



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

Estimates for Public Services 2026: Messages from Select Committees	3
Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions	3
Youth Unemployment	3
Disability Issues	6
Social Welfare Rates	8
Energy Prices	10
Social Welfare Payments	12
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions	14
School Meals Programme	14
Social Welfare Schemes	17
Social Welfare Payments	19
Social Welfare Payments	21
School Meals Programme	23
Social Welfare Benefits	25
Social Welfare Payments	27
State Savings Schemes	29
Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions	31
Road Traffic Accidents	31
Bus Services	34
Bus Services	36
Electric Vehicles	38
Road Safety	41
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions	43
Public Transport	43
Public Transport	45
Bus Services	48
Rail Network	50

Bus Services	52
Greenways Provision.....	54
Public Transport	56
Road Projects	57
Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions.....	59
Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions.....	74
Meastacháin i gcomhair Seirbhísí Poiblí 2025: Teachtaireacht ó Roghchoiste	78
Ceisteanna ar Pholasáí nó ar Reachtaíocht - Questions on Policy or Legislation	78
Repeal of Exempted Development Regulations Bill 2026: First Stage	87
Estimates for Public Services 2026: Message from Select Committee	90
Homelessness: Statements	90
Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters.....	127
Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate.....	128
Schools Building Projects	128
Educational Disadvantage	131
Early Childhood Care and Education	134
Report of the Joint Committee on Artificial Intelligence: Motion	137

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 26 Feabhra 2026

Thursday, 26 February 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Estimates for Public Services 2026: Messages from Select Committees

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): The Select Committee on Fisheries and Maritime Affairs has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2026: Vote 29 - Climate, Energy and the Environment.

The Select Committee on Agriculture and Food has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2026: Vote 30 - Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Youth Unemployment

1. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if his attention has been drawn to the rising rates of youth unemployment; the strategies he is developing to address this issue; if his attention has been drawn specifically to the causes of unemployment for the 18- to 24-year-old cohort; the extent to which he has investigated the impact of automation and AI on the youth labour market; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15402/26]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: My question, as the Minister will see, is simple and straightforward. I hope he has plenty of very enlightening answers for me. The question concerns the issue of youth unemployment and, in particular, the impact of automation and AI, which is causing a bit of what might be called a bottleneck. Where previously there would have been a pipeline to move through, a lot of younger people are getting stuck because jobs they would traditionally have moved into are now being done by AI and automated in other ways.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an gceist thábhachtach seo. According to the latest labour force survey, which was released by the Central Statistics Office, CSO, on 19 February, employment has been increasing for young people, standing at 323,200, which is up 6,000 over the past year. Reflecting this, the youth unemployment rate of 9.8% in quarter 4 of 2025 is lower than a year earlier, when the rate was at 9.9%.

It is important to note that youth employment is in most economies generally about twice the level of unemployment. This is because youth labour data is impacted by participation in education.

When participation in education is taken into account, the results of the survey also show that the rate of those not in education, employment or training stands at 6.3%. This rate includes not just young unemployed people but also younger people who may be disabled. The rate remains low by historical standards and compares favourably. However, I am concerned about the rate.

I also agree with the Deputy's concerns about AI. However, as with earlier forms of technological progress, while AI will displace jobs, it will also create jobs and in doing so increase productivity, the gains from which will be reflected in general economic performance. It is too early to say with any confidence what the balance of these effects will be, though historical experience indicates that the gains may be more significant than the losses.

That said, the expert group on future skills needs published a recent report which highlighted our leading global position in relation to AI. It highlighted a strong demand for workers with AI skills and indicated that the adoption of AI presents considerable potential for Ireland's employment and labour market. The Department of Finance has also published research on this subject. It has identified the at-risk sectors as being the ICT, financial, professional, scientific and technical sectors. It noted, which supports the Deputy's contention, that the impact of AI was likely to be more concentrated in entry-level jobs. We are monitoring these developments closely. I will get a chance to speak about the Pathways to Work process in my next response.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: That will be welcome. A number of factors need to be considered. I welcome the fact that the Minister is concerned because I am, too. I feel that when we are both concerned about something, we might be able to do something about it, which would be good.

I welcome publication of the report into AI. However, there is an issue. Youth unemployment is rising at a faster rate than that of the general population. Therefrom comes both of our concerns. What is needed is a bespoke programme for younger people. We are heading into a period where we may experience some unemployment. I feel that now is the time to get ready for that, with the specific needs of younger people in mind, and acknowledge, as the National Youth Council of Ireland has pointed out, the bottleneck that exists whereby people are unable to move on to more fulfilling or different jobs.

The other issue is that of underemployment. A lot of younger people who are working have the capacity to work more but cannot get that work.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. I confirm that we are monitoring all AI developments very closely. We are doing so in the context of developing the successor strategy to Pathways to Work. That strategy will include priorities for younger people. We expect it will be published in quarter 2 of this year.

We have made some changes. I particularly draw the attention of the Deputy to the changes in Tús. The Tús work placement scheme is being extended to 18-year-olds who are in receipt of jobseeker's allowance or who are the beneficiaries of temporary protection, and those people who are assessed as having a low probability of being able to access work in the open labour market after they meet an employment personal adviser. Some 150 people have availed of this option and it is already being found to be particularly effective following a review undertaken jointly by us, the OECD and the European Commission. We will explore the potential for it to expand, with a specific focus on those who may have difficulties in securing employment.

Our teams in Intreo are engaging closely and intensely with younger jobseekers to try to get them onto courses and into supports at the youngest possible age to avoid the chances of them being detached from the labour market.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Minister. He mentioned that Intreo staff are engaging intensely. He might provide me with a note on the type of engagement and where it is that Intreo is directing people. We know that 50,000 young workers are either working part time or on low-hours contracts. In some instances, much and all as they should not be, they are on zero-hours contracts.

I met representatives of the National Youth Council of Ireland. They are saying clearly that there is not just youth unemployment, which is an issue and which I feel is a bit of a canary in a coalmine, as I have said previously, but there is also the issue of underemployment. If we look at the statistics, we will see that 18% of 25-year-olds had to go back to their parents' houses after attempting to live on their own and 43% have never left. Clearly, there is an issue. We have all been 25, albeit that it was a long time ago, and you do not necessarily want to be living with your parents at that age. I do not think that figure represents people who are happy to be at home. Those are people who are stuck at home. That needs to be examined.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I will certainly provide that information to the Deputy. The range of supports that Intreo advisers use includes Springboard+ and identifying Springboard+ opportunities. It provides free and sometimes heavily subsidised education for in-demand skill areas. We can match courses to people's skills and abilities.

SOLAS continues to provide focused training programmes. There is also the work placement experience programme. With the back-to-work enterprise scheme allowance, I am encouraging people to set up their own businesses. That is something I am very passionate about. I will be asking the Department to focus on supporting people through the journey of setting up their own businesses, giving people options and, most importantly, providing the supports to go through that. We also have the short-term enterprise allowance.

There is a range of schemes there. I will engage with the National Youth Council of Ireland about how we package those schemes in a way that can be understood, and understand how

they are relevant to the current demands of the labour market and the pressures that are on people. I will come back to the Deputy about underemployment.

Disability Issues

2. **Deputy Eoin Hayes** asked the Minister for Social Protection to provide an update on his engagement with disabled persons' organisations; the consultation he is undertaking on the cost-of-disability support payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15656/26]

Deputy Eoin Hayes: Last week, the Minister announced that a public consultation is to take place on the cost of disability. Will he confirm that this is with a view to introducing a permanent cost-of-disability support payment in budget 2027? As part of that consultation discussion with disabled persons' organisations, will the Minister withdraw his comments on their lived experiences in saying that their accounts of their experiences were misleading and dangerous?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. The Government recognises the additional costs that are associated with having a disability. We are committed to improving outcomes for disabled people. The programme for Government includes a range of commitments to support disabled people, which includes a commitment to introduce an annual cost-of-disability support payment. In addition, under the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030, which was developed with significant input from disability groups and their advocates, it was agreed to establish a strategic focus network summit on the cost of disability. While that is led by my Department, it will include other Government Departments. This is a cross-government endeavour and I will be hosting the summit on 13 May 2026.

Departmental officials meet regularly with representatives of disability organisations bilaterally as part of regular meetings with the community and voluntary pillar and in a dedicated disability consultative forum. Disability groups are also represented at the annual pre-budget forum, the post-budget briefing and the annual social inclusion forum.

Since October 2025, my officials have met several groups, including disabled persons and disabled persons' organisations, to discuss the cost of disability. In December, the cost-of-disability strategic focus network was the main agenda item of my Department's disability consultative forum. Officials from across the Government were in attendance at this meeting. I met representatives of the disability consultative forum yesterday, which gave me an opportunity to engage directly with them on many of these issues.

Last Friday, 20 February, I launched the public consultation process on how a cost-of-disability payment and a strategic focus network summit can best be delivered. It will run for over six weeks and will close on 7 April. We are inviting members of the public to participate in the consultation by submitting written, video or telephone contributions. That consultation is open to everybody, with particular encouragement for disabled people and their families and carers, disabled persons' organisations and representative groups. I encourage any interested party to visit gov.ie/cod. To date, we have had over 80 submissions and we have tried to design the consultation to ensure the biggest accessible format available. We are open to input.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I thank the Minister. I genuinely welcome his engagement with the disabilities organisations. The question I have is how that engagement has been going. We put forward the emergency winter payment motion, which has been supported by those disabilities organisations. Has that come up at those meetings? Has it come up in the consultations so far?

It is important to note the rebuttal given by the Minister, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste. They pointed to the supplementary welfare schemes as something that people could avail of if they were in dire straits and choosing between heat and food. Notably, only 3,000 people availed of that payment last year. The emergency winter payment, as proposed, would affect 300,000 people. What is the Government doing for the other 297,000 people this year? They are suffering under the cost of disability.

I ask for a second time if the Minister will withdraw the hurtful and disgraceful remarks he made about the lived experience of people with disabilities in the recent past.

9 o'clock

Deputy Dara Calleary: First, those remarks were not aimed at people with disabilities. They were aimed at political parties that are trying to weaponise the issue.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: What we are saying is the truth.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Supports are available but we want to do a lot more on this. That is why we are putting a huge amount of work into a permanent payment. The cost-of-disability summit in May will produce a briefing paper. I intend to bring that to the Government as part of the budget 2027 negotiations. We are only at the end of February and the budget negotiations are not yet under way. This issue will be my priority going into those discussions. I invite Deputy Hayes and all the political parties to take part in the submission process, as Deputy O'Reilly has indicated she will do, and to put forward their views on what a permanent cost-of-disability payment might look like and how it should be structured.

We had a very good engagement with the groups yesterday. They continue to pursue an emergency winter payment but my focus is on fulfilling the programme for Government commitment to introduce a permanent payment rather than a temporary, one-off, year-to-year payment.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: The House should be aware that a protest will take place this Saturday against the failure to deliver the emergency winter payment. The disability organisations, despite meeting with the Minister and his officials several times, have called for that protest, which I will attend.

There is a conversation happening about a permanent cost-of-disability payment and I really welcome that as a direction of travel. However, there was no repeat in budget 2026 of the €400 payment in budget 2025. The Minister is saying that from budget 2027 on, there will be a payment. The lived experience of disabled people is that they had a one-off non-payment in budget 2026. I ask the Minister for the third time: will he withdraw his hurtful and disgraceful remarks about the lived experiences of people with disabilities? They were derisory and it was

deeply upsetting for many people with disabilities to hear that is what the Minister for Social Protection thinks of their lived experience.

Deputy Dara Calleary: As I said, we are focused on a permanent payment, not a temporary payment from budget to budget. We are focused on getting the design right and on involving as many voices as possible to ensure we consider as many ideas as possible in order to get it right. We had very good and constructive discussions about this with the disabled persons' organisations yesterday. We want to ensure the summit in May is a practical, focused and business-like event. Certainly for me, it will not be a tick-the-box event. We genuinely want to hear from people and get their input into the design of the payment. We will use all the feedback from that process during the budget 2027 discussions. At that point, it will be my priority. We are well away from any budget preparations or commitments but, as I continue to assure the Deputy, it is my priority and we will go into the process looking to deliver it. The proposal we deliver will be one that is owned and shared by those with disabilities and their families, carers, representative organisations and advocates.

Social Welfare Rates

3. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to equalise the youth jobseeker's rates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15403/26]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: This question relates to the youth rates of jobseeker's payments and whether the Minister has any plans to equalise them. Coming from a trade union background, we always said there should be equal pay for work of equal value. However, for those dependent on a social welfare payment, it would be wrong to assume it is pin money or is somehow not relevant to the young person and his or her family.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Age-related rates apply to persons aged between 18 and 24 in receipt of a jobseeker's payment. However, young jobseekers can receive the full adult payment if they participate in training and employment programmes. This is the correct approach, which will help to minimise the scarring effects that extended periods of activity can sometimes have on the long-term prospects and well-being of young people. Age-related rates are not applied to all young adults. Exemptions apply to those with dependent children, those previously in the care of Tusla or living independently and those in receipt of State housing supports such as the housing assistance payment, HAP.

At the end of January 2026, 11,850 people were on reduced rates of €163.70. My priority, rather than adjusting payment rates, is to give young people the best possible chance to participate in the labour market, as we have just discussed. Supporting young people to take up employment, education and training opportunities can enhance their employment prospects over time, as well as their ability to earn an adequate income to support themselves and their families into the future. If young jobseekers participate in education or training, they receive up to the maximum personal rate of jobseeker's allowance of €254. If they participate in a work placement experience programme, that weekly rate can increase to €369.

As I said previously, we are currently finalising our work on the successor to the previous Pathways to Work strategy. As part of that strategy, I am determined to ensure that young

people continue to be prioritised through education, training and employment supports. Accordingly, and in line with the reinforced youth guarantee, my Department continues to work to ensure young jobseekers receive a good-quality offer of employment, education or training within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving education. The current approach strikes the right balance in supporting young people into employment. I have no plans to change the rates for young jobseekers at this time.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: My constituency has the youngest population in the State. Youth unemployment is rising at three times the rate for the general population, as we have discussed, and constituencies like mine will feel that the hardest. A total of 18% of 25-year-olds went back to their parents' house after attempting to live on their own and 43% have never left. This means 60%-plus of young adults remain in their family home. The Minister referenced the need for bespoke strategies. I hope to hear more from him about that in the coming weeks and months. As we have discussed, the labour market is changing. It is not simply the case that young workers need to be incentivised; they need to be trained and equipped to be able to participate in the workplace. The Minister mentioned extended periods of inactivity. There was a bit of a bang of Norman Tebbit off that comment. I do not think anybody enjoys a period of extended inactivity. Young people want to be in work but there must be recognition that some of them will need help with that.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I assure the Deputy I do not want to give off any suggestion of the person she mentioned. We want young people to remain connected to the labour market, to avail of the employment and training opportunities and, more importantly, to avail of opportunities that are suited to their skills and interests as opposed to going through generic schemes. We went through the options earlier, including Springboard and the new changes to the Tús scheme. We want to ensure young jobseekers can receive a higher payment if they participate in training and employment programmes. I know that 99% of them want to do so but there can be challenges in terms of transport and accessing appropriate courses. We are trying to address those challenges as well. As outlined, a young jobseeker participating in education or training can receive up to the maximum personal rate. For participants in the workplace experience scheme, the weekly rate increases to up to €369. We certainly will be focusing on Pathways to Work, which I will have a chance to talk about in my reply to a later question.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The purpose of jobseeker's payments and other social welfare benefits should be to help people to get back on their feet and back into the labour market. However, having subminimum reduced rates for younger people cuts them off and leaves them further adrift. The two-tier element is not a good thing. I appreciate that the full rates are available for those participating in training and employment opportunities but the Minister needs to take a long, hard look at the reasons for non-participation. Very often, it is not from an unwillingness, as he acknowledged. Young people do not want to be disconnected from the labour market. What is happening is that they find themselves cut off because of a lack of transport and, as a consequence of the low rates, because they cannot get themselves out of where they are. I am very conscious that there is a poverty trap for younger people. It is not good to have a two-tier system with different rates. I come from the perspective of believing

our young people want to be in work and to be productive. They just sometimes need a hand to get there.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I agree. We want to avoid people, particularly at a young age, falling into that poverty trap. We want to keep them connected to the labour market, which we all agree is changing rapidly. That is why extra payments are given to those in training and on work experience. As I said, we are working on a new Pathways to Work strategy.

We have had over 430 submissions. We had five stakeholder forum events across the country. We have also met our colleagues in government and in other agencies of Government. We are developing the draft document. I am certainly very much keeping an eye on the changing pattern of labour and the challenges of labour. As a former Minister of State at the Department of enterprise with a particular interest in the digital space, I am very much looking at where those trends are going.

Going back to the reports from the Department of Finance and the future skills group I mentioned earlier, I want to ensure we have appropriate training and appropriate opportunities in place for people regardless of where they live in the country.

Question No. 4 taken with Written Answers.

Energy Prices

5. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection his engagement with the CRU, or energy providers, in relation to pay-as-you-go, or hardship metres; to detail the full extent of this engagement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15404/26]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: My question relates to the engagement the Minister has had with the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, or the energy providers, or hopefully both, in relation to pay-as-you-go meters, or as they are sometimes called, hardship meters. We had a discussion yesterday at committee in relation to a particular incident. I will not ask the Minister to comment on that but there is an issue of what I would call microdisconnections. If people on a prepay meter are on the vulnerable register, it is meaningless because they will get cut off.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. She was going to send me some details in relation to the case yesterday because I want to make sure that situation does not arise again.

The lead role in relation to the engagement with the Commission for Regulation of Utilities or energy providers in relation to pay-as-you-go meters is a matter for the Department of climate. While we have no function in this space, it is an area that we support people in. The Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment has advised that the electricity and gas retail markets in Ireland operate within a EU regulatory regime whereby electricity and gas markets are commercial, liberalised and competitive. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities is an independent statutory regulator and is accountable for the performance of its function to the Oireachtas. That being said, our primary role as a Department is to provide financial support to those households that require help with energy costs.

As regards to income supports, my Department provides a range of schemes to assist with costs. We have increased the fuel allowance this year. We have increased the qualification for the fuel allowance to those on the working family payment, which will kick in from this week on. Other forms of assistance include the household benefits package, the heating supplement and additional needs payments.

I will engage with the Deputy in relation to the experience we discussed at committee yesterday. Arising from that engagement, I intend to update the guidance we issue to our offices around these pay-as-you-go meters, in particular. I also deal with them in my own constituency office. I recognise the challenges people using them face. I do not want a situation where people are without power unnecessarily. Supports should be given and made available to them. I look forward to working with the Deputy on this issue.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: It is very expensive to be poor in this State, if a person finds themselves on a pay-as-you-go meter. I do not give a continental what the energy companies say. Many people are on those meters and they do not want to be. They either believe they have no choice or they are put onto them. They are then charged the most expensive rate of electricity. Thanks to my colleague, Lynn Boylan MEP, we learned in the newspapers yesterday that domestic customers pay twice as much for their electricity as data centres do. It is easy to see where the Government's priorities are there. The people who are on pay-as-you-go meters, who are likely to be the poorest people in any community, are paying a higher rate. They are - forgive me Cathaoirleach Gníomhach - getting screwed and it is really unfair. These microdisconnections are happening every day of the week. There has to be a rapid access system for people so that they can keep the lights and the heat on.

Deputy Dara Calleary: In relation to getting access to supports, I certainly want to work with the Deputy on that, particularly for the pay-as-you-go meters. I would be concerned about the rates that are charged on those meters. I will engage again with my colleague, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, on this. We increased the fuel allowance by €5 from the 1 January this year. That is a weekly payment of €38 for 28 weeks, which supports over 460,000 households with their energy costs and that will be an investment of €486 million. The household benefits package in 2026 million will be further €230 million. The heating supplement is there to assist people with exceptional heating costs. We had a good discussion at the disability forum yesterday about improving information and getting more information out about the heating supplement and I will be acting on that. As we discussed at the social protection committee yesterday, we have additional needs payments but we need to work on the consistency around those payments and I will work with the Deputy on that.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I welcome that. It is good work to be done but the question was specifically about the engagement the Minister might have had with the CRU or the energy providers. I appreciate that he is going to talk to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and I wish him the best with that. However, it would also be important that the Minister would engage with the CRU. I do not think people are engaging with this issue. I see it, and I am sure the Minister sees it in his constituency clinic as well. I am not talking about a massive number of people but for them it is important. The case I spoke to the Minister about involves a young woman with two kids. Her electricity was going off at 2 o'clock. She could not access those

supports, so she would have been in her house, cold. These are facts but they are microdisconnections; they are very small. I encourage the Minister to engage with the CRU. There is no rule that says he cannot. The CRU is the body with responsibility for regulation in this space. The energy companies are - with the greatest respect - the ones who have the responsibility for gouging these people. At the end of the day, it is the Department of Social Protection that will pick up the bill. At this stage, if the Minister could intervene with both of those bodies, that would be a very useful way to engage.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I agree. I am happy to have an engagement with the CRU but, obviously, it is not statutorily responsible. We could have an engagement in the context that I do not have any role but I do think this is an important issue. There needs to be some sort of understanding of the pressure families and homeowners are under with these pay-as-you-go meters. There can be situations of what the Deputy calls microdisconnections where people are left without power and heat, with minimum notice. I will engage with the CRU around this and will emphasise the need for further engagement in this space. I will also engage with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, who is generally very constructive on these issues.

I want to point out that we have made investments in this area. A total of €486 million has been allocated for fuel allowance, with €230.5 million for the household benefits and the extension of the fuel allowance to those on the working family payment from this month on. This the first time the fuel allowance has gone to people on low incomes, which I particularly welcome.

Social Welfare Payments

6. **Deputy Peter Roche** asked the Minister for Social Protection if his Department has considered introducing additional protections or supports for people living with rare diseases, given the unique financial and social challenges they face; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15529/26]

Deputy Peter Roche: Rare diseases collectively affect of thousands of people across our State. What makes the situation different is that the State's systems were never designed around lifelong, complex conditions that do not fit neat diagnostic or disability categories. Parents are becoming full-time carers, care co-ordinators and medical advocates, often overnight and, indeed, permanently, while simultaneously experiencing a collapse in their household incomes and a rise in unavoidable costs. They must repeatedly prove eligibility for assistance that measures disability in static terms.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy Roche for his question. My Department provides a range of income supports for those who are unable to work due to illness or disability, including those with rare diseases. These include non-contributory payments that are based on a needs test, such as disability allowance, but also contributory payments that are based on PRSI contributions, such as invalidity pension. Eligibility for these supports is not dependent on the type of a rare disease a person has but on the extent to which the particular condition impairs or restricts a person's capacity to work. The purpose of these payments is to provide income support for those with a condition that limits their ability to earn an income.

Rare diseases present unique challenges, and these differ from person to person. They can mean that a person is unable to work or only able to work part-time. My Department's income supports are designed to support a person to work where they can. For instance, disability allowance has an income disregard. This means a person can earn up to €527.60 and still keep a portion of their payment and the associated secondary benefits.

In addition, those who are on illness benefit for longer than six months or who are on invalidity pension can transfer to partial capacity benefit where they can work, earn unlimited income and still keep a percentage of their payment.

Under the national human rights strategy for disabled people, which was developed with significant input from disability groups and advocates, it was agreed to establish a strategic focus network summit on the cost of disability.

My Department is leading on this initiative but we also include other Government Departments in what is cross-government endeavour. It goes without saying that those who represent disabled people, disabled people themselves and their families, carers and advocates are also involved, and will play a full part in the consultation and in the summit on 13 May. I have launched a public consultation process on how a cost-of-disability payment and the strategic focus network can be best delivered, and I look forward to engaging with the Deputy and with the rare diseases group in the Oireachtas, through Deputy O'Sullivan, around supports that can be done there.

Deputy Peter Roche: Many people living with rare diseases fall between multiple systems - health, disability and social protection. Approximately one in 17 people will live with a rare disease during their lifetime and, in many cases, these conditions are lifelong, disabling and involve frequent hospitalisations with one parent or carer leaving their employment entirely, yet many of these individuals struggle to qualify for disability supports, domiciliary care allowance or long-term illness-related benefits because assessment criteria were designed around the more typical disabilities and predictable conditions.

Has the Minister examined whether the existing social protection systems are appropriate for people with rare diseases, and will he consider additional tailored supports, including assessment flexibility or a dedicated pathway to reflect the unique financial or caring burdens faced by their families?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I am happy to engage with the Deputy and the rare diseases group around those issues and the proposals the group may have in relation to the systems within the Department. As I said in my response, we provide a range of supports for people who are unable to work due to illness or disability, and that includes people with rare diseases. Eligibility is not dependent on the type of rare disease but on how that disease impacts on a person's ability to work and earn an income. The scheme already supports persons to work where they can. That is why we have an income disregard for the disability allowance. That income disregard is €527.60. That allows the person to work part-time within the confines of their condition if it affects their ability to work.

To come back to the meeting we had yesterday, we had a small discussion about the design of forms and the application process. That is something we are going to pursue. I am happy to engage with the Deputy in relation to that.

Deputy Peter Roche: I appreciate the Minister's honesty and his response. Most of us get representations into our constituency offices in that regard. I would have thought before arriving to this House that that would not be the norm but it is beginning to become the norm where we encounter people who have those very conditions, those rare diseases. It is imperative we find a model they can fit into and that their lives are not complicated any further. Having a rare disease can be quite complex, difficult and upsetting for families who find themselves having to manoeuvre through life with that rare disease.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Absolutely. We want to try to have a Department that helps people who have to manoeuvre through these conditions. One of my frustrations in public life is the way we silo people. That day needs to go in terms of the Department of Health doing one job, the Department of Social Protection doing another and the Department of disability doing another. That is why we are taking a whole-of-government approach to the summit on the cost of disability on 13 May. I am working with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and other colleagues to identify silos that are making people's difficult journey even more difficult. Those diagnosed with rare diseases have enough challenges to deal with without the State getting in their way and making that journey and challenge even more difficult. I am open to ideas from everybody in the House in relation to the schemes of the Department, how we design them and the application processes for them. We had a good discussion at the social protection committee yesterday around some areas and on how we can improve them. We are going to working on that as well.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

School Meals Programme

7. **Deputy Eoin Hayes** asked the Minister for Social Protection his views on the progress of the hot school meals programme funded by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15584/26]

Deputy Eoin Hayes: First, I want to state my unequivocal support for the hot school meals programme. It is a really important programme. I am glad the Minister is doing it and the Department is funding it. The Minister said on RTÉ Radio 1 last week that a third of school meals were not meeting basic nutritional standards, according to the initial assessment carried out by a dietitian appointed by the Minister's Department. Can the Minister confirm whether his Department is worried that once more thorough assessments, including site visits are completed, the figures of compliance may be dramatically below expectations and when those more comprehensive assessment results will be made available?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. I have to say that when I was appointed Minister for Social Protection, I did not think a lot of my time would be spent on school meals. It is one

of the most popular programmes and most debated in the House. That is a good thing and we want to get it right.

In 2019, there were 37 schools and 6,600 children who were eligible for hot school meals. Today, all 3,200 primary schools and 550,000 children are eligible for hot school meals. There are 3,700 schools around the country which are eligible for the full supports; meaning 3.4 million school meals per week, delivered by more than 300 suppliers, including community-based suppliers. Deputy O'Reilly has championed the role of meals on wheels. Overall, I welcome the Deputy's support for the success of the programme but we have more to do and we will continue to strive for improvements.

The budget for any hot school meals programme this year is €289 million. To assist in improving the programme, my Department has established an inter-departmental working group, including the Department of Health, the Department of Education and Youth, the Food Safety Authority and the Department of children, to oversee and make recommendations. Last year, I instructed suppliers to remove fats that are high in saturated fat, sugar and salt. Previously they had been permitted once a week and only when chosen by parents. We have also seconded a CORU-registered dietitian, funded by my Department, for the school meals programme. She is under the clinical supervision of the Department of Health and is undertaking an in-depth review of school meals supplier menus and their compliance to nutritional standards. We also last year launched the summer holiday hunger initiative, which supported 42,000 children. I am very focused on the nutritional standards of the hot school meals. There are 16 different standards and we will get a chance to discuss the full details of those during supplementary questions.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I thank the Minister. Some clarity on those guidelines and standards would be very helpful. The Minister mentioned he instructed suppliers to assess certain nutritional values in the meals. This is one of my supplementary questions. The scheme is funded and being evaluated by the Department but my understanding is the contracts are being organised by the schools with the relevant suppliers. What is the role of the Department in the contracting arrangements, for example, if somebody is not living up to the contractual obligations? Does that come to the school or is it something the Department has a role in? What other instructions is the Department able to give? Reliance on private companies more generally can yield benefits in some ways and disadvantages in others. It would be helpful to understand whether there are any plans on how to change that arrangement and get better value for money, better nutritional standards and on the way the Department would like to pursue this.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The dietitian has been working since September and she has completed an in-depth review of school meal supplier menus and their compliance with nutritional standards. The nutritional standards have been in place since 2019, since the inception of the programme. They were developed by the Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute, the HSE, Safefood and the Food Safety Authority of Ireland. There are 16 standards in total - 13 relating to food and three relating to drinks. The interim report is based effectively on desktop, so we are now beginning, with colleagues from the Department of Social Protection, the process of getting into schools and looking at what is being delivered. The main findings of that interim report, which were based predominantly on looking at menus, is that at least

66% met at least three of the five standards looked at in the initial look. Some 80% contained adequate carbohydrates that did not include foods high in fat, salt and sugar. One of the issues is around fruit and vegetables and how available they are. That was very hard to decipher from the menu. We will have the full report by the summer and I look forward to discussing it.

In regard to our role as a Department, we are also developing an inspection tool. We are getting into schools. We did 400 school inspections last year and another 100 desktop inspections.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: In the next supplementary reply, I ask for some clarity on contracts and the Department's involvement in contracting with the schools. I note that 400 school meals were evaluated and a third of them did not meet the basic nutritional standards. Somebody told me that they did not meet three of the five guidelines. Will the Minister give a sense of how many met all five of the guidelines that were assessed? He mentioned there were 16 guidelines overall. What is the plan to assess those future guidelines? There are 11 more guidelines to go. Is it possible that nobody is meeting all the standards that the Department has set? How will that be evaluated by the dietitian and by the Department?

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Minister for acknowledging my interest in this, and particularly in the role of meals on wheels, which is in the community, already delivering healthy, nutritious meals to people. I would differ with Deputy Hayes. I do not believe there are benefits to being reliant on the private sector. I think that is a backwards step but we are all different in our own lovely ways. Has the Minister had any formal engagement with the national meals on wheels organisation and if he has not, will he have that formal engagement to see how prepared it is to take on the work? My information, having engaged with it, is that there are plenty who will. There would be a tie-in with community employment schemes and other schemes to support this. I wanted to briefly mention portion sizes. We have talked about this before. It is beyond ridiculous that people in junior infants get the same as those who are in sixth class. The requirements of the kids are vastly different. I hope that is being looked at.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I assure Deputy Hayes that the nutrition side is being closely monitored. Coming back to the overall discussion about suppliers, my preference is for local suppliers. That could be meals on wheels. Deputy O'Shea is with us. The Duhallow community food project is also a very good model. It is locally produced. This day last week, I was in St. Munchin's Community Centre in Limerick, where they do extraordinary work. We saw the food being prepared there. I do not mind whether it is private or public. I think it should be local and, most importantly, nutritious. With our dietitian, we are developing a tool to allow us to do more audits, to actually get into schools and to see what is being served, because what is on a menu may be different from what is being served.

The contract is with the school, which does the contract with companies. I pay tribute to the Department of education and the school meals unit of my own Department. They work incredibly hard and give guidance and support. The contractual relationship is between the school and the supplier, which is important. I make the point to Deputy O'Reilly that I hope, once we finalise the report of our dietitian, to engage with organisations based on having her report and analysis of the potential. As I said, I am open to anything as long as it provides nutrition, but my personal preference is for local.

Social Welfare Schemes

8. **Deputy John Paul O'Shea** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of individuals currently in receipt of jobseeker's allowance and jobseeker's benefit in Cork and Limerick, with particular focus on Intreo areas such as Mallow, Newmarket, Macroom and Kilmallock; the most recent trends in these figures over the past 12 months; the supports and activation measures in place locally, such as training, employment services and community programmes, to promote sustained employment in these areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14225/26]

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I ask the Minister about the number of individuals currently receiving jobseeker's allowance and jobseeker's benefit in Cork and Limerick, with a particular focus on my area of Cork North-West, in Mallow, Macroom, Newmarket and Kilmallock, and, most importantly, the recent trends of these figures over the last 12 months. What are the supports and activation measures in place locally such as training, employment services, and community programmes to promote sustainable employment in the area? Will the Minister make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy O'Shea for his question. The total number of recipients of jobseeker's payments has remained generally steady over the last 12 months in both Cork and Limerick. In Cork, it varied between 11,700 and 13,700 over the year, while in Limerick, it varied between 5,200 and 6,000. At the end of January 2026, in Cork, there were approximately 12,100 recipients of jobseeker's payments. Figures were broadly the same in January 2025, with around 12,100 recipients. In Limerick, there were 5,800 recipients of jobseeker's payments in January 2026. In January 2025, there were 5,300 recipients of jobseeker's payments.

Regarding the specific areas the Deputy mentioned, the CSO publishes breakdowns of the live register by office each month. In January 2026, there were approximately 2,700 people on the live register in the Mallow, Newmarket, Macroom, and Kilmallock areas. This is comparable to 2025, when there were also 2,700 people on the live register. I will arrange for detailed tables of recipient and live register numbers to be sent to the Deputy.

The public employment service, Intreo's employer relations team, offers a wide range of locally based services to assist employers, including engaging directly to assist with recruitment activities, and by hosting local recruitment events that connect employers to jobseekers through a mix of in-person events and online webinars. During 2025, Intreo employer relations hosted 12 recruitment events and careers fairs in Charleville, Mallow, Millstreet and Fermoy, at which there were a wide range of supports on offer in further education, training, upskilling, work placements, programmes such as the work placement experience programme, community employment and Tús, to support people to obtain or retain employment.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I thank the Minister for those figures. They are partly along the lines that I thought there were, consistently around the 2,700 mark between all the areas. The challenge for us as a Government is to try to get those people back into the workforce and

working with the activation officers. It will be important to see if we can work on those. The challenge that I see and the trend is that many young people end up in unemployment now. I hate to see that. I would like to see them getting involved in work placement programmes, further education and training, employment services, or community employment programmes such as Tús. Community employment is very important indeed. I thank those who work in the Intreo offices, trying to engage with people on jobseeker's benefit and jobseeker's allowance to try to get them back into the workforce. It is important and we need to continue those good efforts.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy and join him in acknowledging the superb work being done by our Intreo teams across the country. We will have work and skills events around the country next week. I encourage every Deputy to help to promote those events and to attend the events to see how they work. We are more than happy to show them. We have already had a good discussion this morning about youth employment and the work we are doing with Intreo, and the tailored, individualised employment support that Intreo provides. As the Deputy knows, with the youth guarantee of the European Union, we are pledging to provide a good quality offer of employment, education or training to those under 30 within four months of them becoming unemployed. We are focused on delivering that. We are focused on identifying appropriate training opportunities for young people.

I thank the Deputy and Senator Anne Rabbitte for their engagement with me around redesigning community employment, Tús and the rural social scheme, RSS, to ensure that they offer opportunities to people. As I said earlier, we are currently finalising a new draft of pathways to work. That will look at all the labour market challenges we face, because our biggest enemy is complacency, and we must ensure that our labour market and supports are relevant to the conditions in the market today.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I thank the Minister for his continued engagement on this matter. We all need to tackle youth unemployment quickly. It is good to see that, after four months of being on jobseeker's payments, there are significant activation measures from Intreo offices to assist those young people to try to get back to work. I am sure all the Deputies in the House are contacted through their offices or social media about advertising jobs available in the local area. There are plenty of jobs, but we need to work with Intreo staff and employers in the area to make sure that we get as many people back into the work force as possible.

While the Minister is here, I want to mention the southern branch managers association executive being in contact with me about the Intreo offices run privately. I believe they have been in contact with the Minister's office about support for a pay agreement that he and his Department are working on. I encourage him to work with them to try to get that pay agreement over the line. Intreo offices are important to all of us, not just today but in the future too.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We will continue to work on activation. I am focused on targeted activation. It is important that we give people the opportunity to remain connected and qualified for the labour market.

It is something I am very focused on doing, and I thank our Intreo colleagues. In relation to the branch office managers, as the Deputy knows, we have 55 social welfare branch offices at

various locations, including 24 in the southern region, 11 in the northern region, 17 in the midlands and west region and three in the eastern region. We have received correspondence, and we are engaging with the branch manager representative groups in relation to a review of their remuneration arrangements. My officials are engaging around that. We will be engaging with the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and we will have further engagement with the Branch Managers Association in relation to those outcomes. Quite a number of Deputies have been in touch with me in recent days about this. We are very focused on it. I very much appreciate the fantastic work they do.

Social Welfare Payments

9. Deputy Séamus McGrath asked the Minister for Social Protection to increase the living alone allowance in recognition of the significantly lower income available to qualifying single householders relative to couples. [15159/26]

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I ask the Minister to increase the living alone allowance in recognition of the significantly lower income available to qualifying single income householders relative to couples. It is widely acknowledged that the household costs and cost-of-living challenges for people living alone are quite significant. When we compare a couple, for example, versus a single income household, there is quite a significant difference. The living alone allowance is designed to bridge that gap but, unfortunately, it does not go anywhere near enough. I ask the Minister to please consider this increase in the upcoming budget.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy McGrath for raising this issue. As he knows, the primary weekly social welfare payments are intended to enable recipients to meet basic day-to-day income needs. In addition to those primary payments, we also provide a range of other payments that are considered secondary in nature. The living alone allowance is one of those secondary payments. It is not a scheme or stand-alone payment but rather a supplement to certain primary social protection payments for those who are in receipt of those payments and who are living alone.

The current rate of living alone allowance is €22 per week. It has increased by over 144% since 2019, when it was just €9 per week. The majority of the recipients of the living alone allowance are those who are over 66 and who are getting a pension from our Department. The living alone allowance is also available to those who are under 66 who live alone and who are getting disability allowance, the invalidity pension, the incapacity supplement or the blind pension. The rate of primary and secondary payments to pensioners, and their adequacy, are considered in the context of the annual budgetary process.

In doing so, the Government considers evidence from a wide range of sources, including agencies such as the Central Statistics Office, CSO, and also research submitted by advocacy groups around this. The data shows the cost of living for a single person is more than the individualised cost of two people living together, as the Deputy said. For this reason, the living alone allowance is available to those in receipt of qualifying payments. Any future changes to the rate of payment for the living alone allowance would have to be considered in the overall budgetary context. We are not yet in budgetary season but, certainly, it is an area that many

Deputies, including Deputy McGrath, have raised with me. However, it will have to be looked at in the context of the overall budgetary envelope that is available to us in 2027.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I accept we are very early in terms of the budgetary cycle. I did raise this issue with the Minister last year. I appreciate he is under significant pressure in terms of what he can prioritise with the resources available to him. Again, however, I would strongly argue that this receives strong consideration and that is why I am flagging it at this early stage.

A couple who are both on the contributory pension have approximately €600 per week in basic payments or, indeed, a contributory pension plus qualified adult is up to €500. However, for someone on disability allowance living alone, his or her basic payment is €254. The household costs for that individual are very similar. Many household costs are unrelated to the number of people living there, for example, local property tax, house insurance and rent or mortgage payments. Indeed, many utility bills have flat rates, so they are not really dependent on usage to a great extent. The living alone allowance is designed to bridge that gap but I would strongly argue that it needs to increase. I welcome the increases over recent years to €22 but the gulf is far greater, and it really does need to be increased in the upcoming budget.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We are certainly conscious from our day-to-day experience with our own families, but also from our constituencies, that the cost and the cliff for those living alone, particularly those who have suffered bereavement or separation, is particularly tight. We are very conscious of that. That is why there has been such a big increase in it since 2019. I also want to ensure that people are aware there are other supports available that they may not be aware of in terms of the household benefits package and the fuel allowance, which we increased in budget 2026. A person who is in receipt of a pension and who qualifies for the living alone and fuel allowances also receives the telephone support, which is an extra €2.50 per week. We look again at the costs on a 2026 basis ahead of budget 2027. We have shown cause over the past number of years, and it will be looked at in the context of the budgetary allocation for 2027.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: As I outlined earlier, the difference between a couple, for example, on social welfare and an individual can be over €300 of a difference per week. That is very significant. When we look at the advocacy groups, such as Alone, which is advocating on behalf of older people, they indicate that over 100,000 people are potentially in poverty. The vast majority of those would be individuals living alone. Again, the living alone allowance is designed to help support those. I welcome it but, again, I am reiterating the point that it does need to be increased. On any objective analysis, €22 is not sufficient to make up that difference. As I said, many of the household costs are not related to the number of people in the property. As a constituency TD, similar to the Minister, many of the requests we get are from people living alone in terms of the difficulties they face in meeting daily costs and running a household. I appreciate the Minister's response. Again, I would urge him to strongly consider this at an early stage.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I will certainly take on board the Deputy's request. He is definitely in early but there were other Deputies even in ahead of him this morning for budget 2027 priorities.

I will point out in the context of budget 2026, however, that €12 billion has been allocated for pension payments. Many people who are living alone are predominantly pensioners. That €12 billion is an increase of just over €700 million from the 2025 Revised Estimates. The investment in pensions, as we discussed at committee yesterday, is nearly 42% of the Department's overall allocation. In terms of the choices we had to make, this year we went for a weekly increase in the overall pension rate and across all the weekly welfare payment rates. We increased the fuel allowance in the context of energy costs and the weekly rate of the fuel allowance. We also expanded the fuel allowance this year for the first time to working families. As I said, that kicks in from this week. We have made the changes. It is very focused on targeted areas. I hear the Deputy, however, and I hear him in the context of budget 2027. Perhaps he might have a good chat with our colleague, the Minister for public expenditure, in relation to that too.

Question No. 10 taken with Written Answers.

Social Welfare Payments

11. **Deputy Noel McCarthy** asked the Minister for Social Protection his Department's plans to introduce a cost-of-disability payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15527/26]

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I am talking this question on behalf on Deputy McCarthy. I remind the Minister that Deputy McGrath was always first in in the budget process in Cork County Council when he sat on it with me over the past number of years. It is good to see things have not changed since then. I want to ask the Minister, and it is a very timely question on behalf of Deputy McCarthy, about his plans to introduce a cost-of-disability payment and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. The Government recognises the significant additional costs that disabled people are facing in their daily lives. We are committed to improving outcomes for disabled people by reducing more permanent measures. The programme for Government includes a range of commitments to support disabled people, including a commitment to introducing a permanent annual cost-of-disability support payment. In addition, under the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030, which was developed with significant input from disability groups and advocates, it was agreed to establish a strategic focus network summit on the cost of disability. While this is led by my Department, it includes other Government Departments in what is a cross-government endeavour, as well as disabled people, their families, carers and advocates. I have asked my officials to prioritise this work. Subsequently, I launched a public consultation process on how a cost-of-disability payment can best be delivered. We launched it last Friday, and it will run until 7 April. As I said earlier to Deputy Hayes, I encourage maximum participation in this project across the House. I encourage any interested parties to visit gov.ie/cod, where they will find guidance on how to engage with the consultation in whatever format best suits them. We have already received some 80 submissions.

Following on from that consultation, on 13 May, I will chair a cost-of-disability strategic focus network summit. The summit will provide a space for key stakeholders, such as disabled

persons organisations and officials from across government, among others, to input into the design of a new cost-of-disability payment.

It will provide a space for key stakeholders to identify ways that Departments and Government agencies can make changes to lower the cost of disability in the future. This whole-of-government approach is important - as we discussed earlier with Deputies Roche and Hayes - particularly as we know that addressing these costs is not simply a matter of providing income supports; we must also improve the delivery of and access to key services. Other supports continue to be available from and provided by my Department.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: It is great that, as of today, more than 80 submissions have already been made. I join the Minister in encouraging people with disabilities, their families, carers, representative organisations and all interested stakeholders to take part in the newly launched public consultation process relating to the cost of disability.

The programme for Government includes a commitment to introduce a permanent-cost-of-disability support payment recognising the significant additional costs that many disabled people face in their daily lives. The consultation seeks views on how this new payment should be designed and delivered. The consultation provides a very important opportunity for disabled people and their families to shape a payment that is intended to directly address the real and ongoing additional costs associated with disabilities. These include costs relating to transport, healthcare, education, communication, assistive technologies and high household expenses. I encourage the Minister and all in this House to publicise this consultation as broadly as possible in order that we can get as many people as possible provide feedback.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I want the consultation to be as broad as possible. As I outlined to Deputy Hayes earlier, we met the disability consultative forum in my Department yesterday around the consultation. We are open to further suggestions as to how to make it more accessible and to make people engage with it more. There is a guidance document to provoke discussion. We are open to people's ideas in relation to this matter. We had some good feedback yesterday on what it should look like and on administration issues and assessment. We want to ensure that we have a proposal that is ready and that is shared as much as it can be. That is why we have the process. We will also have the consultative forum. As I stated yesterday, we will be inviting the Deputy, as Chair of the committee on social protection, and the Chair of the disability committee to the forum on 30 May. I will also be inviting spokespersons from the other parties to attend. It is important that what happens on that day will not constitute a box-ticking exercise. We are open to ideas on what form the day should take in order to make it an effective use of people's time.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I very much welcome that this consultation will inform the agenda of the strategic focus network summit on the cost of disability, which will take place in May and which the Minister will chair. I look forward to attending as Chair of the joint committee on social protection.

The Minister said that every support will be given in the interim to people with disabilities in terms of any immediate payments that are required. People with disabilities need to contact their local Intreo offices to make sure that any supports available through them would be made

available in that time. On my behalf and on that of Deputy Noel McCarthy, for whom I am taking this question, and as Chair of the joint committee on social protection, I strongly encourage everyone with lived experience as well as organisations working in the sector to get involved in this process. We all welcome that the cost-of-disability payment will be introduced in line with the programme for Government commitment in 2027.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We have spoken extensively about the process this morning. I hope people engage with it. The Deputy is right that there are additional supports available through the community welfare system.

Separately, I will be hosting a briefing next Wednesday in the audio visual room with community welfare officers to outline the supports available from our section. They will also be available in the coffee dock in Leinster House 2000 to meet Deputies who cannot make it to the audiovisual room. There has been a lot of feedback from Deputies on the community welfare system, its availability and what is involved. I would appreciate it if Deputies, Senators or members of their teams could engage with that process on the day so we can get that feedback on a structured basis. All of us will have feedback. We want to get as good a range of experience from around the country. With the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach's forbearance, I will put a plug in for this event. It is important in relation to this issue and also many others in my Department as well.

School Meals Programme

12. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Social Protection for an update on his efforts to analyse and improve the quality of food available through the hot school meals scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14764/26]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Sinn Féin and I strongly support the hot school meals programme. Anyone who has any doubts about it should speak to the principals of DEIS or DEIS plus schools. Incredibly compelling evidence was presented at a recent meeting of the education committee. The scheme is not perfect. One of the areas in respect of which there are concerns is food quality. What is the Minister doing to analyse and improve that?

Deputy Dara Calleary: We had a very extensive discussion on this earlier. I commend the education committee on the work it has done in respect of this matter. That work has been very considered and well thought out, and I look forward to the committee's report.

As the Deputy said, the objective is to provide regular, nutritious food to children to support them in taking full advantage of their education. The programme is an important component to encourage school attendance, extra educational achievement and participation in school.

Under the school meals programme, the primary relationship is between the school and supplier. My Department provides the funding for the meals directly to the school and it is the responsibility of each school board to administer the programme in their school, including handling the procurement process. I thank the school communities around the country that have made this happen in their schools. I recognise the extra pressure it puts on them. The

schools procurement unit under the Department of education provides guidance to schools for all procurements including the school meals programme.

Clear nutritional standards have been in place for the school meals programme since its inception. A specific standard was set for school meals under the nutritional standards for school meals and nutritional standards for hot school meals. A technical nutrition subgroup comprising dietitians from the following organisations was involved in developing these standards: the Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute of Ireland; the HSE; Safefood; and the Food Safety Authority of Ireland. These standards are publicly available on the *gov.ie* website.

As we previously discussed, school meal suppliers were instructed to remove food that is high in saturated fat, sugar, and salt from September 2025.

My Department has seconded a CORU-registered dietician for the school meals programme who is under the clinical supervision of the Department of Health. One of her first tasks was an in-depth review of school meal supplier menus and their compliance with the nutritional standards. That review is ongoing, and I hope to have a full report before the beginning of the summer.

I am very focused on the school meals programme, that it offers the best nutrition. I absolutely agree with the Deputy on its importance. I reiterate that for many children it may be their only hot meal of the day.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I agree 100% with the Minister's final point. I want to focus specifically on the issue of quality. The Minister stated that on the basis of the initial desktop analysis, 66% of meals met 60% of the standard. That is not good by any measure. If you were to give it a grade that is probably a C or below. It is of concern because there is a huge public spend on this. I have heard how the Minister will analyse this. How will he influence this and ensure quality? He stated that in the context of fatty and sugary content, he issued instructions and there was 80% compliance. How will he ensure that when we have this analysis, he actually influences what is happening on the ground?

Deputy Dara Calleary: By funding and appointing a dietician rather than listening to all sorts of opinions, we will obtain an informed opinion. The dietician's first job was to look at a paper-based exercise and look at the menus. They are now getting out to schools with colleagues from the Department of social protection. They are also developing an auditing tool to allow the process to be more efficient and will allow us to get the nutritional standards. With all that information I will engage. I am happy enough that we are on the right path but there can be unintended consequences. On high salt and sugar content, we have had substantial feedback from parents whose children will only eat that for a range of reasons.

10 o'clock

I want to try to get as much in as possible so that we do not add to the distress of children by making what we think might be good decisions but which add to it. I will come back later to the point raised by Deputy O'Reilly around portion size.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I appreciate all of that complexity. We heard at the Oireachtas committee that it is sometimes at the request of parents or the children, in that the food is of a different standard or there is a lack of variety.

Two other important points were raised with us at the education committee which are relevant to the Minister. He mentioned one of those earlier, which is in the area of school holidays. Specifically, a point made by principals, Eoghan O'Byrne and Conor McCarthy, when they came in to us was around the continuation, that is, of the hot school meal for the school term but not outside of that. There was a separate point regarding the administrative cost of the scheme. Schools, and particularly principals, are looking for support on that. Is that something the Minister will consider?

Deputy Eoin Hayes: Will the Department be publishing the standards and what schools, or what suppliers, have met the standards over time? This may not be in the short term but as it gets up to evaluating all the different schools and standards.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Regarding Deputy Hayes's question first, the standards are available. They are published on *gov.ie*. I want to get a full understanding of that when I get the full report. I am not into naming and shaming. We will absolutely publish the full report and I look forward to discussing it not just at the social protection committee but also at the education committee.

On Deputy O'Rourke's questions, the holiday meals school pilot this year was very important. We do that in partnership with the Department of education. I think something like 40,000 children have benefited from it and that was really important. It was particularly focused on what used to be known as the July provision and those who take part in that programme. I agree on that issue of the summer provision and that is something we will look at. As of now, we are focused on this programme. On where we came from in 2019, the then Minister, Regina Doherty MEP, followed by the then Minister, Heather Humphreys, drove it hard to get it into every primary school. We now have it open in most primary schools. There are some we are still working through. I want to bed it down and then start to fulfil the programme for Government commitment-----

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

Deputy Dara Calleary: -----around secondary schools as well. My focus now is to bed down those nutritional standards and ensure we have good compliance with those standards so a scheme as important as this is doing what it is designed to do in terms of nutrition and supporting education.

Social Welfare Benefits

13. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will review the carer's benefit for teachers who are not on full time hours; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15591/26]

Deputy Edward Timmins: The carer's benefit scheme allows people who are working to take time off to care for family members, often children. It is not means tested and it is based on PRSI contributions. It has a requirement that people must work a minimum of 16 hours per week in the period prior to their claim. This is patently unfair to teachers who work, say, 11 hours per week and are deemed not to qualify.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for this question. The Government acknowledges the very valuable role that family carers play and we are fully committed to supporting carers in that role. The commitment is recognised in the programme for Government and in budget changes for 2026 where the earnings limit for carer's benefit will increase from €625 to €1,000 after tax from July, there will be a €10 increase in the weekly rate of carer's benefit, and carer's benefit will be made available to the self-employed for the first time. As the Deputy said, carer's benefit is a payment made to ensure people who may be required to leave the workforce or reduce their working hours to care for a person in need of full-time care. It is payable for a period of up to two years for each care recipient and may be claimed in one go or over separate periods.

There were 4,616 people in receipt of carer's benefit at the end of January 2026. Expenditure on the carer's benefit scheme is estimated to exceed €76 million this year. To qualify for carer's benefit, a person must meet the PRSI and other conditions of the scheme and have been in full-time employment for at least eight weeks in the previous 26 weeks. Another qualifying condition is that the applicant provides full-time care and attention of no less than 35 hours per week to a person in need of such care. The carer is allowed to work or engage in education and training for up to 18.5 hours a week. The 18.5-hour limit for carer's benefit reflects a careful balance between ensuring the care recipient receives full-time care but also enables carers to maintain a connection to employment, training, education or to other interests. Any proposal to amend the 18.5-hour limit would need to preserve that balance and would have to be considered in the broader budgetary and policy context.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I thank the Minister for that. I am aware of all that information but I am focusing on something different. I refer to the qualification based on the number of hours carers work. Sixteen hours is the number. I will explain this briefly. There are two particular circumstances in relation to teachers and even if one were applied in the qualification process, then a teacher on fewer than 16 hours would qualify. At the moment, for a teacher who works 11.2 hours a week, this represents over half the number of hours of a full-time teacher who has 22 class-contact hours. This person works over half a full-time week. In any other full-time role, a person who works half-time will work between 17.5 and 20 hours and, therefore, will qualify for the carer's benefit. There is a distinction with teachers. They must work over 16 hours a week to qualify but that is well over half what a teacher does. I know of a case of a teacher who does 11.2 hours and they do not qualify but anyone else working half their normal week of 35 to 40 hours - that is, 17.5 to 20 hours - would qualify. I will give other reasons in my next contribution about extra hours teachers do that are not taken into account.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I am happy to engage with the Deputy around the specific instances. Subsequently, we can examine those in more detail. As I said, we have made substantial increases to the means assessment and that will continue from 1 July this year. We have also

increased the carer's benefit rate by €51 over the past five years. Previously, this was done by the then Minister, Heather Humphreys, and I have continued that. The changes in the income limits from €625, which started from July, will continue to increase in 2026.

On the specific issue of teachers' hours and what is regarded as a full working week, I am happy to engage in that to see if that can be resolved. I look forward to hearing more details in the Deputy's next supplementary.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I will expand a bit more in relation to teachers. Teachers do much more than 22 class-contact hours. They are required to do many more hours outside the 22 hours and this was outlined in the Croke Park agreement. It includes yard supervision duties and class supervision. There are many other requirements, including planning and setting exams, contact with parents on many issues and continuous professional development. The actual hours worked by someone doing 11.2 hours is actually more than the 16-hour requirement but this is not recognised in some cases while it is in others. I ask that teachers, who work over half the week, be considered to qualify. The 16 hours is the cliff edge but that is not fair on teachers because their week is different. There is the 22 class-contact hours but they do additional hours. If they do 11.2 hours, they are doing more than half. Any other employee in any other job would qualify straightaway. Teachers are a unique case and I ask the Minister to examine that.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Certainly, we will engage on that. There are also issues being brought to my attention around teachers who are job-sharing and that complicate the Deputy's scenario even more. Those who are working fewer than 18.5 hours may qualify for carer's allowance, which would be subject to the means test and to other eligibility requirements. If the Deputy wants to send me the details, we will engage with him around it. Any changes to the carer's benefit or to the qualifying conditions in terms of hours or means obviously has other knock-on issues, so I do not want to give the Deputy a commitment without fully analysing the details. We will drill down into those details and will work with the Deputy's office on that.

Social Welfare Payments

14. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Minister for Social Protection for an update on the programme for Government commitment to introduce pay-related parents benefit and explore other payments where a similar model could be applied. [15142/26]

Deputy Emer Currie: I am seeking an update on the commitment to introduce pay-related parent's benefit and potentially others. I am doing so because Government policies are not joined-up enough when it comes to new parents whose babies are in their first year of life. These parents can find themselves in a catch 22 situation where they either want to stay at home but cannot afford to do so or want to go back to work and cannot source childcare for babies under 12 months of age. The large majority of OECD countries are using earnings-related payments. We seem to be an outlier. We can do more to support parents of children who are in their first year from the point of view of both child development and family well-being.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The programme for Government contains a commitment to introduce pay-related parent's benefit and explore other payments where a similar model could be applied. Parent's benefit provides nine weeks paid leave to each parent during the first two years of a child's life or following adoption. This leave can be taken in blocks of a minimum of one week up to a maximum of nine weeks.

A pay-related model that moves away from flat rates of payment would provide a stronger financial cushion to new parents, as the Deputy has said, while reflecting the contributory and solidarity principles of the social insurance system. A pay-related model was introduced on 31 March 2025 for jobseeker's benefit. My Department will draw on the learnings and operational experience from that to inform options for parent's benefit and other family leave schemes. In that context, I intend to issue a public consultation document on a pay-related approach to parents' benefit this autumn. That will help to inform decisions about other family and related benefits. I will invite the views of the public, employers, members of the House and stakeholders to support the process and to assist in the development of future proposals in this area. I look forward to working with the Deputy in that consultation and subsequent follow-on.

Deputy Emer Currie: That is really encouraging, particularly as we in Ireland are above average when it comes to the length of time we can spend at home with our new babies on foot of maternity and parent's benefit. As stated, we are below average when it comes to the financial supports to do so. As the Minister indicated, pay-related jobseeker's benefit is working very well and is a model that could be applied in this instance.

I cannot emphasise enough how important the first year of a baby's life is for both the baby and the parents. As a mother, it changes you - your body, your brain formation and your identity. There is a term for it, "matrescence", and it does not get the attention it deserves. We are still behind the curve when it comes to family leave. In most countries, maternity benefit replaces at least half of a person's wages but that does not happen here.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Deputy has definitely outlined a very strong and fair case. That is why we have the programme for Government commitment and why I will be launching the consultation on this in autumn. We are certainly an outlier among EU member states in paying a flat rate for all family leave benefits. That needs to be looked at. However, we provide one of the most generous durations of maternity leave in terms of 26 paid weeks and 16 unpaid weeks. On the figures, the weekly rate has gone from €245 in 2019 to €299 in 2026. In 2023, there were 76,935 recipients of parent's benefit. In 2025, there were 93,671.

This is definitely something we will engage on in the context of the consultation. We have a lot of work to do. We absolutely know that. I want to learn from the first year of operation of jobseeker's pay-related benefit and apply some of the lessons in that regard in order to inform how we design the consultation process in such a way that it will be both good and engaging.

Deputy Emer Currie: I am really looking forward to engaging in the public consultation. The figures are important. According to the OECD, payments are lowest in Ireland and the UK, where less than one third of gross average earnings are replaced by maternity benefit. Countries such as Lithuania, Austria, France and Germany have benefits based on past

incomes. We have a high percentage of maternity leave employer top-ups. In 2021, the most recent year in respect of which I could obtain figures, about 70% of women received a top-up. However, that leaves one third of women relying on maternity benefit. I do not think it is a coincidence that one third of women are not availing of their nine weeks of parental leave.

We also have a major issue when it comes to fathers. About 55% of men are taking paternity leave and it drops to 25% when it comes to parental leave. Families are missing out. Ireland can do more here. If you look at countries such as Finland, they have extended leave coupled with lower rates so there is a trade-off. In Ireland, we get above average in terms of time but we are not getting the financial supports. It is really impacting parents with babies who are in their first year in the context of the choices they can make.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I am in full agreement with the Deputy. She has made a very strong case. That is why we will start that consultation and begin work on addressing all of the issues she correctly outlined. They all stand up, and we have an awful lot of work to do in this space. That is why we have that commitment to introduce pay-related benefit for parents, which would address many of the challenges the Deputy highlighted as well

Question Nos. 15 to 18, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

State Savings Schemes

19. **Deputy Eoin Hayes** asked the Minister for Social Protection to provide the total administration fees that have been paid by participants in the My Future Fund to date, or most recent data available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15581/26]

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I would like an update on the administration fees associated with the My Future Fund being paid by the participants. In particular, I would like a sense of any consideration that has been given to these fees not necessarily being flat fees and applying different rates to different cohorts, proportionate to their income.

Deputy Dara Calleary: As the Deputy knows, the programme for Government contains a commitment to introduce the automatic enrolment, AE, retirement savings system. The aim of AE was to address the pension coverage gap that exists in Ireland and to provide workers with greater comfort and security regarding their retirement income. The new system, known as My Future Fund, commenced on 1 January. The administration fee associated with My Future Fund was prescribed in regulations, following consultation with the CEO of the National Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings Authority, NAERSA, and the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation.

The administration fee takes the form of a flat weekly fee rather than a commission based on a percentage of funds under management. We did this because the administration fee reflects the actual costs of administration, which do not vary with fund size, and will be the same for all participants regardless of their income or the size of their retirement fund. The standard pension industry practice is to charge a percentage fee based on the assets under management; the cost of this obviously increases significantly as a person's pension savings

accumulate. In contrast, charging a flat fee will ultimately prove much better value for money for all the participants over the course of a standard retirement planning horizon.

A fee equivalent to 55 cent per week will be charged each time contributions are paid to a participant's fund, up to a maximum of €28.60 per year. If a participant is not making contributions - for example, if they have opted out, suspended contributions, have joined an occupational pension scheme or are not currently receiving their pay - that administration fee will not be charged. As of 19 February, a total of €2,221,231 had been collected in administration fees. These fees are intended to cover the costs of NAERSA on an ongoing basis.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I acknowledge the importance of the administration fee. I welcome the fact that a commission was not charged in terms of the fee. There are options when it comes to a flat fee versus a progressive fee. I made a few back-of-the-envelope calculations in respect of this matter, but do not hold me to them. If someone who is 60 years of age and who earns €20,000 per year is auto-enrolled in the scheme, they would spend about 6.36% of their contributions in administration fees over the course of their involvement in the My Future Fund. That is assuming that they are with it the entire time.

I also welcome the suspension of administration fees if people are not contributing. That is worthwhile and something that does not happen in the UK, for example.

By contrast, someone who is 25 years of age who is making €80,000 a year, and assuming that income stays the same, will spend 0.67% of their contribution on administration fees. There is a wide gap there, from a regressive perspective, on administration fees, depending on your income. If you are younger, you get better returns as you are in there for longer but if you are poorer, they will almost always be a higher proportion of your income.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Deputy's assessment is an interesting one. In terms of getting this up and running, in the early stages we tried to bring as much clarity and understanding as possible in regard to the fee area. The feedback I have got in the past year in dealing with this is that a lot of people find administration fees and investment fees around pensions very confusing. It is one of the things that, certainly in my personal experience, would dissuade you from engaging with the pension provision. Therefore, we wanted the administration fee to be flat and to be accessible and understandable. Equally, we were able then to bring the prospect of the 700,000 plus workers, which we now know is 760,000, to bear in getting investment management fees, which were well under those applicable to an occupational pension scheme or to personal retirement savings accounts, PRSAs.

On the age side, administration fees are higher in a lot of PRSAs than they are in My Future Fund. I am not totally aware of - and I am happy for the Deputy to send me information if he wishes - the progression of fees.

Ultimately, all operational issues from My Future Fund are now going to be dealt with by National Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings Authority, NAERSA. NAERSA has taken over operational responsibility, as we have launched. I want to make sure this is the best value possible and as accessible as possible so I am happy if the Deputy wants to share information with me on that.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I join the Minister in that. I want to make sure auto-enrolment is as successful as possible. I am confident the investment side, in terms of the investment fees, has been very well handled. In terms of the value for money, the Minister has got a very good rate for people.

On administration fees, and I will send this information to the Minister, it strikes me that people who are on the lower incomes - for example, somebody who is on €20,000 for the rest of their life - will spend approximately 3.24% of their contributions on administration fees. By contrast, someone on €80,000 for the duration of the scheme will spend less than 1% on administration fees. There is a question there. If you are on a lower income, a flat rate will be a higher proportion and that may rob people of that financial security into the future. Will the Minister, or NAERSA, consider changing that administration fee in the future to make it more progressive, so that people who are on lower incomes are spending a less of a proportion of their income on the administration of the fund and that it is similarly progressive for people on higher incomes?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Certainly, I am happy to look at the Deputy's information. A realistic assessment of administration fees would have to be done over the lifetime of their participation in My Future Fund. Incomes will, hopefully, change and that incomes will increase over the lifetime of their fund. One of the great advantages of My Future Fund is that it is portable and that people can bring it with them to their next employment, as they change employment. Particularly in this labour market, we are all going to be working in many different jobs. People can bring My Future Fund with them and, as incomes change and employment terms and conditions change, that fee will still remain the same. The best way of looking at the impact of the administration fee is not on a particular time of your income but over the lifetime of your personal My Future Fund growing.

Certainly, I am happy to look at the information the Deputy has prepared. We will provide it to NAERSA. I stress NAERSA is independent in its operation and in its care of My Future Fund.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Deputy Whitmore's Question No. 93 is being taken by the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer. With the permission of the House, I will allow Deputy Whitmore to go first. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Road Traffic Accidents

93. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Transport if he intends to set a road deaths reduction target for phase 2 of Vision Zero; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16152/26]

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: We have seen an incredible loss of life on our roads over the past few days, never mind over the past year. Can the Minister of State let me know if he

intends to set a road death reduction target for phase 2 of Vision Zero and will he make a statement on the matter?

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): We have seen an incredible loss of life this week and in the past number of years on our roads and our thoughts this morning are with the people who have died and were injured and the families. Everything we say is couched in that tragedy and loss of life, and I thank Deputy Whitmore for her very important question.

The Government has, as the Deputy will be aware, prioritised phase 2 of Vision Zero. The Government's current road safety strategy has the target of halving deaths and serious injuries on our roads this decade, or no more than 72 deaths by 2030. Achieving this reduction based on an annual straight-line projection, the phase 1 action plan published in 2021 noted that deaths in 2024 would have had to be no higher than 122. Regrettably, we saw 171 road deaths in 2024.

Any death on our roads is one too many and behind that death is a family, a loved one, a friend and a community where lives are being irreparably damaged by the loss of a loved one. Obviously, we are all working collectively and collaboratively to ensure that our roads are safer. Think of the people who have life-altering injuries from a road traffic collision. For these reasons, the only acceptable long-term target for road deaths and injuries is Vision Zero, and the Government remains committed to this goal.

Achieving our 2030 target will require even greater efforts and a steeper rate of decline during phases 2 and 3. It is imperative that we address the upward trend of recent years in the first instance and, in that context, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and I do not believe it would be helpful to set a specific target for next year when we already have a clear objective for 2030.

A range of important work is already under way across a variety of bodies and stakeholders to restore our long-term road safety progress, and we made huge progress on our annual road deaths, which saw a significant fall.

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

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I am conscious that today there are families bereaved and people injured. Everything we do, from a Department point of view, we will do to ensure that our roads are safer.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: It seems that every day, or every second day, when we wake up there is the most tragic news that another person has lost their life on our roads. Each of those lives lost is avoidable. I would imagine the worst thing possible for any family is to get that call or that knock on the door to let them know their loved one has lost their life.

It feels that it is getting worse and worse. It seems that we are hearing of more people, and more young people. We had, unfortunately, another two young lives lost in Donegal, and my condolences to their families.

Already this year, 25 people lost their lives on our roads. Six of them were teenagers. We need to hear from the Minister of State what he is going to do to address that loss of life. This is within the Minister of State's remit. He has set a plan to have zero deaths on our roads. We are so far away from that.

Will the Minister of State please tell us what he is going to do?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, who is responsible for road safety, sends his apologies that he cannot be here today. He has engaged, as have I and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, on a variety of areas.

The RSA has initiated a number of significant national public awareness campaigns on speed, drug driving, road safety for e-scooter users and motorcyclists, and road behaviour. I share the Deputy's concerns, but if I can make a generic point, we must look at this in the round and have an honest conversation about driver behaviour. Roads are now shared spaces and are not the preserve of one entity or group. They belong to all of us and we all have an obligation and responsibility.

I am not in any way casting dispersions on anybody. We all know people who have been injured or killed on our roads. We must look at enforcement and behaviour and, in particular, we must reflect upon speed, the use of drugs and the use of mobile phones. I will happily work with the Deputy, as will the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, on achieving a better outcome for us all. We all use the road and see the behaviour. The Department is putting pressure on the RSA to work and engage in campaigns.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: There is no panacea to this. There are many issues involved, and the Minister is right that driver behaviour is one of them. However, the reality is that, as we have seen, some driver behaviour is very poor and unless there is enforcement and a fear of being caught for this behaviour on the road, it will continue. While there a lot of actions are needed, the absolute priority here is enforcement and the Minister of State barely mentioned enforcement in his response.

We need to ensure we have sufficient Garda numbers in the roads policing unit. In recent years, we have seen a 40% reduction in the roads policing unit. What conversations has the Minister of State had with the Minister for justice, Deputy O'Callaghan, on dealing with that issue? That is the crux of the matter. Until we get enforcement right, we will continue to see increases in the number of tragic deaths on our roads.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Enforcement is very important. However, we cannot have a garda on every street corner and junction, as the Deputy will accept. We are using technology and speed vans and increasing the use of average speed zones. The Department has invested in the safe routes to school programme and we have seen an increase in the number of gardaí on the roads engaged in enforcement. Just yesterday morning, when I was driving in here at 7.45 a.m., I saw a Garda Síochána checkpoint on Mount Street, which is very welcome. I take the Deputy's point and I will happily work with her on this.

The Department, working with the RSA and An Garda Síochána, will do whatever we can, but there comes a point when we have to talk to ourselves about personal responsibility. Look

at the figures on the increase in drink driving and drug driving. I do not understand, in 2026, how any person can sit behind the wheel of a car, lorry or motorbike, having consumed excessive amounts of alcohol and drugs. I am not sure if the Deputy saw the RTÉ documentary two weeks ago, on which a very brave family bereaved as a result of a road traffic accident in County Waterford spoke. Their young son died in the accident. It was powerful and I commend the families on taking part. With that comes responsibility, and we will do what we can.

I take the Deputy's point on enforcement, and we must embrace modern technology too. Will we see an avalanche of complaints from certain people because we are using new technology? I do not know but I hope we will not.

I will work with the Deputy, and I thank her for raising this important matter. We both agree that there are families in mourning. They are front and centre in our minds.

Bus Services

90. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport the position regarding the bus stop enhancement programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15421/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: The bus stop enhancement programme, which is led by the NTA, is a nationwide programme that invests in bus infrastructure. It commits about €500,000 per year, which is not enough. There are problems with delivery, it is all very cumbersome and it takes a lot of time. I will get into some of the details shortly. Will the Minister give us an update on the programme?

Minister for Transport (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an gceist. Tá brón orm go raibh mé déanach. Shíl mé go raibh na ceisteanna ag tosú ag 10.30 a.m.

I welcome the Deputy's question on the bus stop enhancement programme. It is a relatively new programme. Choosing sustainable transport is not just a matter of where a bus or rail line goes on a map; it is about creating an interconnected network. For that, people need places to stop, start and make a change in their transport journey that is safe, comfortable and accessible.

The NTA undertakes upgrades to bus stops and shelters across a number of schemes, including BusConnects, which is not included in the figures I will give the Deputy, Connecting Ireland, the active travel investment programme and, as the Deputy mentioned, the bus stop enhancement programme. That programme is a multi-annual initiative, which only commenced in 2024 and will run to 2029. Through the programme, funded by my Department, €500,000 is provided per local authority, not nationally, to enhance bus stop facilities at locations within the local authority administrative areas. Along with such funding, the NTA provides local authorities with bus shelters through its contractor, while also making the contractor available for the installation and subsequent maintenance of the bus shelters. Local authorities are required to undertake preparatory work ahead of the installation of shelters.

It is intended to streamline the delivery. As the numbers show, the programme is ramping up. It is important that, for the first time, local authorities, through the NTA, have identified all the existing stops. We ask the local authorities to submit their plans. This covers not just

the bus stops or shelters, as the Deputy knows, but also hard-core surfaces or the extension of footpaths to make them safer.

The Deputy's question is valid. There is significant funding going into this programme and I want to see that ramped up. There is a very good pipeline. I will add more in my supplementary reply.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Minister for his reply and I accept what he said. However, it is important there is a stop in the first place, and stops must also be safe and accessible. An audit was prepared by many local authorities, including my own local authority, in 2024. The difficulty on the ground is that, two years on, the bus stops have not been delivered. An audit is prepared by the local authority, the stop is designed and approved by the municipal district, and the NTA is also involved. However, many of the bus stops have costs, whether it is €25,000 for a simple pole or, where there is more preparatory work involved, up to €75,000 when there is a shelter.

We have a problem in Ballybunion where there are no bus stops. In Lixnaw, there are none either. Tourists on the Dingle Way are looking for a bus stop and there are none. It all seems to be *ad hoc* and this is causing a lot of frustration. We have had an awful lot of wet winters in recent years, and that is going to continue. There are students going to college, people going to work and tourists who do not know where there is a bus stop and if it going to be safe. They need to have bus stops. There is huge frustration on the ground that there is no delivery. If it costs up to €75,000 when preparatory work is done, €500,000 is not really going to deliver a lot of bus stops.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is €500,000 per local authority. I have projected and we reckon the drawdown next year will be about €15.5 million, because we can see the pipeline that is coming through.

In fairness, the Deputy has recognised this is a new programme. So far, under the bus stop enhancement programme, 100 bus stop locations and installations were done in 2025. There were ten new bus shelters, which is not a lot, throughout the State. There was an issue with the provider - I checked this out - because there is a new supplier of bus shelters. A significant number that have been ordered are in transit right now.

I do not want to talk only about the enhancement programme. In 2025, BusConnects Dublin had 750 new stops installed. Portlaoise town services had 73 stops. In the Deputy's area of Cork and Kerry, the Clonmel contract - separate from BusConnects Cork - had 192 stops.

Route 109 had 30 stops. Bus Éireann business-as-usual upgrades, which are to existing stops, numbered 343.

Deputy Pa Daly: Is there something the Minister can do to speed up the process? For example, a section 38 planning notice has to be given. Can that be sped up in some way? We are playing catch-up because the infrastructure just is not there. It has not been provided for many years. What we need is a large amount of money to get these things over the line.

I understand the NTA criteria are based on the number of services that use the bus stop as opposed to the number of people who use it. For someone standing on the Tralee to Listowel

Road or standing in the rain in Ballybunion, the delivery just is not there. For people standing in west Kerry, one of the wettest parts of the country, a structure has not been provided. There are poorly marked stops on some rural roads. While there are primary and secondary criteria and priority, it is the people who are standing at bus stops on their own, in the dark, in the winter and in the rain who are feeling it most.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy's question is valid and the points he made are valid. In fairness, he acknowledged that it is a new scheme. I have given the Deputy details of some of the works that are ongoing. Work on another scheme in Mullingar commenced this week. It will include a further 60 bus stops, the majority of which were completed in 2025, but the remainder will be done there now.

I agree with the Deputy's point with regard to the planning aspects, which can be cumbersome. I met the NTA about this yesterday in the Department. I am looking at how we can accelerate it. One of the issues has been the change in supplier. That has happened and a new supplier is in place for bus shelters. I was informed yesterday there are some 200 bus shelters have been produced and are on their way here. It is not an exact figure but they give the Deputy an indication. Those shelters will be installed and we will see a big ramping up. I am more than happy to look at the planning aspects of the issue. I have seen in my area of Fingal that it can be cumbersome.

To be fair to the NTA, this is the first time we have had a particular focus on this area. On working with the local authorities, the Deputy cited three specific areas in his county. It is up to the local authorities as well to make sure they continue to interact with the NTA to prioritise bus stops. We are working with the local authorities on this.

Bus Services

91. **Deputy Ciarán Ahern** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to issues affecting commuters using the new F1 bus route in Dublin South-West; if it is acceptable in his view that workers using the bus to travel to Dublin city centre in the morning have had an additional 20 to 30 minutes added to their commute; the reason the peak-time, high-frequency timetable only applies to the northern part of the route; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16147/26]

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: Is the Minister aware of the issues affecting commuters using the new F1 bus route in Dublin South-West? Does he believe it is acceptable that workers who were using the bus to travel into the city centre every morning have had an additional 20 to 30 minutes added to their commute as a result of the changes to this bus route? What is the reason the peak-time, high-frequency timetable only applies to the northern part of the route? I ask the Minister to make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I assure Deputy Ahern that the Department of Transport, the NTA and the public transport operators are working very closely to ensure optimised deployment of resources across the network to best meet passenger demand and reduce their journey times, where possible.

The F1 route the Deputy refers to was introduced just last October. We have seen some issues with some routes, such as the Chapelizod route, and those issues need to be addressed. I would prefer if there were no issues at the start of the deployment of a route. That formed part of the BusConnects F-spine, which is the route the Deputy refers to. It operates every 15 minutes for most of the day between Tallaght and Ballymun, with additional peak-time journeys on the northern section to meet higher demand. That is the response I have. The reason is that there is a higher demand on that part of the route.

Together, routes F1 and F3 provide a combined high-frequency service of around five minutes between Kimmage and the city centre, before continuing towards Glasnevin and other northside locations. Beyond Kimmage, the routes diverge to maintain good bus network coverage across the surrounding areas south of Kimmage. To be fair to the Deputy, I acknowledge that the recent network changes have had varying impacts on journey times for passengers and customers. I have said this to the NTA directly. When rolling out phases of the BusConnects network the NTA has committed to monitoring those new services, identifying issues and implementing fixes when and if they are needed. While some increases in journey times are expected as part of the balancing involved and the redesign of the network, both my Department and the NTA acknowledge that certain journey times on this route should be improved. That is being monitored right now. The Deputy's input is valued in that because it is the lived experience of constituents in the Deputy's area who are using this route. That will feed in and it is being reviewed and monitored. The F-spine is a good thing. There is really good frequency there but we need to make sure the focus is on reliability.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I have been very straight about my support for the BusConnects projects and the objective of the programme, which is to improve bus journey times, frequency, punctuality and reliability. That is off the bat. It is great obviously. The routes had to change because they have barely changed in the entire history of the city. When implementing any change to routes there will always be issues like this. Unfortunately, commuters coming from Tallaght, Knocklyon and Firhouse have not seen an improvement. The 49 bus route was a little more direct but the new service is bringing them down roads that do not have dedicated bus lanes and are clogged with traffic in the morning. We have seen issues with routes in some other parts of the city. We advocate that an additional route be implemented or that the 49 service be implemented alongside the F1 route, even during peak hours. People in Dublin South-West have not benefited from the increased frequency that people in other areas have.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I do not disagree. The frequency is there and is improving but the Deputy is right that the journey times on some of the services are longer because the route is more interconnected to take in more people. Having said that, we are working with Dublin City Council and other stakeholders to deliver additional bus priority measures within the city. A lot of it as we get into the city. On 18 March, the Ministers of State, Deputies Buttimer and Canney, and I will meet stakeholders to discuss congestion and see if there are more immediate short-term measures we can take. Some of that will be bus priority measures and some of it will be bus gates and those types of measures.

In the medium term, passengers on the F1 route will also benefit from faster journey times due to the delivery of the planned core bus corridor between Kimmage and the city centre. That project received planning permission in May last year and it will be critical. We have

started the first two quality bus corridors, namely, Liffey Valley to the city centre and Ballymun-Finglas to the city centre. Both of those contracts have been signed and the first one is under construction. That will be transformational. The quality bus corridor for the Deputy's constituents on the F1 route will make a big difference too. We are looking at interim measures.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: That is exactly the point. It is about the interim measures. The roll-out of this programme is piecemeal, and I can understand why, but until we have all the infrastructure in place and all the routes perfectly link up, as per the overall plan, we are going to have issues like this. I ask again that the Minister talk to the NTA and suggest that it review this and maybe implement the 49 route again to run alongside the F1 route in the interim, while this is going on. We need measures like bus gates, priority traffic lights and all that kind of stuff. These are the technological measures we can take to give buses priority. In the meantime, however, an additional route to replicate the 49 route would be very helpful.

The route change has left parts of the community isolated, where once there was a service. Older people in particular are having to walk 15 or 20 minutes to get to a bus stop, where they used to have one pretty close to them. There have also been issues with the reliability of buses. Because this is a cross-town route, people are getting caught in traffic coming from the northside and going to the southside. Some constituents have had to pay nearly €200 in taxis because buses are not showing up and have become increasingly unreliable, which is another problem. I ask again that the Minister talk to the NTA about it.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We will. When questions like this are tabled and they fall within the remit of the NTA, I meet the NTA. It is useful that these matters are raised when we meet. To be fair, the F1, F2 and F3 routes were only rolled out in October last year. I appreciate people's patience with this. I am committed to looking at what interim measures we can take. The frequency on the F1 route is every 15 minutes at most times between Tallaght and Ballymun, and the F2 and F3 routes give a joint service around every five minutes. That is a big improvement. We always need to improve things and look at the experience on the ground.

What leads me to be confident about this is that people are responding. Last year, 363.5 million public transport passenger journeys were made, which was a record number. The Government will continue to invest in this area. We have to improve reliability and journey times, which will not be easy in all cases, particularly with regard to journey times in the city. I will have a meeting with stakeholders on 18 March, specifically looking at congestion within the city core and on the M50.

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Electric Vehicles

92. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Transport the position regarding electric vehicles; the measures he is taking to make them more accessible to rural and lower income drivers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15422/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: I want to ask the Minister about electric vehicles and the measures he is taking to make them more accessible for drivers in rural areas and those on lower incomes. Will he make a statement about it?

Research has shown that successful applications for grants are clustered in affluent urban areas in Dublin and in parts of Cork. We think this is inequitable and regressive and the Climate Change Advisory Council agrees with us. What efforts is the Minister making to extend the grants to families and workers who are not as affluent?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We are fully committed to supporting the transition to zero-emission vehicles. We regularly review the EV incentives and grants to ensure they are delivering value for money and supporting the delivery of the ambitious targets we set. Last year, the target was 195,000 EVs on our roads by the end of 2025. We actually exceeded that. The final figure was 212,500 EVs. The supports are certainly assisting.

Over €120 million has been allocated this year to support the continued transition to EVs, which includes grants for the EVs themselves and EV charging. The road tax for EVs is also lower. Changes have been made on the benefit-in-kind side as well to further incentivise EVs. The purchase costs of EVs have come down significantly in recent years.

Rural motorists are often in the most advantageous position to make the switch to an electric vehicle, due to the large number of dwellings in rural Ireland that are suitable for home EV charging, which we also support. Home charging means lower running costs and many EVs are now capable of doing over 400 km on a single charge, which will meet most people's daily driving needs.

Having an effective and reliable charging network is an essential part of enabling drivers to make the switch to EVs, which they are doing. The public charging network has grown in recent years, and the continued expansion and modernisation of the EV charging network will ensure drivers can use EVs with confidence. We published the national EV charging strategy. I got approval for that on Tuesday this week at Cabinet.

TII is leading on the delivery of that infrastructure along motorways and national primary and secondary routes. I have launched grant aid programmes for the delivery of significant high-powered charging infrastructure on these roads over the next year to provide all EV drivers with reliable access to charging points across the country.

Deputy Pa Daly: The Minister said rural motorists are in a more advantageous position, but there are a couple of issues in relation to that. He also said that he exceeded his target, with the purchase of 212,000 EVs. However, he had moved the goalposts because a few years ago he said it was the ambition of the Government to have 845,000 EVs, and he reduced the target, so that is how he actually hit it. He said he is committed to having 30% of the private car fleet switch to battery by 2030, but that is hardly going to happen at this stage.

The Minister also mentioned the advantages for rural dwellers, but the stats do not match that. In 2024, registrations in rural Ireland collapsed. In Cavan, they were down by 48%, they were down 45% in Sligo and down in Leitrim by 44%. There is a problem with the lack of public chargers. The Minister mentioned it, but it is not actually the case. Ireland has 2,500 public chargers, whereas Denmark has 18,000 and that is a country that is smaller than ours.

The Minister is not scaling up to deliver as many, so we are never going to incentivise and encourage more rural dwellers to use EVs with a charging system like that.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I am not 100% sure what figures Deputy Daly has there and I do not want to just dispute them for the sake of it. I can go back to 2024, but they are not the numbers I have. What is very interesting is that in the first month of this year we are looking at really significant increases in EV registration. If I take the Deputy's own county of Kerry, in January 2025, there were 86 EV registrations. In January of this year there were 142. That is a 65% increase. If I take Galway, in January 2025 there were 164 EV registrations. This January, there were 247, which is a 50% increase. The growth in EVs is based on actual registration of EVs, which is much more significant now in the regions and in rural areas than it is in cities. I will give the Deputy an example. In Dublin, there were 2,277 registrations in January 2025. This January, there were 2,720, which was a good increase, just short of 20%. In Kerry the increase was 65%, in Kildare the increase was 45%, in Kilkenny it was 80%, in Laois it was 60%, in Leitrim it was 70%, in Limerick it was 60% and it was 100% in Longford. I am just giving Deputy Daly the real figures.

Deputy Pa Daly: The Minister is using an increase in the number, for example, in my own county off a low base. In 2021, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael announced a target, which has hardly been enhanced by the Healy-Rae support since the last election, of 1 million electric vehicles on the road by 2030. That obviously has not happened. Even though some electric vehicles have come down in price, they are neither affordable nor accessible for many ordinary people, especially in rural areas where more electric vehicles would have a bigger impact on emissions because research has shown that if used in rural Ireland they would have a bigger climate impact because they remove 35% more emissions compared to their urban counterparts. Seven out of ten grants that are awarded are for cars costing €40,000 or more and one third are for cars costing over €55,000. That is not fair or equitable and it is concentrated in wealthier areas such as Dublin.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We want to make sure that the grants are deployed in an equitable manner, in particular for low and middle income families. I alluded to that at the committee yesterday. Deputy Daly will see where we have made changes on other SEAI grants, such as for home retrofit. My whole focus was on low and middle income families and to break the grants up. We keep these grants under review. They are a good incentive for people. The figures do not bear out what Deputy Daly is saying, notwithstanding the fact that we will always keep schemes under review to try to incentivise more people to use them. I could go through every county in Ireland. There are really significant increases in EV registrations from last January to this one. I am not going to bore him with the details, but I will supply him with them. Mayo is up by 67%. Monaghan is up by 65%. Roscommon is up by nearly 200%. I am not making it up.

Deputy Pa Daly: That is because they dipped in the previous year.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: This is 2025 to 2026. There are 212,500 EVs on our roads. It is going in the right direction, and the target was exceeded. As I said in the committee yesterday, I always keep these under review. We look at what we have done on the residential side. The

impact that has had already is really good. We will keep this under review, but this is absolutely going in the right direction right now.

Road Safety

94. **Deputy Joe Cooney** asked the Minister for Transport to consider extending the mandate for reflective road studs, commonly known as cat's eyes, to regional routes, particularly in rural areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15769/26]

Deputy Joe Cooney: We are all too aware of the terrible loss of life on our roads in recent weeks and years. Unfortunately, the number of road deaths continues to rise. This should concern us all. Most road traffic collisions in Ireland take place on unlit local and regional roads. At present, it is compulsory to install cat's eyes on national primary and secondary routes. However, this requirement does not extend to local and regional roads. Will the Minister consider extending the mandate to regional and local roads, especially in rural counties?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank Deputy Cooney for raising the matter with me this morning. It is a very important question. Like the Deputy, and Deputy Whitmore who asked a question earlier, we are very much concerned with the loss of life on our roads. Everything we do is about reducing fatalities and accidents on roads.

As the Deputy is aware, the improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of each local authority, in accordance with the provisions of section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on these roads are funded from the councils' own resources and supplemented by State road grants. Of these grants, the vast majority are targeted at the maintenance and renewal of the network with approximately 10% of the remaining funding invested in new roads and bridges or for road realignments.

Each local authority is the roads authority within its own administrative area. The selection of roads for the installation of road studs or cat's eyes, as we know them, is a matter for the technical staff within the local authority. They will take road condition, road width, suitability for road studs or road hazard markers into account. The criteria for road studs or cat's eyes are contained in the traffic signs manual published by the Department of Transport two years ago.

11 o'clock

Section 7.10.1 outlines how road studs should comply with European standards and should be of a type approved for use by the Department of Transport. Section 7.10.2 deals with urban speed limit zones, which are being reviewed. I agree with Deputy Cooney that for unlit roads cat's eyes and studs play a role. In my own area of Cork, I cannot understand why TII took away the overhead lights on the N40, making the road dark now. I agree with the Deputy that the more lighting we have, the better it is for motorists and road users. It is a question that we might need to reflect upon on further, in particular in rural areas as the Deputy mentioned. I thank him for raising the matter in particular on our narrow country roads. I will talk to him further on it.

Deputy Joe Cooney: I thank the Minister of State for the reply. Travelling on local roads throughout the country and in my county of Clare is challenging at the best of times. It becomes ever more difficult in the depths of winter. Many local and regional roads have inadequate markings where lane markings, arrows and stop lines are not clear. Most have no indications of the edge of the carriageways and very few are fitted with reflective road studs or cat's eyes. It is difficult to understand why proper markings and cat's eyes on regional roads and well-travelled local roads are treated as discretionary rather than compulsory. At a minimum, these safety measures should be mandatory in locations where visibility is poor, such as at bends, junctions and areas prone to fog in the interests of road safety. While policing plays an important role in reducing road fatalities, that is a separate issue. What we are discussing here is basic road safety infrastructure that should already be in place. I call on the Minister of State and the Department to provide the necessary funding to local authorities and to update the guidance on road maintenance so that these essential safety measures are implemented properly and consistently.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I again thank Deputy Cooney again for raising this very important matter. As he knows, last week the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, announced a road funding programme to the tune of €780 million for regional and local roads across the State. While there is no dedicated programme for local authorities regarding the use and implementation of road studs, each local authority has a discretionary grant in its annual allocation. The total for this year is €86.2 million. Councils have that discretionary spend which can be used in improvement and maintenance works. As Minister of State at the Department of Transport, I would encourage all local authorities to inspect their road studs on a regular basis to identify some of the issues the Deputy highlighted. He mentioned west Clare and Clare. There is deterioration and there are areas that need to be enhanced and improved. The local authority has a role in that. From a departmental point of view, we keep everything under review. Road safety and the enhancement of our roads are priorities for us. In the roads programme we have allocated resources in that area. I would be happy to talk to the Deputy further on that.

Deputy Joe Cooney: Seven in every ten fatal collisions take place on rural roads with a speed limit of 80 km/h or higher. These are the very roads I have highlighted here today. Half of all fatalities occur between 8 p.m. and 7 a.m. when visibility is at its worst. I recognise that road maintenance is expensive but we have a responsibility as a country to do everything possible to reverse the rise in road deaths. Simple low-cost measures can make a real difference and the evidence is out there to be seen. I urge the Minister of State and his Department to upgrade the requirements and make road markings and cat's eyes compulsory on all regional roads and on busier local roads. These basic safety features should not be optional. They save lives and should be in place everywhere they are needed.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I concur with the overarching thrust of what Deputy Cooney said. Our current road safety strategy is very much about what he said - reducing speed and improving road conditions. I reiterate the point that local authorities have that discretionary spend and have the option to spend on what the Deputy has said. The points he makes about road studs and cat's eyes are very valid. Local authorities should utilise the carrying out of maintenance renewal works in terms of pavement improvement schemes and road studs where applicable as part of the roads programme. There is a fund available for them to use. It is built

into their budget for roads. Senator Noel O'Donovan has proposed that we look at our verges and drains, and the Deputy has made the point here today. These are issues that we can look at and perhaps incorporate more into our road safety strategy. What he is talking about is low cost in the main and it makes sense. He is right that early in the morning and late at night the visibility is poor. It is something we need to look at and I would be happy to talk to him further about it.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Public Transport

95. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Minister for Transport to report on the issue of cancelled buses on the Dublin Bus and Go Ahead networks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15474/26]

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: How seriously does the Department take the issue of ghost buses or cancelled buses? In the first six months of last year there were 6,000 complaints to the NTA in Dublin about this. Those are just people who get the strength to make complaints. This is causing real problems in my area, particularly with the 238 which is an absolutely infamous ghost bus. The people of Tyrrelstown are losing their jobs and losing their livelihoods. They are ending up late for work and late for school. It is having a huge impact on people's lives. What are the repercussions from the Department for the operators?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I assure Deputy Coppinger that I do take it very seriously. It is a real frustration and inconvenience for passengers who are affected by ghost buses or services that do not show up. There have been particular recent bus cancellations on the Dublin Bus and Go Ahead Ireland networks. We need to acknowledge that last year there were 363.5 million public passenger journeys across the State, which is up 6% on the previous year, the highest amount ever, so people are responding. However, it behoves the operators to ensure that the services as listed turn up.

Issues happen from time to time and they arise for a range of reasons, including driver and mechanic shortages which has been an issue on the route the Deputy referred to, particularly with the services operated by Go Ahead. In my supplementary reply I will come back with more detail on what is happening there.

The most significant factor in recent months has been traffic congestion. For example, Dublin Bus is currently delivering 98% of contracted kilometres set by the NTA. However, punctuality is being affected by rising traffic volumes in the city in particular. Buses delayed going out and coming back in are having an effect. I have convened a meeting on 18 March with stakeholders specifically to discuss congestion in the city core but also around the M50.

Some things need to be planned better within our transport operators, particularly relating to resources, something Go Ahead has acknowledged. I have been in touch with the operators directly on many occasions, particularly on the issue of being able to trust the data on the app. If the app is showing the bus is coming but then it just disappears, people cannot make alternative arrangements. A big issue with Go Ahead has been with mechanics. It has

employed ten more but they were delayed in getting here. They have been trained and are now working, so we should see an improvement there.

While Dublin Bus is generally performing very well, one of its issues is with driver numbers. It is recruiting a further 100 drivers from South Africa right now and they are coming in. There are still good jobs for people in Dublin Bus. We have work to do there and I am continuing to do it. The Deputy should trust me - I take this very seriously. It is a serious issue. I will come back in with some more details in a minute.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Congestion, drivers, mechanics, breakdowns and all sorts of reasons are given. Is it not some reflection that we cannot get workers to work in these services? As the Minister knows, one of the issues with Go Ahead is that it has reduced conditions compared with Dublin Bus. Drivers were eating their lunch on the side of the road at one point.

However, I want to talk about the 238. It is absolutely unacceptable that between 4.2% and 8.2% of the bus journeys on the 238 route are cancelled every week. How can up to 8% be acceptable at any time? The people paying the price are ordinary working people. It is also ironic that they are trying to introduce parking charges in Blanchardstown centre. The 238 is the only bus people in Tyrrelstown have to get to Blanchardstown centre and yet they are meant to be taking that bus. Many of the people work there, by the way.

I draw the Minister's attention to the impact it is having. There was a very good article in the *Dublin Inquirer* interviewing people in the area. A woman, Ms Bernie Casey, talked about her 23-year-old son and said it is affecting his work. Some of her son's friends have lost their jobs in the centre because of it.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I am pleased that people are responding and using public transport at rates we have not seen previously. That is good. I acknowledge that particularly on certain routes, there are issues. A cancellation rate of up to 8% in a month on the 238 route is unacceptable. I will raise that matter directly with the operators.

The operators do get fined and significant fines are levied on them for non-performance. I have the 2024 figures for Go-Ahead Ireland, which are the most recent figures I have for a full year. It was fined well over €1 million. That money is then reinvested.

Bus Átha Cliath is running a jobs campaign at the moment. They are good, secure jobs with good in-house training. There is good career advancement. The Deputy said the situation is ridiculous if we cannot find people to work in those jobs. There are nearly 3 million now working in the economy. The economy is going well. People are well-trained and well-educated. There is a pro-enterprise Government. That does pose strains. I am not in any way dismissing the point the Deputy has made, particularly about the 238 bus. I will look specifically at that matter. I have a meeting on 18 March with bus operators and other stakeholders about congestion.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I will also mention the other services for Tyrrelstown and Hollystown. The Minister knows these areas well from his time on Fingal County Council. He knows the figures for Fingal. It is the fastest growing area and so on. I do not need to recite

the figures to him. Dublin West has never had the transport it needs. It is the most recurring issue that people are contacting me about. It is causing hardship to students who are trying to get to UCD through two- to three-hour bus journeys. The 39 route is like a coffin ship at this point. It just keeps being added to and the journey keeps getting longer.

A woman in Tyrrelstown contacted me. She works in Dublin Port. Can you imagine what a feat that is? It is like an odyssey, trying to match up the different connections. It is very dangerous for a woman late at night or early in the morning when it is dark. People in these areas are suffering. There is also the 40d route.

If the Government wants houses built, and we all want houses built, we must have the transport and infrastructure. Dublin West needs massive investment in public transport.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Dublin West will get and is getting that massive investment. We have €24.3 billion to invest in transport between now and 2030. The Deputy is right to highlight the issue. I know Dublin West very well. The Fingal area is one of the fastest-growing areas in the country. There are good jobs there. New families are setting down their roots in the housing we have built over the past five years. There are more than pinch points in certain areas and the Deputy is right to raise those as an issue. I will in particular raise the specific routes that the Deputy has mentioned. I am aware of the issues. It is our job to work hard with the transport operators to improve the services that are there. There are some routes that are working very well but there are others that, quite frankly, are not. An 8% cancellation rate is unacceptable.

I will mention the automatic vehicle location system, which will make a big difference. With it, at least people will know if there is a delay or cancellation because they will be able to see it on the app. There will be real-time data. That is going into pilot this quarter, with full roll-out and completion scheduled for 2027, which is next year. That is notwithstanding the fact that we must improve the core quality bus corridors, which we are doing. There are plans in Dublin 15 and west Dublin for that, as the Deputy knows.

Public Transport

96. **Deputy Joe Neville** asked the Minister for Transport the number of transport surveys carried out over the public transport networks to ensure that there is adequate capacity on routes and efficiency in delivery; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15650/26]

Deputy Joe Neville: I welcome to the Gallery my son, Liam, who is taking a mid-morning break from school. He is welcome.

I wish to ask how many transport surveys have been carried out over the public transport networks to ensure there is adequate capacity on routes and efficiency in delivery; and to ask the Minister of State to make a statement on the matter, especially pertaining to north Kildare.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I welcome the Deputy's son to the Public Gallery. Is his name Liam?

Deputy Joe Neville: Yes.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Liam, you are very welcome to the Gallery. Perhaps he will follow in the footsteps of his dad, his uncle and his cousin. Hopefully some day he might be here.

I thank the Deputy for his question. As the body responsible for public transport planning, the NTA, along with public transport operators, conducts regular surveys of public transport capacity. To assist with the prioritisation of the deployment of additional bus capacity in the greater Dublin area, the NTA has recently developed a new business intelligence tool, using ticketing data to identify where capacity issues are being experienced across the bus network by route and time of day. For Dublin Bus, this was supplemented with 17 surveys to verify the accuracy of the results. It is intended to roll out the tool's use across the wider bus network upon the availability of all relevant data sets needed to estimate capacity and usage.

On Bus Éireann services in quarter 4 of 2025, capacity surveys were undertaken on 25 selected routes where overloading concerns were recurring. Selected sample bus stops were surveyed remotely using CCTV and camera technologies. With regard to rail and light rail capacity, in the case of Luas and Irish Rail, fleet and driver resources, as well as track capacity, are now heavily used during peak demand periods so the scope to add extra capacity at these times is limited. The next tranche of new rail fleet, including battery electric DART, is expected to come into service in 2027, at which point there will be an opportunity to add additional capacity to existing rail services.

On Luas services, TII commissions a yearly census over one sample week in October or November on both green and red lines during peak patronage periods. All tram stops are surveyed remotely using CCTV, with some in-person surveys undertaken for validation purposes. Similar annual surveys are undertaken at all Irish Rail stations, generally on a Thursday in November to reflect the busiest period on the network.

The NTA acknowledges that capacity can be a challenge. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I have also been on to the NTA about capacity issues. We continue to regularly monitor this and work closely with all operators to identify where improvements can be made. I will supply the Deputy with more information in the next part of my response.

Deputy Joe Neville: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit for the response. The reason I raise the issue is that in the fast-growing area of north Kildare, which has had a huge population increase, we have significant challenges when it comes to transport and public transport. As we all know, the roads, including the M4 and the N7, are full coming into Dublin in the morning. We want to give the opportunity to as many people as possible to use buses and trains. Ultimately, many of those buses and trains are full. It is good to hear that the surveys are in place, that we are assessing the capacity and that the information is there. At the same time, we need to ensure the information is shared and we understand that it gets used in the best way possible. Trains coming from Kildare in the morning can be delayed. There can be buses that do not turn up. We need to ensure those data are captured. I would like any information that the Minister of State has to be shared with us.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy. He is right that the capturing of information is important. He spoke about the exponential growth in the Maynooth, Lexlip and Kilcock areas. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, spoke about the Fingal piece. The NTA is acutely aware of, and acknowledges, that the capacity issue is a challenge at times. The NTA continues to make efforts to incorporate and learn from the feedback we have spoken about this morning. It is important to recognise that, subject to planning, the recently announced BusConnects phase 7 routes should be of significant help.

I reassure the Deputy that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I, and our Department, will continue to work with the NTA to ensure the network delivers on the objectives set out and that the performances are closely monitored as we remain focused on delivering services for people, the travelling public and the customers that they can depend and rely on. The Deputy is right. It is about ensuring that people in north Kildare have a transport system that is fit for purpose and takes people off the M4, as the Deputy said. I would be happy to engage further with the Deputy, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney. It is about information and data that can lead to positive outcomes for the travelling public.

Deputy Joe Neville: While we are discussing north Kildare specifically, there are a couple of projects that have been set in train. The M4 bus corridor, for example, has been built. I was recently in touch with the Minister's Department looking to ensure that we get the legislation passed so we get that bus corridor open. That would be one way to take traffic off the motorway.

DART+ South West has been delayed. We really need it because there has been that increase in population all the way down towards Naas and all along that corridor. We need to ensure we have a full, live DART system, as well as the one we are going to have from Leixlip to Maynooth and coming out to Kilcock within the term of this Government. There are a lot of positive projects in north Kildare and I am pushing for them, but we need to ensure other things, such as Local Link buses and buses to the likes of Johnstown Bridge, as well as more Bus Éireann buses, while at the same time ensuring we get DART+ South West in place in order that everything links up cohesively.

Deputy John McGuinness: The M7 to Dublin from Carlow and Kilkenny is heavily congested. Drivers are frustrated by the traffic and the delays. The number of business vehicles using the route has increased substantially. I would like to see some action on it.

I draw the Minister of State's attention to the need for huge investment in local routes in Kilkenny city. Places like the Lyrath Estate Hotel, the Abbott facility and housing estates and nursing homes dotted around the city are not served by bus routes. I ask that the reports being submitted and the constant lobbying that is going on be recognised and that we ensure that huge investment and input will deliver extended services to all of those places and bring in towns like Graiguenamanagh, Thomastown, Johnstown and Freshford, which are being neglected.

Will the Minister of State please intervene with Iarnród Éireann regarding Kilkenny railway station? The old buildings are in an absolutely shocking state. Iarnród Éireann has shown clear disrespect for Kilkenny in terms of the appearance of the station.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I am familiar with the situation relating to the M7. Deputy McGuinness is right that it has become heavily congested and is an absolute nightmare for motorists. We need a further conversation on what we can do there. I will happily meet the Deputy on Sunday in Nowlan Park to discuss the important issue he raised regarding Kilkenny city.

Deputy John McGuinness: I thought that in all the announcements about road projects, there might be something about the ring road for Kilkenny.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I could not get the Deputy's number, but I will happily meet with him to discuss it.

Regarding Kilkenny railway station, that is under the remit of the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, but I will get back to the Deputy on it. I certainly will work with him on the roads issue because it is very important.

Deputy Neville is right about the M4 bus corridor. It has been built and should be used. The Minister has asked his officials in the Department to expedite the relevant legislation and he hopes to have it done by the summer recess. It is an important issue. As the Deputy knows, we are seeing progress on DART+ South West. He is right to raise the issue of the M4 bus corridor because the situation beggars belief. I thank him for his advocacy and ongoing work on it. The whole ethos overarching his question is about gathering information that will support future planning and delivery of services, including roads, bus and train services for the travelling public. It is an important question because it will facilitate the development of new routes and alternatives. I hope the Department, working with the NTA, can expedite the matter.

Bus Services

97. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Transport if there are plans to ensure that the NTA and service providers such as Dublin Bus are adhering to punctuality standards for buses across Dublin city, given that, as per the public service obligation contracts annual performance report, many low-frequency Dublin Bus routes did not experience punctuality of above 80%. [15297/26]

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: My question relates to the punctuality of buses in my area. The recent roll-out of BusConnects on the F spine routes 23 and 24 has had a profound impact. Punctuality is not something one would have associated with the early phases or even the continuing phases. Will the Minister provide an update in respect of the obligations on providers in this regard?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy has been advocating on this issue for some time. The F spine routes have only been in place only since October, and there have been issues with them. The NTA is monitoring them. BusConnects is and should be a positive development but we have seen very specific issues with some of the new routes that have been rolled out. I absolutely assure the Deputy that I will work directly with him on this on behalf of his

constituents. I have already highlighted the issues, particularly on the 23 and 24 routes, to the NTA.

There have been issues with some resources within the bus operators. Leaving that aside, BusConnects is a positive development and an investment in our public transport. The Ballymun-Finglas quality bus corridor is approved and going to construction. It is the second one and will make a big difference in terms of giving priority to buses and also on the active travel side. There are issues with congestion. I am convening a meeting with stakeholders on 18 March to discuss, in particular, congestion in the city core but not just there. We will look at interim and short-term measures that can be taken to improve bus journeys in particular.

More and more people are using public transport and it is great to see. There were 363.5 million passenger journeys in 2025, which was the highest number ever. Bus Átha Cliath carried the greatest number of passengers among all our operators. People are responding but I fully acknowledge the frustration with the roll-out of some of the new routes in terms of how they operate in practice versus what was said in principle. I am actively looking at that. The NTA is assessing it right now and will engage with the operators. Lessons have been learnt. I want very clear avenues set down for how we can improve performance in that area. Financial penalties applying is no consolation to people. We need a reliable service. I will remain fully engaged with the Deputy on those two particular routes on the F spine.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I appreciate the Minister's interest in this matter. I have engaged with him regarding the core bus corridors, which are incredibly welcome and which will facilitate speedier journeys into the city centre. Together with the tenders going out for the metro project, we are seeing substantial investment in future infrastructure.

Before Christmas, at a meeting with public representatives, NTA representatives spoke about October being a difficult time to implement a new service, with increasing congestion heading into the Christmas period. They also spoke about issues with recruitment. Providers need to have these matters in order and they need to engage with the NTA. When a new service is being introduced by the NTA, it must be done in conjunction with the operator.

The Minister referred to penalties. I would rather have buses arriving on time than a company being fined. However, when it comes to for-profit operators, the facility to impose a financial penalty is important. There are bus services in my area that are operated by private operators. It is my preference that they not be there but that is the nature of the current framework. We must make sure they abide by the conditions under which they tendered for those contracts.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I 100% agree. There have been issues with Go-Ahead Ireland, for example, with regard to mechanics. That has been rectified and those mechanics are now in place. We have had issues with driver recruitment across our network. One of the reasons for that is we have near full employment in our economy, with record numbers of people - nearly 3 million - working. Having said that, there are very good and well-paid jobs that give a path to progression within our bus operators, including in Bus Átha Cliath, Bus Éireann and others.

The Deputy is right, and I have said this to the NTA, that when an operator bids for a route and is awarded it, we must be absolutely certain the resources are there to manage it. The people need to be there to do the job. Lots of good work has been done and I do not mean to be negative but I have been frustrated on a couple of occasions that we only found out after the event, when issues arose with particular routes, that the operator did not have enough mechanics or had not been able to recruit drivers. We need to tighten up on that big time between the NTA and the operators. Fines will continue to be imposed. In 2024, which is the most recent year for which we have full-year figures, the main private operator was fined nearly €1.5 million. Those fines are reinvested in the network.

I assure the Deputy that this matter is not off my radar. We will get improvements here. BusConnects is a good thing right across the country. There have been issues with new routes. We will work to fix them.

Rail Network

98. Deputy Darren O'Rourke asked the Minister for Transport the date on which the public consultation on the route options and emerging preferred route for the Navan rail project will take place; if he will provide an update on the project development; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14756/26]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: On what date will the public consultation take place on the route options and emerging preferred route for the Navan rail project? A commitment was given at the end of last year that it would happen early in 2026.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The NTA's transport strategy for the greater Dublin area sets out the framework for transport investment across the region from 2022 to 2042. The strategy includes delivery of the Navan rail line between 2031 and 2036, subject to planning and funding approvals. The plan is currently on target.

It is anticipated that a public consultation on the route options for the Navan rail line will take place in the middle of this year. I will ask that it be done by the end of quarter 2. We want to avoid it happening during the summer period. We want people to have input into the consultation process, which will ultimately result in a defined route for the Navan train line. It will support the development of a preliminary business case, which will need to be approved by the Government, in line with the requirements of the infrastructure guidelines, before any planning application.

Government is committed to the Navan rail line project. It is anticipated that a planning application - known as a railway order - for the Navan rail project will be lodged with An Coimisiún Pleanála in 2028. We have the public consultation on the preferred route and the preparation of the planning. In 2028, the planning application will go in. It is fully funded to do that. To be fair, the Deputy and his colleagues in Meath West have been raising this regularly, and rightly so. Navan and the area around it are growing. We have committed to the rail line. Some might say with a lot of justification that it has been talked about for too long but has not been delivered. We are absolutely committed to doing so. I am hopeful that if we can meet those timelines, we will have planning permission in 2029. The sectoral plan, which

was published in November 2025, provides funding for the Navan rail line project to progress through this process and up to the railway order. That is the timeframe. We are looking at the end of quarter 2 for the public consultation.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I make no apology for being obsessed with this project. It is just such a potential game changer for the county on so many different levels. It is hugely important socially, culturally, economically and environmentally. It would be transformative and I welcome the fact it is now back on the agenda and back in the plans and there are euro beside it. I am concerned there will be slippage at every juncture, and there has been slippage in relation to it. As I said, in October, we said early 2006. Is the Minister confident that by the end of quarter 2, we will be able to go to consultation? I can say without a shadow of a doubt there will be huge interest, regardless of the time of year this goes to consultation. There have already been a huge number of submissions in relation to this project. There is huge interest in it.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy is right and I have no issue whatsoever with him raising this matter regularly. I do not want any slippage on it. The Navan rail line will be absolutely transformational in terms of quality of life, the environment and the economy. It will be a major piece of infrastructure to deliver. All I am interested in doing is making sure we hit those timeframes. In the NDP, there are major projects like MetroLink which has gone on for years and will start construction next year. There is DART+ and all of the various things. We have talked about quality bus corridors. There is major investment in public transport, and rightly so. I am keeping a really close eye on the Navan project and I want the public consultation out by the end of quarter 2. I take the Deputy's point that whenever it comes out, people will be very interested in it.

Regarding the timelines, we are dependent on planning. For some of those elements, we have a better planning system now. Obviously, I hope we do not get objections and various things like that but let us control what we can control. For the public consultation piece on the preferred route, we are aiming for the middle of year, that is, the end of quarter 2 or very early quarter 3 if there is any slippage but it has to be the middle of this year. I will certainly keep the Deputy informed of progress.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: We can control what we can control in relation to this and we will be persistent in pursuing it and making sure, as best we can from the Opposition benches, we hit those deadlines. The big question then is around taking it beyond planning and to construction. Will the Minister outline how the Navan rail project best positions itself as a priority project in the midst of a range of other funding demands on the Department and the Minister? How can the project compete to ensure it can move quickly and uninterruptedly to construction?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy is right; we can control the controllables. It is funded right the way up to planning and we will get it through planning. We often talk about the NDP going to 2030. Of the €104.25 billion investment, one quarter of that is for public transport. If we look out to 2035, the figure is €245 billion. Thanks to the hard work of our people and good economic management, we will have the capital to actually deliver these projects. By the

way, I do not look at them just from an expenditure perspective. It is also about what they will deliver in economic terms. That investment will pay back in spades to the Exchequer. I know Deputy O'Rourke, Deputy Aisling Dempsey, the Minister, Deputy Helen McEntee, and the Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, have all been working very closely together, to be fair, advocating for the people of Meath on this and the difference that it will make. We will have this funded. What we have to do is really watch this project as it moves through. Meath is in the greater Dublin area framework of the transport investment strategy and it is listed in the NPD. Let us get a consultation done, get people engaged with it, get it into planning, get it out of planning by 2029, and get on with building this transformational project.

Bus Services

99. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the review of the public consultation on the proposed 425A bus route; the status of the assessment of submissions received; the expected timeline for completing the review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [14894/26]

Deputy Albert Dolan: I want to raise the issue of the 425A bus route from Mountbellew to Galway city. Back in January the NTA launched a public consultation on its proposals. I would like an update as to where that public consultation is at. Has it been reviewed and assessed and where is it at? From speaking to representatives of the NTA in the Committee of Public Accounts they seemed to indicate that by the end of quarter 1, they would have an update but I would appreciate an update from the Minister today.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Deputy Dolan and I have discussed this route before. The Department of Transport, the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I are acutely aware of this. We have seen good increases across the rural transport network and they are very important links. I have mentioned to other Deputies and colleagues that when we look at public transport usage, we see that 363.5 million people used it last year. People are responding both in urban and rural areas when the services are there.

Regarding the 425A route between Galway and Mountbellew, the NTA was proposing to amend the bus network - we discussed this and the Deputy has concerned around that - serving Athenry. The recently published consultation closed on 9 January of this year. I am telling the Deputy things he already knows. I know them too and I want him to be assured of that. The proposal consists of the rerouting of the existing 425A through Athenry and the introduction of a new route, 416, between Athenry and Tuam. There were over 100 submissions, which is good. I know the Deputy has been to the forefront of this as well. They are being assessed now. I have to give them a little bit of time, although not an inordinate amount of time because people need to act quickly.

On foot of the Deputy's question, which I thank him for, I can say that we discussed this with the NTA and my team yesterday, which the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, will tell him, in preparation for this. I have asked for an update on when we are coming back with the assessment of the submissions. It is good that is done because we have to take people's views into account. We also have to take into account the views of the operators and how we can provide a better service for people. I will keep the Deputy directly informed on this. I expect

to get a date for when the submissions are finalised. Then we can move on and have a look at it and see what the construct of the service will be then.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I really appreciate that and the manner in which the Minister has worked with me on this since I became aware of the NTA's proposals. It is important to say that absolutely nobody in my constituency has come to me saying they want to see the 425A rerouted into Athenry. Previously, the 425A was a once daily return service. It is now a four times daily service. It is working fantastically and we do not need to change it. A 416 service from Tuam to Athenry in the form of a Local Link would be fantastic but the reality is that what we are missing is an investment. We need an Athenry bus that goes directly to Galway city. Athenry is a town with a population in excess of 5,000 people. Our trains, as the Minister knows, are at capacity and we need the bus to provide an alternative form of transport for people to get into the city. That is my real ask; that Athenry gets its own, dedicated bus service.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy has been and remains a very strong advocate for improving public transport in his constituency and the Galway area. I commend him on that and I will work with him in this regard. Thankfully, the Government, of which he is a member, is investing in public transport at a rate never seen before. What really pleases me is the investment in our regions as well. It is not east coast-centric or Dublin-centric where it may have been with some other initiatives. We are looking at regional development.

I asked the NTA about it yesterday. We are looking at the end of quarter 1 for conclusion of the review of the submissions, which is the end of next month. I will give it that time and then we will assess it. The Deputy has very clearly articulated the fact the 425A service is working well and people do not want to see a change being made to it. I am sure that will be borne out in the submissions. I assure the Deputy that he and I will work directly on it.

Deputy Albert Dolan: The Minister is right. There has been such a significant investment over the past few years in public transport, active travel and trying to secure the future of our networks. Athenry had a privately-operated bus service. It pulled out essentially because the middle-day services were not feasible. There is a public service obligation, PSO, determination there. It is in place for Athenry and we need to meet it.

The bus going from Athenry does not have to go directly on the motorway. It goes in by a place called Derrydonnell, over to Oranmore and into Galway City. It could be a fantastic service that covers more areas. It would be an addition of service because the rerouting of the 425A is seen as a shortcut to serve Athenry, and that cannot be the case because it would disproportionately affect people on the Galway Road. I really appreciate the Minister's engagement on this matter.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: At the end of quarter 1 when we have the submissions back, we will have a look at it. One thing is, with the PSO, which underpins many public transport services because we have expanded them so greatly, myself and the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, were able to secure a significant increase in the base in the PSO. This still means we have to manage new routes in the context of our overall allocation.

The point the Deputy has made very clearly is very valid. The existing four-time-a-day service is working very well. If we need additional services, which the Deputy has advocated for also, that also needs to be looked at in the round too. What I commit to doing is, when this submission review has been completed, we will get a copy. We obviously have to work with the NTA because it sets the routes, but I will certainly engage with the Deputy directly on this. I know how important it is to him. To be fair, he has been advocating for it on a regular basis.

Greenways Provision

100. **Deputy Brian Brennan** asked the Minister for Transport for an update on progress of the Arklow to Shillelagh greenway; to outline the next steps in the process, and a timeframe; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15349/26]

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy for raising this very important matter about a very scenic part of the country. I thank him for his advocacy. For the purpose of the question and the greenway itself, the Minister for Transport has responsibility for the overall policy and Exchequer funding in relation to greenways. The planning, design and construction of individual greenways is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland in conjunction with the local authority.

As Deputy Brennan knows, and he has been a long time campaigner for this, the Government has long-since recognised the strategic value of greenways as sustainable transport corridors, as well as being catalysts for regional economic development tourism and community health and wellbeing. That is why the Government and the Department of Transport allocated €59 million to TII this year, to support the greenways and active travel and national roads programme. One scheme being supported is the Arklow to Shillelagh greenway, as Deputy Brennan has articulated and outlined. Last year, this scheme completed phase 2 which was the open selection of TII's project management guidelines. This is a significant milestone for the delivery of the greenway as it involves identifying a preferred route corridor for the scheme. Wicklow County Council is currently procuring a technical adviser to help advance this preferred route corridor through the development approval process. A successful tenderer has been identified, and their appointment is anticipated in the coming weeks. The technical adviser will commence works to progress the scheme through phase 3, which is design and environmental evaluation. This phase takes into account technical, environmental and social factors identified in earlier project stages and will establish the definitive land footprint necessary to develop and operate the greenway. There will also be extensive engagement with affected landowners and stakeholders during this phase.

It is anticipated that phase 3 will take up to 24 months to complete. Immediate tasks over the coming months will focus on engagement with the Arklow to Shillelagh greenway committee, as well as stakeholder engagement more broadly, procuring and undertaking necessary engineering and environmental surveys, and advancing design development. The Department of Transportation – I will conclude on this – has committed €300,000 to this greenway project for this year. We are committed to the scheme. We hope to see, along with Deputy Brennan, it progress in the coming years.

Deputy Brian Brennan: I thank the Minister of State. In my life, before I took up this position, I was heavily involved in the tourism industry in south County Wicklow for over 20 years. I know first-hand the area's needs and I cannot emphasise enough the importance of this greenway project. Our support for this is simply critical, as for decades now there is a genuine feeling in south County Wicklow that it has been ignored in terms of tourism investment. This project will simply be a game changer and a catalyst for future tourism developments in Arklow, Woodenbridge, Aughrim, Tinahely and Shillelagh and everywhere in between. I am of the belief that tourism is the greatest commodity we have in this country. When a person has guests staying in towns or villages it really ticks so many boxes; employment, support for local suppliers, shops, pubs, cafés and restaurants. I recognise there has been positive progress on this project over the past few months, but this project is simply taking too long. The first meeting was held nine years ago, on 17 October 2017, in Lawless' Hotel, Aughrim. We must stay positive and I look forward to ensuring this particular project comes to fruition.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I genuinely thank the Deputy for his commitment and dedication to this project. As someone in the hospitality sector he recognises the importance of the greenway project. What might be unique in this case is that the scheme has general public acceptance and deserves to progress more quickly than others.

In my own area of Cork we have a huge issue with a particular greenway, which is disappointing in terms of the level of engagement by TII. In this case, we have allocated money to TII and it has already expended or allocated almost €100,000 towards this scheme. There is a number of phases to go through, as the Deputy knows. The Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I have always spoken about expediting and increasing the passage through gates in terms of projects. It is important for a variety of reasons. As the Deputy said, this will be a game-changer for the area. If we look at areas like Arklow, Woodenbridge, Tinahely and Shillelagh, these are areas that bring people in. They are wonderful spots and great tourist attractions. This will be an unlocking of further potential.

Deputy Brian Brennan: I totally agree with the Minister of State. I drive this route every week. I try to have a vision of what will happen – not if but when – this greenway happens. We look at cafés on the quays in Arklow, Woodenbridge buzzing with tourists, Lawless' Hotel in Aughrim reopening, bike shops in Tinahely or more pods in Shillelagh. It is going to be simply transformative. We often overuse the term “game-changer”, but it will literally open up new tourism in south County Wicklow. I worked for years in tourism and fought against the Westports, Galways and Killarneys to get tourists into south County Wicklow. When we get this project it will be transformative and we need the Minister of State's help along the way.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I assure the Deputy that the Minister, the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I are very committed to this greenway project. The Deputy is right, and he paints a wonderful picture. I look forward to visiting with him again because he has painted a wonderful, broad brush of what it can do. It will drive economic change and regeneration. The point the Deputy has made is the vision will become a reality. It is not “if”, it is “when”, and all of us on this side of the House are anxious to progress the scheme. From our end, there are no barriers to the progression of the scheme. We have allocated money for the greenway project. The Deputy's enthusiasm will help us to go back and further engage with TII to ensure

that we can, with Wicklow County Council, bring this to fruition. There seems to be broad acceptance and agreement around this greenway, which is a positive. Our Department has allocated funding for the greenway project and we look forward to its completion.

Public Transport

101. **Deputy Maeve O'Connell** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department is considering encouraging transport providers to extend public transport operating hours later into the night to facilitate the night-time economy in Dublin. [14878/26]

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: I want to ask the Minister about how we can support the night time economy by seeing if he is engaging with both public and private transport providers to try to extend operating hours later into the night.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank Deputy O'Connell for raising this really important issue in terms of the extension of service operating hours and the BusConnects network redesign. As she is no doubt aware, it is a transformative programme of investment in our bus system aimed at improving public transport across the city by strengthening the existing system through enhanced services with high-frequency spines and new local orbital and radial roots. As part of that redesign, the NTA has introduced 15 24-hour bus services across the city in recent years. That significantly enhances both late night and early morning travel options. It has allowed more people, particularly night time and shift workers, to use and avail of public transport services.

In addition to those 15 24-hour routes, we have 12 Nitelink services which run from the city centre to the suburbs on Friday and Saturday nights, providing extra capacity during peak late-night demand periods. Iarnród Éireann operates all available trains across the network daily to meet the record demand it is seeing on all routes. This is outside of required maintenance cycles to ensure fleet reliability, and any repair works which may be taking place. However, over periods such as St. Patrick's Day, Christmas and new year, Iarnród Éireann puts on additional late-night services to accommodate passengers. I asked the company if there is any more flexibility, recognising that we do more with the buses. Fifteen 24-hour routes and 12 Nitelink routes are great and support the night-time economy. While I know we have a short window for maintenance of tracks, which we need to do for safety reasons, we might look at further weekends in the year when we could extend the rail and Luas services. They are constrained more than the buses because we have to maintain the tracks and rolling stock, but I have asked both companies if there is any other flex or other opportunities to provide additional services that bit later on certain weekends.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: I thank the Minister. I appreciate the feedback on that and that the Minister is engaging with the rail operators, Transdev and Irish Rail, about trying to extend rail services. I represent Dublin Rathdown, which is a constituency adjacent to the city centre constituencies. An awful lot of my constituents raise the point with me all the time that they would go into town more often if they knew that they could get home. We are within a distance from the city centre that it should be easily accessible and affordable. We have taxi services, but like every form of transportation, they do not suit everybody all the time. Many areas in

Dublin Rathdown are quite close, and I have personally done the walk from the city centre to Stillorgan many times due to the lack of public transport. I always make sure I wear comfortable shoes. Again, that is not suitable for every person at all times, particularly in our climate. I also represent a constituency with UCD's students, and there is huge potential for them to support the night-time economy.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Those 15 routes I referred to are up and running. They are 24-hour routes. Going back five years, we did not have any 24-hour routes. The Deputy is right that we need to support the economy. More people would go out in our city if it was easier to access. It is getting better. Of course we are looking for other opportunities for routes, with more 24-hour routes. Obviously they have to be paid for too. I mentioned in response to colleagues earlier that we have to manage our new routes and improvements to existing routes within the envelope of the PSO that we have. This issue is genuinely kept under review. I, like the Deputy, know the city well. It has bounced back post Covid but it could do with more help. Our taxi fleet has unquestionably improved. The Nitelink services exist but I have also asked the rail and Luas operators to see whether there is any additional headroom where we could provide additional times at certain periods of the year.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: I listened to the Minister talk about the constraints in the system. It would be remiss of me not to refer to some of the communications I have received this week about our wider transportation service. Hannah was in touch with me about the No. 11 bus route in Clonskeagh. Three full buses went past her on one day, and this has happened repeatedly. She has spent hundreds of euro on taxis. Three buses went past Catherine from Leopardstown, going down the N11. In Kilternan, which is one of the fastest growing residential areas in the country, particularly in my constituency, there was a protest last Saturday, led by my colleague, Councillor Pearse Dargan, about the poor bus service there, including the L26, which should be going every 15 minutes and is actually going every 30 minutes, and the 44 service. There is a lack of connectivity between the fast-growing area of Kilternan with Dún Laoghaire and also to the Luas. I appreciate the pressures on the system.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We have to recognise that, as our population is growing, our system is growing too. The 363.5 million public passenger journeys last year is a record number. That is a good thing and I know the Deputy fully supports that. We will look at the specific issues with the routes the Deputy mentioned. I will feed that in and I am sure the Deputy has done so already. We will always have work to do to roll out those improvements. We are ambitious as a Government to see public transport options increased for our citizens and improvements made to existing routes and new routes. We have to balance that with how we can pay for it. It is also appropriate that we do that. Things are going in the right direction. There are issues with specific routes. I have spent quite some time this morning answering questions on those. I will feed the Deputy's comments in.

Road Projects

102. **Deputy Noel McCarthy** asked the Minister for Transport to provide an update on the progression of safety and traffic management measures on the N25 between Midleton and Carrigtwohill, County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15464/26]

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I am taking this parliamentary question on behalf of Deputy Noel McCarthy.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy for raising this project on behalf of Deputy McCarthy, which I know is of great importance to him. The Minister for Transport has overall responsibility for the allocation of Exchequer funding for national roads. As part of the annual allocation process for national roads, TII prepares the booklet for funding for each project for the year. We announced this year's allocation last week. Approximately €139 million in Exchequer funding was allocated to Cork County Council for national roads in 2026. This represents an increase of over €66 million for Cork County Council when compared to last year, and will help to progress a number of major national road projects such as the M28 and N25. I know Deputy O'Shea has been advocating a greater increase in funding for Cork.

I am pleased to confirm that Cork County Council's allocation also includes €500,000 to enable of the progression of the Carrigtwohill to Midleton project, which has been paused at the route options selection phase since 2021 due to funding constraints. This project consists of an upgrade and realignment of approximately 5 km of the N25 dual carriageway from Carrigtwohill to Midleton. It will separate local and strategic traffic, and deliver upgraded junctions. Most important, it will improve safety for all road users on the N25 between Carrigtwohill and Midleton. Those of us who use that road know that it has become very congested and popular.

In addition, over the past number of years, TII has provided funding to Cork County Council for identifying smaller, more localised interventions on this section of the N25, including €100,000 this year for junction safety improvements. These are badly needed and we would all welcome them. While interventions on this section have proven challenging due to the number of access points, limited land in public ownership and budgetary constraints, one measure that has been developed and proposed by Cork County Council is at Milebush, where it is hoped to provide improved access by utilising lands owned by the local authority. I hope that will be progressed this year.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I thank the Minister of State. The current stretch of the N25 national route between Carrigtwohill and Midleton remains a safety issue. The configuration of the road is dangerous. There are frequent accidents, some of which have been fatal. TII's collision analysis has confirmed the collision rate for the route is above average. Low standard junctions, medium crossings and direct access points to the road for properties are not encouraging safe travel. At peak times, it is not unusual to see traffic on two busy lanes travelling at high speed. I acknowledge that TII has recently confirmed funding of €500,000 for the Carrigtwohill to Midleton route. While I appreciate that TII is the authority tasked with planning, design and construction of individual national roads, will the Minister of State please advise what the latest funding will be allocated for? Is it the intention that the junction will remove dangerous median crossings at Ballyrichard and Water-rock? Will they be closed? Any additional information the Minister of State can provide would be welcome.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Deputy O'Shea, speaking on behalf of Deputy McCarthy, is right that the N25 is an important road. It is the road to Rosslare Europort and funnels traffic into

Cork city. As I said, the interventions for junction safety on the N25 are a matter for Cork County Council in this case. It will identify the points the Deputy has outlined and the need for enhanced safety measures to be taken. Funding has been allocated to it. The important point for our Department is that this road has had a number of accidents and fatalities. We have allocated resources to the council to ensure we can have the on-ramp, off-ramp, access points and egress improved.

12 o'clock

I will take the points the Deputy made back to Cork County Council and back to the NTA on behalf of Deputy McCarthy because it is about ensuring that road is safe. We have already seen a huge allocation of resources to the improvement of the road at the tunnel. This will further augment the work being done there.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I note that the N25 Carrigtohill to Midleton project was included in the latest national development plan review, which was published in November, as one of the roads projects to be advanced for future construction. It is, however, currently lagging behind the proposed upgrade to the Midleton to Youghal section of the N25 as no tendering or construction date has commenced or is yet outlined for the Carrigtohill to Midleton section. The situation is likely to worsen in future with thousands of housing units currently under development at Water Rock and more proposed for Midleton. This will put additional pressure on the already overburdened junction at the Lakeview roundabout in Midleton. This roundabout was upgraded with a slip road in 2019, which has made some difference. However, the whole design of the roundabout is no longer fit for purpose given the traffic volumes currently. Can the Minister confirm if the upgrade to the Lakeview roundabout will be progressed as one of the additional interventions proposed at the N25 Midleton to Youghal route? I am sure Deputy McCarthy will welcome any progress.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Government with the NTA and the council have allocated funding. This is a very important route. Living in and being from Cork, I recognise the volume of traffic has increased, and the number of accidents has increased. It is a priority for us in government. That is why we have allocated money after having had a pause. I will take the areas the Deputy mentioned back to Cork County Council because the issues he raised are a matter for the council in the main. I will articulate the views of Deputy McCarthy to the council. I will make the point to Deputy O'Shea that we have allocated €139 million in Exchequer funding to Cork County Council for national roads this year, which is an increase. I hope that as part of that allocation of funding, we will see the route and the junctions the Deputy mentioned are addressed by the council.

Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar www.oireachtas.ie.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Is é seo an suí deireanach den Dáil sula dtagann rialacha an Rialtais i bhfeidhm chun an cíos a ardú Dé Domhnaigh. I gceann cúpla lá, beidh cumhacht ag na tiarnaí

talún móra an cíos a ardú go leibhéal an mhargaidh do thionóntaí nua. Díreach mar a dúirt Sinn Féin, tá na creach-chistí ag dul thart. Sa Teach seo inné, thug an Teachta McDonald le fios go raibh IRES REIT, an tiarna talún príobháideach is mó sa Stát, ag maíomh go hoscailte ina thuarascáil bhliantúil go ligfidh an dlí úr a thug an Rialtas isteach dó a chuid cíosanna a ardú suas le 25% ar léasanna nua. Tá an Rialtas anois ag brú tríd an ardú is mó cíosa atá feicthe againn riamh.

This is the final sitting of the Dáil before the Government's rent hike Bill rules come into force on Sunday. In a matter of days, landlords are going to be handed the power to increase rents to full market levels for new tenancies. Exactly as Sinn Féin warned, corporate landlords are preparing to cash in, and they are not hiding it. They are telling their shareholders that increased profits are coming because of decisions taken by the Tánaiste and the Government. Yesterday in the House, Teachta Mary Lou McDonald revealed that IRES REIT, the largest private landlord in the State, is openly outlining how the Government's legislation will allow it to significantly jack up rents. In comments reported on *thejournal.ie*, its chief executive stated, "Under these rules, every unit in our portfolio with the lease commencing after the 1st of March 2026 can be re-let at prevailing market rents once vacant." He described it as a "substantial" opportunity. He talked about it leading to "enhanced returns for the company and our shareholders". The company has projected a staggering, eye watering 25% increase in rents with minimal additional costs as a direct result of the Government's policy.

This is not a mere Opposition claim. This is the largest landlord in the State explaining plainly, in black and white, that the Government's rent hike Bill will allow it to raise rents and boost shareholder returns.

At the same time, the Residential Tenancies Board figures show that rents are already at record highs under this Government, and that tens of thousands of renters had to start new leases last year. Who are these people? They are ordinary people right across the State who, under the Government's rules, would face rents being reset to full market levels. Behind each of those numbers and each of those statistics are real households who were forced to move maybe because of work, the sale of a property, family breakdown or landlords' decisions. Many of them are already stretched to their limits. The Tánaiste knows that 60,000 renters on average every year move into a new tenancy. Under the Government's rules, the landlord is going to be free to set the rent at whatever the market rate is even if that means a jump of 25% compared to what was paid before.

In the last sitting of this Dáil before these rules take effect, I am going to ask the Tánaiste directly, faced with clear evidence and with everything we know of who benefits and who pays, is the Government even at this late stage going to reverse course and stop these rent hikes before they inflict serious hardship on tens of thousands of renters across the State? How can the Tánaiste stand up, which I have no doubt he is going to do in the next few minutes, and justify a company - the biggest landlord in the State - in some cases renting a two-bedroom apartment not far from here for an eye-watering €3,200? How can he justify the biggest landlord in the State saying very clearly to the Government and its investors that the Government's legislation now allows it to increase rents by about 25% on average for new tenancies? How can the Tánaiste stand over that? How can he look renters in the face knowing the pressures they are under and say that he stands over that?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: There is a consistent and ongoing effort to misrepresent the factual situation in relation to the new rent rules and rental reform. I welcome the opportunity this morning in the Dáil to, I hope, disprove some of the scaremongering and misinformation and to provide some facts to people who are watching at home and would like to know the facts.

First, from 1 March, there is no change at all for existing tenancies - none, zero, none at all, no change. That is really important. What does come into place from 1 March is a balanced package of measures, which includes within it some of the greatest protections we have ever had in the history of our State for renters. That is not just my view. That is the view of the University College Dublin, UCD, professor of social justice who spoke on this in recent weeks as well.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: That is not the view of the largest landlord in the State.

The Tánaiste: We will see greater protection for renters than ever before. For the very first time ever, we will see nationwide rent pressure zones. For the first time ever, we will see six-year rolling tenancies providing people with that security of tenure. For the first time ever, in many ways, we will see an effective no-fault eviction ban. We brought in very strict and stringent rules in relation to that as well. Yes, from March, it is possible for new tenancies to be set at market rates but here is the next bit. It is only possible for them to be set once and then they need to be locked in at that level for the next six years other than being able to rise for-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: Yes, but rent is three years-----

The Tánaiste: Other than being able to-----

Deputy Thomas Gould: It is three years for students' rent.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy, please, allow the Tánaiste to conclude.

The Tánaiste: We are not going to do this; we are going to have a serious conversation. That is other than being able to rise for inflation and, even then, capped at 2%. For the first time ever, somebody who takes out a new tenancy in March will have that six-year security, the protection of an effective no-fault eviction ban, and will also know the rent cannot rise further during that six years, except in line with inflation but no more than 2%.

This 25% figure Deputy Doherty's party leader threw around this House yesterday is not a fair representation at all. That is not my view. This morning on national radio, as Deputies may have heard, and if she has not heard it, I hope Deputy McDonald will go back and listen to it, the representative body for the investment company quoted in the Dáil yesterday felt it necessary to go on national radio to describe Deputy McDonald's comments yesterday as, first, not correct, and, second, as absolutely a complete mischaracterisation of the issue. That is important for the people at home. These are people-----

Deputy Paul Donnelly: They would say that, though.

The Tánaiste: These are people the Deputies would know well because Deputy Ó Broin has met them twice in the past year according to the lobbying register. These are investment companies-----

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: How many times has the Tánaiste met them?

The Tánaiste: They know well in Sinn Féin. They have met them twice in the past year.

Deputy Thomas Gould: That is-----

The Tánaiste: I do not know what Deputy Gould talked to them about but they met them twice.

Deputy Pat Buckley: It is called-----

The Tánaiste: They have come out and said that what Sinn Féin said about it being 25% simply is not true. They said that the 25% was a projected figure over ten years. Deputy Doherty left that out. It is a projected figure over a period of ten years. Sinn Féin obviously recognises, or at least I think it does, there is a need for private investment to come into the rental market. I presume it does because its members keep meeting the companies. The lobbying register is full of times they, particularly Deputy Ó Broin, have met the companies to discuss these opportunities. Let us not scaremonger. People's rents are not increasing by 25% in March. No existing tenancy will see any change. Nationwide rent pressure zones will come into being. We will have an effective no-fault eviction ban.

Yes, for new tenancies, for the first time, the market rate can be set but then it must be locked except for allowing for inflation. That is a significant protection. All this is done with one aim only, that is, to increase more supply because without supply and private investment, according to the Housing Commission, we will not be able to have renters and home owners. We need to keep on doing supply.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste has been found out. It is as simple as that. He has been found out. His only defence here is that not every renter will be hit on day one. If you are looking today or moving on Monday, you will be hit by these rent hikes. The fund was very clear, in black and white, to its investors on its conference call that there will be 25% increases. Yes, it said, it will take a while for that to flow through.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: It will not be from day one.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Does the Tánaiste not know that, from Monday on, every single new renter will be hit by these increases? He stands there and justifies it and his backbenchers applaud it. That is exactly what the Government has done. I have made the point clearly that this is just one landlord – the largest landlord in the State with 3,600 properties – but other big landlords can do the same. Some 60,000 new tenancies are created every single year. The Tánaiste accepts, does he not, that every single one of those new tenancies can now see their rents jacked up? That is the reality. This is the first fund which came out and said in black and white to its investors, "Happy days, lads, the Government has just put millions of euro into our pockets. We can jack up rents by 25% and we see one in seven of our tenants leave every single year, so we will start to see these returns in year one."

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty, your time is up.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is the reality. It is in black and white. The Government has been found out. What the Tánaiste needs to do now is reverse it or defend why he thinks it is appropriate that rents would go up that high.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: What I would say to the young people at home-----

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The ones who have a home.

The Tánaiste: Do not shout me down.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Can we have some order, please?

The Tánaiste: I would like my time protected to answer the question.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

The Tánaiste: I would say to the people watching at home, yesterday, Sinn Féin came into the Dáil and suggested people's rents were going to rise by 25% in March.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: For new tenancies.

The Tánaiste: Today, the Sinn Féin spokesperson has acknowledged that is not a fact-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is not true.

The Tánaiste: -----and actually acknowledged a moment ago that his figures may take a number of years to come about.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is not true.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: You are bullshitting as usual.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I did not say that.

The Tánaiste: It has been found out today on national radio by people saying the Sinn Féin leader's representation in this House yesterday was a complete mischaracterisation. Hypocrisy-

Deputy Thomas Gould: How much will rents go up?

The Tánaiste: May I speak, please?

Deputy Thomas Gould: If not by 25%, then by how much?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Gould, please.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Deputy Doherty asked the Tánaiste a question.

The Tánaiste: Hypocrisy from Sinn Féin is not new when it comes to housing.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Defend what they are telling you. Stop spoofing.

The Tánaiste: We have a situation where Sinn Féin talks about investors as though it does not like them, as though they are not good.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Why does the Tánaiste not defend it? Defend the policy.

The Tánaiste: *The Sunday Times* last week showed Sinn Féin has received millions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: He cannot even defend his own policy.

The Tánaiste: I would like to speak.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please.

The Tánaiste: It is very unfair.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Do not continue this.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is very unfair to renters across the State. The Tánaiste stands there and waffles when these landlords are telling him they are increasing rents.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The increases will take a while, he said.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will move to the next question.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The increases will take a while, he said.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Deputy Buttimer knows this is happening.

The Tánaiste: Sorry, but there is a serious issue here.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: These landlords say one in seven renters leave every year.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Can Members please respect the Chair? I will say again that I do not mind robust exchanges – they are fine – but the carry-on here on Thursday mornings is nothing short of shameful. I ask Members to acknowledge the Chair, acknowledge Standing Orders and please conduct the debate in an orderly fashion.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: If I am allowed, in line with the rules of the House, to respond-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Yes.

The Tánaiste: -----in the minute that is given to me to respond to the charges that are put across this House. The position put forward by Sinn Féin in telling people their rents are going to rise by 25% is categorically untrue. It is being done to scaremonger and to worry. Sinn Féin talks about investment funds as though they are the big bad wolf while regularly meeting them, according to the lobbying register, and while accepting millions of dollars from construction companies and property developers in Friends of Sinn Féin in the United States, as we saw in *The Sunday Times*.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you.

The Tánaiste: They are hypocrites when it comes to this. We are on the side of renters. That is why we are increasing supply-----

(Interruptions)

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Catch yourself on.

The Tánaiste: -----and bringing in rent protection that nobody has ever seen before.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Catch yourself on, man. The only thing the Tánaiste is missing is a red nose because this is the kind of thing you would hear from a clown. He says he is on the side of renters when the biggest landlord in the State is talking about jacking up rents.

The Tánaiste: We are on the side of renters. Sinn Féin is on the side of absolute hypocrisy. Seriously.

(Interruptions)

The Tánaiste: When you cut through the noise, all you get from Sinn Féin is hypocrisy.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Tánaiste, please.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Honest to God. The Tánaiste makes for a good comedian.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The Leinster House comedy club.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: Two weeks ago, "RTÉ Investigates" aired two programmes on the appalling treatment of some of the most vulnerable and seriously mentally ill persons in this country. It made for harrowing viewing. It is unconscionable that the State effectively condemns mentally ill persons who come into contact with the law to indefinite remand, without access to the appropriate medication or treatment, and all because of the lack of appropriate care in the community. In the wake of these revelations about the state of our adult psychiatric services and the reliance on our prison system to deal with and treat these people, what is the Government response? To be honest, I have heard no urgency nor any update by way of response to what is a scandal of this State. In the words of Professor Charles O'Mahony, who contributed to the programme, Ireland is effectively using the Prison Service to warehouse people with severe mental illness. Our country has replaced one form of detention in psychiatric institutions for many decades with another, the prison system. That is wrong.

There are around 340 psychiatric patients being held in prisons across this country, with dozens of acutely psychotic people waiting for admission to the Central Mental Hospital. We know that one third of the beds in the Central Mental Hospital remain unopened. We heard just this week from the HSE that it hopes that ten beds will open by March but it could not be confirmed.

A high-level task force report on mental health and addiction from 2022 contains some really good recommendations but there was no progress report last year, which is the year some of those recommendations were supposed to be implemented. It seems when it comes to the crunch there is little or no action.

We all know this system did not emerge today or yesterday. It emerged over many decades. We now need a complete change of approach. We need to move away from using detention as a tool of control. Last year, the Mental Health Commission said there had been 62% reduction in the use of seclusion practices and restriction practices in psychiatric institutions. That is great but the reality is that many of those people are now being held in our prison system. We need to move away from a system where the only access to mental health supports is through the prison system. Conor Ryan from "RTÉ Investigates" told the story from Cloverhill Prison of how people were being refused access to psychiatric units within our hospitals and only finding that help within the prison system. We need to move to a system of diversion.

Recommendations in the Henchy report are now 50 years old but have not been implemented by the State.

These are life and death issues, not just for the patients but also for their families. In recent weeks, I spoke to the family of Maud Coffey, who lost their sister two years ago, and to the family of Natalie McGuinness. The thread is very clear. There is a lack of joined-up thinking between mental health services and a lack of communication with families and, ultimately, people are losing their lives.

What is the Government's response to this horrendous situation of using the prison system to effectively treat and detain people who are seriously mentally ill? Will the Government proceed with a programme for Government commitment to build approved health centres within the prison system? To be frank, that is the completely wrong approach. Will the Government prioritise diversion over detention for seriously mentally ill people in this country and place diversion on a statutory framework?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Sherlock for raising this very important, sensitive and real issue in our country, our prisons and in relation to our mental health services. It is something that I know is having a real and painful impact and is a worry for many families in our country too. I join with the many who have already thanked those who spoke on the recent "RTÉ Investigates" programme on the forensic mental health services for sharing their lived experiences and giving voice to issues that should not be seen or debated in this House as abstractions. While I am not a clinician, the responsibility of the Minister of State with responsibility for mental health and all of us in the Government must be to maintain public confidence in an essential service for a highly vulnerable group of patients - I use the word "patients" because that is what they are - and the dedicated staff who care for them. I spoke to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, recently on this. She has asked the HSE for full reports on the cases highlighted in the programme, particularly those involving the Central Mental Hospital. I just want to make that point. The Minister of State has also asked that all appropriate care options for the individuals featured be examined.

There are actions under way to try to improve this situation. I know it is a statement of fact but it is important to remind us all that the Central Mental Hospital is just that; it is a hospital. Its purpose is and must be to provide treatment to support rehabilitation but also to have a carefully, safe, managed environment to help people return to the community where possible. We have seen demand for forensic mental health services grow in recent years and we have seen the opening of the new CMH at Portrane. That was an important moment. It saw the transfer of over 90 patients from an old, outdated, really inappropriate building in the Dundrum facility to a new hospital that has been recognised as one of the best forensic mental health hospitals in Europe. However, we need to open more beds in it. We have 114 operational beds at CMH. That is an increase of 20% on the former hospital. Additional funding has been secured to open the remaining 16 beds and recruiting staff is the key priority here. There is a need for very specialised staff in some of these settings, as the Deputy will be aware. An additional €2.8 million was provided in budget 2026 to open what they call the new ICRU which will bring beds into use that will support smoother patient movement through the Portrane campus and will also create further space.

On our prisons specifically, we already have two psychiatric intensive care units at Carraig Mór centre in Cork and the Phoenix care centre in Dublin, and we are also now providing psychiatric in-reach services to ten of our country's 12 prisons, assessing and treating prisoners with moderate to severe mental illness. Additional funding has also been provided to extend this service to Limerick Prison and we are very eager to progress with that as quickly as possible.

There is a programme for Government commitment. I think the Deputy has a different point of view on health and the Prison Service but the view was here that there was a need to provide within the Prison Service for people who require imprisonment to meet their mental health needs, separate and distinct from the health needs that could be provided in the hospital.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: Everything the Tánaiste has said is nothing new in that it is already contained within the service plan for the HSE for this year or last year. The reality is that there has been no response to the appalling revelations. I am shocked, as I hope other people are as well, but we are not hearing that urgency from Government. The reality is that not every bed within the Central Mental Hospital will be open by the end of this year and there is no plan to open every single bed. That is absolutely wrong. The reality is that the State has failed to invest over many years. Last year, €95 million was spent on exporting some of our most seriously ill patients to the UK - a 20% increase last year - all because of the failure to build here. This is the week in which we see an actual cut in the HSE capital plan this year compared to last year. There is a lack of a plan and a lack of action on the part of this Government with regard to mental health services. For years, we have had soothing words that there was going to be an increase in support. The reality is that mental health is the poor relation of the health service, and that needs to change.

The Tánaiste: I take the Deputy's point and I accept her bone fides in relation to this but this is an issue Government is taking extraordinarily seriously. The Minister of State, Deputy Butler, is taking a very hands-on leadership approach to this area. I thank her for that. She has the support of all of us in government. On the specific, very worrying and concerning revelations in the "RTÉ Investigates" programme, the Minister has sought a full report from the HSE on each of the experiences and cases highlighted in that programme. I know she is very eager to get that report and is very eager to be able to work through any such report on a response to the issues. Objectively and fairly, the decision we took to invest in, and now open, a brand new, state-of-the-art Central Mental Hospital, deemed one of the best forensic mental health hospitals in Europe, is a major step forward in forensic mental health services in this country. If you had all the money and all the staff in the world, you would still open that hospital on a phased basis to get it right and to do it in a very orderly way considering the complexity of care that is required. We have seen that. Ninety three patients have been successfully moved, capacity has been increased to 114 and there is now a process to continue to open all of the beds. More broadly, should there be an ability of the mental health services to spend more capital the Government will provide that funding.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Let us be very clear. It is not the Opposition that made the claim that the rental income of IRES REIT is going to go up by 25% as a result of the changes the Government has made. It was IRES REIT that made that claim. Does the Tánaiste accept that?

His only defence seems to be that not every renter will be affected immediately. Does he not realise that a 25% increase in someone's rent, whether it is this year, next year or the year after, is completely unmanageable for the vast bulk of renters? How does the Government think people are going to be able to pay this increase? Does it not understand that people are already struggling to make ends meet and to pay their Bills? The Government admitted this week it got it completely wrong on SNAs. Will it admit it has got it completely wrong in terms of these changes that are a gift to corporate landlords?

To put this in context, IRES REIT made a profit of almost €50 million last year. Does the Tánaiste not understand that the changes are going to cause even more hardship for renters and for families, putting them under more pressure? Does he not understand it will push more and more people into homelessness, that we already have record homelessness, including a record number of homeless children, and, shamefully, a record number of homeless pensioners? This is going to make it even worse. Beidh níos mó agus níos mó daoine gan teach.

Earlier this week, the State's biggest landlord, IRES REIT, about which we are talking, announced it was going to buy up an entire apartment block in Naas. This block with 77 apartments was already under construction. IRES REIT is not building anything new or increasing supply. Individuals and families who were hoping to buy one of these apartments and homes when the construction was completed are now being left disappointed. It is doing this because of Government policy. Government refused to ban corporate landlords and investment funds from bulk-buying apartments. Now, by letting rents rip it has opened the flood gates. These corporate landlords are going to snap up more and more homes. People work so hard to support their families and to get a place of their own. Instead of saving to buy a home, they are now handing over their wages to these giant landlords.

Is the Tánaiste so blinded by his craven ideology of giving these corporate landlords whatever they want and ask for that he cannot see the damage he is doing? Renters in Ireland who are already paying some of the highest rents in Europe are now going to be fleeced even more. The Government admitted it got it completely wrong on SNAs. Will the Tánaiste now admit it has got it completely wrong on letting rents rip and reverse its decision on this?

The Tánaiste: I have never been accused of having a craven ideology before. Our only policy objective in this coalition Government is to make sure we build more homes for our people to buy and rent and to make sure we deliver supply. Without properties, apartments and homes to buy or rent, every conversation we have in this House is interesting but academic. It is interesting but abstract if we do not build enough homes. The Housing Commission, which I am sure did not have any ideology either, as it had lots of different perspectives and backgrounds, said very clearly that there was a need for private investment in terms of getting to the supply. I make the point respectfully that it is surely not the Deputy's position that the only people who should be building apartments should be the State. Surely we see the benefit in private investment alongside an unparalleled level of State investment in housing. We are investing more than most European countries in housing supply, yet we know, as do the Housing Commission and everybody who has looked, that in and of itself will not be enough. It will not be enough to fix the housing emergency unless we also attract in others to add private investment funds. If we talk of ideology, we should be very careful we do not demonise that. We need a diversity of supply. We also need lots of different types of building and construction under way.

I hope the Deputy would accept the points I have made in this House that the comments this morning on national radio regarding the 25% clarify there was never a position that was going to be in a year or, indeed, in two or three years. That was apparently a projection, according to the comment on the radio this morning, over ten years. I am not saying anyone did it intentionally but it has been done in such a manner that has caused fear and worry. Nobody is suggesting market rents are going to be reset at 25%; not the investment fund the Deputy quoted. That investment fund has clarified that this morning. It is important we make that point too.

I have acknowledged, because it is the truth, that from March it will be possible for new tenancies to have rents set to market rate. I have also said, and it is only fair the Opposition also says this, that along side that there is a protection for the renter that is not there today, in that their tenancy is secure for six years and their rent cannot be adjusted beyond inflation capped at 2% for the next six years. That is a significant protection for people who rent a property. They know they are there for six years, there is an effective no-fault eviction ban in place and their rent is effectively capped at no more than a 2% increase per year.

That is a significant package of changes. Yes, there are comments from all sides of the debate - the left, the right and everywhere - about how we could have done this or done that. Lots of different people have a different perspective. The Government has tried to arrive at a balanced point of view here, one that drives more people to invest because, by God, we need it - we need more homes and apartments built in this country - but also one that, alongside that, puts in place a very ambitious, comprehensive set of protections for renters that have not existed in this country before and have been warmly welcomed by many, including those in the UCD school of social policy.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Mick Byrne of the UCD school of social policy, whom the Tánaiste has been quoting, said that what the Government is doing is effectively removing rent regulation. The Tánaiste has been selectively quoting what he has been saying on this.

The Tánaiste: As has Deputy O'Callaghan.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: IRES REIT has been very clear in what it has said on this. It has said it believes its rents are currently about 20% below what it believes should be the market levels and it has said these changes will result in its rental income going up by about 25%. The Tánaiste has not addressed that. Simply saying that not every renter will face this straight away and, when they do face it, the rent can only go up by 2% every year for a few years does not address it. When it balloons by such an amount, how will people be able to cope with that?

Does the Tánaiste not understand that if people are already put to the pin of their collar in terms of paying rent and their rent jumps by 20% or 25%, that will push more families, pensioners and children into homelessness? Does the Tánaiste not understand that? How will people paying extortionate rents be able to face those kinds of increases? What will they do? Will the Tánaiste reverse his decision?

The Tánaiste: I patronisingly get asked by the Opposition whether I do not understand, but does the Opposition not understand that we have to increase supply? We have to increase

supply. I never hear from the Opposition, beyond more State investment - which we are doing - what policy lever the Opposition would pull to encourage more people to build more apartments. The people who vote for them and those who vote for me-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Cut VAT.

Deputy Rory Hearne: What about the State investment scheme?

The Tánaiste: We have very significant levels of State investment. We have a Land Development Agency-----

Deputy Rory Hearne: Why is there not more? The Government is bringing in investment funds.

The Tánaiste: Maybe the Social Democrats will give Deputy Hearne a go at Leaders' Questions one day. We are investing more than ever in housing. We are investing more than most European countries - genuinely.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: None of that justifies a 20% increase in rent.

The Tánaiste: However, there is a need and it is not just my view and it is certainly not my craven ideology; it is the view of the Housing Commission-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: It never said to increase rents by 25%. When did it say to do that?

The Tánaiste: No, it said to get in private investment. There is no Government policy to do that.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is to increase rent.

The Tánaiste: The Government's policy is to stimulate private investment-----

Deputy Rory Hearne: By throwing renters under the bus?

The Tánaiste: -----but alongside that put in place a package that the Opposition is refusing to acknowledge because it does not work for their social media clips.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Rory Hearne: This is about social media, is it?

The Tánaiste: There will be an effective no-fault eviction ban. The Opposition will put up a selective clip that will put the fear of God in people in relation to rent but it will not tell them about the no-fault eviction ban.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: What the Government is doing is putting the fear of God into people.

The Tánaiste: It will not tell them about nationwide renters' protections. It will not tell them that, actually, the sound bites delivered in here yesterday were dispelled on national radio today. Let us be fair on this sensitive issue. Let us actually bring forward ideas in relation to this. We are bringing forward a balanced package to stimulate supply and protect renters.

Deputy Peadar Kirby: The Office of the Confidential Recipient was founded in 2014 as a result of the Áras Attracta scandal. That scandal was exposed by RTÉ in a documentary called "Inside Bungalow 3". Disturbing undercover footage showed vulnerable adults being mistreated by some staff within that HSE-funded service. It showed inhumane and degrading treatment to residents and several people with intellectual disabilities in that location. Secretly recorded footage showed that staff members were slapping, kicking, force-feeding and physically restraining vulnerable adults while also subjecting them to psychological abuse, such as shouting and demeaning insults. The exposé revealed a systematic culture of neglect and institutional control, where residents were often treated like eternal children and deprived of basic dignity and liberty.

In the aftermath of that, several of the staff faced criminal prosecutions and convictions. Nine were immediately suspended. The scandal triggered multiple national inquiries by HIQA and the HSE. One of the main outcomes of that scandal was the fact the HSE set up safeguarding services and the Office of the Confidential Recipient was created. The then director general of the HSE, Tony O'Brien, said the Office of the Confidential Recipient would, under the terms of the 2004 Act, be a recipient of formal, legal delegation from him, giving her the authority through the health service and the powers invested in the chief executive of the HSE.

I have heard shocking news about that office this week. The Office of the Confidential Recipient is to have its powers eradicated. It was an independent avenue for the public to get issues of wrongdoing resolved. A total of 1,500 formal complaints were made. Thousands of consultations and inquiries were held. Hundreds of vulnerable people who had no other pathway to justice used that system. As a result of new decision within the HSE, shockingly, the powers invested in the Office of the Confidential Recipient will be eradicated. The delegation, which is the legal underpinning of the powers of the confidential recipient, is to be set aside. Without that delegation, the office has no independent powers.

The new national framework HSE policy for adult safeguarding in the health and social care sector, which was just announced, has a serious and inherent conflict of interest. The HSE will now be its own de facto regulator. The HSE, which is the primary carer for these individuals, will now be the primary investigator of abuse in that particular sector. These fundamental changes mean that the confidential recipient will basically have no independence. She will

come under the office of the chief social worker of the HSE. Essentially, it has made that office answerable to the chief social worker on an operational basis.

I ask the Tánaiste here today what independent and confidential pathways will vulnerable patients of the HSE have to get justice and have their situations looked at? Will he make sure this decision is reversed?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue and reminding us of a lot of the very good work that has been done by that office since its establishment. I recall the appointment of Leigh Gath, who I think was the first confidential recipient. She was a woman whom I knew and she did incredible work. She was a Thalidomide survivor herself and a disability advocate. She really did excellent work and I acknowledge that and think of her today.

I will ask the Minister for Health to come back to the Deputy directly with any further information or thoughts on this but my understanding is that when the office was originally established much of the structure that is in place today in relation to safeguarding, and even the role of the chief social worker within the HSE, bizarrely, perhaps, did not exist. There has been a very significant overhaul of the structures in place. We now have a chief social worker. That chief social worker has that overall responsibility for delivery of adult safeguarding services. We have had expert reviews in relation to that role and the structure of safeguarding services within the HSE as well.

My understanding, and based on what the Deputy has said, which I have no reason to disbelieve or doubt, is that the confidential recipient's reporting line will now be to the chief social worker as opposed to the chief executive of the HSE. I make the point that, even as originally constructed, the office always reported in, for want of a better phrase, to the HSE, whether to the CEO or the director general previously. In this case, there is some wisdom to the idea that the chief social worker is a person who has a level of professional expertise and qualification that may indeed be more appropriate. The structure has changed. I genuinely do not believe there is any attempt to downgrade or in any way devalue the vital work done. I reiterate the Government's view that this work is vital, beneficial and has made a very significantly positive impact on improvements to our health service. We want to see that continue.

However, the structure of the HSE has changed and there is now a chief social worker position that did not exist when the original structure was put in place. That is my understanding of the change, no more and no less. I will ask the Minister for Health to reflect further on the Deputy's comments and revert to him.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: What is happening here at the moment is a serious scandal. This country has a really bad record in terms of standing up for people with disabilities and learning difficulties. Many of them have been abandoned for a long period of time. State bodies have a history of defending their institutions against those individuals who have been wronged. That is a record that is peppered right throughout the State bodies in this country. Look at the Brandon and Emily cases. The Brandon case exposed 100 incidents of sexual abuse and other abuse against people with intellectual disabilities in Donegal. The Emily case involved the rape of a nursing home resident with dementia in this State. We are talking about situations of

absolutely grave importance. We are also talking about a serious eradication of that independent power and confidential power.

Already, there are people within the HSE refusing to work with the confidential recipient or get into things with her. Already, that is happening within the HSE.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You should conclude, Deputy Tóibín.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The idea that in some way getting rid of independence and putting another individual of the HSE in control of an office for investigations that are to happen in the HSE is backwards. It is giving the power to investigate to the organisation that is accused of the wrongdoing.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You should conclude, Deputy.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: That never works. Will the Tánaiste seek a reversal of this?

The Tánaiste: I disagree with the Deputy's characterisation of it but I appreciate the point he is trying to make. It is a highly important issue that we all need to be alert to. This office has operated since day one as an independent office. It was an independent office that receives confidential information and then reports it to the HSE's CEO.

When it was reporting it as an independent office to the HSE's CEO, there was no chief social work officer responsible for reforming and driving reform in this area. There now is. Certainly the Minister can revert to the Deputy on some of the concerns he has raised, but I want to be really clear: the office remains independent. There has been no effort to subsume the office into the HSE's internal structures. What has changed, and the Deputy is correct on this, is the reporting structure. The confidential recipient now reports in their information to the chief social worker and had previously reported in to the HSE's CEO. That is being done from a place of wanting to reflect how-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is a radical move.

The Tánaiste: -----the HSE now operates and the role and the value of the chief social worker because the chief social worker has been a positive addition, for the many reasons that the Deputy outlined, to the HSE. I will ask the Minister to come back to the Deputy further.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Barry Ward: I want to ask the Tánaiste about the SNA circular and the recent bad handling by the Department of a reorganisation of SNAs. It has caused huge upset within and without this House.

I pay tribute to Michelle Cotterell, who is the principal of Our Lady of Good Counsel Boys' National School in Johnstown in my constituency. Ms Cotterell was one of the leaders in

highlighting this issue. One of the reasons for that was that her school was one of the ones that got the really bad news about SNAs.

I welcome the steps taken by the Government to stop this and to give some certainty to people until the end of the next academic year, but the reality is that is the extent of the certainty that they have been given. Already, SNAs and schools worry about what is going to happen in the following academic year.

There are two issues that have emerged from this that we need to address urgently. The first is the redrafting and refocusing of Circular 30/14, which was reissued in 2024 and is totally out of date. The circular does not reflect the reality of what teachers are facing on the ground in terms of the difficulties that some students have and the accommodations that they need, and the assistance they need, much of which is provided through the SNA system. The circular does not reference the many conditions we know children now have to face - the difficulties and the obstacles they face in terms of achieving the same educational equality that we all want for all of our children. As a parent whose child has not yet started school, I know that as she approaches that age this will be a concern for us and for other parents in a similar position. Will the Tánaiste commit to the redesign and refocusing of that circular in a way that reflects what has to be done? Will he also answer the question in relation to what certainty can be provided on a longer term basis because, although the Government has stepped in and I am delighted that it did, we still have a job to do to convince SNAs, teachers, principals, parents and children that there is certainty in the longer term?

The second point is perhaps a wider issue. I have put down questions in this House about what the cost would be of expanding the SNA provision and having a second adult in every classroom - a second pair of hands for every teacher. Although there are children who have more profound needs and may need more focused attention from an SNA, the notion that we have school classrooms the way they were 30 or 40 years ago is now an outdated model. We need to look at a situation where teachers have that assistance within the classroom from another adult and that should not be limited to classes where they can prove there is a specific need for a specific child. We should be looking at it from a policy perspective and saying there is a broader idea here that we should be giving teachers the back-up and support that they need and that means a second pair of hands in every room in addition to maybe targeted supports that are proven, through medical need or whatever it might be, in accordance with the circular. Nobody in the Department of education seems to be able to answer the question as to how much it would cost to have an SNA in every classroom in addition to whatever specific needs are tailored to the children in that classroom.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ward for bringing up this issue. I am particularly grateful to him for mentioning Michelle Cotterell, the principal, because I saw the report on the Six One news the other night. I have never met Ms Cotterell - I would be happy to meet her - but I thought her presentation of the issue was exceptional. She made the point - indeed, it is a point I have been repeating in the days since - that we have to use the period of time between now and future school years to look at the fact that the school community or composition, not only of that school but of all schools, has changed significantly since the 2014 circular, and that is what we intend to do.

We have to be honest in relation to this, and we should be honest. Parents of children with special needs assistants, teachers and SNAs themselves know this. Reviews have always been a feature of the SNA system. They largely paused since Covid. They have always been a feature. We need to make sure, though, that the review is based on a revised circular that is more reflective and understanding of the reality in the school classroom today. The reality is that when it comes to the phrase "additional and significant needs", there are children whose additional and significant care needs are obvious and visible, and there now likely more such children, certainly than there were in 2014, and there are some who are less likely to be visible and perhaps could be referred to as hidden or at least often hidden. That is the point that I heard Ms Cotterell make. It is a point that I heard many people make. It is a point that I think is true.

We are going to revise the circular. We should do this in a deliberative manner. We should listen, we should engage and we should get it right.

Crucially, we also need to get the SNA redeployment scheme over the line. My understanding is it is almost there. This is something that I acknowledge Fórsa has been engaging constructively on. I thank it for that. This is important and it would put SNAs on a similar par to teachers in terms of redeployment.

Third, we need to also have a look at workforce planning in general in special education. What frustrates parents of a child with additional needs is that we can stand here and say we are spending more money than ever before - true - we will have more SNAs in classrooms than ever before - true - and we will have more special classes open than ever before - true - and yet one will not meet many parents of a child with additional needs who feels the system is where the system needs to be. We need to look at how we workforce plan.

The Deputy raised an interesting point and I will not give a knee-jerk response to it on the floor of the Dáil. I certainly remember when I was in school a classroom assistant used to actually be a role. I have no sense of where the policy thinking in the Department of education is on that but I will certainly follow up with the Minister for education on that.

Our priority, alongside the SNA circular review, is the roll-out of the therapist workforce in education. We now have for the first time - it has only started - established within the NCSE an education therapy workforce. Forty-five special schools are being sanctioned first but the ultimate aim here is to get this into mainstream schools. That could make a very significant difference because one of the realities that I hear from SNAs is that often they find themselves having to also pick up the slack due to the lack of provision of other services, most particularly therapies. We need to look at how we can address that therapy deficit too.

Deputy Barry Ward: I thank the Tánaiste. One word he used in his answer is really important, and that is "understanding". The circular needs to represent an understanding of what teachers face and what school communities face in terms of the additional assistance they need to put in place.

I attended a meeting earlier this week with approximately 30 principals from my constituency. One of the comments at that meeting was that the Government does not trust teachers. I do not think that is the case. There is an issue of trust with the Department and with officials because the reality is that, through the scheme, when teachers go to the Department and say they need X, Y or Z in terms of special needs assistants, what they get back is a load

of paperwork asking them to prove it, essentially. We need to move, through the circular and through the scheme, to a place where we are trusting teachers, who are the professionals on the ground, the people with the training and the people with knowledge of the particular school community. When they say they need something, we should accept that they need it and are not saying it to make their lives easier or because they have picked a figure out of the air. Let us trust teachers, let us deliver for them and let us make sure that the children they are teaching are given the best possible opportunity to achieve what they can achieve in terms of their schooling.

The Tánaiste: Something good has to come from this. When you are a parent under pressure worrying if your child is going to get the supports that they need, you do not really care which arm of the State, which office, which Minister or which Department. The buck stops with us, the Government. That is why we needed to stop the review, provide the additional SNAs where that was identified, not have a downward revision in schools but then crucially use this time - that is the really important bit.

I say this in the spirit it is meant. We should engage collaboratively in this House, whether at relevant Oireachtas committees or wherever the appropriate place is, to identify what we want the system to look like into the future. The level of investment now, quite rightly, is very high.

The number of people in the system, quite rightly, is very high. All of us feel that we are getting to a point where it is also going to have to involve a conversation about reform and about what an inclusive model of education looks like. Nobody has a monopoly in terms of the answer on that.

It has been an upsetting week. In politics, when something goes wrong, it is your responsibility to say that, to fix it and to learn from it. That is what we intend to do.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before we move to Questions on Policy or Legislation, I wish to acknowledge the group of students in the Public Gallery. They sat patiently through all of the Leaders' Questions and other business of the House. I do not know where or what constituency they are from or what school they might be from, but I want to give them a bit of homework. They might write to the Ceann Comhairle to let us know what they thought of this morning's behaviour.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: Hear, hear.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I would love to hear from them, because my 12-year-old grandchild tells me that if her class behaved the way some people behave in this House-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Some.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: -----they would be sent to the principal's office. I do not know what the equivalent of that would be in Dáil Éireann-----

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: That would be your office

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: -----but, certainly, I could pick out a few from this morning and most other Thursday mornings, whom I would love to send to the principal's office. I look forward to hearing from the students.

Meastacháin i gcomhair Seirbhísí Poiblí 2025: Teachtaireacht ó Roghchoiste

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Tá Roghchoiste na Gaeilge, na Gaeltachta agus Phobal Labhartha na Gaeilge de chuid Dáil Éireann tar éis athbhreithniú a chríochnú ar na Meastacháin seo a leanas i gcomhair seirbhísí poiblí le haghaidh seirbhísí na bliana dár gcríoch an 31 Nollaig 2026: Vóta 42 - an Roinn Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail, agus Gaeltachta.

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

Deputy Martin Kenny: Five people are occupying the offices of Bord Bia at the moment. They do not want to be there; they want this situation to be resolved. In fairness, the Irish Farmers Association, IFA, in recent days put forward a proposal to try to resolve it. The IFA has offered a suggestion to the effect that the chairperson of Bord Bia step aside while a full review of the situation takes place. Will the Government please, in the interests of everybody involved and, in particular, the industry, which has been brought into disrepute because of what is going on, accept that and move the situation forward?

This week and last week, thousands of farmers attended meetings around the country. I attended two of those meetings. Farmers are angry, frustrated and annoyed and cannot believe that the Government cannot see the contradiction of the chair of Bord Bia importing Brazilian beef while being the main advocate when it comes to the sale of Irish products. Farmers are not stupid people. They hear Government telling them that they do not understand the nature of global supply chains. When the Government tells them that, what they hear is "You guys are stupid." They are not stupid. They are intelligent, sensible people who want a solution. Will the Government please bring this matter to a head and sort it out? It cannot go on. If it does, it is going to escalate because these farmers are not going to back down.

The Tánaiste: Farmers are far from stupid; they are the backbone of the indigenous Irish economy. They also know that this Government has their back. It had their back on nitrates and on Mercosur and will have it when it comes to the CAP and bluetongue. We know that they know we are with them and will be supporting them. We have had a point of disagreement with regard to the chair of a semi-State board. The Government has a job to do, and this Oireachtas has had a vote in respect of that. We have had committee hearings and there have been board meetings. The Minister for agriculture, Deputy Heydon, is engaging intensively on these matters. I thank him for all the work he is doing.

The board of Bord Bia held a scheduled meeting on Wednesday, 18 February. Following that meeting, the IFA submitted a document that consisted of seven strands and that requested that the board of Bord Bia commit to initiating a review process into the various issues that have arisen in recent weeks. Many of the seven strands relate to the quality assurance schemes. These can be dealt with by the farmer forum that Bord Bia is establishing on foot of the

commitments given at the 18 February meeting. In addition, the Minister is examining the option to commission an expert-led governance review which would cover the other strands of the IFA proposal. There has been direct contact with senior members of the IFA regarding its proposals in the context of trying to find a potential compromise. The word "compromise" is important here, because compromise does not mean somebody getting their own way. I have spoken to the president of the IFA in recent days, as has the Minister. Everyone wants a resolution to this.

The board of Bord Bia will meet again on 2 March. We all agree that this protracted dispute is not in the best interest of the agrifood sector. Engagement is taking place and efforts are being made to resolve the matter.

Deputy Duncan Smith: The Tánaiste will be aware that this is Eating Disorders Week. He will also be aware of the relentless work my colleague Deputy Sherlock has done and continues to do in this area. Yesterday, I attended the most impactful presentation I have ever be at in my many years on this campus. The presentation was made by Cared Ireland in the audiovisual room. Cared Ireland is a voluntary organisation that represents parents and carers of people with eating disorders. Those present shared absolutely heartbreaking stories. It is hard to get across just how powerful that hour was. Eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of all mental health illnesses. One in 20 people in Ireland will experience an eating disorder in their lifetime. A study by the Health Research Board has shown a 121% rise in hospital admissions for eating disorders among children. In real terms, the number of cases rose from 170 to 375 between 2018 and 2022.

Will the Government engage with Cared Ireland and listen to its demands, of which there are a number? Can it commit to an immediate emergency plan for those with no access to services, to the full resourcing of eating disorder teams in child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS and adult mental health services, AMHS, without delay, and to a mandatory transition pathway between CAMHS and AMHS?

The Tánaiste: The Deputy has been in this House long enough that when he says he attended the most impactful presentation he has been to, I take that very seriously. I will certainly arrange for the relevant Ministers, perhaps Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, in the first instance, to engage with that organisation and work through the list of, no doubt, constructive proposals it has put forward to try to make progress in support in this area.

Deputy Jen Cummins: Special education in this country is decades behind special education other modern countries. In recent weeks and months, we have witnessed the absolute shambles of the SNA cuts and the lack of appropriate school places for children with additional needs. Thankfully, the Government, in a late-night announcement on Monday, conceded to public pressure, and a promise of €19 million, and no cuts, was made. The public accounts committee has representatives from the Department of education before it at the moment. The Department of public expenditure has just stated that it does not know where the money in question is coming from. Where is it going to come from? Did the Government make the announcement because it just wanted to buy itself out of the difficulty it was in at the time?

Yesterday, one of my colleagues in the Labour Party referred to the fact that far more special education places are needed than Government has planned for and that, perhaps, 800 to 1,000 students will be left without appropriate school places. The Opposition party leaders met following yesterday's country-wide protests, and there is a groundswell of public mobilisation against the Government's disastrous handling of this matter. I know that the Government wants to build back trust and do the best it can for every child in this country. How is it going to fix this and how long is that going to take?

The Tánaiste: The Government has voted expenditure of over €118 billion. Within that voted expenditure, this additional allocation of around €19 million will be made to the Department of Education and Youth. No official should be in any way glib in that regard, because we are very sincere in respect of this matter. That money will be provided. I say this as a coalition leader and as the Minister for Finance.

I take the point that after the week we have had, trust has to be earned back. That is a fair point. People were deeply upset and hurt. I can outline the rationale and all the statistics, but what I have said is also true - people were upset and hurt. How you earn that trust back is by listening and delivering. Therefore, in the first instance, we will deliver on the part of the review that would have seen additional SNAs being allocated to schools. We will not go ahead with the part that would have seen a reduction in the number of SNAs. We will revise Circular 0030/2014, and it is a long time since then. We are happy to hear the Deputy's views and the views of others in relation to that. We will get the SNA redeployment scheme over the line.

I say the following to be constructive- I said it a moment ago, and I know the Deputy has a sincere interest in it. We in this House need to look at how we can have wider engagement on the broader policy issues. The demographics are bringing us into certain areas, as are the complexities involved. We need to have an informed discussion about the policy approach we want to take, as well as about the funding approach.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Local government is the beating heart of democracy. That heart was torn out of democracy in 2014 with the abolition of town and borough councils. The latter were replaced by committees with no powers, no functions and no funding. This has done serious damage to towns across the country in the context of their economic and social development. It is now widely acknowledged, even by a former leader of the Labour Party, Brendan Howlin, that this was a very bad decision.

The local government task force established to examine the position held its first meeting on 26 June last year.

1 o'clock

Its report and the recommendations in it were to be with the Minister within a six- to nine-month period. We are now at the end of the eighth month of that period. Has the Minister received the report? When will the Government re-establish town and borough councils and will they be in place in time for the local elections in 2029?

The Tánaiste: I truthfully do not know if the Minister has received the report, but I will certainly find out for the Deputy and ask that the Minister write to him. The programme for

Government is clear in relation to this. There are examples around the country. I should declare an interest that I am a former member of a town commission in Greystones. There are examples of how town councils and town commissions provided excellent work, not just for budding politicians who might have wanted to go from a town council to a county council or maybe even the Dáil, but also for people who wanted to just serve their communities in that role. The councils organised events such as the Christmas lights or St. Patrick's Day parades and fostered a sense of civic pride. This is something the Government is actively considering. It might be something that bridges the political divide in Tipperary, because Deputy Murphy has also raised this matter in the context of Clonmel. I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and the Minister, Deputy Browne, to come back to Deputy Healy regarding the timeline for that report.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: The Tánaiste's party campaigned in the run up to the general election to review and remove the eight-year deemed disposal requirement for Irish domiciled funds and life products. As he will be aware - but, just for everyone else's benefit - the system taxes people 38% every eight years on gains they have not made yet. This was reduced slightly in the budget, but it is still regressive and in practice might be pushing ordinary savers into property investments when they could be funding worthwhile projects, especially if a wider number of schemes were to be introduced. I understand that some progress on this matter may be made through the taxation of retail investment. It would be great to get a timeframe as to whether the Government will definitely be doing it this year and if it will be introducing a simple ISA-style investment account, which, I suggest, could be purposed towards providing funding to help build housing or critical infrastructure. Is that being considered?

The Tánaiste: In the two budgets that I intend to deliver as the Minister for Finance, I am absolutely determined that we do something in relation to retail investment. Irish people are among the best savers in the European Union, but we have one of the lowest rates of participation in investments. The reality is that good, hard-working and decent people right across the country are trying to do the right thing and put aside a few bob - even very small amounts because times are tough - but that money is not earning them anything. We have to fix that. In that context, I am actively considering how we might bring in a savings and investment account in line with the Savings and Investment Union at EU level. I am looking at what has been done in the UK, Sweden, Canada, Japan and a number of other countries. I intend to convene a stakeholder forum on this within the next month or so, with the view to having options in advance of the budget. Deemed disposal is something that definitely deserves consideration. There is an unfairness in relation to it, and it was brought in at a very different time. I am minded to see what progress can be made on it in the time ahead. Specific taxation measures are obviously a matter for budget day.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I want to speak on behalf of the small businesses that are the backbone of our local economies. They are the real heroes at local level in light of the extent to which they invest local, spend local and hire local. These businesses are under huge pressure as a result of increased costs, something that is acknowledged on page 15 of the programme for Government. The programme for Government contains a commitment to making changes to employers' PRSI to ease the pressure on small businesses. Is consideration being given to a

PRSI rebate scheme for employers that would be linked to lower paid employees and that will ease the pressure on these heroes at local level, many of whom are in the eye of a perfect storm in the context of increased costs?

The Tánaiste: SMEs remain the backbone of the Irish economy. While this country proudly has a good tradition - and one we want to continue - in terms of foreign direct investment, including in the Deputy's county, the biggest employer in Ireland remains small- and medium-sized enterprises the length of breadth of the country. This is why we took a number of measures in the budget to support small businesses, to protect jobs and to try to maintain competitiveness. We also brought forward the reduced VAT rate on gas and electricity for SMEs and the reduced VAT rate on hospitality will come into place on 1 July. The Minister, Deputy Burke, has established the cost-of-business advisory forum. This will consider all of the costs that businesses face, and particularly small and medium businesses, and any regulatory, infrastructural or policy or budget changes that should be addressed. Specific measures as to what we may or may not be able to do in the budget are a matter for budget day. I assure the Deputy that the next budget, just like the most recent one, will be about protecting jobs and supporting Irish businesses.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: There was a recent announcement of funding for roads in County Clare. An amount of €2.5 million has been allocated for the Drumeen to Darragh section of the N68. It is stated that this is for pavements. Yet, after a back-and-forth, the senior engineer in Clare County Council has stated that it is for resurfacing works on the road in question. A local campaign group has been calling for safety measures on this road. A Garda report shows that there have been 33 collisions on the road and that some of them involved fatalities. In the context of the programme for Government and the road safety strategy, the Government has adopted the Vision Zero strategy with the aim of eliminating all road deaths. Why does the document relating to the funding announcement to which I refer state that the money allocated is for paving work when it is actually for resurfacing works? Will public lighting and road realignment be included? Why have much-needed road safety measures not been included? When will such measures be put in place to ensure that no more lives will be lost on the road in question?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising the very specific issue in relation that particular stretch of the N68. I will follow up directly with the Minister on the matter, on the funding involved and on the purpose for which the Deputy believed and which the documents indicated - it was for versus what she has heard locally. I will ask the Minister to come back to the Deputy on the matter.

I join with the Deputy regarding the broader point in relation to the importance of road safety. We are not that far into 2026, and we are already seeing road fatalities going in the wrong direction. This is an extraordinarily serious issue, after years of progress, and it is going to require all of our best thinking, not just from a policy perspective but also from an enforcement and individual behaviour perspective, to try to reverse this awful situation on Irish roads.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: The building “is not fit for purpose to operate without considerable risk” and “is unsafe and poses a serious immediate threat to the well-being, health and safety of the occupants and users.” This is a consultant's report in relation to St. Patrick's National School in Celbridge. Those occupants and users are children, teachers and staff. The Minister for Education and Youth visited the site just over a month ago. What are needed right now are new modular units. There is a long-term plan for a permanent school, but new modular units are needed immediately. I have proposed a solution to move modular units that are not in use in another school in Kildare to the site. This is something we need to act on now. I am more than happy to share additional information with the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ó Cearúil for raising this important issue in relation to St. Patrick's National School in Celbridge. I am pleased to hear that the Minister visited the school in recent times and will, therefore, have an awareness of the situation. I am also conscious of the health and safety information the Deputy has read out in respect of the seriousness of this matter. On the basis of what he said, it seems that there may be a temporary situation that can be put in place to help alleviate this, including new modular accommodation. The Deputy is being constructive in bringing forward ideas as to how unused accommodation could also help. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to look further at this issue and to revert to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Barry Ward: Most of the wastewater in south-east Dublin is collected at the West Pier pumping station and then pumped under the sea to Poolbeg for treatment. There is an attenuation tank at the West Pier to handle overflow because during high rainfall events, run-off means that there is more water there than can physically be pumped to the pumping station. The attenuation tank at the site is 70,000 cu. m, so it is huge, but when there is an awful lot of rain, it is not big enough. When it fills up and there is no room in the tank to pump the water in, it literally overflows into Dublin Bay. I welcome the nitrates directive, which may be unrelated, but it places a greater obligation on us to deal with water quality issues. This is a water quality issue in Dublin Bay. We eat fish from and we swim in Dublin Bay. This is a major problem. The solution is the construction of a second attenuation tank at the Gut at the back of the West Pier in Dún Laoghaire. Is that something we could look forward to, particularly as it will solve a major water quality problem?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ward for raising this serious issue regarding water quality in Dún Laoghaire and Dublin Bay and more broadly. We have made a lot of progress on water quality in recent years. We are investing more now through Uisce Éireann. On foot of the Deputy raising this issue, I will speak directly to Uisce Éireann in respect of it. We have provided a lot of additional funding to Uisce Éireann for the years ahead. I will certainly ask that it considers the point he has made about the need for a further attenuation tank. I will come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: In the HSE Capital Plan 2026, a new ten-bed specialist community mental health unit has been included in the plan for Wexford, which is more than welcome. Since the closure of St. Senan's acute mental health beds in 2009, Sinn Féin representatives across the county and I have campaigned for their replacement, which was promised by the

Minister for Health at that time. In fairness, the Tánaiste visited Wexford last week and stated that the lack of 24-7 psychiatric care in Wexford is a major concern.

I come from the old school - if you cannot see it or touch it, then it does not exist. When can the people of Wexford expect to see these 24-7 acute beds in operation? Will it be within a five-year period, a ten-year period, or more? We can only speculate on how many lives would have been saved over those 27 years if that promise had been honoured in the first place.

The Tánaiste: I sincerely thank Deputy Mythen for raising this very important issue. As he rightly says, I was in Wexford very recently and I took the opportunity to visit the hospital. I met with the hospital manager, Linda O'Leary, and the team there who do very good work. I was very conscious in all of my engagements in Wexford that there is an acute issue with mental health services in the county. I have had very good discussions with the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, in relation to this. I welcome the fact that the HSE's capital plan in recent days tries to move this forward, with the commitment to a ten specialist bed unit in Wexford. I will ask the Minister of State to come back to the Deputy directly on timelines as to how quickly we can advance it.

In the limited time available to me, I am also aware there are other measures in the here and now that I think need to be advanced, including the provision of 24-7 ED consultant presence in terms of mental health expertise within the ED in Wexford, which I believe is also lacking. I will talk to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, and ask her to come back to the Deputy on timelines.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: On 12 April 2025, serious concerns were raised by people in Grenagh, County Cork regarding the demolition work on the former piggery site where asbestos was present and became airborne. I can confirm that no planning permission was granted by Cork County Council for the demolition works, no planning was granted in respect of the asbestos materials and no disposal plan was in place for these asbestos materials. Both the HSE and HSA have engaged. Remediation works stopped in September last, which is six months ago. No completion timeline has been provided by the land owners to Cork County Council. It is now almost a year since residents flagged this, and they are still living in uncertainty. Local businesses and sports clubs have been affected. Families have questions about safety. People are afraid to use the playground in the area, and property values have significantly declined. Does the Government accept that unauthorised demolition involving asbestos is a serious breach of planning and environmental law? Will the Government now take action to ensure compliance and immediate remediation works in Grenagh?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Flynn very much for raising this issue and the concerns of his constituents and the community in relation to the presence of asbestos and the actions that have been brought about potentially as a result of demolition works. While I am not familiar with all of the granular detail, on foot of the Deputy mentioning that the HSE and the HSA are both familiar with it, I will ask the Minister for Health, who has responsibility for the HSE, and the Minister for enterprise, who has responsibility for the HSA, to engage with both of those organisations and to come back to the Deputy directly. I will also ask that we follow this up with the planning authority from a planning enforcement point of view.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: It was clearly outlined to me just now at the Committee of Public Accounts that the Department of education does not have the number of special classes and special school places available to match the level of need and provide for the number of applicants. Therefore, right now we have children without a place for the next academic year. I was told that all Government leaders are aware of this. When was the Tánaiste made aware of this? Will he put on the record that every child that requires a special class or a special school place will get one for the next academic year, considering that the Department of education just stated that it does not have the resources to match the level of need?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Kenny very much, and for his ongoing work in this important area. I can assure him that the Government is working on this constantly through both the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan. As a Government leader, I am being kept up to date regularly on this, as are others. There are a number of issues here. There is the opening of additional special classes. There is the fact that the portal opened earlier this year to try to have advance and earlier knowledge of the number of places needed. There is also the fact that through no fault of their own, other parents needed to apply after that date. There is also the fact that there may be some students in mainstream classes who may now require special classes as well. There is quite a piece of work going on here to try to clarify all of these matters. We have provided significant funding for more than 400 new special classes, and at least 400 new special school places. This will see almost 3,000 new special education placements created for next September. I assure the Deputy that active work is going on to ensure that places are provided in advance of September. The Government at every level is working closely with the Minister for education and the Minister of State with responsibility for special education on this issue.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I believe the Tánaiste has already spoken about St. Patrick's National School with Deputy Ó Cearúil. I want to build on that. I have just spoken with the Secretary General at the Committee of Public Accounts. Everyone is aware of this now, especially with the damning findings of the architecture report. We need to bring everyone together on it at this stage. We could have modular units in the short term. The Tánaiste has to see it to believe it right now. Is there anything we can do to expedite this?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. What he said is right based on what I have heard today from the Deputy and his colleagues - that you have to see it to believe it. The good news is the fact that the Minister for education has seen it. I know she was out at the school in the past month or so. On foot of the Deputy raising this, I will speak to the Minister, Deputy Naughton, later today and ask that she would endeavour to pull people together to see if we can find a temporary solution that seems to be based around modular, while planning for the longer term future and advancement of the school. The immediate priority has to be to address the health and safety concerns and modular may well be an option and a way forward there. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Today, I want to raise an issue regarding frequent power outages in my constituency, especially for communities in Palmerstown and Clondalkin. Over the past 12 months there have been 11 outages in Palmerstown village, which have impacted an older population and initiatives such as Palmerstown meals-on-wheels. There were two outages in

Clondalkin on Saturday affecting 4,000 households. I have been in touch with the ESB, and it has given me reasons for this but the broader point is the resilience of the network in that general area. As the Tánaiste is aware, Dublin Mid-West is one of the fastest growing constituencies in the country. There is a scale of building happening there right now and we need a resilient energy system and power grid. We need to try to minimise the frequency of these outages so that they do not impact initiatives, and residents and businesses as well. Could the Tánaiste turn his attention to that to see what we can do to increase the resilience of the network?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Moynihan very much for raising this issue, which I can only imagine is causing significant concern for residents and businesses in Palmerstown and Clondalkin in his Dublin Mid-West constituency. On foot of him bringing it to my attention, I will speak to the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, who is the Minister with responsibility for energy and also ask that he engages with the ESB in relation to this. There is a broader issue in regard to our need and wish to invest more in our energy grid, and energy network. The Government has identified significant additional funding for EirGrid among others. It is important that the investment plan is put in place as quickly as possible.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I want to raise with the Tánaiste today the lack of wastewater treatment capacity in the town of Kanturk in north Cork. We are very lucky to have five or six sites in development at the moment, with a number of houses being developed right across the town. We have a number of other applications for planning permission which do not have a wastewater connection at the moment. I believe there is a plan to install a modular wastewater treatment plant alongside the wastewater treatment plant that is currently in place in Kanturk. That will allow for an increase in the population equivalent, PE, in the wastewater treatment plant, which would allow for ca. 230 more houses to be built. I bring this to the floor of the Dáil today in the hope that we could push it forward in the future. Could the Tánaiste give me a response?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Shea very much for raising this matter on behalf of his constituents. My understanding is that the Kanturk wastewater treatment plant has provision in the current RC4 investment cycle. There are plans to initiate a wastewater treatment plant upgrade project. This project is currently at stage 1, where Uisce Éireann develops the project objectives and outcomes and indicative range of costs. This work will continue through the year and I hope we can get this to the business case stage as quickly as possible. More generally, we need to see this moving quickly in terms of water and wastewater. One of the big focuses the Minister, Deputy Chambers, has been working on is that where we have identified need and provided funding, we reduce the regulatory and bureaucratic hurdles in terms of the length of time between the identification of a project and its delivery. Perhaps this is an example of such. As this business case is developed, I will keep in close contact with the Deputy to see that we can deliver the project as quickly as possible.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Bailíodh breis is €41,000 i bPort Láirge chun clinic soghluaiste máithreachais a chur ar fáil do mhná i nGaza. Tá an t-aonad seo i gCaireo na hÉigipte faoi láthair mar nach bhfuil cead aige dul isteach i nGaza. Tá mná ag iompar agus ag

saolú leanaí i gcoinníollacha contúirteacha, míshláintiúla agus mídhaonna. Over €41,000 was raised by Gaeil ar son Gaza in order to fund a mobile maternity clinic for women in Gaza.

This unit is currently stuck in Cairo in Egypt because they are not being permitted entry into Gaza. At the same time, as the Tánaiste knows, Gaza's health system has been devastated and pregnant women are forced to give birth in conditions that are unsafe, dangerous and inhumane. I ask the Tánaiste to urgently intervene and ask the Minister for foreign affairs to do likewise to secure immediate access for these Irish-funded mobile maternity units? Will he use Ireland's voice at EU and UN level to demand safe humanitarian medical access for mothers and newborn babies in Gaza without further delay?

The Tánaiste: I will indeed, and I thank the Deputy for highlighting the issue. I thank his constituents in the community for the incredible amount of fundraising they have done, raising €41,000 for maternity care that is no doubt urgently needed in Gaza where the health service has been obliterated and utterly decimated. I will ask the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to inquire with our embassy in Cairo on this issue to see what assistance Ireland can provide and she can revert to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: This Saturday at 1 o'clock in Parnell Square, disabled people, disability groups and the Affordable Ireland Coalition, of which I am a part, will be mobilising in a protest, demanding that this Government relent and concede the demand for an emergency disability winter payment of €400 for those with disabilities and, beyond that, implement a cost-of-disability payment. A young man named Jack, who was at our press conference yesterday promoting the demonstration, was on the radio today describing how he had to buy an extra duvet because he does not want to turn on the heating as he is afraid to the cost. He gets anxiety attacks when he has to go to the shops. He has additional energy costs because he has to power his wheelchair. He is facing all these cost-of-living pressures. The Government hammered those people in the budget by taking €1,400 away from them. Will the Government concede their demand for an emergency payment before the demonstration on Saturday?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Boyd Barrett. The Government is in the process of working to develop a cost-of-disability payment. The consultation opened on that last week. We are actively engaging now with people with disabilities directly and also with their representative bodies. I encourage everybody and political parties in this House to get involved in that process as we try to design, for the first time, a cost-of-disability payment. I appreciate the cost-of-living challenges are real people, which is why we took a number of measures in the budget that were targeted, including expanding the eligibility for fuel allowance. I also make the point that emergency payments are available through community welfare officers for anybody in any difficulty.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: People should not have to beg.

Repeal of Exempted Development Regulations Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to repeal the Planning and Development (Exempted Development) (No. 4) Regulations 2022 (S.I. No. 605 of 2022) and Planning and Development (Exempted Development) (No. 4) Regulations 2023 (S.I. No. 376 of 2023) related to the provision of temporary accommodation for persons seeking international protection or in receipt of temporary protection.

Exempted development regulations are an important part of our planning system but they should always be the exception and not the rule. They work best when they are for small developments or indeed for developments that are temporary or are required for an emergency. As the Minister of State knows, long-term development requires proper planning, thoughtful consideration by planning professionals and adequate public participation.

In 2022 and 2023, two sets of exempted development regulations were introduced to facilitate the provision of temporary accommodation for people in receipt of temporary protection or seeking international protection. The context, of course, was Russia's completely unjustifiable invasion of Ukraine and the refugee crisis that provoked, as well as an increase in the number of people seeking international protection. There was clearly a rationale at the time for those exempted development regulations.

Notwithstanding that, there was some abuse of those regulations. As the Minister of State will know, in my constituency, despite concerted attempts by South Dublin County Council to make the former SIAC building fire compliant, the owner of that building put the well-being and lives of 186 and international protection recipients at risk by non-compliance with fire safety, ultimately forcing the council to have the building evacuated for it to be remediated. That is a consequence of the improper use of exempted development regulations.

Since then, things have changed. The emergency crisis that was in evidence in 2022 and 2023 is no longer the case. Sinn Féin believes the provision of accommodation for people either in receipt of temporary protection or applying for international protection should be provided by the State in a manner that is cost-effective for the taxpayer and fully compliant with the human rights requirements of the people in that accommodation. Sinn Féin, in particular my colleague Deputy Matt Carthy, has been urging the Government to move away from expensive, inadequate, private temporary accommodation. Certainly, at a rhetorical level, the Government has accepted that.

If we are moving to having private accommodation, it needs to go through the planning process properly. We need to have thoughtful consideration of applications, proper public participation and good-quality developments. In our view the rationale for exempted development regulations from 2022 and 2023 no longer exists. Those regulations need to be repealed and all existing and new centres that are going to be permanent need to go through the proper planning process. On that basis, we tabled the Bill today to achieve that end.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I thank Deputy Ó Broin for his work on this legislation. This Sinn Féin Bill seeks to end the current planning exemption for IPAS and temporary protection accommodation. That exemption has been in place for too long. A standard measure of a democratic system is that communities should have the ability to provide input on planning proposals that affect the area in which they live. Legislation currently allows for IPAS

accommodation to be exempt from this minimal public engagement process. We have seen examples where it has led to anger, frustration and even division. It is now time for the exception to end.

Ending the exemption for IPAS accommodation is not just about community input, although that is vital. It is also crucial to ensuring that the accommodation provided is suitable for housing those seeking international protection. We have seen that the exemption has facilitated the use of unsuitable buildings, vacant commercial buildings, old factories and office blocks. Without planning scrutiny, local authorities cannot properly assess the suitability of a site or a building, which is not in anyone's interest. It is a system that has led to bad decisions and community alienation. People continually tell us that they feel they are denied a say.

It has also led to consternation in many cases, where property owners request an exemption for buildings for which they do not have a contract for accommodation and which the Department tells us they have no interest in using. That has put elected representatives and other community leaders in a very difficult position as people are wondering whether it is the request for the exemption or the departmental statements that should be heeded.

It is time for the Government to recognise that it has badly mismanaged the IPAS accommodation system. The failure to do so thus far suggests that previous mistakes are likely to be repeated in the future. That is why it was so worrying that last night the Government and others rejected my amendment to the International Protection Bill that would have ensured that a community impact assessment would be conducted prior to any new IPAS accommodation going ahead. It seems that the Government still has not learned that communities have to be part of the decisions that affect them.

Sinn Féin has been clear that IPAS centres should be placed in areas that are resourced to accommodate them, that community engagement has to be a real and defined concept, and that the private interests of property owners should not be allowed to be prioritised above all other considerations. The first step is to end the planning exemption and to support this Bill.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Colm Brophy): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.29 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.10 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.29 p.m. and resumed at 2.10 p.m.

Estimates for Public Services 2026: Message from Select Committee

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): The Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and Taoiseach, has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimates for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2026: Vote 1 – President's Establishment; Vote 2 – Department of the Taoiseach; Vote 3 – Office of the Attorney General; Vote 4 – Central Statistics Office; Vote 5 – Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions; and Vote 6 – Office of the Chief State Solicitor.

Homelessness: Statements

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I am delighted to be joined by my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell. The Minister, Deputy Browne, cannot be here for the opening section of these statements because he is at a subcommittee meeting and otherwise engaged. He will be here, however, to give concluding statements. He will be kept up to date as to the comments made during the statements from right across the House.

I welcome the opportunity to come before the House to speak on this most important issue of homelessness and the work being undertaken by this Government in responding to it. I will set out how the new housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities, is building on the progress made in recent years to increase housing delivery across the board and social housing, in particular. The Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, will outline specifically how the plan will ensure the provision of supports to older people and vulnerable cohorts in our society. The Minister, Deputy Browne, will conclude the discussion by outlining the many actions in the new housing plan that are specifically targeted at ending homelessness.

The Government is acutely aware that homelessness is the single most pressing social issue that we face and the impact that experiences of homelessness have on households and children, in particular. With this in mind, the programme for Government and the new housing plan reaffirmed Ireland's commitment to working towards ending homelessness by 2030.

Increased supply is key to addressing homelessness. Last year saw the highest number of homes completed in more than a decade. More than 36,000 were completed. Delivering Homes, Building Communities builds on the achievements and progress already made under Housing for All to further accelerate housing delivery. The key difference between Housing for All and this plan is a greater emphasis on creating the environment for more homes. To deliver more homes at speed, the State will do more but this plan will also empower others, particularly those in the private sector, to play their part.

A significantly greater supply of housing can be achieved through a balanced approach focused on both directly supporting people to have a home of their own but also creating the best possible conditions for the industry to build and to activate more homes. This new plan commits to the building of 300,000 new homes. By the end of 2030, there will be 72,000 additional new-build social homes, built for those in our society who need them most.

Our goal remains a housing system that truly serves the needs of our people. That is why we are committed to also providing 90,000 affordable housing supports. Delivering Homes, Building Communities is ambitious, but the Government is fully committed to making it a reality. This is an integrated housing and homelessness plan that reaffirms the whole-of-government approach to addressing the housing crisis. It will ensure that the funding and the strategies deployed to address housing and homelessness are fully aligned at all times.

The plan will build on progress already made. In 2023 and 2024, we saw delivery of newly built social housing reach levels not seen since the 1970s, with almost 16,000 social homes built. Between July 2020 and the end of quarter 3 of 2025, over 52,300 social homes were added to the social housing stock and more than 14,100 homes were brought back into use under the voids programme. The pipeline is also strong. The latest construction status report showed over 25,000 social homes at all stages of design and build in Ireland at the end of September 2025.

Direct funding for housing is at record levels. In 2026 alone, over €9 billion in capital funding will be provided through the Exchequer, the Land Development Agency, LDA, and the Housing Finance Agency, HFA. Affordable housing schemes are now operating at scale and the affordable housing delivery programme continues to be expanded and developed year on year, supported by unprecedented levels of State investment. The Government will continue to bring forward measures that will increase the supply of new homes across all tenures to make sure that everyone has a range of housing options available to them. More than 18,900 affordable housing supports were provided by quarter 3 of 2025, increasing home ownership for families and ordinary workers.

Over the past five years, almost 149,000 new homes have been delivered. This is significant progress, which must be recognised. It also gives the Government a strong platform to scale up housing delivery and under our new plan, we are focused on delivery. This will not be easy and there is no one single solution that will solve the housing challenges we face. Delivering Homes, Building Communities takes pragmatic action across a number of different policy areas to boost housing supply while ensuring that the new homes delivered support the people who need them the most. These two key objectives provide the foundational pillars in the plan: activating supply and supporting people. The first pillar, activating supply, is about removing structural barriers to homebuilding and ensuring we deliver 300,000 new homes in the lifetime of this plan. This includes measures aimed at unlocking land, reforming planning, delivering infrastructure and creating the conditions needed to increase investment in housing supply.

Reaching the target of 300,000 new homes will only be achieved through the individual and collective effort of the key delivery partners. Local authorities, together with approved housing bodies, the Land Development Agency and the construction sector, will be critical to delivering and enabling the delivery of the quantum of homes needed over the lifetime of the plan. Central government will provide the policy, regulatory and funding frameworks to support housing delivery.

Further to this, Delivering Homes, Building Communities is enabled by the largest ever capital investment in the history of the State. A total of €275 billion will be invested over the next ten years under the national development plan to significantly upgrade our infrastructure and make the environment for building homes much better. This cannot be overstated. This includes almost €20 billion to support the delivery of the 72,000 social homes and 90,000

affordable home supports over the next five years. It also includes €12.2 billion for water and wastewater services and €3.5 billion in equity funding for ESB Networks and EirGrid to make sure that we have the capacity in these vital services to make housing connections as and when they are needed. The Uisce Éireann investment is particularly significant.

In January this year, the Government announced a new multi-annual €1 billion housing infrastructure investment fund to support direct investment in housing enabling infrastructure. The new fund will be managed by the housing activation office and will complement investment by infrastructure agencies, such as Uisce Éireann and ESB Networks, as part of a more co-ordinated approach. It will focus on projects that can move quickly and at scale. We want strong, deliverable projects that can hit the ground running and start unblocking housing delivery immediately.

Housing delivery is at the centre of the revised national development plan. We are investing €102 billion over the next five years, an additional €33.9 billion on the previous national development plan allocation. Overall investment of over €40 billion will be provided for housing and related water services to 2030. This funding will support vital water infrastructure projects, address historical bottlenecks in the system and accelerate us towards our delivery targets.

Over the lifetime of this plan, we will deliver an average of 12,000 new social homes each year. That is an unprecedented commitment. In parallel, we will provide an average of 15,000 affordable housing supports annually through the starter homes programme and related initiatives.

The help-to-buy and first home schemes continue to bridge the gap for first-time buyers struggling with deposits and mortgage limits. These schemes are not abstract policy instruments. They are enabling thousands of households to purchase their first homes.

Budget 2026 has continued the record level of investment in social housing, with €2.9 billion in capital allocated to support the delivery of social homes by local authorities. This continued investment in the social housing programme will increase the supply of stock available to allocate to households on the social housing waiting list, including households in emergency accommodation.

I am acutely aware of the profound impact homelessness has on individuals, particularly children, and addressing homelessness is a key priority under Delivering Homes, Building Communities. It is only through the increased provision of housing that we will begin to see a consistent drop in the numbers accessing emergency accommodation. We do not underestimate the scale of the challenge. We recognise that a radical step change is needed in housing supply. That is why we are using every lever at our disposal. We remain steadfast in our commitment to meet the challenge head on and ensure all those who aspire to independence in the housing market can realise their aspiration.

I hope we can work in a collaborative way across the House so we can continue to increase the supply of housing. I look forward to hearing Members' views and perspectives on this vital matter.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I appreciate the opportunity to address the House on this

important matter. Addressing homelessness is a top priority for the Government. We remain committed to working with all key stakeholders to reduce and prevent homelessness across Ireland, including homelessness among our more vulnerable people, including our older people, disabled people and Travellers. Our new housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities, is an integrated housing and homelessness plan in which the Government recognises that homelessness is the single most pressing social issue that we face. The plan introduces a number of new measures to address homelessness.

One priority action is the development of a whole-of-government homelessness prevention framework. The Department of housing is leading on the development of this framework and all key stakeholders, including other Departments, are closely involved in the process. The focus of the prevention framework is to ensure there are increased efforts to tackle the causes of homelessness and increase the level of activity aimed at reducing presentations to homeless services. We recognise the need to focus prevention measures on cohorts most at risk. As such, we will explore additional measures that can be put in place to support at-risk cohorts such as older people, disabled people and Travellers, as I have referenced.

In addition to developing the framework, we are also working closely with local authorities to accelerate exits from emergency accommodation. We are committed to ensuring the necessary funding is in place to address homelessness. Some €560 million is available in 2026 to ensure local authorities can provide sufficient emergency accommodation, as well as essential related services, including homelessness prevention supports, day services and tenancy sustainment measures.

We are taking measures to increase the delivery of housing for older people and address homelessness in this cohort. As we are all aware, Ireland has an ageing population. Census 2022 data confirmed that Ireland's ageing population is increasing significantly, with the population aged 65 and over growing by 35% since 2013, which is over double the EU average increase of 17.3%. Projections indicate that the number of older people in Ireland will be approximately 21% of the population by 2040. In addition, it is expected that the population aged over 85 will increase by more than 140%.

The Government is committed to increasing housing available to older people to facilitate ageing in place with dignity and independence and to supporting right-sizing on a voluntary basis. The Programme for Government 2025 - Securing Ireland's Future, recognising this demographic change for older people, includes commitments to deliver practical housing options for positive ageing. A working group established in my Department considered how best to progress these commitments and informed the development of the new national housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities. The delivery of more suitable homes and choice for older people, including measures that support independent living, has been firmly prioritised in the actions set out in the plan. It is highlighted in the plan that the overall aim of policy is to increase delivery of house choices for older people across both public and private housing to facilitate them to age in place, in their own homes or in their community, with dignity and independence.

I have just come from the launch of a collaborative housing development in Richmond Place, Inchicore, involving the Departments of health and housing, Dublin City Council, Circle Voluntary Housing Association and ALONE. A total of 68 residents are getting supports in addition to housing. It is very much an innovative approach in terms of people being able to

live independently. People are moving there from areas close by and it is catering to their needs. It is an approach we are looking to progress in greater numbers.

The national housing plan includes commitments to work with local authorities in a number of ways, including the introduction of dedicated older people social housing annual targets in each local authority's housing delivery action plan. This is something on which I am very strong. The plan commits to the introduction of more efficient collection processes for data on older people housing delivery and allocations, having regard to older people and homelessness. There is also a commitment to improved site identification to support more targeted local authority and approved housing body delivery specifically for older people and provide accessible locations within local communities. In addition, we recognise the increased number of older people renting in the private rented sector. Therefore, the new housing plan commits to examining the affordability challenges for older people approaching retirement in this sector. Work on how to address these challenges and deliver this commitment is under way.

Delivering Homes, Building Communities also includes actions to provide greater choice to older people, including through increased delivery of more suitable homes through housing strategies in all tenures. We will continue to work with the AHB sector, local authorities and other stakeholders in supporting the continued delivery of housing for older people. The new housing plan includes a Government commitment to work collaboratively through the establishment of a co-operation framework between the Departments of health and housing, across which I have responsibility for older people, to improve the integration of health and social care supports and housing for older people. I saw that in action at the Richmond Place housing project today. This work will include building on the learnings from existing projects of supported housing for older people to support wider future delivery.

The housing needs of older people are diverse. Policy responses will need to address housing choice and deliver solutions in both public and private housing as well as support those who choose to voluntarily right-size. We want to provide choice. If people wish to purchase a home more suitable to their needs, we will support them by, among other measures, advancing consideration of the availability of bridging finance. If people wish to adapt their homes to suit their needs within the home, perhaps by converting their homes into separate living spaces, we will support that. We are looking at planning exemptions in this area to support greater choice. It is all about providing choices to older people that they can avail of on a voluntary basis. As our population ages, it is essential that we increase delivery of homes for older people and deliver more homes that are suited to their needs. We must provide choice for older people in a way that supports them to live independently and remain connected to their communities. Delivering Homes, Building Communities is a reflection of this and of the Government's commitment to ensuring older people have the opportunity to avail of increased housing choice for ageing in place.

Census 2022 indicated that 22% of the population, or just over 1.1 million people, have experienced at least one long-lasting health condition or difficulty to a greater extent. The National Housing Strategy for Disabled People 2022-2027 and its associated implementation plan, operating under the new housing plan, present the framework for delivering housing for disabled people in conjunction with the necessary support, as required. The Government is committed to ensuring disabled people are supported and encouraged to live independently and

to addressing homelessness. Co-operation and collaboration among Departments, State agencies and others are key in delivering housing and related supports for disabled people.

The housing adaptation grant for older people and disabled people is an important support in assisting people in private houses to make their accommodation more suitable for their needs. These grants are available to people with an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual disability, and to older people who experience mobility issues or require essential necessary repairs to their home in order to continue to live independently at home. Funding for the housing adaptation grant has been increasing year on year since 2014, facilitating the payment of more than 180,000 grant claims. We have increased the allocation for the housing adaptation grant to €130 million for 2026. This increase of €30 million on 2025 funding is in line with commitments in the programme for Government and ensures the continued year-on-year increases in funding for the grant scheme since 2014. This funding will facilitate the payment of some 17,000 grant claims as well as the continued implementation of the revised scheme. The continued enhancement of this significantly important grant scheme is a priority for the Government.

Addressing the accommodation needs of Travellers continues to be a Government priority. In the past six years from 2020 to 2025, a cumulative capital investment of more than €125 million has been provided to local authorities for delivering Traveller-specific accommodation. This investment continues in 2026 in line with the action set out in our new housing plan. The Government continues to invest in high-quality Traveller-specific accommodation, with increased capital funding of €26 million provided in 2026. The caravan loan scheme provided accommodation for 85 Traveller families in 2025 and will continue to deliver for Traveller families in the years ahead.

The Government will continue to ensure that housing is delivered through the well-established capital funding schemes for both local authorities and approved housing bodies to meet the needs of all people accessing social housing, including vulnerable groups. We are fully committed to ensuring the measures outlined in the new housing plan are implemented to address homelessness, including for older people, disabled people and Travellers. I will continue to work with my ministerial colleagues, Members from all sides in this House and in the Seanad, and all stakeholders to deliver homes and build the communities we need to meet housing needs now and into the future.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been in government for ten years, first through a confidence and supply arrangement in 2016 and then in two formal coalition Governments. During that decade, 55,000 adults have been forced into homelessness.

Let that sink in for a second. According to data from the Department of housing, from January 2016 to June 2025, 55,000 adults have been forced into emergency accommodation, funded by the Minister of State's Department. That is more than the entire population of Longford. It is more than the entire population of Drogheda, the smallest city in the country. It is more than it would take to fill the entire Aviva Stadium for any sell-out event. That figure does not even include children. It does not include rough sleepers or women and children in Department of justice-funded domestic violence refuges, people with refugee status trapped in direct provision or the hidden homeless. Fifty five thousand adults have been forced into

homelessness during the ten years Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been in Government. That is a truly scandalous figure.

On Friday, we will get the latest Department of housing homelessness report. The last report we got told us that at that point in time, 17,000 adults, including 5,000 children, were in emergency accommodation. The number of adults homelessness was up 13% on the year and the number of children up 15%. Every single category of homelessness was up; adults, families, singles, children and pensioners. In a country awash with surpluses and filled with talent and capacity, tens of thousands of people have been made homeless. There is a very simple reason. It is the failure of Government housing policy and successive Government plans by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. It is not rocket science. The fundamental problem, of course, is a chronic underinvestment and underdelivery in social and genuinely affordable homes.

If I hear a Government Minister once again telling us that they built more social homes in 2024 than in the 1970s, I will pull my hair out. The population in the 1970s was half what it is today. We had a surplus of public housing. A person on a council list would be housed within two to three years in the 1970s. Today it is more like ten to 15 years, depending on the local authority. If the Government was serious about matching 1970s output, it would be delivering twice the volume of social homes delivered last year.

Not only is the Government underdelivering on social affordable homes, it has also completely botched the regulation of the private rental sector, making it even more dysfunctional than it was in the beginning. There is a virtual absence of spending or programmes on homeless prevention. Just 5% of the annual budget that goes into homelessness is directed towards prevention programmes. The previous Government failed to use the breathing space of the emergency ban on no-fault evictions from 2022 to 2023 to do anything different. It ended that ban in 2023 with no proper contingency measures in place. That is why homelessness is rising year on year.

It is remarkable that in the two speeches we have heard, there was not a single acknowledgement of year after year rises in homelessness for a decade. What is worse is the new Minister, the new Government and the new housing plan are making things worse. There is no meaningful increase in new-build social and affordable homes in the new Government's housing plan. It is nowhere close to what is required.

The Government has just introduced probably the most controversial reform of rent regulation, which is going to bring us back to double-digit inflation and that is going to drive even higher levels of homelessness. We published an analysis, based on Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, figures, showing that 25% of all tenancies registered every year are new tenancies. That is approximately 60,000 households. That is the potential scope of new tenancies to be captured by the market reset. From the RTB's data on new and existing tenancies, we have shown that the cost of that is somewhere between €3,000 and €5,000 of extra rent every year. When we published these figures the Government told us we were not telling the truth and that we were exaggerating. Thankfully, the largest landlord in the State, IRES REIT, has published its own analysis. It believes the consequence of the market rent reset will be a 25% increase in its rental intake over a number of years, with an extra €21 million. IRES REIT's turnover is about 14% a year. This means that over seven years, if those trends continue, all its tenants will be captured by the market reset. In fact, based on its figures, its tenants, captured by the Government's reset, will be paying almost an extra €6,000 a year in rent. What this report

actually says is that we, in Sinn Féin, were conservative in our estimate of the impact of this on renters, starting from Sunday. Simon Harris had the brass neck to come into this Chamber earlier and say he was on the side of renters. How does hitting renters with an extra €6,000 per year for IRES REIT tenants from March square with that claim?

We are also seeing a Minister whose first act this time last year was to slash funding for the one homeless prevention programme that was actually working, namely, tenant in situ. We finally got the figures and we now know last year there were just over 700 social housing acquisitions. This is half what it was the year before. That was the only programme where if somebody on a social housing waiting list, or who was eligible for cost rental, and was at risk of eviction, it could be prevented. Yet the Government pulled the rug from under our local authorities, undermined the scheme and introduced restrictions to cut the funding. As a consequence, there are people today who are in emergency accommodation and at imminent risk of homelessness because the Government took the funding away. I just cannot understand how the Minister of State could countenance that.

On top of all that, I did not hear either Minister of State mention the programme for Government commitment to end homelessness by 2030. I did not hear either one outline any new initiative to prevent homelessness or to get people out of emergency accommodation more quickly. What does that tell us? It tells us that with the Government continuing with the same failed policies that have pushed 55,000 adults into emergency accommodation over a decade, those numbers are going to continue to increase. That is what has been admitted to through the omissions here today.

Crucially, it does not have to be this way. It is possible to end long-term homelessness. The solutions are all around us. We need an emergency package of measures to reduce presentations and increase exits, an emergency ban on no-fault evictions, increased funding for tenant in situ and a doubling of Housing First tenancies. Sinn Féin made a specific proposal to introduce emergency planning and procurement and new building technologies to provide a dedicated stream of additional social housing to end homelessness for the over 55s in a single year and dramatically reduce adult and child homelessness year on year.

Crucially, we need to see a doubling of investment in delivery of social and affordable homes. We need to see a removal of the red tape imposed by central government to accelerate that delivery. In real terms, we need about 25,000 public homes to be delivered each year comprising social, affordable rentable and affordable purchase. Those homes need to meet need. They need to be based on an objective assessment of what is required. That means more one-bed homes and more larger homes. It means more homes for people with disabilities and, crucially, an increase in allocation of council homes for those in emergency accommodation. There also needs to be a far greater focus on child and youth homelessness. The strategy ends in 2026 and most of the commitments have not been implemented and we do not know what is going to happen after that.

When I hear the Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, talk about progress, it confirms to me that this Government is in complete denial. The claim that tackling housing and homelessness is the number 1 priority is not only dishonest but it is an insult to the people being forced into emergency accommodation. When the Government is not insulting them, it is blaming everybody else. First it was Covid, then it was the war in Ukraine, then it was net migration and now it is the councils, the communities or the Opposition. Everybody else is to

blame for year-on-year rising homelessness but Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. I repeat that in ten years, 55,000 adults have been made homeless by these parties.

The question I want to end with is: how many more people have to become homeless? How many more adults, children, singles, families and pensioners have to become homeless before the Government accepts that the problem is its failed housing plan? It should start to implement the alternatives we all know would work but it simply will not listen to us. Is it 65,000 or 75,000 or will the Government let it go to 100,000? If the Government does not make a change, that is where these numbers are going.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Government talks an awful lot about how the Opposition does not bring forward solutions. We are sick and tired of bringing forward solutions. The Minister of State spoke about working together. We want to work together. We want to end long-term homelessness and get children out of emergency accommodation and into a safe, sustainable home with a roof over their head somewhere they can build a life. We want to stop the trauma. That is what we want to do. The Minister of State said that is what the Government wants to do.

The Government has shot down everything we have we proposed. Every week I ask for an increase in funding to return vacant boarded-up council houses to use. It is the simplest way to deliver housing quickly. Every week the Minister, Deputy Browne, refuses to give the money. He said that at the housing committee. A freedom of information request I put in stated that the cost of keeping a family in emergency accommodation outside of Dublin is €55,000 a year and it costs more in Dublin. We are bringing forward a solution but the Government's answer is to only give local authorities €11,000 when it knows they need more than €30,000. The mind boggles. The Government spends €55,000 to keep one family in emergency accommodation when if it gave local authorities an extra €20,000, they could get that family out.

According to the National Homelessness Action Committee NHAC, there are 6,206 individuals in long-term homelessness. That is families, couples and single individuals. There are 4,251 empty council homes right now. We could end long-term homelessness if the Government wanted to. Why does the Minister of State not do it? Can he answer that question for me? Why will the Government not do it? This Government is choosing to give tax breaks to the wealthy and the vulture funds and to leave ordinary families struggling to put a roof over their head, in emergency accommodation or at risk of homelessness.

I am from Cork and the homeless figures there are at an all-time high. According to the previous chief executive's report, there are 524 individuals in homeless accommodation in Cork longer than six months. Can the Minister of State imagine that there are children who do not remember anything but being in emergency accommodation? How is that right? For the love of God, how can the Minister of State stand over that? I know a family who are three years - 36 months - in emergency accommodation. How can the Minister of State stand over that? How can this Government stand over that?

There are adults who see no light at the end of the tunnel. Every now and then a backbencher or a Minister might say people in emergency accommodation are refusing houses. I will give the Minister of State some of the figures. In December, there were three refusals in Cork out of 524 individuals in long-term homelessness. These are facts. These are individuals who have

been homeless longer than six months. Government Deputies come in here and try to blame everyone else, such as homeless people and the councils. They say it is not the Government's fault but it is. It is the Government's job. It is stripping people of hope. People are looking to the Minister of State for hope. Where is the hope?

I know a man who is 60 plus. He is eight years on the housing list. His landlord did not want to sell the property through the tenant in situ scheme. He said it would take too long and he could not trust the Government would not pull the funding as it did last year. Where is he going to go? He is 60 years of age. He has worked all his life and the Government is driving him into homelessness.

I know a mother with five children living in one bedroom in a hotel. There are people in Edel House, in the family hub, and in bed and breakfast all over Cork. Where is the hope? Will the Minister of State give these people hope today? Right now, they do not believe the Government. It is letting them down.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: In the south east, there are 330 adults and 113 children officially recorded as homeless. That is 70 families. In County Waterford alone, 110 adults and 37 children are in local authority-funded emergency accommodation. Those are only the official figures; they are the tip of the iceberg. They reflect people in local authority accommodation but they do not capture the hidden homelessness that every public representative in this Chamber encounters weekly - certainly those of us who operate clinics and have a listening ear. In Waterford alone, beyond the 37 children formally recorded, there are another 66 children placed on an emergency basis in vacant council houses with their families. These are houses which are not ready or fit for allocation. They are not secure tenancies or allocated. They have no stability. It is effectively emergency accommodation under another heading.

Behind those figures and statistics are the real stories of people I meet. Just this week, Liam who separated from his partner visited my constituency office. He ended up sleeping in his car and he is still sleeping in his car. He will sleep there tonight. He works, pays tax and gets up early in the morning. He does everything expected of him. He has nowhere to live or to go and no prospect of that changing anytime soon. Emma, who survived serious domestic abuse, secured a private rental but now faces losing it because the landlord wants the property back. This is no fault of her own. She is again staring homelessness in the face. For Louise, two days before Christmas could not tell her children where Santa would be delivering presents. Ultimately, they had somewhere for the Christmas period but we cannot countenance the instability, hardship and stress that caused. James and his family are overholding because they have nowhere to go. He leaves for work each morning unsure whether he will return to the locks having been changed and their belongings and whole life in black plastic bags out in front of the house.

Just this week, I met grown siblings who were raising their respective young families in their parents' house. There are three generations under the one roof - multiple families, not out of choice but because the rental market has collapsed. This is happening in Waterford city, Dungarvan and across our rural communities as well. Rural homelessness rarely looks dramatic. It does not make headlines; it is usually unseen and seemingly unacknowledged by Government. It does not tend to appear in the Government's figures. It looks like a young

couple back in a childhood bedroom with their kids, separated parents forced to continue sharing a home long after a relationship has broken down because neither can afford to leave, or people returning from urban areas to overcrowded family homes because there is nothing to read locally. That is homelessness too.

Tá an ghéarchéim tithíochta seo le feiceáil go soiléir i bPort Láirge agus ar fud an oirdheiscirt. Tá na céadta daoine gan dídean go hoifigiúil agus go leor eile nach bhfuil san áireamh sna figiúirí sin. Tá páistí á dtógáil i seomra plódaithe i dteach a shean tuismitheoirí agus daoine óga ag codail i gcarranna. Tá daoine scartha fós ag maireachtáil faoin díon céanna mar nach bhfuil aon rogha eile acu. Is toradh ar chinntí polaitiúla Fhine Gael, Fianna Fáil agus na neamhspleáchach é an scéal seo, agus tá sé de chumhacht againn agus ag ionadaithe an Rialtais cinntí eile a dhéanamh.

Nationally, homelessness has risen by 13% a year, child homelessness is increased by 15% and almost 17,000 people are officially homeless, including more than 5,000 children. At the same time, funding for tenant in situ has been reduced, the scheme that keeps families in their home and prevents them going into emergency accommodation. We see the rent hike Bill the Government is trying to pretend did not happen, does not exist and will not impact renters. Those rents are continuing to rise naturally but they are definitely going to rise in light of the changes the Government has brought in at the behest of the institutional investors.

Supply continues to shrink despite what the Government says and fewer than 1,800 homes were available to rent across the State at the start of this month. No credible modelling has been presented to show what this will mean for renters and the likely outcome is clear - higher rents, shorter security and increased risk of homelessness for families.

In Waterford, this homelessness crisis has a human face. I have told the Minister of State some of the stories. This does come down to some of the policy choices he and his colleagues in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have made, along with backbenchers and the Independents buoying up this Government. We need action and a change in direction from this Government but before any of that will happen, the psychological reality is that it needs to acknowledge the mistakes and harm that has been, is being and will continue to be caused unless it changes its ways, trajectory and policy. The question is: having listened to the statistics and heard the stories, will the Minister of State do that? Will he change the trajectory, listen to the people of Ireland and take this issue seriously?

Deputy Pat Buckley: Homelessness is displacement. We all know what displacement is like in Gaza. People are calling it an absolute disaster. We have displacement of more than 5,500 children. That is happening today and is a disaster. The number of homeless adults in Cork rose by 24% in the past year, the biggest year on year increase in the past five years. These figures show a dramatic increase in the number of people accessing emergency accommodation in Cork but I believe these figures do not fully reflect the actual number of people who are homeless across the country or the county. They do not include rough sleepers, women and children in domestic violence refuges, or those who are using IPAS accommodation as emergency accommodation. Figures should also be made available for those presenting as homeless to the council services and being refused, not just those who are placed in emergency accommodation. Let us not forget the hidden homeless, those sofa surfing and those living in substandard, inadequate accommodation.

Rents have increased in Cork, while supply is falling. Add that to the mounting cost-of-living pressures and it is the perfect storm for increasing homelessness. We see what the Government is doing on 1 March. The storm will be brewing much stronger. I speak to people every week in my constituency office who are experiencing homelessness and there is a real sense of despair, and I mean despair. There are only so many knocks that people can actually take. It ties our hands behind our back because we cannot give them answers because of the policy that the Government has made. The Government is just not getting it. These are young people, old people, women, men, children, and people who have jobs. I know people who have full-time, professional jobs. You cannot see the homelessness in their faces but they are sleeping in cars. One individual works in a supermarket and sleeps on a mattress in a buddy of mine's garage. That is how serious it is.

I hate speaking from script but sometimes I need it for notes. When I speak from the heart, it is the truth. Average rents in Cork at the moment are nearly €1,500. Figures show that rents for new tenants in Cork rose by 6.8% in the past 12 months. God knows what is going to happen after 1 March. In the past 12 months, rent for existing tenants has increased by nearly 5%, so we are not going the right way. We are going the wrong way.

Another woman who came to me is a highly qualified legal secretary with years of experience. She was given notice to quit. She could not find anywhere to live. Now she is secretly sleeping in her office. These people are not numbers or statistics. I hate that bloody word, "statistics". They are not a piece of paper. These are real human beings getting up, going to work, paying their taxes, trying to live a life, trying to rear a family, and no matter what way they go, there are two types of door in this country. In the health service and mental health service, there is a revolving door. When it comes to housing and homelessness, there is a shut door. It is an absolute disaster.

I mention the tenant *in situ* scheme. It is the one thing that worked. In my experience in the years I have been here, one of the greatest gifts this Government and past Governments have had is that when they try to fix something that is not broken, they end up making an absolute hames of it, then they scratch their head, because they are reactive more than proactive, and they ask how that happened, and then the whole situation blows up.

With the way the Government is tackling this homelessness crisis, I cannot see it being a priority. We are probably one of the richest countries in the world. We are definitely one of the most progressive but having more than 5,000 children still homeless today is absolutely shameful. That is a very polite word coming from me.

The Government signed the Lisbon declaration on homelessness in 2021. The declaration commits the Government to working towards ending homelessness by 2030. That is only around the corner. We had an alternative housing plan. Our housing expert, Deputy Ó Broin, has given the Government solutions, not ideas, but solutions, and we want to work with the Government to do it. We have to ensure that everyone has a home. It is not bricks and mortar. Houses are knocked down and rebuilt. That is bricks and mortar. A home is where people can have sanctuary, where they can raise a family, and where they can have peace. The biggest thing, as in Gaza, is having hope. If hope is taken away from a nation, it is left with nothing.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I genuinely do not know where to start. I was flabbergasted by what the Tánaiste said earlier on about this Government apparently being on the side of renters,

when we know that IRES REIT owns 3,627 properties and made €49.7 million in profit last year. It said that it welcomes Government's proactive approach because its portfolio is currently 20% undervalued and it has a potential 25% rental income uplift. That is going to take a terrible situation and make it inherently worse for those who are on the margins because since January 2016, homelessness has increased by 200% in this country. Child homelessness has increased by 450%. At the same time, the Irish economy grew by 5% every year. This did not happen by accident. This happened by design and as a result of the failure of this Government's housing policy, and the interventions that this Government is making are making this crisis worse.

The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, signed up to the Lisbon declaration to end homelessness by 2030. When he signed up to the Lisbon declaration, the number of homeless people was at around 12,000. It is now at 17,000. How in the name of God can we be serious about ending homelessness by 2030 when in a little over three years, we are supposed to fulfil the obligations that we have signed up to under that declaration while the numbers are persistently and consistently growing every single year? I cannot take the Government and this housing plan seriously when it continues along the same lines as the stuff that was in Rebuilding Ireland and Housing for All that have created this problem.

The Government talks about accelerating supply. We are on the same page with regard to that but the big difference is how we, on this side of the House and in the Labour Party, feel we go about solving this. First of all, scrapping annual completion targets is not going to solve this. In fact, it is only a mechanism for Government to avoid responsibility. There is constant reliance on a volatile private market, as if it will somehow build us out of this crisis, when it has not done so for the past ten years. The social and affordable housing targets in the new plan are too low. They do not take into account the growing housing deficit of at least 256,000 units in the Housing Commission report, which is growing and widening because the targets for social and affordable housing under Housing for All were never met. The Government is not going to need them this year and it will need a miracle of Fatima to meet the slightly increased targets in the new plan. Moreover, the Housing Commission was clear that social and affordable housing should make up 20% of all housing stock. It is currently about 10.7% of all housing stock. We need to double our output of social and affordable housing.

There are aspects of the housing plan that I welcome. I welcome a specific action plan on child and family homelessness but this must not be another paper exercise. It needs timebound commitments and ring-fenced funding, otherwise it will be absolutely meaningless. The bit that I find laughable in the new housing plan is that the Government is implementing a national homelessness prevention framework. It says it is focused on early intervention. The best and earliest intervention in most cases is to keep a roof over someone's head.

3 o'clock

The tenant in situ scheme, as it existed in 2023, was very effective. Over 1,500 units were acquired in 2024. That dropped to 750 in 2025. There was €133 million cut from that scheme. In 2024, €420.9 million was spent on it. The figure in 2025 was significantly less. The fact is that any day, night or week that somebody spends in emergency accommodation damages their physical and mental health, and it really damages their children.

The Minister talks about the second-hand acquisition fund and ring-fenced funding for exits, but he has cut the ring-fenced funding for preventions. We know that because the data on preventions show that over 43% of preventions into emergency accommodation were done through the tenant in situ scheme. That then dropped to a little over 11% between December 2024 and December 2025.

Today feels like Groundhog Day because at every turn, this Government is exacerbating homelessness. The whole idea that we will fulfil our obligations under the Lisbon declaration is laughable. To be honest, we might as well bloody come out of it because the gulf between what the Government says and what it does is massive.

We also need to have a specific strategy within the housing plan for getting single people out of emergency accommodation. There is a plan focused on families. As of last December, there were 7,300 adults in emergency accommodation. I am frustrated because I and my party have brought forward policy proposals. In March of last year, I wrote to the Minister, Deputy Browne, who, as the senior Minister, should be here to hear this debate, and set out five measures for tackling homelessness. The most obvious and simple measure is to pass our Housing (Homeless Families) Bill, which has been lost in the ether around this place since 2017. That Bill passed legislative scrutiny in October 2019. There was talk of it being contained in the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2024. That did not happen. I ask the Department to move on our Bill because it would ensure that local authorities place the best interests of children at the centre of decision-making when supporting homeless families, building on the work we did in the children's rights referendum.

The Government should repeal the flawed rental legislation. At a minimum, it should pass our 2021 Residential Tenancies (Tenants' Rights) Bill 2021 and introduce a rent break in its deeply flawed legislation that will gouge renters. I am convinced that in years to come, when we are all old people and long gone from this House, our successors will be here giving a State apology to a generation of children whose life chances we have absolutely destroyed through failed housing policy. We are going to have to pay those people redress because we are in a situation where children's physical and mental development is being stunted by the length of time they are spending in emergency accommodation.

The Minister informed me at a meeting of the housing committee on Tuesday that he wants to focus our funding on building new social homes and getting people into social allocation as opposed to second-hand acquisitions. The Government needs to do both, such is the scale of the crisis we face. The Minister needs to reverse course on second-hand acquisitions and revert to the old scheme that was in place pre-2025 because under the rental changes, these numbers are going and grow.

I have become nearly completely numbed to the people who come in to my clinic in my constituency office every week and tell me harrowing stories. In the time I have left, I will read into the record a letter I received from one of my constituents in relation to her situation:

I am experiencing ongoing and severe health problems due to fibroids and an enlarged uterus ... I have already undergone ... [a procedure] in December 2023 and ... [another one] in September 2024, which failed, leaving hysterectomy as the only remaining treatment option. Due to ... [medical complications], this will require an open abdominal procedure rather than keyhole surgery, which is a longer and more difficult recovery. My consultant has

confirmed that I require a hysterectomy, and that I cannot be discharged into emergency accommodation following surgery, which has resulted in surgery being postponed [repeatedly]. In the meantime, I am experiencing significant pain, heavy bleeding, anaemia, fatigue and stress.

[...]

Alongside my own health issues, I am under considerable emotional strain due to family circumstances. My father is seriously unwell and has been hospitalised since August ... [and] in addition, my daughter Emily is autistic and relies heavily on routine and stability to cope. Living in emergency accommodation has already had a detrimental impact on both of us. The combined effects of serious ill health, housing instability, and ongoing family stress have left me exhausted and struggling to cope day to day. I am currently on illness benefit and experiencing persistent pain, fatigue, anxiety, depression and declining wellbeing. Without stable and sustainable housing, I do not believe it is possible for me to recover safely from surgery or maintain my health.

How have we arrived at a situation whereby a woman who is awaiting a serious medical procedure cannot have the operation done because she is currently living in a hotel? She is not the only person I am dealing with who is in a situation like this. It is absolutely shameful. It is something on which all of us, especially the Government, need to seriously reflect. I urge the Minister of State to go back to the Department and listen to some of the solutions we have put forward to try to chart a way out of this.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Many years ago, there were perhaps some indications or factors that may have made people more prone to homelessness, be it addiction, familial breakdown or economic background. That is no longer the case, as all of us know. Homelessness is like an illness; it can strike anyone at any time, particularly if they are a renter or renting in this country. If someone came into my clinic or any other Deputy's clinic 18 months or two years ago, we would go through a list if they were on a notice to quit. We would ask whether they were on the housing list, how much time they had or whether they had any medical conditions. All Deputies have done this and asked the questions. At the very bottom of that list, however, the one backstop we had was the tenant in situ scheme where, at the very least, we could begin a process with a tenant in situ purchase. Was it expensive? Yes, but there are two benefits to it. Chief among them was that we would keep a family or individual out of homelessness through the tenant in situ scheme. The second benefit was that the State would acquire a property, which it would then own for public housing.

The fact is that this State, which is awash with money, turned its back on funding that scheme. When people come into my clinic, Deputy Sheehan's clinic or anyone's else's clinic, we do not have that backstop and fail-safe at the end and we know, in the pit of our stomachs, that it is more likely than ever that these families or individuals are going to be sent into the homeless services. However much the tenant in situ scheme cost, it was way more value for money than shovelling money into the pockets of landlords in Gardiner Street in Dublin, where one tenth of all homeless people in the country are. We have talked to the schools and seen reports in the national media on the impact on local schools. Primary school students living in homeless accommodation are trying to get proper food, concentrate in school and get an education while living in unstable, long-term accommodation, if that is not an oxymoron.

That is exactly what is happening. The Government needs to reverse, at a minimum, the lack of funding for the tenant in situ scheme to give some hope in this national emergency it has created.

Deputy John McGuinness: We did not just arrive at these numbers overnight. This has been ongoing since 2011, I would say, and successive governments since then ignored all the signals that would tell them a problem was emerging in housing. Local councils even ignored it. They massaged the figures to make things look better and pretended there was no problem when, in fact, there was a massive and growing problem.

I was often criticised during those years when I raised the issue of housing and the fact that it was not being delivered at a pace to meet the demand. When I look back now, I think I was right about it. A year into this new Government, there is a dysfunction at the heart of all of this, and that includes Ministers and civil servants. An attempt is being made to ensure the voices of backbench and Opposition Deputies are not being heard in this Dáil. That is a terrible reflection on the Government. It is a weakening of democracy.

As we discuss this issue today, we have the Minister of State here to answer. There should be representatives from the Department of housing in the Chamber because they need to hear directly from every single backbencher who will contribute today. I attach relevance to and place emphasis on backbenchers and what they say due to the clinics that we do. What we hear and see at the coalface is being reflected in this debate. There will not be one single reply to any of us here from the Department or the Minister to say "You know what, I listened to the debate" or "I was told about the debate and I think your idea is worth exploring". Anything that we raise in this House in this Government term seems to be ignored because it is now more about spin and social media than about hard facts and delivery. That is my view.

Often, Opposition Deputies will tell us we are in Government, but that does not mean that we do not have ideas or that we cannot reflect what the constituents we represent say to us in clinics. I certainly will not ignore what they say to me and if that is criticism of the Government, then so be it because we are here to represent those who elected us.

The dysfunction at the heart of government has to be dealt with. I have never seen a time where there was so much money in the system, yet so little ability on the part of the State to deliver on most projects. I can always point to the children's hospital or to the issue we are discussing, for which there is lots of money, yet we still have a growing problem. There are many other examples of that and if the Government and the Departments do not recognise that, we will be in real trouble altogether.

I am going to reflect what I hear in my clinics. I want to look back and recognise the record of local authorities. Back in the 1950s, when there was little or no money around they built wonderful housing estates. These estates were not made up of modular homes but of solid, well-built houses. I was reared in one such home on O'Loughlin Road. I look back on it with great memories because the people who were allocated those houses made up the community based on a meitheal concept. That is how most people throughout the country got a head start in terms of their homes. The reason we cannot do that now is that we have loaded the system with bureaucracy and red tape, creating obstacles for everyone and anyone who wants to move forward. We are taking the future from our children by not ensuring that we deliver to meet

the housing needs they are experiencing. In the main, I am talking about people who would qualify to receive council houses because that is where the relief needs to come.

I have never seen anything like the homelessness we have. It is shocking. I would never have said we would have homelessness in Kilkenny city or Carlow town, and we have. It affects not only those who fall out of society or have difficulty with engaging with society, but people who are earning money and have a job. It may be a low-paid job but they are working and cannot afford to get a house. They are often being refused by the council in a very inhumane way. They apply for a house and, with few if any reasons for refusal, the council sends them back all of their documentation in the post and says they do not qualify. Why can the council not do what most people in this House would do, and call them in to have a chat, rectify their application and approve them? I tell people that once they have been approved, there is no magic wand. They might be approved and get HAP but there are no houses to get.

Look at the housing stock the councils have. I wonder why there is no real effort to turn around a house that has been vacated and put it back into active residential use. I am told there is an issue with the cost of repairing and refurbishing these houses. That is a load of nonsense. There are many people on the housing list who are living in dire circumstances and would accept a house that might fall a bit short on some standards. They would do so in the hope that once they have a house, they will get it repaired in future. That does not happen, however, and nobody is accountable. At the end of the day, the Minister and his senior officials are accountable. Do we hear from them? No.

Downsizing or resizing is another issue. I know cases where people want to downsize from a three-bedroom house to a one-bedroom or two-bedroom house but the council does not have the ambition to make that happen. It just will not let that happen. The result is a family is left homeless, while one person living in a three-bedroom house who wants to move to a one-bedroom house cannot be accommodated. Council officials are often baffled and bewildered by the range of problems they are facing and the skill set is not there to reach out. Maybe the ambition of chief executives - I am not talking about any particular chief executive - is not there to work with the Ministers and civil servants to get this job done.

There was reference to adaptation grants. Around budget time, I asked the Government to make sure the shortfalls in the grant in every local authority were addressed. I asked that local authorities be given even more money to ensure people remain in their houses and that houses would be made available to disabled persons, freeing up other houses. That does not happen. I have seen more refusals on the basis of no funding being available. The Minister needs to make every single council accountable to us in this House.

The Minister has to insist they deliver on their numbers. Do not let the Opposition say now we are blaming the councils. I am not. I am simply saying they all have a role. They are all getting paid, so why should they not be accountable? That does not remove accountability from the Minister or the senior civil servants.

I cannot understand either why a council that runs into a difficulty with a tenant - I have an example of it in my county of Kilkenny - turns to evict that person. Whatever the reasons are for that, is it right to evict a family of six and put them on the roadside, citing succession rights, rent arrears or whatever it might be? Is it not a case where someone from the council should go to mediate? I asked for mediation in the particular case I experienced in Kilkenny and the

answer was no. The council said it had a court order and it was evicting the person and the family. Do councils not get what is happening in society right now? You have a case where the council wants to increase the rent. Should the parents take in the family that cannot afford to pay a rent in the private sector? They go back home and lo and behold the council is on to the family immediately to increase their rent. There has to be some forgiveness in circumstances like that. A space has to be created to allow that family to assist their family members, sometimes with young children, and not be told their rent is being jacked up for that purpose.

All of the schemes the Minister has to give people the opportunity to buy their own homes are failing in part because people cannot get through the hoops that are attached to every single scheme. There is no one there to assist them and to say that if they did things a particular way, they might qualify for one scheme or the other. That does not happen. They come back to public representatives like all of us in this House and guess what? They have to fill out a two-page permission under GDPR so that the council officials can speak to us when we are trying to speak on behalf of a constituent who has come to us in the first place. We ignore that here. We do not do anything about it. We should do something about it. It is preventing us from doing our work. More importantly, it is preventing the officials from understanding the real-life experiences of people as explained by a public representative.

We are often treated with disdain. They do not want to communicate in a way that will expose the real problem and in a way that will give proper rights to the people we represent. These are all things that can be changed. The Minister should tell the council chief executives when they meet next that he wants a different or simpler form or that he wants to the word of a public representative to be taken when he or she makes representations on behalf of a client.

Choice-based letting is a good thing. I see a lot of people on the housing list use it but it is another measure that is restricting those who are not IT-literate. Nobody wants to talk to you in the council unless you are doing it by email or by CBL, and that excludes an awful lot of people. It excludes older people and it is not treating them with respect. That has to be addressed.

Single men and single women are probably the biggest number on the housing list in my constituency. I fight hard for each and every one of them because the last thing we want to see happen is that they would be trapped in private rented accommodation at the age of 60 and not be able to get accommodation. It is a downward spiral from there. Again, it is not understood properly by the local authorities and it is not being dealt with properly or funded properly by the Government. How many times have I heard, sitting in the Ceann Comhairle's chair, Members of this House tell the story about vacant properties? Every chief executive should be made account for the number of vacant properties on their books and there should be a timeframe given for them to work on it. I support everything that is said about the tenant in situ scheme. For God's sake, fund it and make it happen.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: When Fine Gael entered Government in 2011, we had 641 children living in emergency accommodation. After 15 years of Fine Gael in government, propped up by Fianna Fáil for most of the time, we now have over 5,000 children homeless. That is a disgrace. It is not an accident. It is a direct result of the Government's bad policies. One example of that is cutting the funding for the tenant in situ scheme. In 2024, the scheme in

Dublin City Council had €115 million in funding. Last year, guess what was is? Last year, it was cut to €38 million. This scheme was an incredibly important one because it worked. It was a vital homeless prevention measure. It kept families in their homes. I urge the Minister of State to increase funding for this scheme at the very least back to 2024 levels.

The situation on the ground is desperate. Only last week my office was speaking to a woman who was recently made homeless with a young child. She rang up Parkgate Street and was told no emergency accommodation was available in Dublin. Her only option was to go to County Meath. It was totally impractical. This woman did not drive. How was she supposed to get her child to school? On top of the trauma and the real upset of the loss of a secure home, this child's education is going to be seriously impacted.

We have people in my constituency stuck on the council housing list for ten, 12, 15 and more years. We have so-called affordable housing where a three-bedroom house is over €0.5 million. On what planet is that affordable? This is a disaster of Fianna Fáil's and Fine Gael's making. We need to see huge investment in social and affordable homes and we need to restore the tenant in situ scheme back to its proper funding.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: We have more than 5,000 children in emergency accommodation, a figure that is both shocking and shames the State. Yesterday, the Government rightly apologised to institutional abuse survivors. It was a hard-fought for and very much delayed apology. As I have said previously here, I have absolutely no doubt that a future government will be issuing an apology for the damage homelessness has done and is doing to children during this decade. The Government has not only utterly failed to address the issue of homelessness in this State, its actions has contributed to a homeless crisis that is directly impacting the lives of thousands of our citizens. Focus Ireland's homeless figures give an insight into the failure of successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments.

In January 2016, when I came into the Dáil, a month later, 5,715 were availing of emergency accommodation across the State. Fast-forward to December 2025, that figure is almost 17,000. As I regularly do, I spoke to people in Limerick this week who work in emergency services. They advised me that there is no sign of the crisis abating and everything is getting worse. They said the number of people sleeping rough has increased due to the lack of emergency accommodation in the city, with people being turned away from emergency accommodation every single night. Staff working in the University Hospital Limerick have told me there are approximately 12 or more people staying in the accident and emergency department every single night to keep out of the cold. It is so common there that they are classified as P5 patients. These are failures of this Government and its most recent predecessors.

What has happened? Why is there such a failure? A lack of support for local councils for refurbishment of voids is one element.

In Limerick, there are always 200 vacant local authority homes not in use as there is only €11,000 in funding, a tiny amount, available from central government to refurbish vacant homes. Everybody knows that is simply not enough. In Limerick, the number one issue raised with me is the need for housing. There are approximately 2,000 people on Limerick's housing list and these figures are growing. People are waiting years without any prospect of getting a home. Increasing numbers of notices to quit has left many people desperate with nowhere to go.

It is time the Government provided proper funding, turned vacant local authority houses into homes, improved the tenant in situ scheme and restored the funding that was there for it, restored funding to homeless prevention schemes and increased the amount of emergency accommodation available in Limerick. In a society like ours, which is supposedly one of the richest countries in the world, people living - and, unfortunately, in many cases dying - on our streets is simply not acceptable.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I am not taking aim at the Minister of State but it is deeply disappointing that the Minister responsible, Deputy James Browne, is not in the Chamber for this. These are the first statements on homelessness under his Ministry. We are told he is at a subcommittee. Surely, that subcommittee could have been rearranged and he could have had the decency to be here. I am not taking it out on the Minister of State but it is absolutely disgraceful that the Minister for housing is not here for the first statements on homelessness.

Reading through the Minister of State's statement, I can call it nothing other than sanitised spin to deflect from utter failure. The Minister of State accepts the profound impact homelessness has on individuals and particularly children. That is one sentence in a three-page statement. However, not once does the Minister of State say the levels of homelessness are too high. What are the levels? There were 16,734 individuals homeless in December. The Government goes on about the success of housing policy and, reading this statement, you would think the Government is absolutely solving the issue of homelessness. What is the reality? The figures are there in the local authority quarterly report, which I have gone through. I will show the Minister of State the figures and the reality of homelessness which the Minister of State and the Government completely deny and are trying to normalise.

There has been a 12% increase in the past 12 months. There are now 2,478 families homeless in this country, an 18.5% increase since the start of last year. That is an almost 20% increase in the number of families who are homeless and this Government acts as if its housing policy is working. Since the Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Government was set up just over a year ago, we have seen the number of children who are homeless increase by 11%.

Let us look at Fine Gael's record in government. We have figures from 2014. That is 12 years of Fine Gael in government and there has been a 590% increase in the number of children who are homeless in this country. How many children have gone through emergency accommodation over that decade? We do not actually have figures for that. I am the only one who has tried to estimate how many children have been in emergency accommodation over the past decade. I estimate somewhere in the region of 40,000 children have been through emergency accommodation in ten years of Fine Gael being in government. I still do not understand how Fine Gael and the Government just say this is okay, this is normal and they actually treat it like the emergency it is. The Government is not treating it like the emergency it is. It is an absolute scandal.

I am going to read some of a report from Barnardos which it released last year. It is about the impact of homelessness on children. I encourage people to read it and try to highlight it as much as possible because it is devastating. What is being done to children in emergency accommodation and the utter failure of this State to provide for those children is devastating. Before I get onto that report, a Royal College of Physicians study in 2019 showed that 40% of children in emergency accommodation were experiencing clinically significant levels of

mental health and behavioural difficulties. That figure is 40% - almost half of the children in emergency accommodation. Children in homelessness were twice as likely to require hospitalisation as children not living in homelessness. The Barnardos report states:

It is hard to understate the potential impact that moving into emergency accommodation can have on a child. For many children we work with, it is a case of suddenly leaving their homes, most of their belongings, potentially their pets, and moving into much smaller accommodation that is less suitable and a considerable distance from their previous homes. This event can be extremely traumatic for children and unfortunately, without supports, long lasting. The trauma can affect children's relationships with others, their behaviour and ability to engage in school, their confidence levels and feeling of wellbeing, in essence all aspects of their lives.

This State is failing 5,188 children who are in emergency accommodation right now, the thousands of children who have been through emergency accommodation and the thousands of children who will become homeless in the coming years because the Government failed to put a ban on evictions of children and families who will be made homeless. The Government's new rental measures do nothing to protect the hundreds of thousands of renters who are in existing tenancies and will still be subject to no-fault evictions, so we will continue to see thousands of children in this country subject to trauma - trauma that is utterly preventable. It is preventable if the Government has the courage to put in place a ban on evictions but it will not do it. The Government will take emergency action for investor funds but it will not do it for thousands of children and families who have been made homeless, are homeless or will become homeless in the coming months and years.

I will go through some of those figures. There are now 2,500 children who, right now, have spent over one year in emergency accommodation. That is one year of not being able to have birthday parties, not being able to have friends over and living in unsuitable accommodation. Barnardos and the Royal College of Physicians have set it out. The evidence is there. Yesterday, the Taoiseach gave a State apology for people being institutionalised. We are institutionalising a generation of children. This State, the Government, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are institutionalising thousands of children right now under their watch. The Government knows it is happening. It knows the damage it is doing to children. Yet, what does the Government do? It wrings its hands, shrugs its shoulders and says we cannot put a ban on evictions. That would be emergency action that would prevent children being made homeless but the Government will not do it.

The Minister for housing should be here to answer this but he is not. He runs away from it. He runs away from his responsibility. There are 1,100 children in emergency accommodation for longer than two years. We know some of them have been in that accommodation for three, four or five years. There has been a 25% increase in the past year. This State is absolutely responsible for that. It is a derogation of that responsibility to allow this to continue. I can guarantee there will be commissions of inquiry in the future as to how this State let this happen. The Government knows it and has known it for years. It is a shame on Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and this Government that thousands of children are being left in emergency accommodation that is deeply damaging.

Fundamentally, it goes back to the Government's failure to prioritise homelessness and prevention. The Government cut the tenant in situ scheme and will not increase the HAP limits.

What does it do? It increases the rents chargeable for investor funds. The Simon Community's report showed there are no rental properties within the HAP limits for those who are being made homeless, so where are they supposed to go to? The new rental increases will lead to higher rents and higher levels of homelessness. Yet, the Government says it is all needed for supply because supply and more supply is the solution. Supply is not the solution for families and children whose landlords are evicting them. The solution is a ban on evictions of families and children into homelessness.

That is an immediate emergency action that the Minister of State could take. Why will the Minister of State not take it? Do the institutional investors, the corporate landlords and the landlord lobby have the Minister of State so under their thumb that he will not act for the thousands of individuals, children and families who are being made homeless?

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: We know that while everyone feels the pressure of the housing crisis, there are particular groups who face the most brutal aspects of it. The crisis really has seeped into the life of every Irish person, but some people feel it worse than others. Those individuals are more likely to become homeless. They then struggle to get out of homelessness. I am talking about Travellers, migrants, those suffering with addiction, those with disabilities, the elderly and children. Today, however, I want to talk about one particular group that faces massive barriers when it comes to accessing housing or living with the risk of homelessness. I refer to one-parent families.

Since becoming a TD, time and again I have heard the stories of single parents who are renting who can never aspire to own their homes. This is because they are on one income and have children who are solely reliant on them. I have heard their stress and their worry about how unstable their situations are and how an eviction notice could land on the mat in the morning.

I have also heard from parents who have had to face the reality of being unable to find another property for them and their children, having to put their children in new schools or commuting two hours a day because that is the closest emergency accommodation they can get. They are trying to balance their jobs, their children and the pressing need to find and keep a roof over their heads, and they are doing it all alone.

Focus Ireland found that 57% of homeless families in this country are one-parent families. One of the parents interviewed for that report had the following to say:

I never thought I would end up homeless. I had a job; I was doing okay. Then my landlord sold the house, and suddenly we were in a hotel room. My kids ask me every day when we will have a home again. I don't have an answer.

Another stated:

Childcare is impossible. I want to work, but how can I when I can't afford it and there's no support? It feels like the system is set up to keep us stuck.

Muna bhfuilimid in ann tacú leis na tuismitheoirí seo agus a bpáistí, ní bheimid in ann combhionannas a fháil sa Stát seo. Tá an córas atá againn ag cur daoine ar na sráideanna agus á gcoinneáil ann. Caithfear dul i ngleic leis an bhfáinne fí seo.

All across the country, people are trapped in a cycle of homelessness due to the failure of this Government's policies. I refer to those who are served eviction notices and are unable to find somewhere else that they can afford for their families. I also refer to lone parents in particular who are unable to do anything about their lower incomes and who are locked out of work due to the cost of childcare and locked out of the property market on foot of house prices that the Government is keen to continue to allow to rise.

I will end with a final quote from the Focus Ireland survey, namely:

It's the stigma that hurts the most. People look at you differently when you say you're in emergency accommodation. I feel like I've failed my children, even though I'm doing everything I can.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: Homelessness is a moral stain on our society, of that there is no doubt. I have watched over the past decade as the number of people becoming homeless and entering emergency accommodation has climbed each year and as increasing numbers of people, particularly younger people, beg in the streets. Even older people are not spared the impact of the failed housing policies of successive Governments.

What society can claim to be fair when homelessness within it continues to climb? What Government could possibly hold its head up high as it lifts an eviction ban and security-of-tenure provisions fail to rise to the occasion? Homelessness has gripped far too many people across this country and in my constituency.

During the local election campaign two years ago, I knocked on the door of one house in Terenure. The woman who lived there came to the door. Within minutes, she was in tears. Her young son was inside, and she did not want him to hear her. She had recently been divorced. The court had ordered that house be sold as part of the divorce settlement and she was being evicted with her son as a result. She was working in healthcare at the time and still does so. Today, she shares a one-bedroom apartment with her son. She spends 40% of her income on rent and sleeps on the couch. She emailed me recently and stated that she is extremely worried for her and her child's future. She is merely one bad event or an eviction notice away from devastation.

I was in contact with another mother recently who is in one-room emergency accommodation with her 14-year-old son, who is autistic and who suffers with severe anxiety. Their cramped homeless situation has greatly exacerbated his difficulties. She is terrified of bringing him outside due to his worsening ability to regulate his emotions and behaviours. Their mental health is deteriorating rapidly. She can see no light at the end of the tunnel.

The third case I wish to highlight is that of a young woman in Rathmines and her mother, who was recently diagnosed with cancer and who has a number of other serious conditions, including mobility issues, for whom she cares. The young woman in question contacted me in desperation when she was served an eviction notice. Her mother's health condition, as well as some historical financial difficulties and her father's recent passing, have made it impossible for them to find alternative accommodation. She is wondering how she can present to homeless services with her mother, who, as stated, has significant mobility issues. She is at her wit's end.

These are real people with real stories. Theirs are real tragedies brought about by Government policies that seem to try and paper over a gaping wound in Irish society. While

the support emergency accommodation is a lifeline for so many, it was always meant to be temporary. The seemingly permanent nature of the Government's approach to emergency accommodation, HAP and evictions only edifies the argument that it is a Government for the rich that operates at the expense of everyone else.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): The next slot is a Government slot. Deputy Aird, le do thoil.

Deputy William Aird: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cathaoirleach Gníomhach. I want to raise an issue that I have already raised with the housing Minister and his Minister of State. I want to use my time highlight an issue that does not always show up in the headlines relating to the homeless figures but which is very real and urgent, namely the growing number of people with disabilities who are effectively locked out of independent living.

I was contacted earlier this year by a young woman in her late 20s who was born with a disability. She has used a wheelchair since childhood. She is highly educated, works full time and contributes meaningfully to our society. However, despite doing everything right, studying, working and paying taxes, she has recently been removed from the social housing list in Laois because her income exceeds the threshold. On paper, she earns above the limit, which is €35,000 for a single person. In reality, that figure tells only half the story. Her net income is significantly reduced by the cost of disability. She pays for private physiotherapy, hydrotherapy, orthodontics and prolotherapy. She pays for private health insurance because she knows her medical card may be withdrawn because she is working. She has at times paid €70 for a single accessible-taxi journey to and from work. She does not know how long she will physically be able to sustain full-time employment. The uncertainty is not a choice. It is the reality of living with a progressive physical condition, but the system assesses her solely on gross income.

As a result of the fact that this young woman lives at home with her parents, the HSE does not provide adequate personal assistance, PA, hours. On foot of that, she cannot live independently. Because she cannot live independently, she remains in the family home. It is a vicious circle. Her parents provide 24-7 support in the context of personal care and transport. That unpaid care has enormous economic value, yet it is invisible in the Department's housing assessment.

There are currently no wheelchair accessible apartments available to rent or buy in Portlaoise. Any home she might purchase would require extensive and costly renovation. That is, of course, if she some day may be in a position to purchase an apartment or a house. As a single applicant with a disability, she cannot access mortgage protection insurance; the risks are simply too high. This is the reality facing many people with disabilities who fall between two stools.

They are above the threshold for social housing, barely above €35,000, but far below what is required to secure accessible housing on the private market. We must ask ourselves whether our social housing income thresholds accounting for the cost of disability. Are we penalising people with disabilities for working? Are we creating distinctions for employment by failing to consider real, unavoidable disability-related expenditure?

We rightly speak about supporting independent living. We ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities but independence is impossible without housing. Housing policy must recognise disability creates structural barriers that income figures alone cannot capture. There must be flexibility in the assessment system to consider medical vulnerability, accessible needs and the sustainability of employment in the long term. We also need to increase the supply of universally designed and wheelchair-accessible homes as standard practice.

Homelessness is not only about rough sleeping or emergency accommodation. It is also about the hidden insecurity of adults who cannot leave the family home; adults who cannot access appropriate supports; and adults who see no viable pathway to independent living. We must ensure our housing system does not punish resilience, ambition or the desire to work. People with disabilities should not have to choose between employment and security.

I urge the Minister of State to: first, review the operation of social housing income thresholds as they apply to people with disabilities; second, I want him to examine how disability-related costs are factored into assessments; and, third, I want him to ensure those who are medically vulnerable are not excluded by inflexible criteria.

The Minister of State probably knows this already but Nelson Mandela said, "A winner is a dreamer who never gives up." I want the Minister of State to bring this back to the Minister for housing, Deputy Browne, on my behalf, because I have already raised this with him. I am the dreamer, and I will never give up on this case until I succeed for her.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: The national total for those considered homeless is 16,734. Of that figure, 5,188 are children. These figures released in December 2025 show a shocking increase in both adult and child homelessness. These figures also mask the real number of those who are homeless because they do not tell us how many people are couch surfing and sleeping rough on the streets or in their cars.

Eviction notices from landlords have continued at pace, with tenants having nowhere to go after eviction, except the homeless services. The new differential rent scheme being introduced in April by Dublin City Council has created additional problems. From the number of people who have contacted my constituency office in recent days, it is almost certain that a new cohort of people will enter homelessness. The income-based assessment approach has had the consequence of adversely affecting many tenants, as the calculation on rent owing is now made according to who is the highest earner in a household and not who is the primary tenant. This has substantially increased rents for many of the most vulnerable in our communities, particularly old-aged pensioners. One old-aged couple's rent is increasing from €63 to over €80, over €20. It is absolutely terrible.

In a housing crisis, as people struggle to get on the property ladder, many adult children have remained in the family home to save money for a deposit or mortgage. Their parents are now being punished for helping their children save for a house because if their earnings are more than their parents, their parents' rent goes up substantially. This has been a big shock for many people who are already struggling financially. Parents may now have to delve into their savings to pay the extra rent or consider putting their children out of the house. I advise anyone in financial difficulty to apply to the council's hardship fund to assist them in their financial distress and alleviate pressures on the family income.

While the reasoning for these increases in rent is that the moneys will go toward housing maintenance, insulation of homes, adaptations etc., the reality is the Department of housing is not sufficiently funding councils, which have some of the oldest properties in the State. Basically, the Government is putting the critical funding required for maintenance back on the poorest and most vulnerable in our communities. We can see this Government is incapable of resolving the homelessness crisis, which will continue to get worse.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is hard to know what to say at this stage because it will not be anything new from me or anyone else. I used to joke about single, transferable speeches but, unfortunately, there is an element here of, "Where are we going?"

As Deputy Ellis said, that 16,734 is the officially accepted or classified number for homelessness. Obviously, this does not deal with rough sleepers, children in domestic violence refuge and a huge number of things. It does not deal with those people who are getting by on the basis that they are staying in their friend's front room and moving from one to the other. I have to assume the Minister of State has people coming to him at this moment in time, no more than we do, under severe pressure with notices to quit. He is going to talk about tenure and about how there is a greater level of protections but we do not see it. We are talking about 25% of all private rental tenancies that are registered with the RTB being new tenancies.

We are looking at possibly having up to 60,000 from 1 March. We could be looking at literally 60,000 tenancies every year with a market reset. It is not a normal market; it is an absolutely broken market. I will be honest and say that I was talking to a very small landlord who put up a notice for a small two-bedroom in Dundalk but had to take it down within an hour. There were well over 100 emails, with people offering whatever they could to get a house. There were about 50 phone calls, of which not all could be answered for obvious reasons. There was a huge number of people who are facing notices to quit. We are talking about 5,100 children within that figure I mentioned earlier.

The only people who are happy at the minute are those in IRES REIT. It is looking at a 20% to 25% increase in its profits for rents. I do not see any solutions here. It is like this problem has become so big, that Government is happy enough to just let it lie on the basis that there is an element of apathy and of people who are afraid there is not a solution. We all know there are solutions, and it is about Government investing properly. It is about ensuring there is a steady supply of affordable and social housing. I do not know how the Government can defend this in any way, shape or form.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I have asked for this debate for weeks on end at the Business Committee. Finally, we got there but it takes this long just to get a debate on what is an absolute disaster. The Minister for housing, Deputy Browne, said when he came into office that child and family homelessness was his priority. The Government has repeatedly said this is the biggest social emergency facing it. Yet, tomorrow, we are going to have the new homelessness figures and the likelihood is those figures will reach close to 17,000 people in emergency accommodation, maybe even exceeding that figure, with 5,000 of those being children.

4 o'clock

The likelihood is that those figures will reach close to 17,000 people in emergency accommodation and they may even exceed that figure, with 5,000 of those being children. It is an obscene level of child and family homelessness. We are breaking the records pretty much every month in terms of the hardship and suffering being imposed on families, children and individuals in homelessness, facing homelessness or in crisis housing situations. It seems to me that the Government is normalising this. There can be no other explanation for allowing the homeless figures to climb to the levels the Government has allowed, in a housing crisis that has been acknowledged. It took a while for Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Governments to acknowledge it. I remember when some of us were using the term "crisis" back in 2012 and 2013 and we were being dismissed. Eventually there was an acknowledgement, more than 12 years ago, that there was a crisis, not an emergency. I do not know if the Government is willing, even now, to use the word "emergency" to describe the absolute disaster that is facing so many people in housing crisis situations or who are actually homeless. The Government has allowed the situation to deteriorate and get worse. It seems to me that the Government actually wants to normalise the situation and get us used to it. The media at this point will probably sort of ignore this debate now because even they are being inured to the idea that there is just going to be a permanent state of housing misery in this country.

I want to use the brief time available to me to highlight some cases. I get so exercised about this issue because of the people who come to me. I will give a few examples just to highlight the failure of the Government. Suzanne has been nine years on the housing list. She has three kids aged ten, four and two. Her ten-year-old has additional needs and her two-year-old has a heart condition. She will be homeless on Saturday when she has to hand back her keys on foot of a notice to quit because her landlord is selling the property. She has done nothing wrong. This will be the third time in five years that she has been made homeless. Suzanne grew up in care with no family support network. She has been on to the council repeatedly about her situation and is told it does not even have homeless accommodation for somebody who has been nine years on the list and facing her third stint of homelessness. She has been told she will probably have to ring the emergency hours homeless number when she is made homeless on Saturday. It is despicable that Suzanne could be in this situation again with her children.

Caoimhe has been eight and a half years on the housing list. She has three children aged nine, four and two. They have been living in damp and mouldy homeless accommodation for almost ten months. Her two-year-old was taken to hospital with pneumonia during the winter. She was previously in homeless accommodation in 2021. She found a HAP property and lived there for four years but was then made homeless again. Her daughter, at Christmas time, asked for only one thing from Santa - a home of her own. It is just disgusting that she and her child are going through this again.

Vera and her partner have three children, two of whom have disabilities. They have been in homeless accommodation in Monkstown for over six months. The HSE has visited and deemed the accommodation inappropriate for disabled children. Vera submitted multiple consultant letters urging the council to house them. The children are really suffering in the homeless accommodation. She submitted a medical priority form, a HMD form, ten months ago but it still has not been adjudicated on. The family are in absolute crisis.

The list goes on. Julianne has been homeless now with her two children for more than two years and is in her second homeless accommodation. She is currently sharing a bed with her nine-year-old son. Her daughter, who is 14, is now refusing to go to school.

Saoirse has been in a hub for a year. She came in to me and described how she has been suicidal. Her son has autism. She is on a list for a two-bedroom property but is still awaiting to be processed on the HMD form. The list just goes on. This is just a snapshot of cases I am dealing with in my office.

These people are all on the lists for two-bedroom or three-bedroom properties. There are almost no three-bedroom units in the pipeline in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. The private developers are mostly building one- and two-bedroom units and are not really interested in three-bedroom homes because they can get more one- and two-bedroom units on a site. Families are in absolutely dire situations and the Government says it is its priority. What is it going to do for these families? The tenant in situ scheme has slowed to a snail's pace, so for those facing eviction that one possible hope for some of them is not available.

Let us think of people trying to find a HAP tenancy in this situation. Rents in my area for a three-bedroom home are now at €3,200. Any tenancies that end will now all go up to that level in my area. There is no chance of even the HAP as an outlet. As difficult as it was to find a HAP tenancy previously, now there will be no HAP properties available within the limits or anywhere even close to them.

We also have the older people. Tommy and Bridie are a couple who are being evicted from the home they have rented for the past four years. They are aged 69 and 77, respectively, and are absolutely terrified of what is coming down the line. They have been on the older person's housing list for seven years. The council has given them no reassurance, telling them they are No. 38 on the list. Obviously they are terrified as older people, at those ages, that they will end up in emergency accommodation. Both of them have health issues. Bridie has had part of her lung removed as a result of cancer and her breathing is affected. Tommy has macular degeneration and is almost completely blind in one eye, with deteriorating sight in the other. He also has type 2 diabetes. The thought of these people going into a hostel in town is disgusting.

Gary has been living in private rented accommodation for years. In his current place, he has been on rent allowance for 14 years. The council is disputing how long he has been on the list. He has chronic arthritis and rheumatism but neither that nor his age qualifies him to be prioritised by the council. His attempt to be prioritised has been rejected. Older people are not on choice based lettings, CBL, so he has no idea how long he will wait.

Joan is aged 84. Her husband died a few years ago. She lived Dún Laoghaire all her life and she was evicted on 20 January. We were in touch with the council but nothing could be found for her. She is now staying with a family member in Waterford.

We have families and children and older, sick and vulnerable people who are in homeless accommodation, are homeless or are facing homelessness. Then there are those suffering from domestic violence. I will not mention the names here. A woman who has two children was viciously attacked by her ex-partner who is awaiting trial for the attack. Her youngest child witnessed the attack and is traumatised. He has attacked her apartment also, despite a protection order. She tried repeatedly to get priority housing through the council but to no

avail, even though she is fleeing domestic violence. Another woman escaped a violent abusive partner and has been couch surfing between two homes. She has been waiting over six months for a HMD form to be assessed.

This is affecting children, families, older people and women and children fleeing domestic violence. There are also those people who go over the threshold. Ian has lived in private rented accommodation with his partner for over 14 years. They were paying €2,300 a month. They have been issued with a notice to quit and are becoming desperate because they cannot find anything within their price range. As you might imagine, €2,300 a month pretty much stretches them. Now, of course, rents for the same property will be over €3,000. They are marginally over the limit for social housing and therefore are not entitled to HAP or any assistance or any prospect of a social home. They went in for the few lotteries for cost rental but of course they did not get them because there is massive oversubscription for those.

Then there is Ben, a very nice young man in his 20s, who came in to see me. He is working for the council but his income is €1,500 over the threshold, which, by the way, has not been moved for three years. He has been on the housing list. He has to pay €250 every two weeks in maintenance to his partner, but that is still assessed against his income. If that was not assessed, he would be below the threshold and he would not be knocked off the list. By the way, his partner is being assessed on the same money he is giving to her, which is double counting of the maintenance. I think the Minister of State gets the point.

Where is the effort to stop people being homeless? The only meaningful thing the Department has done is to guarantee that people's prospect of finding private rented accommodation in my area, the whole of south Dublin and huge parts of the country is now going to be totally impossible because the rents will all go up €3,000 or €3,200. It was very hard before, but now it just will not happen, so the likelihood of those people escaping from homelessness is gone. Everything the Government is seen to be doing - not lifting the thresholds and not controlling the rents - is making it more likely people will stay in this homelessness misery, in conditions that are totally unacceptable.

The Government could do something about it. It could stop evictions, put in real rent controls, take aggressive action against people who are land-hoarding and speculating, prioritise the provision of more social housing and raise the thresholds. There are a lot of things the Government could do, but it just does not seem to care. It seems as if the Government just wants to normalise this horrendous situation.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: It is an utter shame and disgrace that statements on homelessness are becoming so frequent in the Dáil. The fact that the Minister is not here either is also shameful.

Every single time this issue comes before us, the numbers of people, including children and the elderly, who have been failed by this Government and have ended up homeless have risen. The number has risen drastically and it is rising every day.

The facts are there in black and white before us. They spell out clearly what we in Sinn Féin have been calling out for years: that the Minister has been throwing petrol on the fire with his housing policies. The housing policies do not work for ordinary working people trying to buy a home. They do not work for pensioners facing eviction. Let us imagine getting to that

age in life and not knowing where we will go next. We need more local housing for older people. People decide who is at the top of the list in communities. We are being told people are not on the list. It does not matter what medical issues they have, as people are dictating who gets the houses. That is wrong. Older people should not have to face eviction.

The housing policies do not work for adults with additional needs who desperately need a safe and secure place to live. Recently, in the audiovisual room, we heard from the Before We Die campaigners who spoke about the hidden homeless. The parents are too old. They are getting to a stage where they cannot possibly look after their loved ones, yet the State says that they must. How are they supposed to do that? Some of these people are in their 80s. It is not possible. The State needs to step up and stop putting the blame on parents.

The housing policies do not work for students being fleeced with sky-high rents. I know colleges that have space to build. We need to get in there. Rents should not be a barrier to people going to college. Parents cannot afford to live in their own homes and they cannot afford to send their children to college purely because they cannot afford to pay the rent. That is not right.

The housing policies only work to line the pockets of the mega-landlords, the vulture funds and the big property developers. Put simply, the Minister is putting private capital and profits ahead of the public good. That has led to ever-increasing homelessness.

Only this week, I was contacted by a couple in their late 50s who face a no-fault eviction from the house they have rented for almost 20 years. They are devastated and left with no idea of where to go. They face a very real prospect of homelessness.

We are a strong, prosperous, highly developed State. How this Government can allow so many people to fall into homelessness is an absolute disgrace. Without a radical reset of housing policy, as recommended by the Housing Commission, this crisis will only get worse. That means the Minister will not meet his target of ending long-term homelessness by 2030.

We have a wealth of expertise and knowledge in this State - experts who could help end this crisis. It is time the Minister started listening to them, and not the lobbyists for big capital. Homelessness is the single most pressing social issue that affects individuals and families in Ireland right now. There are people in Carlow and Kilkenny who are working but cannot afford to rent, if they could even find a house to rent. They cannot get a mortgage because their wages are too low. We need to get back to local county councils building houses, just like the one that I grew up in. Kilkenny would be in a far worse crisis if we did not have the Good Shepherd Centre. It is doing tremendous work but we need more of that.

I am glad the Minister eventually came in. There are older people and children who are homeless. Deputy Boyd Barrett said that all the children wanted for Christmas off Santy was a roof over their head. That is a crying shame. Some of these parents are working yet they cannot afford to rent a house. They have no chance of ever getting a mortgage. That is on the Government.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The homeless crisis in Ireland has reached a historic and harrowing breaking point for so many families. The figures currently show that 16,734 people are trapped in emergency accommodation. That is a record-shattering figure, representing a 12% increase year on year. However, it is actually only a fraction of the truth if we add in rough sleepers and

the 290,000 hidden homeless - the families who are squeezed into garden sheds, those who are couch surfing and living in overcrowded flats or the adults who are in their 30s, regressing into childhood bedrooms because this State has outsourced the right to a shelter to what is market forces.

The Ombudsman for Children has documented many complaints and reveals what I would call a systematic institutionalisation of children in this State. One mother described her children's silence, noting that her son had stopped speaking entirely because of the regimented prison-like experience of guards and roll calls in their so-called home. In these hubs, families of five are actually confined to single rooms. The ombudsman reported that children are not making their milestones, such as crawling or walking, just because they simply do not have enough floor space to be able to get moving. In some of these areas there are floors that are damp and rooms full of people that are full of mildew. There is the noise of strangers, heard through paper-thin walls.

The school run has become a marathon for many kids, who have to get up at 5:30 a.m. to get to the school in the area where they lived originally. One parent talked about their child having to eat a dry breakfast out of a plastic bag at a bus stop, just be able to get to school on time. Teachers are reporting the phenomenon of homelessness fatigue because children are having to travel such distances from the temporary homeless hubs to get to the original school they were in.

I had not heard of the term "kettle cooking" until recently. A generation of children are now growing up on pot noodles, tea and instant pasta prepared on the floor of their room on their bedside table. That is the nutritional content that we are investing in a whole cohort of children in this country.

Other children, because of the distance that they have to travel on buses to get home, are missing meal times in the hubs, and maybe missing the only hot meal of the day as well. Homelessness takes a psychological toll.

We see behaviour regression from children who were once independent. We are seeing documented cases of children aged eight, nine, ten, 11 and 12 years old returning to bed-wetting because of the instability of the situation of they are in and the proximity of strangers in hostels as well.

There is a profound sense of stigma for many of these children. Children and teenagers describe as a social death telling people that they are homeless. It is impossible for them to have a friend over, as well the effect that has on the socialisation of those individuals. They do not have a wall to put a poster on, a door to close behind them or a proper bed to sleep in at night.

Up until this situation, we were talking about people on low incomes but we are now actually talking about middle-income families in this situation. Incredibly, families who are on €30,000 or €40,000 and up to €48,000 in some places are being disqualified from housing assistance, leaving them in a situation where they are too wealthy to be able to get housing assistance but too poor to be able to afford rent and in the limbo space of being forced into temporary accommodation. It is an incredible situation. The Government refuses to change the income limits despite the realities of the cost-of-living crisis. This is engineering a section of society which is now falling into homelessness and that is policy-driven.

I want to just speak about some of the solutions for this because there is no point in just focusing on the outcomes of the Government's attitude. The Government's residential tenancies Bill will come into play on Monday. That Bill is designed purposely to raise rents. That is the objective of that Bill. The Government does that because it wants to attract investors. It does it because it wants to increase activation and viability. I do not know of any other government in the history of the State that has implemented a Bill whose primary objective is to raise rents. To do it at a time when families are struggling with absolutely astronomical rents is really hard to believe.

I accept something needs to be done on the viability question. However, at a time when the Government is putting €10 billion into a savings account on an annual basis, surely there is another method to make house-building viable. In my constituency there are heaps of builders at home who are doing nothing and are not building because it is not viable for them. The majority of the top 50 construction companies in this country are currently sending their workers abroad because it is not viable to build here in Ireland. However, in the North of Ireland there is no VAT on the construction of homes. There is no tax take by the state on the construction of homes in the North of Ireland. The Minister has already accepted that is an activation action by actually doing it for flats and apartments. However, that really only attracts the investment funds into that space. Imagine if it was done for house-building, for the people who are building their own houses or the families who want to get into a first-time house in their locality.

This Government is absolutely laden down with red tape and bureaucracy. I have mentioned this to the Minister a number of times before. Unless he actually gets to the heart of this, he will never fix this problem. We have the slowest planning, permitting, licensing, tendering and judicial review system in the whole of Europe. It takes a phenomenally long time to build anything. This is not just affecting the housing crisis. We cannot build flood defences, rail lines and the other infrastructure necessary to allow people to live, and that is a significant problem. The habitats directive has a big influence on that. However, it is also because the Government is not staffing the planning authorities or An Coimisiún Pleanála to the level they need. It is also because it puts layer upon layer of bureaucracy on the system year after year. If the Government does not tackle that, we are going to have a massive problem.

At the moment Ireland has 26 judicial reviews for every 1 million people. Britain has five judicial reviews for every 1 million people. It is becoming a national sport here. We have proposed a Bill to prevent vexatious objections to construction. Right now, if I live in the Minister of State's constituency in Cork, I can put in an objection to a person in Donegal building a slatted shed on their farm, which is an incredible situation. A person with no material interest in a particular project can put in an objection. People should not get me wrong; I understand that there are civic society groups that stand for proper planning and development and should have the ability to influence or put in objections. However, we need to start targeting vexatious objectors and the vexatious judicial reviewers in this process.

One of my biggest frustrations with this Government has been the type of debate that we have had on this issue over the years. It has been a very one-dimensional debate. It is happening between the Government and a certain section of the Opposition. We need to have a deeper debate on how we make house building viable in this country without putting the weight on the families who are looking to buy those homes or the renters who are looking to

rent those homes. People need to be allowed to build in their own local areas. Until the Minister gets to address these issues, he will join a long line of about five or six Ministers who have crashed and burned in relation to the objectives of the housing Department. That is not the holy all of it. The main problem is the families who are made homeless as a result of that situation. There is a permanent government in place in relation to all these objectives. They are driving the bus and the Ministers present are simply passengers on that bus. Unless that changes, we will be back here year after year looking at the situation.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I do not know where to start. There are a huge number of issues and the lads opposite will be familiar with them, given that they are the cause of most of them. We are here to discuss the specific issue of homelessness. I want to talk about hidden homelessness. There is a rising number of families affected by relationship breakdown. Because they are petrified of homelessness and have nowhere to go, they are stuck in the home that they started together. They do not want to be together any more and that happens with people no longer in a position to continue living together, but they are stuck. They are stuck in a relationship they want to get out of. They are stuck in a house they want to be liberated from and they are stuck because there is nowhere for them to go.

In the last couple of weeks, I have come across several cases but two really stuck out. A couple in their mid-60s live in a housing estate in north County Dublin with one of their adult children and another one possibly on the way back. I met both the ex-husband and ex-wife, as they are now. I do not know if the Minister understands the impact this is having on their health, their mental health and their well-being. They cannot move on. They are stuck in a house. The relationship is over. It is perfectly all right for two people who started a relationship to come to the decision that they want to end that relationship, but they have no choice but to live together. There is a huge impact every single day of having to live with a person you no longer want to be married to or in a relationship with. When added to that there are adult children forced by the Government's housing crisis back into the smallest room in the house, the tension is off the charts. This is the human impact of the Government's housing and homelessness crisis, disaster - Jesus, I am running out of words. This is the human impact of hidden homelessness. Technically at least one person in that relationship is homeless but they just have not moved out. Technically they have somewhere to live but it is mental bloody torture, day in and day out for them. They cannot move on because there is nowhere for them to go.

Another husband and wife live not too far from me. They have two children. There is a safety order in place, but again nowhere for them to go. Their daughter has started to self-harm simply because of the tension in the house.

This is another shambles that the Government is presiding over. Their daughter is now trying to get onto a very long waiting list to access CAMHS. In the meanwhile, her parents' relationship has broken down. They are stuck living in a small house. All four of them - mam, dad and the two kids - are stuck living in a small house. Their teenage daughter has started to self-harm. Guess what? There is nowhere for them to go. There is now no place for them to simply separate and live separate lives. They are all stuck together and there is no mental health support for their daughter who is self-harming on a regular basis. She has no medication or psychiatrist. There is just a bloody waiting list. The human impact is mind-blowing.

I am glad that the Minister is here for the remaining few minutes of the debate because I want to ask him about the tenant in situ scheme. The very least that anyone could expect from a Government would be that it would not make things worse. Yet, I know of a family in Rush, comprising mam, dad and two kids, who have a notice to quit that expires in a couple of months. Their landlord is willing to sell to the council so the family wrote to the council. Not many landlords are willing to do it, but this landlord is willing to sell to the council. The family wrote to the council and the advice that came back was that Fingal County Council is no longer accepting new expressions of interest for the tenant in situ scheme and cannot advise whether it will be in a position to accept tenant in situ applications in 2026 as funding is determined by the Department of housing. I am delighted that the Minister for housing is here. Perhaps he will be able to tell me, so that I might tell my constituents, when the tenant in situ scheme will be open. There is a real chance to save this family from homelessness. The family comprises mam, dad and two kids, one of whom is a teenager and the other an adult. They could be saved from homelessness but the Department must release the funds.

Deputy Carol Nolan: As the Minister is aware, data from the latest homeless quarterly progress report on the scale of homelessness clearly shows there were 16,734 individuals accessing emergency accommodation at the end of quarter 4 of 2025. This was an increase of 120 individuals on the position at the end of quarter 3 of 2025. There was an increase of 1,870 on the total recorded at the end of quarter 4 of 2024. There were 2,478 families accessing emergency accommodation at the end of quarter 4 of 2025, which was an increase of 35 families on the position at the end of quarter 3 of 2025 and an increase of 386 families on the total recorded at the end of quarter 4 of 2024.

On top of all of this chaos, we now have new residential tenancy rules and the mass exodus of many small landlords from the housing system. I have met many of these small property owners. They were all people who worked hard, contributed to our economy, paid their taxes and decided to buy a small property, which they rented. I know from my own constituency that in many cases, the arrangement with their tenants worked quite well. I am now hearing from tenants who are coming to me in floods of tears that landlords are forced to sell because of the Government's genius new laws. I condemn those laws because the Government is making a bad situation worse. It shows that Government parties are shifting further to the left. In fact, they are becoming more left than the left themselves. The Government has absolutely no right to dictate to citizens of this country what they should do with their own private assets that they worked hard for, bought and paid for. The Government has absolutely no such right. If that is not from the left-wing playbook, I do not know what is. The Government is certainly making a bad situation worse. I am calling for those laws to be reviewed. I have met many property owners who have told me that they were Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil voters but are disgusted with this behaviour and the way they are being treated. I call for those laws to be reversed.

I have repeatedly spoken of my concerns around the laws and the growing fear that while in theory safeguards may be in place, in practice, the cure may be worse than the disease. Perhaps if the Government were to hit the top and the vulture funds instead of small property owners, it might make more sense and we might get more solutions and progress. Perhaps that would be the way to proceed.

All of that, of course, is at the macro level. We can see cases at the individual level and it is only when we see those cases that we can truly gauge the ineffectiveness of the so-called reforms and the harm that continues to be done to families. I am continuing to deal with a constituent who through no fault or desire of his own was forced to sell his home. He did so because he is now locked in a battle to get planning permission for another home as he already made use of the rule allowing a build if you have a local connection.

I established, through a series of parliamentary questions last month, that there are massive delays in the registration process within Tailte Éireann. I have repeatedly contacted Tailte Éireann. It is not acceptable. The organisation is totally ineffective and needs to be overhauled quickly. If the Government is serious about making progress, it needs to ensure that Tailte Éireann is doing its job. From what I can see, it is failing. Indeed, the data provided to me confirms a rapid and exponential build-up in property registration delays in recent years, with the 2025 figure alone showing over 57,000 applications still pending from that year's lodgements. Surely this can be called out. Surely the Government Ministers can get a grip on that as soon as possible.

The total arrears across all years now exceeds 90,000, highlighting a massive accumulation that has built up despite efforts to address it. This data underscores the overwhelming scale of the challenge. Applications have grown, year on year, outpacing earlier resourcing and leading to this backlog. This backlog has escalated dramatically in the past few years, potentially impacting property transactions, agricultural transactions, conveyancing and housing market efficiency across Ireland. This highlights the urgency of ongoing efforts to clear applications and prevent further escalation and delays.

I was also able to establish, through another series of parliamentary questions in the past few weeks, that the so-called deemed disposal rule is adversely impacting housing. I know the *Business Post* carried an article on the issue last week. I placed the questions primarily because the issue was raised with me by a number of concerned constituents who feel that the current rules are overly complex and out of kilter with other EU member states. My constituents are also of the view that as currently drafted, the deemed disposal rule is contributing to a hoarding of property by ensuring that people keep what capital they have firmly locked into residential property. This keeps houses off the market and contributes to pent-up demand and inflated rents. I am asking the Government to perform some basic joined-up thinking on this issue. If we are serious about tackling the housing crisis, we must get under the taxation bonnet and properly assess what aspects of the taxation regime can be changed to facilitate greater supply while also allowing people to maximise their investments and returns. By that I mean private Irish citizens who have contributed to this economy, paid taxes and worked hard. They deserve respect and fair play.

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I thank all Deputies for their contributions. Addressing homelessness and increasing the supply of homes required to do so is my absolute priority. The programme for Government is committed to working towards ending homelessness by 2030. To meet this commitment, Delivering Homes, Building Communities was developed as an integrated housing and homeless plan. The new plan is based on two key pillars: activating the supply of 300,000 more homes and supporting people to have a home of their own. The plan will ensure that the funding and strategies deployed to address housing and homelessness are fully aligned at all times.

Increased supply is key to addressing homelessness. The Government is focused on making sure that everyone has access to good-quality, affordable and secure homes that suit their needs. The Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, spoke to the actions in the plan that are focused on increasing supply with over €9 billion in capital funding being made available for housing in 2026 alone. In addition, we are progressing significant measures to improve both security of tenure and supply in the rental market through the new rental legislation and the regulation of short-term lets. The new rental legislation will introduce stronger tenant protections by significantly restricting no-fault evictions. New tenancies created for the first time between parties on or after 1 March 2026 and the current provision for tenancies of unlimited duration will be strengthened by the incorporation of tenancies of a minimum duration of six years.

In addition, the regulation of short-term lets will bring back a proportion of the houses and apartments being used for short-term letting purposes to the traditional long-term rental market.

Ownership measures and actions already under way are having an impact. Supported by increased social housing delivery and supports such as HAP, more than 650,000 adults were helped to exit emergency accommodation in the past two years. However, the housing plan very much recognises that delivery alone is not enough. Despite a significant increase in the number of new homes being delivered and the high number of people being supported to exit homelessness, the numbers of households, including families with children, in homeless emergency accommodation has continued to rise. In order to see this number of people experiencing homelessness fall, there has to be an increased availability of homes for households at risk of homelessness not only as an exit pathway but also to prevent people from needing access to emergency accommodation in the first place. Prevention of homelessness in the first instance is an absolute priority.

There are many prevention initiatives already under way in my Department and across Government. They include the provision of social and affordable housing, the HAP and homeless HAP schemes and our strong tenancy protection legislation. In addition, we support local authorities to provide prevention services through significant funding each year. The level of expenditure on prevention services increased from €15.4 million in 2021 to €24.7 million in 2024, an increase of some €9.3 million, and now accounts for 7% of the total homeless budget. To ensure a fully aligned all-of-government approach under the plan, we are developing a national homelessness prevention framework within which homelessness can be prevented in a structured and planned way, with tailored prevention measures for each potential at-risk cohort. This framework will be in place in 2026.

We are also developing a child and family homelessness action plan, bringing together key stakeholders to drive the continued focus on preventing children and families from entering emergency accommodation and providing enhanced support for children experiencing homelessness, as well as measures to accelerate exits and reduce the time spent by children and their families in emergency accommodation. Since 6 October last year, I have written to and met with chief executives of local authorities asking that all necessary actions be taken to ensure families the longest in emergency combination are provided with housing solutions by utilising the various options available to local authorities, including HAP, RAS and allocations of local authority and AHB homes. To further support this effort, funding of €150 million has been ring-fenced for acquisitions that will support households the longest in emergency

accommodation to exit homelessness accommodation. In addition, the new plan recognises that domestic violence can lead to family homelessness. A protocol will be agreed with local authorities to ensure victims of domestic violence can transfer previous time spent on a social housing waiting list to another local authority, subject to meeting all social housing eligibility requirements.

Housing First is another key policy response in our efforts to reduce homelessness among our most vulnerable citizens. The new housing plan recognises that individuals experiencing homelessness with complex support needs often become entrenched in emergency homeless services. Under the plan, the Department of Health will provide increased health support to households experiencing homelessness through the implementation of the HSE national strategic plan to improve the health of people experiencing homelessness. Under the youth homeless strategy in place for the past three years, we introduced a range of new measures, including housing support for use in shared accommodation schemes. Budget 2026 provides a total allocation of €563.5 million to address homelessness. This includes €513.5 million in current funding to ensure local authorities can provide sufficient emergency accommodation as well as essential related services. Housing First makes provision for homeless prevention supports and data services and tenancy sustainment measures.

Everybody in this House wants to address homelessness. We might have different approaches to doing so but nobody in the Dáil has a monopoly on compassion. We must be constructive. Challenging policies and legislation is absolutely essential but whipping up false anger in a kind of performative effort is outrageous. I have pulled people in here up previously for just wanting to create social media clips. We have seen prime examples of that here today. There is only one housing spokesperson in the Chamber for my closing remarks, and that is Deputy Boyd Barrett. Deputy Sheehan was apparently outraged that I was not here earlier, which was because I was at a Cabinet committee meeting. It is outrageous, apparently, that a Minister should attend a Cabinet committee meeting. I do not control the scheduling of the business of the Dáil or of Cabinet committees. A photo was sent to me of Deputy Sheehan when he had barely finished speaking in the Chamber. He was at a Luas stop with a coat and jacket on, no doubt heading back to Limerick with his credibility left back here in the Dáil Chamber. Deputy Hearne was equally outraged that I was not here and that I would, as a Minister, dare to attend a Cabinet committee. The Minister of State, Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan, explained why I was absent at the start of this debate. Again, the minute Deputy Hearne was finished speaking, he fled the building.

It is fine to try to whip up anger; that is straight out of the Trump playbook. However, I am struck by the cynicism and shallowness of it. Deputies opposite did not come in to talk about policy or legislation. We cannot expect people at home to understand the workings of the Dáil Chamber and committees. Members are regularly in other places around Leinster House doing work. We cannot always be in here, unfortunately. People at home do not know the workings of the Oireachtas but Deputies Hearne and Sheehan do know them. They are playing on the public's lack of knowledge of the workings of the Houses. They tried to whip up anger that I was not here for the start of the debate. I was doing my work as a member of the Cabinet at a Cabinet committee meeting.

There is also no one here from Sinn Féin, the Labour Party or the Social Democrats. Members of those parties spent the past hour and a half being outraged about homelessness but they are not here in the Chamber for my closing statement.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I am here.

Deputy James Browne: I was called out for not being here and I am responding to that.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: The Minister said there was no one here from the Social Democrats.

Deputy James Browne: The Deputy is here to raise a Topical Issue; he is not here for this debate. We are seeing a race to the bottom with this Trump-style anger that is expressed only in the hope of getting elected if enough anger is created against the Government. The Labour Party did that in 2011, and where did it end up?

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: If the Minister keeps looking at me when making his remarks, I will keep responding to him.

Deputy James Browne: The party created a kind of Faustian pact by whipping up anger among people.

I ask that Members opposite deal with the issues at hand and stop trying to create bogeymen for vote-getting purposes. That will solve nothing. Everyone on this side of the House wants to solve homelessness. I do not expect Members opposite to agree with our policies. That is not how it works or should work. Challenging us on policy, as Deputy Boyd Barrett often does on a very deep level, sharpens our policies and at least gets the debate going.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins): 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 improvement and refurbishment works for older school buildings across County Kerry.

Deputy Grace Boland - The national fare structure for train fares and its impact on passengers travelling from Balbriggan and Skerries.

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

Deputy Duncan Smith - To discuss the future of St. Ita's campus in Donabate.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss the need to review Circular 0030/2014 with regard to the role of special needs assistants.

Deputy Joe Neville - To discuss the completion of emergency works at St. Patrick's Primary School in Celbridge.

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

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

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

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness - To discuss the need for neurodiversity early intervention classes in primary schools in Waterford.

The matters raised by Deputies Joe Neville, Shane Moynihan and Robert O'Donoghue have been selected for discussion.

We will suspend briefly to allow the Minister of State, Deputy Niall Collins, time to get to the Chamber.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 4.48 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 4.49 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 4.48 p.m. and resumed at 4.49 p.m.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Joe Neville: I am raising the very serious issue of St. Patrick's Primary School in Celbridge, which opened in 2008. It is housed in a prefabricated building that was only supposed to be in place for five years. Unfortunately, 18 years later, the school is still in that building. In June 2025, a report was submitted after the work had been done at the end of March. It states:

I am of the opinion that the existing building in the current condition is not fit for the purpose to operate without considerable risk to the occupants and users as a school, is unsafe and poses a serious immediate threat to the well-being, health and safety of the occupants and users.

That is how a primary school in Celbridge in which there are more than 300 students and also SNAs and teachers is described. These children are the some of the most important and most vulnerable people in our community. They deserve a much better and safer building in which to attend school. Much of what is in the report was made public on a KFM programme over the weekend. The report has also been covered in the *Liffey Champion* on a number of occasions in recent weeks. This is an ongoing issue.

As I said, it is 18 years since the prefabs were put in. I raised this matter with the Minister for education at a meeting on 18 June last year. I also raised it in the Dáil last October and again in January. The pictures of the classroom that I have with me were taken at the end of January. It is not a place where kids should be. There is water running down the walls. The principal and her partner had to clean the classroom after a weekend of rain at the start of January, but the situation has only been exacerbated since then. The Minister, Deputy

Naughton, visited the school, and she saw the issues that exist at first hand. She has highlighted the issue, but more work needs to be done as a matter of urgency. The principal and the teachers are doing amazing work, and the school has a great community, but the parents are really concerned. We need a resolution.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for allowing me to speak on this matter. The Minister of State is faced with a rare situation whereby all the TDs in the constituency are working together on it. We raised it earlier with the Secretary General of the Department of education at the Committee of Public Accounts. We know that Simon Harris and the Minister are aware of what is happening.

Deputy Neville outlined the matter in a very comprehensive manner. We need to see action on the architect's report. The evidence is no longer anecdotal. There is a real and significant health and safety concern for the children. There are issues with fire safety, the floor plate, wall retention, mould and damp, etc. Nobody should be expected to learn in such an environment. The entire school community, including the principal, the teachers, the SNAs and the secretaries, should not be expected to work in those conditions.

I join Deputies Neville, Cronin, Ó Cearúil and Lawless in commending the entire school community regarding what they have had to endure. I cannot overstate how concerned the parents are right now. We have reached the point where they are organising a meeting next week to try to progress this. They do not know what the next steps need to be, which is why they need the State to step in on an emergency basis. None of us really believes that works will suffice at this point. The Minister of State knows that for an 18-year-old modular unit with a design lifetime of five years, it is not a great solution to upgrade what is there now. We need something in the short term which will ensure that the health and safety of the staff and children is of paramount importance. We all look forward to the Minister of State's reply. He should know that he has collective support from all TDs in the constituency in the context of progressing this over the next couple of weeks. The latter is the timeline within which we need to see action.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Niall Collins): I thank Deputies Neville and Farrelly for raising this matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth. I welcome the opportunity to provide details of the interaction the Department of Education and Youth has had with St. Patrick's Primary School Celbridge in relation to the emergency works scheme and to provide an update on its capital project.

As the Deputies will be aware, the purpose of the emergency works scheme is to provide funding specifically for unforeseen emergencies or to provide funding to facilitate inclusion and access for pupils with special needs. An emergency is deemed to be a situation which poses an immediate risk to health, life, property or the environment, and a situation which is sudden, unforeseen and requires immediate action. In the case of a school, the situation must be of sufficient gravity whereby, if not corrected, it would prevent the school or part of it from opening.

Following an invitation from Deputy Neville, the Minister visited the school in January. She was given a tour of the building before meeting local school leaders and the board of management. During this visit, she was advised by the school that a number of classrooms had

been closed and that the building had structural defects. St. Patrick's Primary School has submitted a number of applications for funding under the emergency works scheme for life safety equipment, fabric defects and roof works. The emergency works scheme operates on the basis of a minimal scope of works required to remedy an emergency situation. On this basis, the school was advised to submit a revised scope of works with an accompanying itemised cost breakdown.

In January, the Department engaged project engineers and contractors to address the immediate issues. This facilitated the completion of initial remedial works by 5 February, which allowed for classrooms that were closed to reopen. There has been significant engagement with St. Patrick's in relation to the sequencing of works to address the outstanding issues. A written programme update was issued to the school on 9 February. A further update was provided to the school on 24 February. This programme outlined a number of actions which are planned, utilising two modular units which were provided to the school. This will facilitate the temporary decanting of students to allow classrooms works to take place. The sequencing of works is set out to maximise the mid-term break and Easter break. The Department will continue to work with the school in this regard.

In relation to capital works, a new school building for St Patrick's Primary School is part of a campus project that has been devolved for delivery under the National Development Finance Agency, NDFA, as part of a bundled school building programme. The brief for the school includes the provision of 24 mainstream classrooms and four special educational needs classrooms. The project is currently at detailed design stage of the architectural process, which involves developing the designs, fully costed planning, the campus project and preparing the necessary documentation to facilitate the application for statutory approval to the local authority.

Following a request from the Minister, the Department of Education and Youth, the NDFA and the Land Development Agency recently met to discuss progress on this important project. The Minister has requested that the school be kept fully informed of that progress.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I just want touch on a couple of the matters. The two modular units have been set down and the children are using them. However, the units are very small and way too cramped for proper classes. Also, there are no toilets in the modular units, which are located away from the school building. That poses its own difficulties.

I was at the school yesterday morning. The scaffolding has been put up. There is no work going on and the scaffolding is blocking some of the fire exits. This emphasises the dangers and risks for the children. Obviously, I welcome the two-pronged approach being taken, particularly as we need to have the emergency works to fix the school. However, we also need the delivery of the new school building. Ultimately, a three-school campus needs to be put in place. That is a longer term solution, however. We all know that new schools are not built too quickly in this country, so we need a proper solution for these children in the immediate future.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I was somewhat concerned about the fact that the officials of the Department of Education and Youth who appeared before the committee yesterday stated that they are conducting a peer review in respect of the architect's report. In some ways, this casts

a shadow what the architect has said. Ultimately, what we need to know, in very clear terms, is whether the plan that was presented to the school on Tuesday will remedy what the architect outlined in terms of the immediate concerns relating to the health and safety of children and staff at the site.

5 o'clock

If the Minister of State can tell me that, then we as a collective group can go back with that. From this reply, I am not convinced. If the Minister of State can give us a guarantee that what the architect had to say in his assessment of the site will be remedied, then we have a plan we can work towards. Otherwise we might have missed an opportunity here.

Deputy Niall Collins: I reiterate that the Minister for education and the officials in her Department are fully aware of the issues raised and will continue to proactively work with the school, pending the delivery of its permanent accommodation solution. The new building project is currently at stage 2A of the architectural design process and the Department of Education and Youth currently awaits the submission of the stage 2A report.

In general, some €397 million was invested in capital funding for Kildare schools between 2020 and 2025 and over that period, a total of 47 Kildare schools were upgraded, through the provision of a new school building, a large-scale extension or modular accommodation. There are also nine school projects in Kildare under construction at present. Under the national development plan, another 12 school projects in Kildare will go to tender or construction in 2026 and 2027. This summer, five schools are approved to undergo works as part of the summer works climate action scheme. In addition, since 2020 a total of 74 special classes have opened in Kildare, 11 of which were sanctioned for September 2026.

Educational Disadvantage

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as a bheith anseo inniu. An rud atá mé ag plé inniu ná an gá stádas DEIS a bhronnadh ar Ghaelscoil Lir i dTeach an Sagard atá i mo dháilcheantar féin. An fáth atá mé ag cur na ceiste seo faoi bhráid na Dála ná go bhfuil leibhéal suntasach tithíochta socheacnamaíocha agus éagsúlachta ag baint leis an scoil. Tá an scoil féin ag freastal ar theaghlaigh atá ag brath ar íocaíochtaí leasadh shóisialaigh de réir mar atá le feiceáil ó innéacs pobal. Tá an-chuid de na daltaí ó chúlraí imirce agus ilteangacha agus tá cuid mhór acu ag cur fúthu san ionad IPAS in aice na scoile. Tá go leor riachtanaisí breise oideachais le sonrú sa scoil freisin. Mar Ghaelscoil, tá an Ghaelscoil féin ag déanamh freastal ar go leor teaghlaigh nach bhfuil an Ghaeilge mar theanga sa bhaile acu, agus fiú amháin nach bhfuil Béarla ann. Is léir go bhfuil páistí sa scoil seo a bhfuil ag labhairt as Gaeilge nach bhfuil cumas acu sa Bhéarla, rud atá an-spéisiúil agus iontach ann féin, ach tá riachtanais ag an scoil a bhfuil freastal ag teastáil orthu. Níl rochtain ag an scoil ar a leithéid de chlár críochnaithe scoile, níl nasc idir an scoil agus an baile, agus níl fáil aige ach oiread ar a leithéid de dheontas le cúntóir a fhostú sa scoil.

The Topical Issue I raise today relates to Gaelscoil Lir, which is a growing school in my constituency based in Saggart-Citywest. To be clear, I am a member of its board of management. The reason I raise for Gaelscoil Lir to be considered for DEIS status is the school was established in the 2021-22 school year. It missed out on the immediate adjudication and

assessment of a school for inclusion in the DEIS programme. If we look at the overall picture of the school itself, it is one that has the needs add profile to justify the bestowing of DEIS status on it. There are families from low-income backgrounds whose children attend the school. Social welfare is the only source of income for a number of those families, there is a high prevalence of special educational needs in the school and there are two special classes in a student body of under 100 students. In and of itself, this is quite remarkable and shows the school staff's commitment to providing high level special education. A number of the students attending are from backgrounds where Ireland is not their country of birth. Many of them are also living in the IPAS centre immediately adjacent to the school.

One of the unique and very special things about Gaelscoil Lir is it has a number of students who speak Irish who cannot speak English. They have their native language from home or their own country and they now have proficiency in our native tongue, which is a beautiful thing to learn. The other side of that, however, is this is a school that has all of these needs but does not have access to things like the home school liaison programme or the school completion programme and is not able to employ a caretaker because of the size of its ancillary grant. Were we to have a serious debate about the need to encourage and ensure Irish-medium education; something I am very passionate about, we would also need to make sure Irish-medium education is available to all people of all backgrounds.

A support we in Fianna Fáil are rightly proud of is the expansion of the DEIS programme and giving children the educational opportunities they need. I would seriously consider the need to review Gaelscoil Lir's status and make allowance for the fact that given its student population, with many students residing in the IPAS centre, and given the significant areas of deprivation adjacent to it, there is an argument to consider DEIS status for Gaelscoil Lir. I wholeheartedly urge that as a consideration today.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank Deputy Moynihan for raising this important issue. Addressing educational disadvantage is a key priority for the Government, for me and, obviously, for the Minister for Education and Youth. The DEIS programme is a key policy initiative for addressing concentrated educational disadvantage at school level. DEIS supplements universal supports by targeting additional resources to schools where disadvantage is most concentrated, helping to promote equity and meet the needs of children and young people.

Currently, the DEIS programme supports almost 1,200 primary and post-primary schools and reaches approximately 260,000 students with an annual investment of more than €180 million. Budget 2026 allocated an additional €16.5 million in 2026, rising to €48 million in 2027, to support the implementation of a new DEIS strategy and introduce the DEIS plus scheme, which will commence this year. Schools which were included in the expansion of the programme in 2022 were those with the highest levels of concentration of children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage, as identified through the refined DEIS identification model. Schools were not required to apply for inclusion in the DEIS programme.

The model was applied fairly and equally to all schools, including those in the DEIS programme already, to ensure they were in the band which best addressed their level of disadvantage. The Minister, Deputy Naughton, is committed to addressing educational disadvantage in all schools to ensure all children can reach their potential. To this end, a new ten-year DEIS strategy to 2035 will be published in the coming weeks. The new strategy will

introduce innovative solutions to address educational disadvantage and continue to address the gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools. Over its lifetime, the new DEIS strategy will focus on improving the opportunities and achievement levels of children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage, developing more innovative approaches to tackling educational disadvantage, and working towards a more flexible system of supports to ensure that a school can receive the right support at the right time. Any future changes to the identification model and overall allocation of resources will be considered within the context of the new ten-year DEIS strategy.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as an freagra sin. I thank the Minister of State for taking this Topical Issue. I am a little disappointed the response did not refer to Gaelscoil Lir and that is something I will raise with the Department, given that was the particular schooled I raised in this instance. I draw attention to the fact that Gaelscoil Lir is quite unique in where it is located. It is located beside an IPAS centre and has a diversity of student backgrounds that have higher levels of special educational needs. It requires access to a home school liaison. It has scope to be one of the fastest growing schools in the Saggart-Citywest area and crucially, and this is something I have a particular interest in, it is also securing the language rights of families who want to send their children to an Irish-medium school. That is something we have to take seriously. I welcome the fact that DEIS strategy is being reviewed at the moment and will identify unique pockets of disadvantage but I also heartily encourage the Department and the Minister to seriously consider how the socioeconomic gaps that exist in areas around the country are also reflected for schools with Irish-medium education as well.

Sometimes there is an assumption that because a Gaelscoil is a Gaelscoil, it does not need access to support, the school completion programme or the home school liaison programme. We have to disabuse ourselves of that notion because that is not true. Tá an-obair ar siúl ag foireann Ghaelscoil Lir. Tá an-dúshlán á shárú aici. An rud atá mise ag iarraidh sa Teach seo inniu ná go mbeidh tacaíocht ar fáil d'fhoireann, do thuismitheoirí agus do phobal scoile Gaelscoil Lir chun go mbeidh siad in ann freastal ar na riachtanais atá acu agus go mbeidh siad in ann freastal ar na daltaí atá ag dul ag an scoil sin. Tá mé ag iarraidh go mbeidh gach aon deis ag gach aon dalta sa scoil sin gach rud gur féidir leo a bhaint amach sa saol sa todhchaí agus go mbeidh an Stát ag tacú leo é sin a dhéanamh.

Deputy Niall Collins: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue and giving us the opportunity to discuss it. The Department of Education and Youth is committed to supporting a high quality and inclusive school system that provides an equal opportunity for success for all children. DEIS remains central to that commitment and the forthcoming DEIS strategy will ensure that supports are targeted fairly and reflect the evolving needs of our school communities, informed by stakeholder engagement and a strengthened, needs-based allocation model. As part of the new ten-year strategy, the Department will review the current DEIS framework with a view to refining how disadvantage is measured and how schools are supported. This process will take account of a range of evidence and stakeholder feedback to ensure that schools serving significant levels of need are appropriately recognised in the updated model. The refinement of the DEIS model as part of the new strategy will consider how emerging or evolving patterns of disadvantage can be better addressed and how the system can best respond to schools that face increasing levels of need.

Early Childhood Care and Education

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Early childhood education and care in Dublin Fingal West is no longer a gap in planning. It is a failure of prioritisation. Dublin Fingal West has one of the highest concentrations of private childcare provision in the country, yet one of the lowest of community childcare provision. That imbalance has not happened by accident. It is the result of the State stepping back and leaving provision to the market, and families are paying the price as a consequence. Across Dublin Fingal West, particularly in the rapidly growing towns of Rush and Lusk, thousands of houses have been built and young families and couples have moved in, yet the essential public infrastructure that is community childcare that should accompany that growth has not kept pace with the development.

I receive constant emails from parents in my constituency who cannot easily access early education and school age childcare. Parents are on waiting lists before their child is even born. They cut their working hours because the fees are too high. They are forced to take whatever place they can get, not the place that best supports their child. It is not a functioning system. It is patchwork. Private providers no doubt play an important role but early childcare cannot be left almost entirely to private operations in a rapidly expanding area like Dublin Fingal West. My constituency has been left with one of the lowest levels of community childcare provision in the country. That is not equity; that is neglect. What makes it even more frustrating is that solutions are available. There are suitable sites in both Rush and Lusk that have planning permission. The land exists, the demand is clear, and the demographics are undeniable. If the Government truly intends to expand State-led childcare provision, then Dublin Fingal West is exactly where the commitment should be tested. It is the perfect canary in the coalmine.

The Government speaks frequently about building State-led early education models but families in my constituency do not see that ambition reflected on the ground. They see housing developments completed before the childcare facilities are delivered. They see population growth without the matching public services. They see political spin without urgency. Early education and care is not an optional extra but essential infrastructure. It enables parents, particularly women, to remain in the workforce. It supports early childhood development. It strengthens communities. When the State fails to provide it adequately, families bear the burden, so today, I am asking the Government to commit to prioritising Dublin Fingal West for State-led community-based childcare facilities. Will it engage with Fingal County Council and the Fingal childcare committee immediately on the identified sites in Rush and Lusk? Will it acknowledge that leaving one of the youngest populations in the country with one of the lowest levels of community childcare provision is simply not acceptable? Dublin Fingal West cannot continue to be an afterthought in national childcare planning. Families deserve more than promises; they deserve delivery.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank the Deputy for raising this Topical Issue matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Norma Foley. The Minister would like to thank Deputy O'Donoghue for raising this important issue and for offering her the opportunity to respond. I will deliver her response to the Deputy. Improving access to quality and affordable early learning and childcare is a key priority of Government. Early learning and childcare capacity is increasing. Data from the annual early years sector profile shows that the estimated number of enrolments

increased by 25% over the last three years. I believe that Fingal increased by 20% in the same period. The reality is that demand for early learning and childcare remains higher than available supply in certain parts of the country, particularly for younger children.

A forward planning model is in development which will be central to the Department's plans to achieve the policy goals set out in the programme for Government to build an affordable, high-quality, accessible early childhood learning and childcare system, with State-led facilities adding capacity. That model seeks to identify the nature and volume of different types of early learning and childcare places across the country and how that aligns with the numbers of children in the corresponding age cohorts. That will be done at local area level.

The Department continues to support the ongoing development and resourcing of core funding, which has given rise to a significant expansion of places since the scheme was first introduced. Core funding, which is in its fourth programme year, funds services based on the number of places available. This provides stability to services, and reduces the risk associated with opening a new service or expanding an already existing service. The Government is also supporting the expansion of capacity through capital funding. The building blocks extension grant scheme is designed to increase capacity in the one to three-year-old, pre-early childhood care and education age range for full daycare. That is to support the parents who the Deputy specifically mentioned in his own contribution.

Core funding partner services could apply for capital funding to physically extend their premises or, in the case of community services, to construct or purchase new premises. The scheme will deliver up to 1,500 full-day care places for the one to three-year-old age category. The Minister recently announced €135 million in capital investment in buildings for high-quality, accessible State-led early learning and childcare. The process will begin this year with investment in buildings in what will be a ground-breaking initiative for this Government. Capital funding will be used to acquire and/or fit out the building, depending on requirements. Services will be operated on a not-for-profit basis by third parties. Where a project is being considered without an operator already in place, the Department will run a process to identify an appropriate not-for-profit operator, with capacity to operate a high-quality service.

There will be a particular focus in the new State-led facilities on providing places for one to three-year-olds because this is where the need is greatest, with scope for these children to progress in the service until they start school. The aim of delivering additional supply of this kind in suitable locations will include both rural areas and urban areas which are not well served at the moment. Additional supply in areas of disadvantage is another priority because early learning can have really positive impacts on children at risk of disadvantage. Another factor to consider is the need to rebalance supply in some areas where there is a high concentration of private supply but very low levels of community childcare. That is what the Deputy outlined in his contribution, with regard to his constituency, Dublin Fingal West.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I thank the Minister of State and welcome what she said. Dublin Fingal West would be the perfect area to roll out a scheme like that. I welcome that capital funding will be used to acquire or fit out the buildings. That would certainly help in my constituency. I would also like to address the Government's commitments to reducing childcare costs to €200 a month over the term of the Dáil.

That is obviously welcome. However, we must be very clear about the language we use here. When we talk about cheaper childcare, we reduce this sector to a bargain bin service. It starts sounding like a Ryanair advertisement where the lowest fare wins. That cannot be what early childhood education and care becomes. Affordability does matter - of course it does - but quality must be number one. I am glad the Minister of State acknowledges that in her statement. It is worrying to see providers threaten a judicial review on the employment regulation order, ERO, in the sector. That shows how unstable the sector is. A Band-Aid is holding the sector together. We do not need a patch. We need to rip off the Band-Aid and have a transformative moment, like Donogh O'Malley bringing in free secondary education or Niamh Bhreathnach getting rid of fees and opening third level to a generation. Those decisions were not tinkering; they were bold and brave. They recognised education as a public good. I urge this Government to recognise early education in the same vein and start a transition to a fully public childcare model so that parents have real choice and every child has access to quality, accessible childcare.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I am glad to hear that some of the policies the Minister is pursuing and introducing may be of benefit to the Deputy in his constituency, but most importantly, the parents and children in his constituency. Up to eight buildings will be selected for investment this year, and the State-led initiative will provide thousands of places up to 2030 using the €135 million provided in the national development plan. The level of investment will ramp up over the lifetime of Government. The initial approach is on purchasing and refurbishing buildings given that this is a faster route to delivery in the short term. However, the option of new building facilities will also be considered over subsequent years. The Deputy highlighted two specific sites in Rush and Lusk that would be worth looking at from this perspective. The Department is assessing sites and buildings and, where required, will seek expressions of interest from operators to deliver State-led services. Local city and county childcare committees will be supporting the development of these projects in the first instance. Community early learning and childcare operators, local authorities, developers or others who might have some suitable premises, projects or sites should, therefore, first contact their local city and county childcare committee. I would encourage the Deputy to put the owners of those sites in touch with his own contacts locally.

Separately, following on from the success of the building blocks extension grant scheme, a further scheme will open for applications later this year. The round of capital funding will focus on funding extensions to existing premises to allow for increased numbers of children to be offered places on a full-time basis. Community and private providers that are core funding partner services will be eligible to apply for this scheme, and the Minister expects to announce details of this next building block scheme in the coming weeks.

On some of the Deputy's comments, I will firmly put on the record that the Government is absolutely committed to reducing childcare costs. Affordability is really important from the parents' perspective but so too are accessible childcare and ensuring that we have the right amount of childcare in the right locations. Quality needs to be paramount. In a previous role, I was Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and signed into law one of the EROs the Deputy referenced. I wish to put on record my support for that process.

Report of the Joint Committee on Artificial Intelligence: Motion

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I move:

That Dáil Éireann shall take note of the Report of the Joint Committee on Artificial Intelligence entitled "First Interim Report", copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 12th December, 2025.

Tá áthas an domhan orm an chéad tuarascáil ón gComhchoiste Um Intleacht Shaorga a mholadh. Tá an teicneolaíocht iontach seo ag athrú ár sochaí agus is ceart go bhfuil an tír seo ag glacadh ról ceannaireachta sa díospóireacht domhanda seo. It is a great privilege to be able to introduce the first interim report of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Artificial Intelligence. I am very grateful for the work of my fellow members. We have worked in a collegial and collaborative way to achieve this first report, which has 85 recommendations covering a range of issues.

Our committee has chosen to work in a way whereby we looked at artificial intelligence because it is cross-cutting; it impacts on every Government Department and nearly every Government agency. We took a decision that we would operate in a module formula and address issues over time, looking at AI in healthcare, energy and education. We started, obviously, with a state of the nation address. We are very grateful to the Minister of State for her input right at the start. However, we decided to look at this topic through three very specific lenses, namely, AI and children and young people, AI and older people and AI and disability. I have to say, that has helped to inform a lot of the work we have done. For me, personally, of all the witnesses, and many great witnesses appeared before our committee, hearing the voices of young people who came through the National Youth Council of Ireland and the youth advisory panel of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children on their perceptions of AI and how it is transforming their lives was particularly interesting. It is certainly important that we continue to listen to those voices as this debate goes on.

In terms of the overall approach, what we are striving to do, and it certainly chimes with Government policy, is support and encourage innovation, balancing that with regulation to support the responsible use of artificial intelligence and the protection of fundamental rights. It is very important that we send out that clear message that innovation and regulation are not mutually exclusive and, indeed, go hand in hand. I was very glad to see that last week, the Government published the national digital and AI strategy. Indeed, it is very positive for our committee that many of its recommendations and reflections found their way into the strategy or are echoed in a lot of the priorities that are presented. I will raise a number of issues contained within our report and suggestions to Government as to where we should be going in positioning Ireland because it should be as a leader in this space. Quite rightly, there is a recommendation within our report and within the strategy that we need an all-of-government approach to artificial intelligence. It is interesting that the Government's strategy states that this is going to be led from the Department of the Taoiseach. While it is not a specific recommendation of our report, certainly, the reflective view of all members of the committee is that because it covers more than just the Department of enterprise, consideration should be given to placing the office of the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, at the Department of the Taoiseach. Enterprise is a very important part of how AI is having an impact, but this is much

broad and has major societal implications so that is certainly an issue that should be considered.

Our report and the 85 recommendations place a very strong emphasis on transparency, accountability and public trust. It is critical, as with any technology that is rolled out, that trust is always maintained. That is particularly true in the roll-out of AI in the public services. Both our report and the Government strategy talk about the need for more debate in public around AI and new technology and the opportunities and challenges. Our report recommends that we should have a citizens' assembly on AI, digitalisation and technology. It is critical that we engage all sectors of society in discussions on the potential benefits but also the pitfalls of this new technology. The use of public information campaigns so that people can actually understand what is happening is very important. The Minister of State may remember that at one time there was a very famous advertisement with the line "I don't know what a tracker mortgage is". It may be a case of reviving it along the lines of "I don't know what an algorithm is" and having those public information campaigns so that everybody in society can take part in the active debate around new technology.

We place a lot of emphasis in our report on skills and literacy when we are talking about AI adoption. Our report very clearly recommends that emphasis be placed on a co-ordinated education initiative operating right through the education and training systems, and a lot of emphasis on AI literacy.

This applies in schools and workplaces right throughout the entire system. This is something that is reflected in the Government strategy, particularly in terms of upskilling. I commend our colleague, the Minister for further and higher education, Deputy James Lawless, who has been talking about rolling out microcredential courses across the State ranging from very simply what is AI to support for SMEs about how they can embed AI to deliver their services more effectively.

Our committee was very strong on opening an AI skills observatory. This is something the Minister of State is very committed to. This is very important. We know that the labour market is being impacted in many ways. The Department of Finance published a report specifically on this last week. There will be job displacement and jobs will be lost but equally there will be huge opportunities with new jobs as a result of AI. It is critical for us as a state to have real time information to be able to prepare for those changes and that can then inform the upskilling and reskilling of all of our citizens and those who live here.

I want to turn to the national AI office. When the Minister of State came before our committee, we had quite a lot of discussion on this. She has a very strong commitment to that and ensuring it gets up and running, which is welcome. Unfortunately, even though there is a very specific committee on artificial intelligence, the legislation has gone to the enterprise committee. I appreciate the reason the rules of the House say that has to happen but we make the point that the AI office is about more than just enterprise.

On the imminent recruitment of the first chief executive, he or she will set the direction and how the role will operate. We need to see that role as a facilitative role. It cannot be a "Thou shalt not" regulator or an additional layer of bureaucracy on top of the system. It should be about ensuring how society is able to responsibly use AI to get better results. Technology is

not a goal in itself; technology is the enabler for us to be able to achieve better goals for all of humanity and it is critical that it is humans who are going to be in the loop.

We are very clear that as part of this office there needs to be the establishment of the youth advisory panel. The Minister of State will be aware that within other offices, the Ombudsman for Children's Office and Coimisiún na Meán, this has worked very effectively. We need to ensure young people's voices and those who work with young people are heard at the discussion table but again, we emphasise the importance of the voices of older people and those with disabilities and that they are recognised and heard within the discussion.

I want to praise the Minister of State's role in terms of the leadership that she provided on this. We have dealt a lot with the controversy involving Grok and she has been very clear-minded and focused in that area. When she came before us that on the first occasion prior to report, she set out a very ambitious programme. She clearly committed and owned that we were going to have an AI summit in Ireland in October focusing on Ireland playing a leading role in the kinds of skills that we all need in the world of AI. I want to commend her leadership role and our committee looks forward continuing to work with her on preparation for that during the EU Presidency.

It is vitally important that Ireland continues to take that leadership role and therefore I welcome the fact that the Minister of State took part in the global AI summit in India. I had concerns that Ireland was not going to be represented. Even though there is a diverse range of views on our committee, we think Ireland should inform and lead that debate and the values that we place on human rights and those fundamental rights, keeping humans in the loop - Ireland's values - will inform the global discussion on AI. It was critical that the Minister of State attended that summit. I appreciate that the EU Presidency is the focus but in terms of Geneva hosting the summit next year, I hope there will be a very strong Irish presence and input into that.

The committee's report made 85 recommendations. I pay tribute to my colleagues that we have worked in a cross-party way because we are all learning. This is a new technology. The reason we chose to do interim reports, and we will come out with another one, is to reflect the views that we are hearing because if we waited a few years for this report, things will have moved on quickly. There is a firm recommendation that the committee, which was set up as a medium-term special purpose committee, would be put on a permanent footing because the issues in the debates that we are dealing with and that we are facing is not just Grok. It is about what is happening in the employment market; the opportunities that are happening in healthcare; and the implications of AI energy use. All of those issues are going to continue to grow and it is critical that in the national Parliament we have a vehicle where they can be debated and views can be exchanged and that we can learn.

I mentioned the awareness campaign and the general public. We need to look at doing it in here internally then within Leinster House as well so that people become very much aware of the transformational powers, positive and negative, of AI. We are using AI products, and rightly, already within Leinster House. Increasingly we know our constituents, businesses and organisations are raising issues relating to AI with us. A training programme in here for legislators, in the same way as it is intended to roll out training right across add the public service, is something that is important.

Again, I thank the secretariat and my fellow members of the committee for all their work and for their input. We want to continue to work with the Minister of State and across all of the government in a collaborative way to ensure Ireland plays a leading role in the global debate around artificial intelligence to ensure that our citizens are equipped to be able to avail of the opportunities and to make sure that the necessary safeguards are in place to protect our fundamental rights.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I welcome the opportunity to address the House. I sincerely thank Deputy Byrne, as Cathaoirleach of the Joint Committee on Artificial Intelligence, and the overall committee for the important work they have undertaken in their first interim report, which is the subject of this motion. The extensive engagement by the committee that informed this work, including the range of views and perspectives gathered through consultations, expert discussions and research is evident throughout. I appreciate the significant time and consideration that went into developing such a comprehensive report.

We are at a pivotal moment in our digital transformation. The rapid progress of digital technologies, and AI in particular, is changing how we live, how we work and how we interact as a society. The opportunity AI offers is immense, but I am acutely aware that so is our responsibility to get it right. The Government recognises that AI is not just a powerful tool for business and the economy; it is an enabler of progress that can benefit society as a whole and improve the lives of our citizens.

AI is not confined to any one sector, as the Cathaoirleach quite rightly alluded to. It is a cross-cutting technology that influences many areas of public policy and everyday life. The impacts of AI range from public service delivery, digital infrastructure, cybersecurity and online safety to enterprise and innovation, skills development and digital regulation. This requires a co-ordinated, coherent and ambitious whole-of-government response. That is exactly why, last week, the Government published our new national digital and AI strategy, Digital Ireland - Connecting our People, Securing our Future. The strategy reflects both the breadth of our ambition and the shared responsibility across government. It sets out five strategic and mutually reinforcing ambitions - apply, grow, invest, lead and empower - reflecting the agility needed to succeed in a fast-evolving digital world.

Those ambitions are to apply digital and AI technologies to enhance public services; to grow our digital economy and profile as a location of choice for investment and as a global hub for Applied AI; to invest in secure, resilient, future-proofed digital infrastructure, including building our cybersecurity capacity; to lead as a trusted, agile and forward-looking digital regulatory hub and centre of excellence; and to empower all groups in society and the economy with the skills and literacy needed to participate confidently and safely in a digital and AI economy and society. In order to protect vulnerable groups, particularly children and young people, we will also enhance our online safety framework at both national and EU levels. Through 20 high-level objectives and 90 deliverables, the strategy outlines the concrete actions that will accelerate digital and AI adoption across enterprise, the public sector, research and academia. It also includes targeted measures to improve public services and strengthen our health service.

The 85 recommendations in the committee's report naturally cut across the work of many Departments. I will focus specifically on some of the key recommendations that fall within my own remit. I am pleased to say that many of the recommendations are already under way. Starting with regulation and the national AI office, I acknowledge the emphasis the interim report places on ensuring robust and effective regulation is in place, and the important role of the national AI office in that regard. This aligns with the objectives and work of my Department, as does the report's call for the national AI office to support Government, business and civic society in understanding and adopting trustworthy AI where appropriate.

The AI Act is an EU regulation which provides a consistent and high level of protection for European citizens' health, safety and fundamental rights, and provides certainty for the use of human-centred and trustworthy AI in the EU. As an EU regulation, it is directly applicable and binding to all EU member states and ensures uniform rules for artificial intelligence to be applied across the EU. That said, the Act also imposes obligations on member states that require national implementing measures, including establishing a regulatory regime to supervise and enforce the regulation and establishing a single point of contact.

My Department is leading across government on the national implementation. We are making really strong progress on implementing the EU AI Act, the main supervision and enforcement provisions of which take effect from August 2026, with more specific rules to follow by 2027. The Government recently approved priority drafting of the legislation needed to give full effect to the Act. We have adopted a distributed implementation model so businesses can work with regulators who understand their sectors. My officials are engaging intensively and extensively with my Department, competent authorities and fundamental rights bodies to ensure Ireland is ready for the full implementation of the regulation of AI in Ireland. In parallel, work is progressing on the establishment of the independent statutory AI office of Ireland, which is scheduled to be in place by August 2026.

The Government recognises the importance of Ireland's reputation as a trusted, agile, forward-looking digital regulatory hub, and of ensuring our regulators are independent and adequately resourced. The statutory status and governance structure of the AI office of Ireland reflects that of established regulator bodies and is in line with Government's code of practice for the governance of State bodies. A budget of €1.5 million has been allocated for its start-up phase. The office will be the central co-ordinating body for the implementation of the EU AI Act and will leverage the expertise of regulators across all sectors to ensure that when AI is deployed, it is done in a responsible and ethical manner. The remit of the office will also include maintaining a central register to identify and monitor systemic risks across sectors, ensuring the establishment of the national AI regulatory sandbox, and establishing collaborative forums with representative groups from society to support transparency, accountability and effective governance as Ireland implements the EU AI Act.

My officials are currently focused on the initial steps to stand up the new AI office of Ireland, including recruiting key personnel, developing the ICT framework, putting in place a single-point-of-contact structure, designing an extensive communications programme and putting in place a pool of technical expertise to support the competent authorities. The creation of the AI office of Ireland provides an opportunity to provide the Government with a permanent, independent source of expertise on AI. It will also promote the safe adoption of AI in our country.

Recent online safety issues have highlighted just how essential it is to have a strong and effective legal framework in place. The committee's report makes a number of recommendations in relation to online safety and has particular concern around recommender systems. I want to be clear that online safety, especially for children and young people, remains a whole-of-government priority. A significant body of legislation and regulation, including Coco's Law, the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act and the EU Digital Services Act, is already in place. From a digital regulation perspective, the DSA forms a central part of Ireland's online safety framework. It includes specific provisions on recommender systems to ensure transparency. Under the DSA, platforms must clearly explain the main parameters behind how content is suggested to users. Services accessible to minors must also ensure a high level of privacy, safety and security, including a ban on direct ads based on profiling when the user is a minor.

It has been noted on a number of recent occasions in this House that several investigations are ongoing on these matters and the Attorney General and the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration are examining and will consider whether further legislative measures are needed in the area of non-consensual intimate images. In my own Department, we are liaising with the European Commission and member states to advocate for adding the use of AI systems for the generation of such images to the list of prohibited AI practices under the EU AI Act.

Online safety is a core pillar underpinning the National Digital and AI Strategy 2030 and a priority for Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union. These measures reinforce the Government's commitment to enhancing online safety, in particular for children and young people, as a whole-of-government and European priority. This brings me to another key focus of the report and a primary objective of the AI Act, namely, to promote and support the adoption of safe and trustworthy AI in enterprise and in our wider society. I have seen at first hand the impact AI can have on boosting productivity and enhancing competitiveness in firms of all sizes. This will be achieved through a new targeted sectoral strategy to drive enterprise AI adoption and by appointing new AI sector champions. We will also conduct an AI and digital awareness and literacy campaign for SMEs. It is important that we strengthen Ireland's capability to understand and respond to the opportunities and challenges presented by AI. We are fully aligned with the committee on this point. For this reason, the new strategy includes actions to establish two observatories, which will provide the evidence base necessary to guide workforce, enterprise and innovation policy in the years ahead.

First, on skills, the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has recently signalled his intention to progress the establishment of the national skills observatory, which is envisaged will transform our skills intelligence landscape. It will provide a valuable source of data and insights on the labour market and skills, facilitating improved workforce planning, stronger policy making, and improved lifelong learning and workforce reskilling. In my Department, we will establish an observatory for business AI readiness, focused on enterprise adoption of AI. Together with the national skills observatory, this will inform the Government in shaping future AI-related enterprises and jobs policy.

Finally, the committee's report highlights the importance of the summit we are planning as part of our EU Presidency. I am happy to say work is well under way in the planning this flagship event, which will have the overall theme of enabling AI to power innovation-led growth across Europe. The summit has Government sponsorship at the highest level, bringing

together over 1,000 global leaders, including CEOs, EU Ministers, officials, academia and innovators. As Ireland sits at the intersection of European and global tech, we are uniquely placed to convene meaningful dialogue. I am very much looking forward to showcasing Ireland's leadership in AI and digital innovation.

I will finish by saying that our vision is clear. We want to build an environment where AI and digital innovation empower our people and strengthen our economy and society in a way that is ethical, inclusive and sustainable.

I look forward to the debate today.

I will conclude by thanking all of the colleagues here today. This reflects many of the recommendations that have been made. I thank each and every Deputy for their contributions. I know they have worked extensively and very intensively. I tuned in to the AI committee hearing on Tuesday. I also want to put on the record my disappointment that some of the biggest companies here in Ireland, Microsoft and OpenAI, were not in a position to attend. I am equally disappointed that the committee did not get any response from X at all. I thank Google, whose representative attended and listened to the views of our colleagues from around the House.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank the Minister of State for her contribution today and thank all of my colleagues from the committee. I also thank Deputy O'Rourke for allowing me to go first. I have a constituency event so I really appreciate that.

I have really enjoyed the work of the AI committee to date. I am a new TD and I am on three committees. I have to say, the AI committee has been the most divisive in a lot of ways. The polarised views of the Government and the Opposition on AI are so clear. There is a real emphasis on enterprise, innovation and competitiveness coming through from Government voices. From the Opposition, there are concerns around trust, risk, climate and what we see as many dangers presented by AI as it is rolled out in society.

I name-checked that division not to emphasise it here in the Chamber but simply to say it was quite a pleasant surprise for me that we came together so well in compiling this report. We had a very productive and robust session to get through all of the amendments that were proposed to bring this report to completion. The model we are working on in bringing through modular reports which respond to the pace of AI and moving technology is exactly the way we should be dealing with this. I wanted to call that out immediately. I also call out the contribution of Senator Lynn Ruane, who I think put forward by far the majority of the amendments, probably about 70% of them, and put an awful lot of work into that. Obviously, she is not in the Chamber today so I wanted to make sure her work was recognised.

One of the other things I have learned from being on this committee and on the culture, communications and sport committee is the cross-over between the two areas. I realise that AI as a topic is cropping up in many of the committees, such as the children and young people and education committees. Deputy Byrne and myself are both on those two committees and there have been some of the same witnesses in and some of the same topics debated about online safety, platforms and regulation. It is really important to mention this because there is still a perception that AI is distinct and is a technology that sits on its own. All of the issues we are dealing with in those online platforms are supercharged and turbocharged by the development

of AI. Recommender algorithms are the problems they are because of AI. They have always been using AI and automated technology to prompt for us what we see on our screens. That is exactly what AI is doing. In the minds of many lawmakers and policymakers, there is perhaps still that distinction. What we are seeing, through the co-membership of these committees, is how integrated they are. I have certainly learned a lot through that.

I will speak to a couple of the specific areas that have been touched on in the report and in the Minister of State's contribution and that of the committee Chair as well, starting with the AI office. This is something I have raised many times in the committee. I have concerns about the governance of the AI office and the location it currently has in the Department of enterprise. I raised this when the Minister of State was at the committee along with her officials. I emphasise that I am in no way trying to diminish the competence of her officials in calling out my concerns about the location of the AI office that currently sits in the Department of enterprise. It is quite the opposite. It is the job of the Department of enterprise's officials to promote industry, draw in investment and develop our economy through growth and trade. I do not believe that is where an office which is charged with the broader responsibility of the implementation of AI into society should sit. I also appreciate that, once the organisation is established, it will be then popped out and become independent. I have led an independent State agency, namely, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, which is governed by the UN principles and is arguably the most independent State agency in this country. I can tell the Minister of State that where the organisation is born will forever inform how it operates. I have real concerns that the origins of it should be outside of the Department of enterprise.

I echo Deputy Byrne's comments and his idea about the elevation of the Minister of State's office out of the Department of enterprise and put into a more central Government Department, such as the Department of the Taoiseach or the Department of public expenditure. It should be in a more central and neutral Department where she would have the authority to oversee the regulation of AI in a way that of course looks at enterprise, growth and competitiveness but has that more balanced view that I think is required in the treatment of fundamental rights and protections which are at threat because of this technology. This can be seen in examples I do not think I have to go into any more because we have discussing them *ad nauseam* for the past number of weeks.

This is emblematic of a business focus and I might go back to that division for a little bit. Although I see in this report and in the words the Government says and Government spokespeople say about there definitely being issues of concern, the fact that we need better regulation and how we can have innovation with regulation, the actions are not stacking up. This is evident even in what the Minister of State set out here today. We have talked about the establishment of the AI office as a regulatory response to the AI Act. It is a requirement of the AI Act and we know that. However, we if we look to the last section of the Minister of State's contribution, she was talking about observatories that are around enterprise, as well as a summit with the title of "enabling AI to power innovation-led growth in Europe". I want to see more balance in all of those areas. I want that summit to be more balanced. I also want it to talk about the dangers of AI and not wash over that and pretend that we can - because we cannot.

This is my overall point. If we do not trust AI and if we do not build a governance and regulatory framework that builds that trust in AI within our citizens, AI will not reach its potential. It will not reach its potential within our economy, our public sector or anywhere else.

I really want to see that kind of shift from Government representatives on that. One of the places it really needs to happen is in the simplification agenda because I hear again and again that simplification does not mean deregulation. However, the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, said to me simplification does not mean deregulation but it does mean relieving the regulatory burden.

In response from Google at the committee just this week, I heard the response that simplification is about streamlining. I believe Mr. O'Flaherty told me there have been something like 100 different EU directives relating to technology, they are drowning in all of this regulation and it needs to be streamlined, simplified and harmonised. I do not doubt representatives of Government believe that is what happening but I am sorry, that is not what is happening. It is deregulation. If these tech companies are drowning in that much regulation, how has Grok happened? That is my simple question. How has Grok happened and how have we seen such a failure to deal with it?

The reality still exists that, right now, people can access the nudification feature on Grok. Despite the Minister of State's own efforts and her incredibly strong messaging on this, despite the investigations that are ongoing by An Garda Síochána and despite the co-operation of Coimisiún na Meán and the Data Protection Commission, with the European Commission and with the UK inquiry into privacy and despite all of these investigations, inquiries and avenues to access justice, people can still do what they could do all along. You just need to download a simple VPN and you can access the nudification feature. Besides that, you can access those nudification features on platforms other than Grok and X.

These problems persist despite what the Government and the industry are describing as an overburdensome regulatory framework. It just does not stack up for me. The simplification agenda has to be examined by the Minister of State and her Government. The issue of AI and technology is not the only place I am coming across it. My procurement Bill two weeks ago was knocked back on the same basis of simplification. That took eight years of work from Senator Alice-Mary Higgins. It came to the Dáil floor on Second Stage a couple of weeks ago. It was in this very slot, actually. On the same basis of simplification, the Minister of State's Government said "No". For me, that is something the Minister of State has to look at. I appreciate that is what is coming down the track from Europe but we do not have to conform to it as a State. We can seek to better regulate and better build standards for our citizens and say to Europe that we will actually do it this way and we will show it why that works better.

The digital omnibus is the absolutely crucial part of it in this space. The digital omnibus promises to gut the AI Act. I know people push back at me and say it will not gut the AI Act. If you look into the detail of it, the digital omnibus is doing exactly that. Before the AI Act is even implemented on 2 August this year, the omnibus packages that are going through at the moment will absolutely shift it back to self-regulation and pull right back on protections we have enjoyed under GDPR.

6 o'clock

We need to preserve the artificial intelligence, AI, systems' registrations' requirements, safeguard powers of Article 77 fundamental rights bodies, maintain high-risk AI system timelines, protect GDPR personal data protections, maintain human oversight requirements, limit the collection of sensitive personal data, protect inferred sensitive data and prevent

weakening of AI literacy requirements. I am more than happy to submit that list to the Minister of State. I have quite an expanded piece of research done on this, which I can share with the Minister of State and her officials, which demonstrates that these omnibus packages will pull back on protections and rights. It is not benign. It is not harmonisation. It is deregulation and it is a threat to our safety from these products.

I thank the Minister of State and thank all my colleagues in the committee. I have really enjoyed being a part of this. I am very proud of the report that we are tabling here today.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I am pleased to be here today to respond to the First Interim Report of the Joint Committee on Artificial Intelligence. I thank the Minister of State for being here. I thank the Cathaoirleach, Deputy Malcolm Byrne, and all the members of the committee and the secretariat and the witnesses who helped to shape and inform and prepare the report.

It is a significant milestone. It represents a cross-party collaborative effort to understand not only the technicalities of AI, but its real-world impact on the people of Ireland, from our youngest citizens to our oldest and across every community, including those who are too often left out of the conversation.

I welcome this report and commend its findings. It is a cross-party collaborative effort. In my comments, I will focus on three pillars that, I believe, are the foundation of a successful national AI strategy: governance, regulation and meaningful engagement.

First, on governance, the report correctly identifies that the *status quo* is not an option. AI does not respect departmental silos and it cannot be managed by a piecemeal approach. The recommendation to establish the joint committee on a permanent basis is a wise one. This technology will be with us for decades and it demands sustained, dedicated oversight.

I particularly welcome the call for an immediate co-ordinated all-of-Government approach led by a well-resourced national AI office. The committee has wisely stressed that this office must not be just another Government body. To be effective, it must have true independence and the technical expertise to navigate the complex conflicts that will inevitably arise between supporting industry, deploying AI in our own public services and enforcing robust regulations.

I welcome the Minister of State's commitment in relation to the two observatories - the national skills observatory and the observatory for business AI readiness, OBAIR. I would be interested to hear more detail in relation to them and the division of labour. It is important that there is an analysis in terms of the impact of AI on jobs and on labour. There should be a particular focus on the impact of AI on youth unemployment, which is increasing at three times the rate of that in the general population. There is important work to be done there.

The recommendation for a national AI risk register is a practical and necessary tool. We cannot mitigate risks we have not identified. We must know where the systemic dangers lie in our infrastructure, our labour market, as I say, and our social fabric before we can protect against them.

We must support our regulators. The nine authorities tasked with safeguarding our fundamental rights under the EU AI Act cannot do this important work on a shoestring budget. If we ask them to protect citizens from AI-driven discrimination or harm, we must give them the human and financial resources to do so.

Second, on regulation, the report sends a strong and welcome signal regarding the EU AI Act. The committee states unequivocally that Ireland must not shy away from the Act or try to dilute it. We should treat it as a minimum baseline, not a maximum standard. That is crucial. I share the concerns that Deputy Gibney raised. It is an issue we discussed at the committee after this report. The omnibus and the simplification agenda are important. I hear the arguments from the Government. It is that piece around striking the balance. We have to navigate it very careful.

There will always be commercial pressure to put innovation before protection but this report recognises the wisdom we learned from GDPR. Good regulation does not stifle innovation. It frames it. It provides the guardrails that allow businesses to innovate safely and give citizens the confidence to trust and adopt new technologies.

The emphasis on applying existing laws, such as GDPR and copyright law, to AI is also vital. We do not need to reinvent the wheel here. The right to access our data, the right to rectification and the right to erasure must apply whether a decision is made by a human or an algorithm, and I strongly agree that creators must be protected. Creator content should not be used to train commercial AI models without their consent and fair compensation.

I am concerned, as the committee is, about the role of AI-driven recommender systems in pushing harmful and hateful content and I note the Minister of State's comments. The recommendation that these systems be switched off by default, especially for children, is a commonsense child-centred approach and I fully endorse it. We cannot allow profit-driven algorithms to undermine the mental health and safety of our young people.

I commend the committee for placing engagement and inclusion at the heart of its work. In this block of work, we heard from a range of voices in relation to participation and the need for engagement.

AI is not a force of nature. It is a tool. We have the power to shape it, but we can only shape it well if we listen to those who will be most affected by it.

The report's call for a citizens' assembly on artificial intelligence and digitalisation is an important one. We need a national conversation. We need to move beyond the echo chambers of experts and bring this discussion into every living room in Ireland. The structured engagement with young people, older people and disabled people, not as an afterthought but as a core part of the committee's initial inquiry, set a powerful example in relation to this. Their testimony, detailed so clearly in this report, exposes the real world biases and barriers that already exist.

We heard how AI can perpetuate discrimination against the Traveller community, for example, how it can isolate older people and how it risks making inaccessible public services even more out of reach for people with disabilities, but we also heard about the potential AI that can assist with independent living, support inclusive education and break down communication barriers. The recommendations, therefore, for equality by design, for involving marginalised groups from the very start of product development and for establishing advisory panels of young people, older people and disabled people within the national AI office are not just about being fair; they are about being effective and inclusive. A system designed by and for everyone will work better for everyone.

The report tells us that we need strong independent governance, robust regulation and genuine public engagement. I thank everyone who contributed to the report.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I thank the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach and the Minister of State. I too acknowledge our Chair, Deputy Malcolm Byrne, and other colleagues on the joint Oireachtas AI committee.

Before I continue, I will address some of the remarks made by Deputy Gibney because, while I believe they are sincerely held, I do not think they are a true, fair or accurate characterisation of the views of the members of the committee, whether in opposition or government. Deputy O'Rourke's contribution surmises that fact. In fairness, Deputy Gibney highlighted how we came together in the work of the committee which is somewhat contradictory to saying that there is a binary position between Government and Opposition. Ultimately, we are a mature democracy and I am proud of the fact that Ireland is a strong member of the European Union and we will have an opportunity to shape the AI Act. There was an effort to conflate the omnibus Bill, which is efforts in relation to innovation, and the protection against harm in the deployment of AI by mentioning Grok and everything related to it.

The reality is that, when Coimisiún na Meán came before the joint Oireachtas AI committee last week, it supported the recommendation of the national AI council that we should expand the AI Act at an EU level to prohibit any system that could be deployed for the purposes of providing non-consensual adult images or child sex abuse material. I have to say it shocks me that this does not already form part of the legislation, but we are where we are, as they say.

I am pleased that the Minister of State, in her speech today, has made clear that Ireland is also going to support this, along with other member states, and that this is something we can drive forward in the Presidency. That will be a great legacy. We can do this at the same time as showcasing an AI summit, which the Minister of State has highlighted. Again, this is an issue that came before our joint Oireachtas committee and there were early calls for it, including from me.

The establishment of the joint Oireachtas AI committee last year marked an important moment. It was a recognition that technologies had the potential to reform our economy, our society and people's everyday lives. When I joined the committee, AI was something I saw almost incessantly in the media, a technology that would deliver either utopia or the apocalypse. Many commentators also argued that the wave of these new technologies would sweep aside economies, institutions and societies - the world as we know it - and that there was nothing states could do about it. I was sceptical of this narrative then and I still am now. The state will play a central role in the future of this technology and in how quickly it is developed, how widely it is adopted and how stringently it is regulated.

Given that our leaders thought AI warranted an entire joint Oireachtas committee, I knew that preparing Ireland for this new future was being taken seriously at the highest levels of Government. That is why the work of the joint Oireachtas committee is so important, and why the publication of this first interim report is a good opportunity to reflect on where we are going. The report contains a number of recommendations. This evening's debate coincides well with the recently published national, digital and AI strategy, a strategy published by the Department of the Taoiseach, which is a roadmap of where Ireland is going. It contains 90

deliverables across a wide number of Departments and agencies. These involve the digitalisation and integration of AI into our public services, the adoption of AI across enterprise, our regulatory framework and preparing for the future of work. The committee's report considers each of these areas, with a particular focus on regulation.

Regulating AI is obviously essential and important for the committee to consider carefully, given our adoption of the EU's AI Act, which adopts a risk-based and rights-centric approach that is an example for other legislatures to follow. The report focuses less on the impact that AI might have on enterprises and jobs across the country. That is why our broader enterprise and innovation environment, along with how AI might affect our labour market, are subjects I look forward to considering in more depth over the coming year on the committee.

Our EU Presidency, of course, presents a unique chance for Ireland to lead on each of these three themes: regulation, innovation and the future of work at a European level. This is a chance the Government must grab with both hands. When it comes to regulation, with the Presidency fast approaching, it is clear that regulation of AI systems will be a central focus. As I mentioned, Coimisiún na Meán has already made recommendations regarding how we can expand the AI Act. However, there is more we can do. We can press for changes at the EU level during our Presidency. We should push for the EU to prohibit under the AI Act the deployment of AI systems for producing intimate imagery of real people without their consent or that might be used to produce child sex abuse material. As I said, it is surprising that this has not already been done. People on all sides of this House agree on the need to strongly regulate technologies that put our children and everyone else at risk, and will support the Government in its efforts. There is much we can do at a domestic level not only to protect people, but to see that the country as a whole benefits from the opportunities that these technologies present in the fields of medicine, financial services, energy, pharmaceuticals, and research and development. To realise the potential of these technologies, there are things beyond regulation we must consider.

As regards the skills gap, the national AI and digital strategy contains several initiatives intended to equip our country for the new world of work. It commits to a roadmap for technology skills of the future, a new national skills observatory to monitor labour market dynamics, a one-stop-shop AI skilling platform and more. The most important thing here is that these initiatives be up and moving as quickly as possible. There is already progress being made in the Department of further and higher education in this respect and there is exciting work going on in many of our universities already.

The new AI strategy will provide clarity to all relevant arms of the State on the direction of travel, and organise a whole-of-government approach to preparing our workforce for an uncertain future. Last year, over 1,000 jobs a week were created, a record 2.83 million people were at work in the fourth quarter of last year, and almost 1 million jobs have been created since 2011. In other words, we are in a better place than most countries, but the risks we face are significant. The Department of Finance's most recent quarterly economic report highlighted those risks. It said that Ireland was particularly exposed to AI, given the high concentration of employment in knowledge-intensive sectors like ICT, financial services, and research and development.

Faced with such uncertainty, it is the job of policymakers to prepare for multiple scenarios. The goal of the AI strategy is to equip all our people, young and old, with the skills required to

manage these potential disruptions. Exploring how AI might reshape our labour market, impact the future prospects of our young people and the skills we need to equip our workers with will therefore be a crucial element of the joint Oireachtas committee's work.

This is intimately related to the final theme of my remarks, namely, the environment we need for our well-equipped workforce to participate in AI innovation, adoption and scaling. Skills are a necessary but not sufficient condition for Ireland's economy to flourish in the new, digital future. The foundations of our enterprise model also need to change. Our highly skilled workforce and Irish companies need to confidently take the risk and access the capital required to take risks, innovate and scale. The good news is that we have introduced bold measures in the past that have attracted cutting-edge, high-value industries to Ireland. Changes to our corporation tax system, as well as initiatives to educate our population, led to technology and pharmaceutical companies locating in Ireland. The fruits of this are evident in the hundreds of thousands of people they employ. Google, for example, first employed only five people in Ireland when it set up operations here in 2003. It now employs over 5,000 people in Ireland. There are many examples just like this. Even now, OpenAI plans to double its headcount in Ireland. We are clearly at the races for attracting future investment.

However, attracting FDI is only part of the equation. Given our base of talent, AI presents a real chance for new, Irish-led companies to emerge, scale and export. The need for indigenous companies to scale and grow in Ireland has been crystallised by the disruption of our global trading system over the past year. However, our track record in creating the right conditions for Irish start-ups and scale-ups has not been as strong as our record on FDI. Great work is being done to encourage the development of tech start-ups, with the likes of Dogpatch Labs and the Guinness Enterprise Centre, but our Stock Exchange has seen something of an exodus.

To conclude, with strong and clear regulation, by urgently addressing our future skills need and by introducing the targeted reforms necessary for Irish start-ups to scale, there is a clear path forward. Ireland can be a model for how good regulation of AI is compatible with a dynamic environment for businesses and workers. The joint Oireachtas AI committee will play an important role in scrutinising the Government's progress in each of these areas, and I look forward to playing my role in that process.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I thank each and every Deputy for their measured, considered contributions. We are all striving and working towards the same thing. I might specify two particular issues that have been raised overall.

On simplification, I know how Deputy Gibney in particular feels, but we all feel passionate about it. The idea of simplification does not in any way diminish our protection of citizens and our fundamental rights. That is absolutely clear. The Deputy is right, in that I am coming from the perspective of being in the Department of enterprise. We are all agreed that, for many years, businesses have felt stifled by bureaucracy and over-regulation. There is no doubt about that, but we cannot just lumber it all in together. I want to thank my officials, including Mr. Declan McCormack, who is here with me and has been through every debate to advise and assure me, as well as to take the views the Deputies make so that those are fed into the regulation of the AI office.

The fundamental rights and the protection of our citizens is going to be at the heart of everything we do. That is very important.

With regard to the simplification piece and the digital omnibus, Ireland will be pushing to ensure that it does not mean deregulation or the exposure of fundamental rights for our citizens.

There is one other piece. Nine national authorities have been identified as the formal bodies for the protection of fundamental rights under the AI Act. These authorities have a central role in the implementation of the AI regulation in Ireland and Europe. My Department is engaging with these authorities and will continue to ensure that there is balance, and that innovation and creativity among our businesses is allowed to flourish and that they are not killed by bureaucracy, which we know has been a problem, and at the same time we are looking at and protecting the fundamental rights of our citizens. I just wanted to outline that from the outset.

I thank the chair of the committee, Deputy Malcolm Byrne, and all colleagues for speaking today, and for the publication of this report. I welcome this constructive contribution and discussion on our approach to AI. It is clear that no one entity can navigate the complexities of AI alone. This debate is very timely with the publication last week of the national digital and AI strategy. Digital Ireland sets out a clear road map for Ireland's digital and AI adoption and development in the years ahead. As mentioned, it takes a whole-of-government approach, building on Ireland's strengths in digital skills, enterprise, infrastructure and the transformation of public services. It has to be acknowledged that the Department of the Taoiseach has taken a central piece and a central role in collaborating on the national AI and digital strategy, but my colleagues right across Government have a role too, including the Minister, Deputy Jack Chambers, who has responsibility for AI and the guidelines around public services. The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy James Lawless, also has a specific role and a focus on AI. There are many different elements and many different Departments within government. It is not a silo we are working in. It has that broad approach and every single Minister within this Government is very conscious of the impact of AI in all of our Departments, and that is exactly how it should be.

A central element of the strategy is to champion AI as a transformative strategic technology, reinforcing our ambition to maximise its economic and societal impact. There is a strong alignment between elements of the strategy and several of the committee's recommendations. I think we are all united in our shared aim of ensuring that everyone in society is equipped and empowered to thrive in this digital era.

Delivering on the strategy requires strong leadership. Implementation will be driven from the centre of Government by the Department of the Taoiseach, working with all relevant Departments, and overseen by the Cabinet committee on economy, trade and competitiveness. Progress will be monitored via the senior officials' group on digital and AI issues, with progress reports published annually.

Regular stakeholder engagements will be a key element in ensuring successful, responsive and agile implementation. The Oireachtas Joint Committee on AI's report emphasises the need for engagement and input from civil society. I take on board too the recommendation and the thought process on a civic open discussion around this debate. That is a really good idea.

The Government recognises the importance of ensuring that Ireland's approach to AI serves the needs of all parts of society. Digital Ireland renews the Government's commitment to inclusion and accessibility to ensure that no one is left behind in this digital and AI revolution.

Our wider national governance framework for AI, including implementation of the EU AI Act, is designed to promote fairness, transparency and strong protections for health, safety and fundamental rights, while supporting the development of a human-centered, trustworthy AI.

Apologies Chair, I obviously waffled too long. Could I conclude?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): We are not under pressure for time.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Acting Chair. If I could be given a little bit of latitude to conclude.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): Yes.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: In November 2024 the Government designated a list of national public bodies that protect fundamental rights. We need to just keep that in our minds. These are nine national bodies to protect fundamental rights, including the right to non-discrimination in relation to certain high-risk uses of AI systems specific to the AI Act. In addition, once established the national AI office of Ireland will engage and consult with a broad range of stakeholders across civic society, including the representative bodies most affected by AI systems. Deputy Gibney made the point about having the balance. That is critically important. It was alluded to in opening comments that we have a shared focus on getting the balance right and that it is not just about innovation. It is about our citizens as well.

Taken together these measures provide Ireland with a structured, expert, informed and citizen-focused system on our approach to artificial intelligence policies and ethics. I also want to assure Members of the independence of the new AI office. While Deputy Gibney has a concern about it coming from the Department of enterprise, as was quite rightly said, when that new CEO is appointed that is where it will be led from and that will show us the pathway for where AI will be in a much broader sense. While it is established by the Department of enterprise I think that any anybody coming in who gets that position will have to ensure they have that much broader view of the world when we are talking about AI.

I also want to assure Members of the independence of the AI office. The general scheme of the regulation of artificial intelligence Bill 2026 was approved for priority drafting at the Government meeting on 13 January 2026. The guiding principles are that the AI office of Ireland must be independent in structure in order to oversee the governance and co-ordination of the national roll out and ongoing supervision and enforcement of the EU AI Act, ensuring that all relevant authorities and stakeholders are aligned with its interpretation and the application of the regulations.

A separate issue, which I know is on people's minds, is the potential impact of job displacement. AI is a disruptive technology and I completely understand concerns regarding the impact of AI on the labour market. While AI will undoubtedly create new opportunities it

also carries risks of job displacement. Recent research from the expert group on future skills needs reports that Ireland's enterprise sector and workforce are adapting rapidly to AI, with strong demand for AI skills matched by solid supply. While the report finds that AI is likely to augment many existing roles it also notes that the overall impact on employment levels is less clearcut and that continued monitoring is essential. What is clear is that the structure of work will continue to change and new types of jobs will emerge. Digital Ireland outlines actions to support workers to navigate and mitigate the impacts of potential job displacement, including through agile, responsive and accessible skills' supports. The new national skills observatory and the observatory for business AI readiness will play an important role in shaping future enterprises and employment policies, as well as directing targeted investment in upskilling and reskilling, ensuring that our workforce is supported and ready to adapt as these roles evolve.

Finally, I want to emphasise that while artificial intelligence should drive innovation it must also be fair, inclusive and trustworthy. This is why when implementing our new strategy the Government will work hand in hand with businesses, experts and most importantly our citizens. Our ambition is straightforward, which is to create a country where AI and digital innovation genuinely improve people's lives and contribute to a fair, resilient and future-focused economy and society.

I thank the Acting Chair for her latitude.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): My apologies. The clock was wrong. The Minister of State had ten minutes. I apologise for that. The final speaker will be Deputy Malcolm Byrne.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: This has been a very informative debate. It reflects the nature of how our committee has worked. If we think about our role as legislators, our responsibility is towards the safety of our citizens and those who live here. It is about equipping people to be able to deal with the challenges that we face in our lives and in our workplaces. It is about supporting innovation and creating an environment where jobs and wealth can be created. It is about ensuring that we deliver public services in as effective and efficient a way as possible, that it is targeted at those who need supports, and that it allows for us to have a better society in which to live. Artificial intelligence cuts across all of those. It is the most transformative technology. As the Minister of State and colleagues have said, it is about getting that balance right between regulation and innovation.

Deputy Geoghegan spoke about Ireland being a mature democracy. I often reflect on this. When we come into this Chamber on some of the big set-piece days there is a lot of theatre that goes on. The media become obsessed about the disagreements and the arguments. I have to say that I have learned so much at this committee. I felt we worked in a really collaborative way. People took off their party hats. I learned from colleagues as well and I thank James, Darren and Sinéad, and all the members of the committee for their views.

There were disagreements on issues. I found that our views have changed. Sometimes we might not necessarily get the answers, but we suddenly start to think of the questions that we need to ask. In a mature democracy, it is critical that parliamentary committees operate in that way. The outcome of that, because we were able to work together, is we have come up with those 85 recommendations. They chime with a lot of what has gone into the strategy.

As we move through other modules, I look forward to be able to further impact on Government policy. We are continuing to deal with AI in the State. We will be moving on soon to explore issues like AI and justice, AI and the creative industries, which I know the Minister of State is very passionate about, AI and energy and AI and education. We are learning from people right across these Houses, and from civic society organisations, business, and academic experts. We are very keen to hear their views. People can email *ai@oireachtas.ie*. That is an open call for e-mails.

We should not underestimate the scale of the changes that are happening. Every new technology is often overhyped in the short term, but it tends to be underestimated in the medium to long term. AI is having a profound impact. I am really grateful to colleagues. We are committed to continuing to work together to explore all of those issues and to working closely with the Minister of State and the Government to deliver the best for our citizens and those who reside here.

Our committee has an awful lot more work to do. We have requested that it be put on a permanent footing. I am sure the Minister of State will support us in that regard. Debates like this are critical, but it is important that the debate is not just within this House. We need more debates in the media, business organisations, trades unions and civic society about how we deal with the threats and the challenges, but also about how Ireland can position itself to ensure that we benefit from the potential of this truly transformative technology.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 6.32 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 3 Márta 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.32 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 3 March 2026.