "That the amendment to the motion be made", a division was claimed, and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 74; Níl, 64; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Bacik, Ivana.	

Ardagh, Catherine.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Boland, Grace.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Brian.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Brophy, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Browne, James.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butler, Mary.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butterly, Paula.	Crowe, Seán.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cullinane, David.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cummins, Jen.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Daly, Pa.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Devine, Máire.	
Calleary, Dara.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Canney, Seán.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Collins, Niall.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Connolly, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Cummins, John.	Gould, Thomas.	
Currie, Emer.	Graves, Ann.	
Daly, Martin.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dillon, Alan.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Lawlor, George.	
Fleming, Sean.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Foley, Norma.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Geoghegan, James.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Grealish, Noel.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Harkin, Marian.	Murphy, Paul.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Heydon, Martin.	Nash, Ged.	
Higgins, Emer.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Keogh, Keira.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Lahart, John.	Nolan, Carol.	
Lawless, James.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	

McEntee, Helen.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Quaide, Liam.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Murphy, Michael.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Connor, James.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

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

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 75; Níl, 65; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Boland, Grace.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Brian.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Brophy, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Browne, James.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butler, Mary.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butterly, Paula.	Crowe, Seán.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cullinane, David.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cummins, Jen.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Daly, Pa.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Devine, Máire.	

Calleary, Dara.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Canney, Seán.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Clendennen, John.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Collins, Niall.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Connolly, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Cummins, John.	Gould, Thomas.	
Currie, Emer.	Graves, Ann.	
Daly, Martin.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dillon, Alan.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Fleming, Sean.	Lawlor, George.	
Foley, Norma.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Geoghegan, James.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Murphy, Paul.	
Heydon, Martin.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Higgins, Emer.	Nash, Ged.	
Keogh, Keira.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Lahart, John.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Lawless, James.	Nolan, Carol.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McEntee, Helen.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihán, Michael.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moynihán, Shane.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Quaide, Liam.	
Murphy, Michael.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Connor, James.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Tóibín, Peadar.	

O'Shea, John Paul.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

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

Question declared carried.

Expanding Access to General Practitioner Care: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Pádraig Rice on Wednesday, 25 February 2026:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that:

- access to timely General Practitioner (GP) care is a fundamental pillar of a safe, effective and equitable health service;
- GPs play a vital role in our health service, managing the majority of people's medical care needs, and acting as the first point of medical contact for most patients;
- GPs provide a core leadership role in delivering care outside of the hospital setting, and are central to the provision of Sláintecare's new model of integrated, multidisciplinary care; and
- to continue the shift away from our current hospital-centric system, patients must have timely access to GP and community-based healthcare services that are free at the point of use;

notes that:

- Ireland is an outlier in Europe in not providing universal primary healthcare that is free at the point of need, instead, we have a system of eligibility which is determined primarily on the grounds of income or age;
- according to the Health Service Executive (HSE) Primary Care Reimbursement Scheme, approximately 42 per cent of the population has access to free GP care through medical cards or GP visit cards, and the remaining 58 per cent pay out of their own pocket;

- the cost of visiting a GP can range from €50 to €90;
- in 2025, research commissioned by the Irish Cancer Society found that more than 30 per cent of people surveyed didn't attend a healthcare appointment because of cost;
- the same survey revealed that 25 per cent of people prioritised other costs over their healthcare, including heating and eating;
- a key recommendation from the Oireachtas Special Committee on the Future of Healthcare Sláintecare Report, published in 2017, was universal GP coverage by year five of implementation;
- the 2016 Programme for Government committed to extending free GP care to under 18s, which never happened;
- free GP care for children aged under six was rolled out in 2015, but it took another eight years before free GP care for children under eight was authorised in 2023; and
- the 2025 Programme for Government commits to extending free GP care to children up to at least 12 years;

further notes that:

- the 2017 Sláintecare Report stated that the current GP contract was a barrier to a primary-care orientated health service, and recommended an entirely new contract to facilitate new ways of working;
- the current GP contract is over 50 years old, and although it has been amended on numerous occasions, the core contract does not reflect modern day general practice, nor the future career expectations of young trainees and GPs;
- research carried out by the Irish College of GPs in 2023, found that almost half of trainees, 48.1 per cent, were not prepared to take up the contract within a year of finishing their training;
- the same research found that just above one third, 36.7 per cent, of graduates felt comfortable with the traditional responsibilities of the GP principal/partner position;
- the need for better working conditions, greater flexibility and new ways of working has consistently been identified by the Irish College of GPs and the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, in their GP Retention Project; and
- in April 2023, the Department of Health and the HSE initiated a Strategic Review of General Practice, which was due to be completed that year but is still ongoing, nearly three years later;

acknowledges that:

- according to the Economic and Social Research Institute, an additional 943 to 1,211 GPs will be needed by 2040;
- while the Irish College of GPs estimates that 2,000 more GPs are needed due to current demand of our aging population and population growth;

— in 2024, just two counties exceeded the World Health Organization's recommended ratio of 100 GPs per 100,000 of population, with areas of deprivation and rural areas worst served;

— it is well established that there are higher and more complex health needs in areas of deprivation, yet there are fewer GPs working in these communities compared to more affluent areas;

— it is estimated that Dublin's North Inner City has one GP for every 3,525 people, compared to the national average of one GP for 1,759 people; and

— a third of the population lives in rural Ireland, yet the Irish College of GPs estimates that only 10 per cent of GPs work in these areas, with many in solo practices;

further acknowledges that:

— the Chronic Disease Management Programme (CDMP) has clearly demonstrated what general practice can deliver, when structural programmes, which align with Sláintecare, are implemented and resourced; and

— last year, the HSE's report on GP-led Chronic Disease Management found that participants in the programme had 30 per cent fewer emergency department attendances, 26 per cent fewer hospital admissions, and 33 per cent fewer GP out-of-hours visits;

is concerned that:

— many GPs are overworked, burnt-out and increasingly overburdened with administrative work, all at the expense of their own work-life balance;

— in the absence of reform, we are seeing the increasing corporatisation of general practice, with small family practices being bought up by investor-owned corporate entities with multiple locations;

— a significant number of GPs are approaching retirement, with the Irish College of GPs estimating that 600 GPs are aged 65 or over, 300 of whom are aged 65 to 69, and 300 of whom are still working aged 70 and over;

— according to an Irish Independent survey of 275 registered GPs carried out in 2024, more than half of the GPs could not accept new patients, with more than two out of three GPs in rural Ireland unable to take on new patients; and

— there are critical gaps in out-of-hours GP services, and capacity constraints in daytime general practice are putting additional pressure on out-of-hours services; and

calls on the Government to:

— in the forthcoming budget, implement the Programme for Government commitment to expand free GP care to children up to 12 years of age;

— immediately set out a clear timeline for the delivery of universal GP and primary care, which is free at the point of use, within the lifetime of this Government;

- introduce a salaried GP model, with GPs directly employed by the HSE, for underserved communities, beginning with rural areas and offshore islands, and expanding into areas of deprivation and out-of-hours services;
- create a new DEIS for GPs scheme, deprivation-weighted General Medical Services capitation rates, with a cap on list size, in recognition of the additional health needs of patients in deprived areas;
- expand locum cover supports for GPs, by developing a nationwide HSE locum bank to ensure all GPs can take leave;
- develop a new GP contract which facilitates new ways of working, meets the work-life balance and career expectations of younger GPs and trainees, and incentivises health promotion, public health work, disease prevention, and the delivery of integrated care;
- invest in a national GP Clinical Lead role, to design, test and support new models of rural and remote general practice care;
- establish a primary care health equity working group, with representation from frontline services and patients living in deprived areas, similar to the successful Scottish model;
- accelerate the delivery of HSE-built primary care centres, to provide suitable premises for GPs and their teams, and support the delivery of integrated, multidisciplinary care;
- develop a national strategy to attract, support and retain future GPs, and this should include increased exposure to general practice in medical schools, structured post-training fellowships, specific time spent in practices in both rural areas and areas of deprivation during GP training, and measures to support more diverse, flexible, and equitable career pathways;
- accelerate implementation of the Irish College of GPs' 2023 report, entitled "Medical Student to General Practitioner - An urgent call to action";
- provide an additional 100 GP training places, through the expansion of training capacity in hospitals and supporting training practices;
- implement a new model of out-of-hours GP care, which is uniform across the country, to ensure that access to out-of-hours care is consistent;
- align general practice nurses' terms and conditions with their HSE colleagues, recognise and support general practice nurses' continuing professional development, and establish clear career pathways for progression;
- increase annual public health nurse training capacity, from 160 to 240 places;
- remove the Common Conditions Service fee for medical card holders;
- provide universal access to the CDMP for all patients with type 2 diabetes, asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cardiovascular disease and any further expansions such as the planned inclusion of chronic kidney disease;

- expand the CDMP to include severe and enduring mental health difficulties, epilepsy and other conditions as appropriate, in consultation with GPs delivering the service;
- develop a structured women's health programme for general practice, which deals with contraception, screening of STIs, fertility, pre-conception, endometriosis and menopause; and
- develop a national GP data framework to provide for integration with future eHealth systems, standardised data collection, greater data flow, data stewardship and investment in analytical capacity.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

To insert the following after "and investment in analytical capacity":

";

further recognises that:

- the inverse care law and unequal access to GPs is giving rise to stark inequalities, delayed diagnosis, poorer health outcomes, and increasing upward pressure on the hospital system;
- recent extensive research by the Labour Party on GP-to-patient ratios has highlighted significant inequalities, and found that there is one GP per 1,390 of population in Clontarf in Dublin 3, yet in Cabra in Dublin 7, the ratio is one GP to 3,060 of population;
- suburban areas of significant population growth are struggling with a lack of GP services, with East Meath having one General Medical Service GP for every 5,090 people, a divergence of 3,331 from the national average; and
- the 2025 Economic and Social Research Institute projections, of national demand and workforce requirements for general practice in Ireland, also show there will be a demand increase of at least 23 per cent by 2040, requiring up to an additional 761 to 868 General Practice Nurses, alongside increased GP numbers; and

therefore, further calls on Government to support the passage into law of the Health (Availability of General Practitioner Services) Bill 2025, to provide for a direct statutory link between the HSE's assessment of the level of need for primary care services in specific areas, and the level of service provided."

- (Deputy Marie Sherlock)

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding expanding access to general practitioner care. On Wednesday, 25 February 2026, on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 65; Níl, 76; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon

Bacik, Ivana.	Aird, William.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Brady, John.	Boland, Grace.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Brian.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brennan, Shay.	
Carthy, Matt.	Brophy, Colm.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Browne, James.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Burke, Colm.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Butler, Mary.	
Crowe, Seán.	Butterly, Paula.	
Cullinane, David.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Cummins, Jen.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Daly, Pa.	Byrne, Thomas.	
Devine, Máire.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Calleary, Dara.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Canney, Seán.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Clendennen, John.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Collins, Niall.	
Gannon, Gary.	Connolly, John.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Cooney, Joe.	
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Gould, Thomas.	Cummins, John.	
Graves, Ann.	Currie, Emer.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Daly, Martin.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Healy, Seamus.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Hearne, Rory.	Dillon, Alan.	
Kelly, Alan.	Dolan, Albert.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Lawlor, George.	Fleming, Sean.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Foley, Norma.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Geoghegan, James.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Grealish, Noel.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Harkin, Marian.	
Murphy, Paul.	Heneghan, Barry.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Heydon, Martin.	
Nash, Ged.	Higgins, Emer.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Keogh, Keira.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Lahart, John.	
Nolan, Carol.	Lawless, James.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Lowry, Michael.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Maxwell, David.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
O'Hara, Louis.	McCarthy, Noel.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	McConalogue, Charlie.	

O'Rourke, Darren.	McCormack, Tony.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	McEntee, Helen.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Moynihan, Michael.	
Quaide, Liam.	Moynihan, Shane.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Murphy, Michael.	
Sheehan, Conor.	Naughton, Hildegard.	
Sherlock, Marie.	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
Smith, Duncan.	O'Connell, Maeve.	
Stanley, Brian.	O'Connor, James.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
Wall, Mark.	O'Meara, Ryan.	
Ward, Mark.	O'Shea, John Paul.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Marie Sherlock and Duncan Smith; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Amendment declared lost.

Motion agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 11.35 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 26 Feabhra 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 11.35 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 26 February 2026.