



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions	491
Hospital Services.....	491
Health Services.....	493
Dental Services.....	495
Cancer Services.....	497
Hospital Equipment.....	499
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions	501
Medical Register	501
General Practitioner Services	503
Healthcare Policy	507
Primary Care Centres	509
Disease Management.....	511
Home Help Service	513
Healthcare Policy	515
Healthcare Policy	516
Health Services.....	518
Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions	521
Housing Provision.....	521
Housing Provision.....	523
Housing Schemes	526
House Sales	529
Housing Policy	531
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions	533
Rental Sector	533
Vacant Properties.....	535
Regeneration Projects.....	538
Further and Higher Education	541

Housing Provision.....	543
Defective Building Materials	545
Defective Building Materials	547
Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions.....	548
Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions.....	560
Ceisteanna ar Pholasáí nó ar Reachtaíocht - Questions on Policy or Legislation.....	563
An Bille um Ainm agus Seoladh Gaeilge an Duine (Síneadh Fada), 2026: An Chéad Chéim	575
Electricity Regulation (Amendment) Bill 2026: First Stage.....	576
Electricity Regulation (Amendment) (Standing Charges) Bill 2026: First Stage	578
Situation in the Middle East: Statements	579
Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters.....	621
Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate.....	622
Electricity Grid.....	622
Regeneration Projects.....	625
Road Projects	628
Road Projects	631
Traveller Community	633
Criminal Justice (Rehabilitative Periods) Bill 2018 [Seanad]: Second Stage [Private Members]	636

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoín, 5 Márta 2026

Thursday, 5 March 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Hospital Services

1. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health her current policy on the colocation of the Rotunda Hospital; the amount spent to date on colocation planning, including any preliminary stages; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17627/26]

Deputy David Cullinane: My first question is on the Rotunda Hospital. Since the question was tabled, however, a memo was brought to Cabinet and the Minister has decided to abandon the plans to colocate the Rotunda Hospital with Connolly. If I am right that this is her position, she might outline that. Now the key thing has to be what happens with the critical care unit. I welcome that, as part of an enhanced planning application and the critical care unit, the sexual assault unit will also be enhanced. The Minister might take the opportunity to update the House on those two very important projects.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I thank the Deputy. Just to clarify and for accuracy, I did not bring a memo to Government. That is only a technical point. The Deputy is quite right. What we have decided to do is reflect on the judgment and on the needs of women going forward. The needs of women going forward are for critical care capacity for neonates. I am sure the Deputy has been in the unit in the Rotunda Hospital. They do exceptionally good work but it is not in a suitable place for neonatal intensive care. The idea is to go back in with a new application. All of our options were considered in relation to whether to take a judicial review. That would mean going through an extensive legal process, potentially for two years, to go back into the same body. I am not sure that really meets the needs in any event.

What we have decided to do is enhance the application, to go bigger. We need critical care capacity onsite. From the perspective of patient safety, that enables me to say I am satisfied that the patient safety needs of women on that site are being yet better met. Already, of course,

the Rotunda is practically beside the Mater and there are very good bluelight channels, as the Mater has said. No woman has died in the Rotunda in 20 years. It is a safe pathway already but it does need enhancement. That is why that critical care capacity for women as well as for neonates will form part of the new application.

That enables us to delineate the Rotunda from the otherwise important colocation policy of having that critical care capacity for women closer, the case being Holles Street and the National Maternity Hospital. It enables us to remove that from the equation of a new planning application. The colocation question cannot be in the minds of anyone because it is delineated from that in that way. We are intending to go back with a bigger application directly to An Coimisiún Pleanála with critical care capacity for women and an enhanced sexual assault treatment unit. I want everybody here, which I know they will do, to make a statement that the Rotunda is for women in the city centre in every possible way. The Ministers, Deputies O'Callaghan and Chambers and myself will be backing that application and I am sure the Deputy will too.

Deputy David Cullinane: The colocation plan unfortunately was an anchor around the hospital for far too long so I welcome the fact that anchor has now been removed. It is policy since 2015 but very little money has been spent on it and there was no real timeframe. An Coimisiún Pleanála's decision did mention colocation not as the main reason but certainly as one of the factors it took into account, so removing that obviously helps.

It is possible and necessary that we protect the built environment that is Parnell Street. Nobody, including the master of the hospital, disputes that the architectural heritage of that building is important. However, it is possible to have a planning application that can address some of those concerns but also provide world-class, first-class buildings and capacity for the staff who, as the Minister said, do a wonderful job in the Rotunda Hospital. I am satisfied that this can be achieved. It will require funding and support at every step of the way from Government.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I agree. Of course, the heritage consideration was the dominant one in that third round for the decision-making. It still remains of importance to that area. However, balancing the public interest is something we do all the time. Dublin City Council and the inspector took the view that in the previous application, the public interest was overwhelmingly served by progressing with it. The deciding body in the end decided in the opposite direction. In many ways, what we say here informs the public interest. We are the representatives of the public in what we say in relation to the importance of the care of women. Successfully and correctly delineating the Rotunda from the colocation policy, which is important for other hospitals, is a significant step in that. I do expect the application to be well supported in the broader public interest.

The Deputy is correct that very little money was spent on the colocation of the Rotunda. However, an enormous amount of money has been spent on colocation policy generally in respect of Holles Street. That reflects the hierarchy of need. The need to move Holles Street was much greater because the patient safety need was much greater, the distance being greater between Holles Street and St. Vincent's than between the Rotunda and the Mater. That speaks to the priority placed on it.

Deputy David Cullinane: The decision for the Rotunda in relation to colocation has raised issues around other colocation proposals as well. The Minister mentioned Holles Street, which is moving to Elm Park and which is much more advanced. There is a plan for Limerick and for the Coombe. Now questions are being asked about where they stand, particularly the Coombe, which is to move to the site adjacent to the new children's hospital, which is yet to open. Are there timeframes for that? What is the policy of the Government? Is there any fresh thinking on the Coombe given the decision that was made for the Rotunda Hospital? It is really important that certainty is given to all of those hospitals. I refer to one of the lessons we have to learn if the certainty is not there, if the pathway is not there and if there are no timeframes for colocation while these hospitals are trying to expand and provide the services they need to provide in the here and now as well as for five, ten or 20 years' down the road. Being tied to colocation can be problematic when there are no real timeframes or movement. The Minister might be able to give her insight into the Coombe and Limerick as well.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Deputy is exactly right. Holles Street and Elm Park is settled. The question on Limerick forms part of what we are trying to do generally in Limerick and I would be happy to update the Deputy but our policy is very much the same in respect of colocation there. The Deputy is right to identify the Coombe, which is quite close to St. James's Hospital, where we are investing significant additional capacity at present. It is something I am now going to reflect on. I do not want to separate that yet but it is important that we do a detailed analysis of the needs of the Coombe, the adjacency of St. James's and what we have learned in relation to that. Back in 2013, 2014 and 2015, there were discussions about the necessity for trilocation and all those different efforts to try to put those pieces together. Of course, we are learning more and more. We are seeing the different pathways now. The Deputy is right to identify that and I cannot answer that today. It needs more reflection. We can do that collectively over time. There is not the same imperative because we are driving ahead with investment in the Coombe as it is.

Deputy David Cullinane: It would be a good issue for the Oireachtas health committee to examine in the next number of months, namely the whole colocation strategy.

Health Services

2. **Deputy Charles Ward** asked the Minister for Health whether she will commission a study on the health impacts of prolonged exposure to mould and damp in homes impacted by defective concrete; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [18050/26]

Deputy Charles Ward: I would be grateful if the Minister of State would let me know whether she will commission a study on the health impacts of prolonged exposure to damp and mould in homes impacted by defective concrete.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank the Deputy for raising this. We know that living with mould and damp can have a profound impact on people's health and well-being. They are known to cause respiratory illnesses and can also affect mental health. Children and other vulnerable people often feel these effects more than most.

The Government recognises the difficult and painful situation that many families are in and is working to address the root cause through the defective concrete blocks grant scheme. We are very mindful of that. This scheme provides financial support to those in designated counties whose homes have been damaged by the use of defective concrete blocks during construction. We understand that families can face financial hardship and in some cases may have to leave their homes. We are very much aware of this and can see that there is a huge level of stress and anxiety.

To support those affected, enhanced mental health supports have been introduced. I do not know if the Deputy is aware of these but they are really important. They have been introduced through the enhanced defective concrete blocks grant scheme, and through our mental health services. It is called MyMind, which provided free counselling, psychotherapy, and psychological support. At the moment approximately 450 appointments are offered each year, along with group sessions and workshops.

Children's Health Ireland's respiratory, cystic fibrosis and sleep teams continue to provide essential care for children affected by respiratory conditions. Given the well-established health impacts of mould and damp, a further study is not going to be needed. Our priority is to deliver direct, practical support to those living with the consequences of defective concrete blocks.

Deputy Charles Ward: I want to highlight some urgent cases in Donegal involving individuals with serious conditions living in unsafe, defective homes. I have written to the Minister of State previously regarding these. Their health, dignity and daily lives are at constant risk. These are real families, not statistics.

9 o'clock

Unfortunately the only response from the housing Department was a generic letter offering practically no support. I commend the Minister's leadership particularly with regard to the Letterkenny hub. These cases are an opportunity for the Government and the Department of Health to lead again. We need help. Urgent cases need to be fast-tracked. People are stuck in homes, their health is failing and they are ageing. They need to be prioritised. At the moment there are no steps to do that. Will the Department take anything from this and help them? They are running out of time in their lives. They need all the help they can get and there is no priority list for them.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Working with my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, we will come back to the Deputy on that and see what we can do. Working with the Minister for Health, as a public health approach, this issue has to address the underlying cause of ill health. The best way for us to help those affected by mould and damp in their homes with defective concrete is to address the housing directly. That is a priority. I have been speaking to the Minister for housing, Deputy Browne, about this too. We need to move on this urgently. As the Deputy will probably be aware, the scheme was recently extended in other counties. The amount available to homeowners was increased by 10%. It is now €462,000. We need to do more; I understand. I know families affected myself. I see the stress and anxiety. I will work with the different Departments so there is priority for what needs to be done.

Deputy Charles Ward: I have a constituent with a severe reduction in her lung capacity. Her daughters are deeply concerned about the effects of prolonged exposure to damp and mould in a defective home. There is no doubt it has shortened her life. Each day this constituent remains in her home, her health deteriorates. She also suffers from dementia and has a heart condition. I am also aware of a terminally ill mother who is a nurse. She has stage 4 cancer. She wants her house rebuilt for her four kids before she dies. That is serious. I would like the Minister for Health to put something in place for these people to make sure there is priority. We need to make sure we is done for them. The mother who came to me will not be here next Christmas and she has four kids. It is important this is looked at in a humane way and try to get it done. Whatever has to be done, get it done. It is not just her and her husband; there are also four young children. As their representative, I take it seriously. We need to make sure there is urgency.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I understand people living with defective concrete in their homes experience real challenges. You can see it - families are really affected by this. That is why our Departments are working together to get the funding to get this done. The scheme is a major commitment by the State to help impacted homeowners to move on with their lives. We have to make sure the families who need counselling or support get it and that there is a commitment from Government. We know mould and damp can have a huge impact on people's health and well-being. I will work with the Deputy on that to prioritise. I will go back to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, about what is in her remit and mine. We will talk to the Minister for housing because it involves different Departments. I thank the Deputy for highlighting this important and serious issue today.

Dental Services

3. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health her plans to bring forward legislation to enhance the powers of the Dental Council; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17628/26]

Deputy David Cullinane: The Dental Council of Ireland does not have sufficient powers to protect the public from unregistered dentists. It has been unable to act in 80% of cases of credible concern of unregistered dentists in the past three years. I have met council representatives on a number of occasions. I assume the Minister has as well. It has been raising this matter for some considerable time. I also know compulsory continuing professional development, CPD, is important and the Minister is working on it and has supported it. Regulation and powers for the Dental Council of Ireland are what is at play. Will she set out her intentions are in this regard?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: There is no question but that the regulatory framework requires updating and modernisation. It is closely linked to the wider implementation of the national oral health policy. Ahead of comprehensive reform, several priority interim amendments have been identified particularly to strengthen the powers of the Dental Council of Ireland. The first amendment addresses the lack of a statutory basis for continuing professional development, as the Deputy highlighted. While dentists are currently required to meet ethical CPD standards of course, that is not enough and they must be underpinned by

legislation. A policy has been developed to introduce CPD on a statutory footing, which will enhance the Dental Council of Ireland's ability to ensure dentists undertake adequate and appropriate ongoing professional development. I have received Government approval for that policy along with consent to draft the general scheme of the Bill. My Department is now preparing the heads and associated regulatory assessments. We will deal with that in the Oireachtas in due course.

With regard to unregistered dentists, powers to address the illegal practice of dentistry by unregistered individuals exist under the Dentists Act 1985 and other legislation. Under the Dentists Act it is an offence for unregistered persons to use the title of dentist to provide dental treatment or present themselves as dentists and the council may prosecute such cases. In addition, under the Consumer Protection Act 2007, the council can also seek court orders to stop dental practices from operating if they enable unregistered individuals to practice illegally. All suspected cases of illegal dental practice should be reported to An Garda Síochána. Unregistered individuals who treat patients while masquerading as dentists may also have committed assault under the Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person Act 1997 or have breached the Criminal Justice (Theft and Fraud Offences) Act 2001. Those offences carry significant penalties including imprisonment.

Deputy David Cullinane: I welcome the wider work but the Dentists Act, an issue I have been over several times, does not provide the Dental Council of Ireland with sufficient powers to deal with unregistered dentists. In fact, it has been saying recently that it has not been able to take action against a total of 37 unregistered dentists over the past eight years, including one who was practising unregistered with a sexual assault conviction. I met a locum dentists recently who spoke to me about some horror stories of him being placed in unregistered dental practices. Some of the stuff would make the hairs stand on the back of your head. He was very concerned. There needs to be a review of that Act. I agree with Minister about the wider issues, a new oral health policy and stronger regulation and so on but if it is a case of right here, right now, the Dental Council of Ireland tells us it does not have sufficient powers. It may have some powers and there are other powers but these dentists are going undetected, are not properly sanctioned and I am hearing of these horror stories. I think this was reported in *The Irish Times* last week as well. They are serious issues that need urgent intervention.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I agree with the Deputy. While the broad legislative suite is in place and there are existing powers are under the Dentists Act, I have no difficulty with a review and strengthening them where needed. I recognise the suite of legislative powers I outlined so we need to be very specific as to the additional powers necessary. I have no difficulty in strengthening the powers of the Dental Council of Ireland to do just that. We are talking about potentially unremediable assault on a person in their mouth or on their face. It is an appalling thing to happen to any person. We need to make sure the powers are as robust as necessary. There is simply no question on that. I signal a change I want to make to the Act to enable direct access for dental hygienists. That would require an amendment to section 54. Direct access refers to the ability of a dental hygienist to initiate treatment within their scope of practice based on assessments of patients' needs without the specific authorisation of a dentist. That is a change I want to make to enable the workforce but that is for dental hygiene work not necessarily dental work. There is distinction, of course.

Deputy David Cullinane: I welcome that as well. It will add real value. The Minister spoke about oral health generally. There are issues with screening in schools. Enough simply is not being done. There is a need for more publicly hired dentists. I have made the same argument in relation to GPs. I would like to see a public GP contract but for dentists we need to look at that space. Dentists are not engaging with the dental treatment services scheme. There are rights and wrongs on both sides. I have said to dentists and the representative body that there is an obligation on dentists to ensure the most vulnerable patients have access to services. We need to beef up the public system particularly in terms of screening and orthodontists because of the waiting times.

This is particularly the case in the south east where I live, where children are waiting four, five, six or in some cases even eight years. They are listed as urgent cases and the most urgent cases are when children are in pain. There is a lot of work to be done in this area. I acknowledge what the Minister has said but there are so many issues to be addressed.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I agree with the Deputy. At the moment I am trying to develop a programme with Pat Healy in the HSE, who is doing excellent work on a very targeted programme of intervention to get on top of screening in schools and make sure we can address the backlog, particularly in relation to orthodontic work and specialised orthodontic work. I have given a direction to all of the various regions that I expect our new surgical hubs to have a measure of dental capacity in them, whether it is once a month or whatever it happens to be, so that access to theatres is there equally for dentistry in the community and to ensure we have pathways. I acknowledge there is a considerable work to be done and I will bring forward a plan and proposals on this.

I welcome the Deputy's engagement with the dental associations. We do need to hire more public dentists. They have suggested to me that part of the graduation programme could be that qualifying dentists spend a period of time in the public system, something I would greatly welcome. It would give dentists who do not have an opportunity to train in public practice the opportunity to be in public practice. It is too private, too remote and too disconnected from the public health system. If part of the training was that we got the benefit of a graduate spending a year in the public system, I certainly would be very much in favour of that proposal.

Cancer Services

4. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health her plans for a new cancer strategy; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17629/26]

Deputy David Cullinane: This question is on cancer services and the national cancer strategy. We have had two strategies, the one coming to an end and the previous one, and they have added real value and are among the best success stories in the Irish health service. I am blown away by the work people do in this area, with research, development, new technology, new drugs and new treatments. It is mind blowing and it is of benefit to patients. There has been slippage in some of the key performance indicators, KPIs, and some of the access times and wait times. I will go through them later. We should accept any slippage and we cannot afford any slippage. We really need to keep the focus on what has been a real success story for the health service.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I agree with the Deputy. The two strategies have changed the landscape for people who are diagnosed with cancer. Today nearly 250,000 people in Ireland are living with or beyond cancer, 50% more than a decade ago. The evidence is that the chances of survival for more than five years for someone diagnosed with cancer in the 1990s was considerably less than what it is now. This is on foot of the extraordinary work done by clinicians and researchers, and the way in which cancer services are delivered. This has enabled a very considerable shift. Nevertheless, we know we will have more and more people diagnosed with cancer in the years to come. This is because we are living longer and we are diagnosing better, and we need to make sure that the services are available for them, for all of us and for everybody we represent who will face a cancer challenge at some point in their lives, particularly as we live longer.

The Deputy is right to identify the strengths in some of the KPIs as well as the slippages in them. I certainly want to highlight both of these things. One of the reasons we are changing to this regional funding model is so we can have better regional transparency. It is correct that public representatives have the ability to see this regional variation and that there is a pressure linked to the performance framework in relation to the regions achieving the best performance and matching the best performance around the country.

The cancer strategy had 52 recommendations, 43 of which have been delivered or continue to be in the process of being delivered, as will be the case to the end of the strategy. We want to reflect on and evaluate the strategy and its efficacy as we develop a new strategy. What will be very interesting, and where we are open to every suggestion, is how much the world has changed in terms of research and the role AI can play. Some of the extraordinary research being done in Galway, for example, is where they have learned to manipulate cancer cells against themselves and how this works. Treatment has become so individual and personalised. The next cancer strategy can be genuinely ambitious and different again, and I welcome every suggestion relating to it.

Deputy David Cullinane: We would all accept that early intervention in healthcare is very important, especially for cancer patients, from the first GP referral to a consultant, diagnostics, treatment and surgery. I acknowledge that in some of the areas we are still doing very well but there are areas where there is slippage. Data from 2025 shows that 15% of chemotherapy patients and 21% of radiotherapy patients did not start their treatment on time. It also shows major delays in surgical care, which is concerning. A total of 61% of prostate cancer surgeries were not carried out in the recommended time frame, which is the gold standard we all want and we all accept. A total of 45% of breast cancer surgeries and 39% of lung cancer surgeries did not happen in the recommended time frame in 2024 and 2025. There are also issues in relation to diagnostic equipment and radiotherapy equipment. Much of it is out of date, particularly radiotherapy equipment. I see this and hear about it from local representatives and from hospitals. The key issues are staffing and equipment. If we put these in we can improve the areas where we are not doing as well as we should.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Deputy is right to highlight the variance. It is very different between hospitals. For example, the time for chemotherapy is within 15 days, which is so important. This information has been provided to him. In Cavan hospital, there were 174

patients and 174 of them were seen within 15 days. It was similar in Connolly hospital with 1,717 patients. Naas hospital is at 98%. I do not want to just highlight the good ones and I will pick at random. Tullamore hospital is at 93%, St. James's Hospital is at 91% and Drogheda hospital is at 83%. Then we get to Waterford hospital, which is at 66%, which is the area the Deputy represents. CUH is at 68%. There is variance. Most of the hospitals are concentrated at way over 85% and then there are hospitals such as Portiuncula hospital in Galway, St. Luke's hospital in Kilkenny, CUH, Waterford hospital and St. Luke's Hospital in Dublin, which are at less than 75% and this is not good enough. This is the sort of visibility and transparency we need, and we need to continue to drive to ensure everybody is at a rate of well over 95%. I recognise the variance in this.

Deputy David Cullinane: One of the benefits of having health regions is that we can have this type of focus, we can drill into the data and we can have real accountability. There are regional imbalances, county imbalances and very localised imbalances. The cancer strategy is a national strategy. We have specialist centres. I want this to be maintained, of course. It is really important. Where the areas of chemotherapy and radiotherapy are a problem, and where we are slipping, we have to fix the problem. From what I can see, part of this is due to equipment being out of date and not having staff to operate some equipment. I have tabled parliamentary questions on this and gone through it in detail. In some places the problem is that we do not have the staff to operate equipment, and somewhere else equipment is not being used because it is out of date, breaking down and needs to be replaced. We have these issues. Surgery is where I think the Minister's own attention is very important. We are seeing slippage in prostate cancer surgeries and breast cancer surgeries. Again, there may well be regional variations but the focus needs to be on where it is slipping and where we are not doing as well. The health regions can add real value from this perspective.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: This is very important. We have 58 seconds to have this conversation but it would be good to have a session at the Oireachtas health committee where we can go through all of the various regions and KPIs and recognise the variance. For example, we spoke in December about Galway, where there was a particular challenge. It reported 86% within the target in December, which was up from 68% in November. Local management is so important. Significant additional resources in terms of people and equipment are included in the annual plan and in the capital plan. Sometimes this is the issue and there is a question later on recruitment and replacement when we can deal with this. It is also about local management. Deputy Charles Ward spoke earlier about access to surgery. This is why I am putting in additional oncology chairs and surgical hubs in Letterkenny hospital to make sure there is better access. It is a combination of various things but as long as we are focused on what is different and why it is different, we are all likely to achieve a better and more consistent outcome.

Hospital Equipment

5. **Deputy Martin Daly** asked the Minister for Health the number of linear accelerators currently in use for radiotherapy services in the State; their age profile, including the number over 20 years old; the recommended replacement age for such equipment; and whether a rolling procurement and replacement programme is in place. [18169/26]

Deputy Martin Daly: The number of linear accelerators in use in radiotherapy in the State is 22. Following the discussion we have just had about the cancer strategy, will the Minister make a statement on the procurement and replacement programme by the HSE for new linear accelerators? A number of the accelerators are reaching the age of 18 and the recommended international replacement time is eight to ten years. It costs a lot of money to maintain them.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Under the national plan for radiation oncology, an equipment replacement programme is in place in St. Luke's in Rathgar, St. James's Hospital and Beaumont hospital, along with a phased expansion in Beaumont. The replacement programme is being progressed under the national development plan. It is included in the capital plan and the health sectoral plan. There are 23 linear accelerators, ranging in age from three to 18.

These are located across five public hospitals: Rathgar, Beaumont, St. James's, Galway and Cork. State-of-the-art radiation oncology centres opened in Cork and Galway in 2019 and 2023 respectively, representing a €120 million capital investment. The linear accelerators in Rathgar, Beaumont and St. James's were installed between 2008 and 2016. The HSE advises that the typical lifespan of a linear accelerator is ten to 15 years, although some can be used for longer. An accelerator's lifespan depends on many factors, including the type, how it is used, how it is maintained and the manufacturer support lifespan, which includes software upgrades. There is a degree of variance. The preliminary design process for linear accelerator replacements within St. Luke's is ongoing. In addition, tenders for the main contract for the Beaumont phase 2 expansion and replacement project are due in the coming weeks. We are committed to improving cancer care and to investing in this way.

Deputy Martin Daly: I am asking this question out of concern rather than as a challenge. We heard a presentation from the Irish Cancer Society and Professor Gerry Hanna last week. From the information the Minister is getting from the HSE and from what we are being told, the international standard is to replace a linear accelerator that is being fully used after eight to ten years. The Minister has raised issues around productivity and management of this infrastructure. It appears the procurement process has been held up for the replacement of those older devices, which have been around for 18 years. I believe there are three of these. They will have been in place for nearly 20 years when they are replaced. With regard to the age profile of our infrastructure, it appears we are an outlier within the European Union. It is important that we have an efficient planned rolling procurement process.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I agree with the Deputy. I would like us to be replacing equipment because we have used it so intensively. Part of this issue relates to the number of radiation therapists. There has been a very considerable expansion in that regard. We have 217 radiation therapists in Ireland, an increase of 21% since 2020. In the last six years, the radiation therapy training programme has grown by 32%, with more than 20 additional specialty training posts established in the last three years. We need the people but we also need organisation to allow these machines to be run hard. I will give an example regarding a performance indicator for radiation oncology, that is, the number completing radical treatment and the percentage commencing treatment within 15 working days in the Deputy's own area of Galway. In January 2025, the percentage was 72%, in October it was 98%, in November it was

98% and in December it was 100%. In Cork, there was a fall-off. The figure was 97% in January 2025 but fell to 91%. That is still reasonably strong but nationally we are just not where we need to be. It is about resources, organisation and consistency.

Deputy Martin Daly: In talking about management and productivity, the Minister will find an ally in me. She has pointed this out very clearly since she began her tenure as Minister for Health. I agree with her 100%. I acknowledge the investment by the Department and the HSE in the linear accelerators in Galway. That is a hugely welcome development but, as the Minister has quite rightly pointed out, the figures for the time between point of diagnosis and getting to chemotherapy are not meeting the targets in the west of Ireland. We should not have that regional disparity. I am getting off the point but the Minister has acknowledged that, which is very honest of her.

With regard to the linear accelerators, it has been expressed to me that part of the problem is a very slow procurement process, especially for those older machines, which have been in service far longer than internationally recommended. I have been told that, when some of the components break down, not only are the machines taken out of operation for up to three weeks, but the replacement components can cost €300,000 to €400,000. In the context of a machine that costs €2 million to €3 million, that seems inexplicable.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I understand the Deputy's point. We want the machines working hard. There is considerable variance. It should not get to 20 years. We have a programme of replacement. The HSE has a key performance indicator target for 90% of patients to commence treatment within 15 working days. The figure for performance nationally is 79%. The majority are exceeding the target. Unfortunately, St. Luke's is consistently below the key performance indicator target. Is that unfair to say? What are the specific reasons for that? Is it a question of disruption to machines, access to radiation or access to management? As public representatives, the Deputy and I are now able to intelligently interrogate the reasons for that and to challenge or support, as appropriate. Because we have the capacity to tell that story rather than speaking in generalised ways, which unfortunately was our wont some years ago, we are able to have a much more detailed conversation and reflect fairly and honestly on the varying reasons for those things.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Medical Register

6. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Minister for Health her views on whether gender-based violence should be ground for disqualification of a medical professional; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17502/26]

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The question of gender-based violence and the medical profession arose last year when a doctor, Christopher Morris, who had been convicted of assaulting two women was appointed as a locum consultant in obstetrics and gynaecology in the Coombe Hospital. Staff contacted me about that. It has now come up again as the result of what has happened in UCD. Thousands marched yesterday in support of a medical student who was

raped and who had image-based sexual abuse committed against her on three occasions. The college and the school of medicine has clearly not acted properly to deal with this situation.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I acknowledge that was a truly shocking case but I must be careful not to speak about individual cases in too much detail as it is a very sensitive matter. However, that does not mean I am not deeply concerned by it. I can say that the Medical Council is aware of that case and is actively engaging with the associated parties to get more information. The Medical Council has a responsibility to ensure that everybody in the doctor profession, including those in the UCD medical school, meet the required standards for medical education. I expect the Medical Council to make full use of its powers under the Medical Practitioners Act 2007 with regard to accreditation and inspection of all training sites. I have asked my officials to engage with the Medical Council in this regard.

Gender-based violence anywhere is completely unacceptable. I know I do not need to say that to Deputy Coppinger any more than she needs to say it to me. We are entirely in agreement, as is every person in this House. I can unequivocally state that incidents of gender-based violence are unacceptable in any context and must be reported to An Garda Síochána. If any such incidents occur in the health sector and involve medical practitioners, they should also be reported to the Medical Council, which exists for the purposes of patient safety. The idea of a medical practitioner of any kind doing harm to any person, particularly a woman, is anathema to all of us and does not bear thinking about.

Yesterday, we had statements in the Dáil on the establishment of an inquiry for the male victims of Michael Shine right across Louth and Meath. We know about hundreds of such men and I suspect there are many hundreds of others we do not know about. We spoke about the impact it had on their lives to have a sexual offence perpetrated against them within the trusting relationship between doctor and patient. Gender-based violence, like any form of sexual violence, is totally unacceptable in the medical profession and healthcare settings, as it is anywhere else.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Yesterday's protest was historic. Thousands of students reaffirmed our faith in the young generation. A key question that came up during that protest was whether UCD will do everything in its power to ensure this medical student can complete her medical degree within her original timeline or as close as possible to it rather than being forced to spend years longer in college because of the perpetrator's actions. She wants to achieve her dream of becoming a doctor. I ask the Minister to intervene to ensure this can happen. The whole country is standing behind this student. The question is whether UCD will do so. I ask the Minister to use her influence with the school of medicine. We will raise the issue of what happened but let us now look at the future. Can we rescue this situation for her and do everything possible to ensure she can become a doctor not years later, but as soon as possible?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I know UCD and its president, Orla Feely. It is a university led by a woman. That is a difficult position to achieve no matter what year we have reached. I know this medical student will have Professor Feely's full support. I will not speak about the particulars of courses, modules and all of those things I do not know about.

It would be wrong of me to pretend I do, but I certainly know UCD will put its full support behind this young woman to give her the best opportunity to succeed in her course, as she or anybody is entitled to do. I have never lost faith in the younger generation's clarity around values or the way they articulate those values and support each other. The protest was a demonstration of solidarity across the medical training community and beyond. It was a statement against gender-based violence in any context and in support of a vulnerable woman who should not have to deal with this.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Unfortunately, just because women are in certain positions it does not mean all of these questions are dealt with properly. I will not personalise it or mention names but we would not be here if UCD's leadership and school of medicine had handled the situation correctly in the first place. There is a problematic culture there and I ask the Minister to be open to that. As late as yesterday, the dean of the school of medicine sent an email to medical students telling them to be very careful because there was going to be a protest against gendered violence and providing an emergency number they could ring. How tone-deaf is that? The protest was against violence, against a rapist in their midst and against image-based sexual abuse. I saw that image. I had to look at it to verify all the facts. I saw the comments that went with it. They were utterly scary and sickening. People studying medicine potentially had a role in that. The rapist took so much from this person. The school of medicine and UCD should not take the rest. Let her complete her degree and please assist her in that.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy. I have not seen the email she referred to so am at a disadvantage in relation to that.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is on my Instagram.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Okay, but I do not follow your Instagram, if you will forgive me. I deleted it from my phone and do not have access to it so cannot speak to that with the knowledge the Deputy has of yesterday's email or any of those things. What I can simply say again and again is gender-based violence is wrong and the way we handle it is very important. Incidents should be reported to An Garda Síochána, to the Medical Council in cases relating to the doctor's profession and to the NMBI in respect of nurses.

This House made a clear statement yesterday acknowledging that sexual and gender-based violence can happen within the medical profession as much as any other place, that nowhere is a perpetrator to be protected and that nowhere is a victim not to be heard. We said that loud and proud; certainly, these benches said it clearly yesterday.

General Practitioner Services

7. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Health her plans for a new GP contract; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17324/26]

21. **Deputy John Paul O'Shea** asked the Minister for Health the number of approved general practitioner posts currently vacant in Cork; the measures being taken to recruit and retain GPs, particularly in rural areas of Cork; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [16272/26]

Deputy Martin Daly: What are the Minister's plans for a new GP contract and what is the progress on the strategic review of general practice? I ask this in the context of our growing population, the increasing expectations and demands on our health service, the increasing expense of secondary and tertiary care, and the long-term need to treat patients with less complex problems in the most appropriate setting - namely, a primary care setting - by GPs and supported by full primary care teams.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I propose to take Questions Nos. 7 and 21 together.

I assure the Deputies that the Government is committed to the continued development of our general practice service and improving access to GP services for all patients around the country. Over €340 million in additional annual investment in general practice has been provided under the 2019 and 2023 GP GMS agreements. Those agreements provide for increased GP capitation fees, increased and new supports for practices and new fees for additional services. By any measure, that is a considerable support provided by the State and by the taxpayer to private practices. It is important to remember that. The positive impact of this investment is seen in the increased number of doctors both applying for and undertaking GP training. Annual intake into the GP training scheme increased by 80% from 2019 to 2024. We have further increased the number of new entrant training places this year by 50 to 400. In addition, recruitment of GPs from abroad continues under the international medical graduate rural GP programme, which targets the placement of GPs to rural and under-served areas.

A strategic review of general practice that is examining the range of issues affecting it is under way and will be completed this year. The review will examine issues related to capacity and will consider further possible mechanisms to attract GPs to rural and under-served areas. The review will set out recommended actions for more sustainable general practice delivery for the whole community. While the existing GMS GP contract has been significantly updated, including via a circular, a new approach must also be developed. The strategic review will identify the arrangements necessary to improve our current system of GP care and that will determine any changes required in a new contract.

There is hugely significant investment in GPs, particularly in chronic disease management, which has been of real benefit to the broader healthcare system. Regarding the chronic disease management programme, the State has invested in GP services for the benefit of people of a particular age who may face chronic diseases. This is showing dividends in terms of patient care and in terms of the number of exacerbations and presentations to acute hospitals. People are living better with chronic diseases because of our investment in GPs and because they can access it more easily.

I am concerned that there is not the same availability of out-of-hours GPs across the regions. That is putting additional pressures on emergency departments and local injury units, particularly at a time of rising population. I am particularly conscious of that in the mid-west and south west, but it is a national profile. That is something I need to make sure is included in any new contract. I have a number of other reflections about maximising the use of GP services so that we are getting the best in the community and reducing hospital presentations.

It is important to say that our development of pharmacy contracts enables better access to GPs. Let me say loudly again that you do not need to go to your GP for eight conditions,

including a simple eye infection, thrush or a urinary tract infection. You can go directly to your pharmacy and pay €30 for a consultation with a pharmacist, a diagnosis and a prescription. You need never go to two different places when you have such conditions. Who does that matter for? Everybody. It matters because it creates more space in GP practices for somebody who needs a prescription for a urinary tract infection. For an older lady, such an infection is a really serious thing that can get much worse and result in hospitalisation. Because we have changed the pathway, people can get quicker diagnosis and an appropriate prescription to clear up a basic but important and potentially risky infection. In all those ways, we have tried to expand access to appropriate medical care.

Deputy Martin Daly: I thank the Minister for her answer. First, they are private practices but the State has chosen to operate a contract of service-----

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Correct.

Deputy Martin Daly: -----and that has suited the State well in recent years.

The Minister is right that if a GP has a GMS contract, he or she is obliged to be available and provide an out-of-hours service. Many younger GPs are choosing not to sign GMS contracts with the State because of that obligation. I agree 100% with the Minister that we really need to rethink the out-of-hours framework. It may well need to be separate from the GP contract because an increasingly older population of GPs are carrying that out-of-hours burden.

We need to rethink premises. We are relying on a private developer model. That has not worked in many rural or inner-city areas where we need State-led, HSE built premises - I would say rent free - to attract GPs to those areas.

Finally, we need public salary GPs in some remote rural areas and in deprived urban areas.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: The issue of vacant GP posts across Cork is placing serious pressure on communities, particularly in rural areas. Access to a GP is a cornerstone of our primary care system, yet in many towns and villages people are finding it increasingly difficult to register with a doctor or to secure a timely appointment. When GP posts remain vacant for long periods, the impact is felt immediately by the patient, by the neighbouring practices, which are already under pressure, and by the local health services. We need clear timelines and transparency from the HSE on how the vacancies can be filled and what interim measures are being put in place to ensure patients are not left without access to essential care.

Primary care must be strengthened. Two of the biggest issues that come up in my office every single week are access to a GP and access to consultant orthodontists in Cork. I urge the Minister to try to address those two issues for Cork over the next couple of weeks.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I find myself in agreement with all of the five points Deputy Daly made, such that I do not believe it is necessary to repeat them. I look forward to working with him on the practical points he has made, particularly in relation to the out of hours framework, the premises structure, what we might do and how we might think about that,

and the development of that in terms of a tax-efficient way of encouraging activity. The Deputy correctly recognised the public-private element to it. I must also recognise it from the perspective of the taxpayer, and I think that is reasonably fair, but I do not see the need to repeat all those things that I already agree with him on, but I look forward to his input in how we improve them. I thank him for that.

In relation to Cork, while no GMS general practitioner posts are vacant in County Cork, I do understand, for example, in the area Deputy O'Shea represents, in Charleville, in particular, that there is a practice that is going from three GPs to two GPs. The impact that this has on the community is hugely significant. It should not be understated. While it is one GP, that is what matters. It is the hours that are available. It is the support that is there to the community. I recognise the point the Deputy is making. I know HSE officials are continuing to engage with him on that on behalf of his community.

In relation to the query regarding the orthodontic service in Cork, it is anticipated that the whole-time equivalent of specialist orthodontist will reduce to 2.83 from May 2026. That is on foot of three clinical staff retiring from duty, and that has a big impact. Plans to restore the whole-time equivalent levels of specialist orthodontist and senior surgeon posts are being advanced and finalised in HSE south west. In terms of any anticipated retirements for this year, we have not received any indications of retirements from the remaining clinicians but a specialist orthodontist has been on periods of sick leave, which is impacting further delivery. We had a conversation about the importance of that earlier. I thank the Deputy for raising it.

Deputy Martin Daly: I acknowledge the investment of the State in general practitioner services over the past number of years. I think the Minister would recognise that with our growing population - 90,000 a year - the increased expectation and sophistication in what they want from a functioning health service has increased. We are not accelerating the capacity at the rate we are going to have to. We are talking about having 6,000 GPs in 15 years' time in order to meet that demand. We have 4,200 GPs who are registered as GPs but they are not whole-time equivalents. Many of them are in part-time practice. That is just the changing way people and younger doctors work. We need to find a way of getting the full contribution from GP training, in that the State has invested huge amounts of money to get them into general practitioner services in the country, so that it can be sustainable into the future.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I thank the Minister for her continued engagement and interest in the health services in Cork, particularly in terms of GP services. They are a first point of contact for many people. While it is great to see that there are no current vacancies in the GP contracts in Cork, our population in Cork is growing substantially, particularly in rural County Cork, where every single town and village is growing by the number of new houses there. There is particularly a need in Charleville. I thank the Minister for mentioning my town of Charleville that I represent. There is an acute need in terms of getting a new GP contract there because the population of Charleville is increasing significantly. We need additional supports there into the future.

I am receiving increasingly more queries into my office in relation to consultant orthodontists. There seems to be an issue where we do not have enough staff. There seems to be no plan in terms of recruiting a consultant orthodontist. I urge the Minister to see if she can

engage with the HSE and with me to encourage more recruitment as we go forward in the next couple of months.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Let me be very clear in relation to the recruitment. Any delay should only be in actually finding the consultant orthodontist and bringing them into the system. That does take time because people have to leave posts and so on but there should not be any delay at a HSE level recognising the level of need I have described to the Deputy and have described more broadly.

In relation to GPs generally, we have expanded the training programmes and the numbers again and again. We do want them to work. We cannot force them to work as GPs in Ireland and we cannot force them to work in the public health system but that is what we want. Again, I think it is time to reflect on the level of investment that we put into training medical practitioners on behalf of the State. It is such a privilege to be able to do that and not charge the fees that would be charged in any other country to train as a medical practitioner and the opportunity that it gives people. We spoke about with dentists and spending a period in the public system. We want to develop a cohort of public GPs. There is no question about that, and we have to think about the ways in which we give people the opportunity, or make it a requirement, to spend time in the public service to get the benefit of that particular model.

In relation to out of hours, it is really important to reflect on that, particularly in rural Ireland and where it can be more difficult to get to somebody that you need. I was reflecting on Cork in particular in anticipation of the Deputy's question. In relation to Kanturk and Mallow, for example, there were issues going back in 2023 and 2024 that the Deputy will be aware of better than I in relation to Kanturk and Macroom treatment services. The HSE did engage with SouthDoc on the matter, which confirmed that the centres were to be available by appointment only. It has been improved somewhat. I am now aware that there is an on duty doctor physically present in the Mallow treatment centre each weekday night, which is important. They can see routine patients provide telephone clinical advice and travel to locations such as Kanturk to provide home visits. That is the support that is necessary in addition to a second doctor *in situ* at weekends in public hospitals. We do need that out of hours facility, as Deputy Daly has highlighted. We need to continue to make sure that this is part of the GP offering.

Question No. 8 taken with Written Answers.

Healthcare Policy

9. **Deputy John Clendennen** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding any analysis or action plan currently being considered in terms of additional healthcare capacity in the midlands, in particular elective care capacity; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17322/26]

Deputy John Clendennen: This morning I would like to ask for an update for a position regarding any analysis or action plan currently being considered in terms of additional healthcare capacity in Offaly and the midlands, particularly in relation to elective care capacity.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy. I am fully committed to ensuring sufficient health care capacity across every part of Ireland. I compliment the work done in the midlands between the triangle of hospitals between Mullingar, Portlaoise and Tullamore, which are all performing at an exceedingly high standard in relation to all aspects of care, both emergency and scheduled. However, we need further development of the elective care capacity in the midlands. The HSE capital plan sets out a range of investments for the midlands, including the recently completed two-storey emergency department in Portlaoise, the reconfiguration of the renal department to provide additional dialysis treatment space and 2 additional neutral pressure isolation rooms in Tullamore Regional Hospital and progressing the appraisal for the replacement ward accommodation, theatre department and emergency department for projects for Regional Hospital Mullingar.

Alongside this excellent progress and the continued strong work by each of the hospitals, there is need for more capacity in terms of elective work. I do believe that this triangle of hospitals, working together, can offer a situation of exceptionally good elective work. Specifically on that, the HSE Dublin and midlands health region has confirmed that it is undertaking an analysis to inform the future development of an action plan. This early scoping phase is intended to consider potential options for new or additional capacity, including in the area of elective care. An expressions of interest process forms part of this broader review. Work to define scope, parameters and governance arrangements is ongoing. The process is expected to be completed by the end of this quarter. I am assured that the region will provide updates as this work develops.

The implementation of health infrastructure investment policy via the strategic healthcare investment framework means that any future proposal for new infrastructure will be centred on evidence-based demand analysis and established on a need identified by services.

Deputy John Clendennen: I thank the Minister. It is welcome news that we are looking at new elective capacity in the midlands. It is something I have raised here in the past in this Chamber. We have a situation where patients and carers are travelling to every corner of the country rather than the midlands for that surgery and medical care. It will assist in relation to providing better care and local care but also with congestion, not just on roads but in facilities in the likes of Dublin, where patients have had to come for so long. That will take a demand pressure away from those hospitals by bringing a new facility, new capacity and a new modern facility to the midlands.

From my perspective, Tullamore is best suited to provide that facility. The performance ratings of the emergency department in Tullamore in particular are outstanding. Patients are seldom left on trolleys, but that is coming at the cost of elective care. This measure is very much welcome.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I take this opportunity to compliment Midland Regional Hospital in Tullamore and its excellent manager, Louisea Burke, on delivering consistently predictable urgent and emergency care. While it is not easy, they do it with an extraordinary focus on patient care. Mr. Bernard Gloster, CEO of the HSE, visited the hospital recently to compliment them in that regard. Often we attend hospitals where there is a problem but not often enough do we attend hospitals to compliment them on their excellent work. Tullamore hospital is deserving of that attention.

I met Tullamore hospital management reasonably recently, at the end of January at our regional forum, where I again took the opportunity to congratulate Louisea and all of the staff at Tullamore hospital for providing that extremely good, predictable and safe service to the people of the area. The hospital and the midlands need more elective capacity, however. Of course, because of the region it is in, it is within the south Dublin surgical hub, which is connected to St. James's Hospital. That is a busy hub already and there is a need to reflect on the balance of that provided throughout the midlands. I acknowledge the Deputy's advocacy on behalf of Tullamore. Indeed, I have visited it with him and seen the value of the space around Tullamore regional hospital. I know it well because of the Deputy.

Deputy John Clendennen: I appreciate the Minister's support in this regard. The objective is to get to a stage where there will be a call for expressions of interest and follow-through of this plan in order that surgical procedures will happen in Tullamore or elsewhere in the midlands. That is what we all have to aspire to.

I acknowledge the Minister's recent visit to the midlands regarding ongoing facility works, such as the hospice in Tullamore and the primary care centres in Tullamore and Banagher. Edenderry primary care centre is also in for planning permission at the moment. I recently visited Birr primary care centre, which the Minister visited when it was only a shell. It is now nearing completion. If the Minister has any update on the completion of those works and when GPs will move onto the site, it would be greatly appreciated.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I was just reflecting on how Birr primary care centre has evolved since we saw it last summer. I am looking forward to visiting it in quarter 3 of 2026 when it will be operational to see how magnificent it is. For anyone who has not seen it, it is absolutely huge. It will be an enormous addition to primary care for the people of Offaly generally. Of course, it will have extensive GP practices and a pharmacy. It will also provide space for a National Ambulance Service base. It is extraordinary and it will add enormously. Indeed, I hope it will take some pressure off the hospital as well.

It is true that more elective capacity is necessary. While we are not considering a surgical hub model as such – we have enough work to do to get Sligo and Letterkenny ahead – that does not mean there are not different ways of achieving additional elective capacity. When I say we are open to suggestion in this regard, we really are. That is why we have insisted on this expression of interest process to determine what more can be done to deliver that elective capacity in an even stronger way, recognising the already excellent work done by the triangle of good hospitals.

Primary Care Centres

10. **Deputy Joe Neville** asked the Minister for Health the number of GP practices or primary care centres that have been introduced in north Kildare since 2020; the number due to be opened in 2026 that are known; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17744/26]

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The HSE contracts GPs to provide medical services on its behalf, including GP services under the general medical services, GMS, contract. Over 3,200 GPs hold at least one contract with the HSE, which is a 9% increase compared with

January 2020. As GPs are private practitioners, they determine the location from which they provide GP services.

Increasing GP capacity is a priority for the Government. As I said in response to Deputy Daly, we have significantly increased the new entrant places. Additionally, we are trying to recruit from abroad for the international medical graduate rural GP programme.

There are 180 primary care centres operational across the country, with 51 centres having opened since 2020. A total of eight primary care centres are operational in Kildare, three of which are in north Kildare, in Kilcock, Celbridge and Clane. The HSE is also considering the development of a further centre to serve north-east Kildare. Available figures show the number of GPs with GMS contracts in the Kildare west and Wicklow local health office area has increased by over 20% since 2020, from 110 to 134. Obviously, that is a broader area than Kildare North, the constituency the Deputy represents, but it is the relevant geographic operational area for the HSE. Nevertheless, I recognise the significant population growth in north Kildare and the needs of the Deputy's community in respect of access to GPs. We very much hope that number will be enhanced, not just for the region but specifically for the towns and villages of north Kildare the Deputy represents

Deputy Joe Neville: The Minister referred to her discussion earlier with Deputy Daly, which I listened to, about the need for GPs and how we roll them out. He was speaking about both the rural and urban areas in his area, but where I see a real need is in those urban centres of Leixlip and Maynooth. They are two large towns with a university on top. There are 60,000 residents and there is not a primary care centre between them.

Likewise, there is a huge need for GPs. I have known of many cases where people have come into our towns and have been refused a GP because there are no places available for them. They are stuck having to use their GP in the area from which they have come, be it a rural area or Dublin. They have to keep those GPs and, realistically, that is not good enough. We have to ensure we can have more GPs. The Minister and I have discussed primary care centres being a key source of that. Indeed, Deputy Daly alluded to GPs potentially having free use of those primary care centres. Those are the sort of things we need for my constituency of Kildare North.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I agree with the Deputy. The difficulty, again, is that private GP practices determine their location. That is a challenge. The Deputy is right; we need to try to focus on the primary care centres and enable more GPs to come into the public practice. It is a particularly frustrating area because, of course, plans were advanced for primary care centres, which required planning permission to turn a facility into a primary care centre. They have not progressed, however. We are looking at the bigger one to serve Leixlip and Maynooth but that does not answer the question of the Deputy's constituents today.

I agree with the Deputy; it is a considerable challenge for people to have to go back to their original GP, particularly for students, when they need basic access to care. I acknowledge what the Deputy is saying. We are trying to increase capacity everywhere through pharmacies, additional GP practices and additional primary care practices. The Deputy's area has been particularly tight and I know this is not the first time we have spoken about it. The Deputy has

articulated this issue on behalf of his constituents a number of times during these questions, and I genuinely acknowledge what he is saying.

Deputy Joe Neville: Often when we talk about an area like north Kildare with a population that has grown so significantly, we can talk about physical infrastructure, Uisce Éireann or the need for housing. Ultimately, however, we also need the social infrastructure, in whatever guise that comes in, be it locations for elderly people or, in this case, GP services. Social infrastructure makes a community what it is and that is what everyone needs.

While I will continue to advocate for new GPs, I am conscious of the expenses associated with land and offices and the difficulties younger GPs face when setting up in the likes of Leixlip, Maynooth and other growing towns in north Kildare. As I said, north Kildare's population has grown by 40% in the past 20 years, which is significant. We are lacking in some of those basic services. As I said, people have been turned away from GPs, unable to get places, and in some cases people who have not used a GP for a number of years, in a positive way, have received a letter telling them they are no longer members of that GP clinic and that the GP has taken them off the list just because they have not turned up, in a good way as a result of being healthy. This is a basic need. I am glad to work with the Minister to get a solution.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Deputy is right; we have a challenge in this regard. On the one hand, we cannot tell private GP practices where they should locate. That is a matter for them to determine. At the same time, we want to ensure they locate in areas of need, such as the Deputy's constituency. He has suggested looking at some measures to create different incentives for GPs to either join a practice or physically extend a practice and how the State could offer the best support to them to do that. This is something the Deputy has mentioned to me before. Perhaps we might follow that up to see how we could consider that to create additional incentives for GPs to set up or expand practices in specified areas.

Disease Management

11. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Minister for Health the Government strategy to raise awareness of haemochromatosis. [17294/26]

Deputy Martin Daly: I am taking this on behalf of Deputy Byrne but it is something close to my own heart as well. It is to ask the Minister about the Government's strategy to raise awareness of haemochromatosis.

10 o'clock

Haemochromatosis is a disease that causes iron overload in the body. It is a genetically inherited disease. It is the most prevalent genetic disease in Ireland. One in 20 people will carry part of the gene and one fifth of those will develop full-blown iron overload.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Haemochromatosis is a hereditary condition, common in Ireland, characterised by an over-absorption of iron from the gastrointestinal tract. Excess iron accumulates in organs including the liver, pancreas and heart, causing damage. I am informed that Ireland has been confirmed as having the highest rate of haemochromatosis

worldwide. I am advised by the HSE that the Irish Haemochromatosis Association receives €55,000 in funding from the Health Service Executive each year to support engagement, raise awareness, support patients, their families and the medical community and raise awareness of haemochromatosis. The association's initiatives include World Haemochromatosis Awareness Week, taking place from 1 to 7 June every year, and the GP practice nurse training and education programme. The diagnosis, treatment and management of patients living with the condition is guided by the hereditary haemochromatosis model of care, developed by the hereditary haemochromatosis working group, and the guidance document of the Irish College of General Practitioners, Hereditary Haemochromatosis: Diagnosis and Management from a GP Perspective. I understand that the condition can be treated very effectively by a process called venesection or therapeutic phlebotomy, which involves the patient having their blood taken. This can happen in acute hospitals or GP surgeries or at an Irish Blood Transfusion Service, IBTS, facility. It is extraordinary that Ireland has the highest rate of this condition worldwide and we need to do more to drive awareness of it.

Deputy Martin Daly: I thank the Minister for that. This is really important. Haemochromatosis was a hidden disease up to maybe 20 years ago. People would appear late in the disease with diabetes and liver failure and die from this condition. Thankfully, there is greater awareness in recent times. It was in my own family. My father had it and it was in his family. It can be managed very well. We need to diagnose it early. We need to be absolutely aware of how common it is. I do not think many people are aware of that. It can be simply treated in primary care. When we talk about capacity in general practitioner surgeries, that is an issue because while the State has a fee for GPs to do the venesection in their surgeries, many do not have the capacity to do so. People with haemochromatosis end up in hospital at some distance from their own homes. It is about raising awareness because it is the most prevalent genetic disease in Ireland. It is called "the Celtic curse".

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I do not know what the reasons for that are and why Ireland has the highest rate of it. I would be quite interested to find that out. As the Deputy says, this is a condition that can be managed well, particularly at a primary care level. It is the most common genetic disease here, with one in 83 people genetically predisposed to develop the condition. The symptoms are sort of non-specific and include non-specific fatigue and joint pain. The diagnosis is very variable. However, it can be treated well and effectively and it is important we discuss it here in Parliament as part of raising awareness of this very common condition among the Irish population. I thank the Deputy for his question.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I am somebody who has haemochromatosis. I was very lucky about ten years ago that I had the diagnosis. I was simply feeling fatigued. It was a general checkup and I was lucky that my GP decided to check my iron levels. It is a perfectly manageable disease, as Deputy Daly has pointed out, and I am very fortunate that I can have a venesection in my local GP's surgery. The challenge, particularly among men, who perhaps do not go to the doctors as regularly as they should, is that there is not the level of awareness. When somebody leaves this condition undiagnosed and as the condition develops, the risk particularly of arthritis or other diseases grows. I ask that there would be a national awareness-raising campaign because of the disease's prevalence in Ireland. As has been said, given that

potentially one in 83 adults carries the genes for haemochromatosis, the more awareness about this, the better.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy for sharing his own experience and perspective because that helps to tell the story of how common this is and what the impact is. We support the Irish Haemochromatosis Association and World Haemochromatosis Awareness Week, which takes place from 1 to 7 June every year. The association also runs the GP practice nurse training and education programme. To the extent we can do so, we will get behind that world awareness programme every year in the first week of June, a lovely week of the year, to drive awareness of haemochromatosis, and I am sure the Deputies will be at the forefront of that.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Deputy Ó Laoghaire advises that he is on his way.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): We will take Question No. 13 and then Deputy Sherlock, who has been waiting here for some time.

Home Help Service

13. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Health when the HSE will allow the home support service in Donegal to resume recruitment for healthcare assistants to address the growing waiting list for the service in the county.; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17182/26]

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: This question relates to the waiting lists of 324 for home support services in Donegal. I am very clear from speaking to staff in the service that the HSE recruitment policies are preventing it from recruiting the necessary assistants to get those waiting lists down. That also has a knock-on impact on Letterkenny University Hospital. I wish to get a sense of what is happening and why it is happening.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): Addressing the home support waiting list is a priority for me in 2026 and the HSE National Service Plan 2026 includes, for the first time, an explicit target to reduce waiting times. As part of this, I have secured funding for an additional 257 directly employed staff in 2026, with the highest allocation of 56.5 healthcare assistants, HCAs, and three managers going to the west and north-west region. I can assure the Deputy that there is no pause or restrictions on recruiting healthcare assistants in Donegal, and increasing recruitment remains an active priority for me.

Since September 2025, 39 additional healthcare assistants have been hired and commenced work in Donegal. In addition to this, a further 43 candidates have been offered roles, are progressing through pre-employment checks and are expected to take up employment over the coming weeks. Rolling recruitment campaigns are ongoing in the area. A recent recruitment drive for healthcare assistants resulted in a further 50 candidates being scheduled for interview. These interviews are scheduled to commence this week, 2 March. This pipeline will increase staffing levels further in the coming weeks. The agency conversion programme is also strengthening stability. Of 46 agency staff engaged, 42 have now been onboarded, including

ten in Donegal since October who have moved to permanent HSE roles. The HSE continues to work closely with local education and training bodies to support a sustainable long-term workforce pipeline for the region in Donegal.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: We are very proud in Donegal that we have the strongest level of home care assistance delivered directly by the State through the HSE and that is the way we want to keep it. My concern is that there is an agenda to privatise the service in Donegal, that is, to hold back recruitment in the public system and secure the services of private providers. I am aware of incidents in Donegal where the HSE has had to step in after a poor service by private providers. There are real concerns around this. The facts do not lie. The waiting lists are growing. There are 324 people waiting. That is not just about those families and, of course, the people themselves not having that level of support; it also impacts, as I said, on Letterkenny University Hospital. It means more people in the emergency department because we cannot release patients back into the community. I want to get a sense and assurance from the Minister of State that this is not about a privatisation agenda.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank Deputy Mac Lochlainn. I assure him that there is an intensive recruitment campaign for healthcare assistants for Donegal. As I said, 39 additional healthcare support assistants have been hired since September to the Donegal services for home support.

Furthermore, 43 candidates have been offered roles and are currently progressing through pre-employment checks. Seventeen of those are cleared to commence, and a further 26 candidates are currently in pre-employment clearance. A recent recruitment drive by the HSE has resulted in a further 50 candidates being scheduled for interview. These interviews are taking place now. There is a commitment and approval to recruit an additional 257 directly employed staff in 2026. That is on top of vacancies that are there. There is an absolute commitment by the HSE to continue to recruit healthcare assistants in Donegal.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I will continue to monitor this closely because it is clear that in recent years there has been an agenda at senior level in the HSE for a sneaking privatisation of the service in Donegal. In a response to a parliamentary question, it was confirmed that the use of private providers increased from 13% to 19% in one year. I am clear that recruitment through the HSE for home care assistants is being held back by policies there. By its own admission, it is looking to bring in private providers to fill the gap. That is wrong. There is a culture of community focus in Donegal and trying to keep people in their homes as much as we can and not have them in institutions. That helps the hospital. I ask the Minister of State speak to the managers to get an absolute assurance to stop playing games with privatisation. Whatever about the response they have given him, it is not borne out by the facts on ground I am seeing.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: In my role as Minister of State for older people, particularly dealing with home support services, I want to bring down the waiting lists. I want the HSE to actively recruit staff. I have met with the HSE about that on a number of occasions. For the first time, in the national service delivery plan for the HSE we are looking specifically to reduce waiting lists. As it stands, 39 additional healthcare assistants have been recruited by the HSE

since September for Donegal. There are 43 candidates who have been offered roles and 17 of those have already gone through pre-employment clearance and a further 26 are undergoing it. There are also interviews taking place for 50 candidates. These are all people who will be employed by the HSE as home care assistants. The Deputy has a job to do as a representative for Donegal. I have a job to do as Minister of State. We got approval this year for an additional 250 whole-time equivalents. That is something I continue to engage with the HSE on, as well as reducing the waiting lists.

Healthcare Policy

14. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Minister for Health the strategies in place to tackle the high levels of osteoporosis and fracture falls in Ireland. [17293/26]

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Healthy Ireland framework provides a number of strategies to ensure everyone in Ireland can enjoy good health as they age, including the national physical activity framework and the obesity policy and action plan. One in three older women and one in five men are affected by osteoporosis. In 2023, the Department published healthy eating guidelines for adults aged 65 and over, which emphasise the importance of a healthy diet for older adults to maintain muscle mass and bone strength to support independent living. A HSE fracture liaison service pathway developed by the National Clinical Programme for Trauma and Orthopaedic Surgery promotes preventative community-based care as opposed to a reliance on reactive medicine, in line with Sláintecare reform.

This year my Department approved funding to the HSE to pilot a scalable, multidisciplinary falls and frailty prevention service for women aged 65 plus in Mayo, Galway, and Roscommon. This service particularly targets older women at increased risk of falling, frailty, mobility issues, fear of falling, chronic conditions or reduced function post-hospitalisation. The overall aim is to reduce falls and fractures and the demand for treatment and long-stay care in acute services. Falls assessments, along with osteoporosis drug treatments, are essential for fracture risk reduction and these are being progressed through the community access to diagnostics scheme and the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013.

We are also investing and supporting a range of different forms of exercise in the community. I do not wish to name communities but I have seen projects in Sligo, in my own constituency and in Limerick, which are encouraging safe exercise among people of all ages to develop their muscle mass and bone strength in a way that is not likely to lead to any injuries, but only to rejuvenation and greater strength. That is a hugely important part of living well as we age.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: The Minister has outlined what a serious issue it is, and the numbers impacted in this country by osteoporosis. We know there are approximately 32,000 fragility fractures every year and that is estimated to cost our health service approximately €464 million every year. That is not to forget the impact it has on the individual patients. Given our ageing population, if we do not address some of this, those costs could rise to close to €1 billion within a decade. I welcome the commitments toward healthier activity, particularly among older people. The Minister will be aware that there is a commitment in the programme for Government towards tax relief for gym membership to encourage people to build resistance

and cope with falls. I hope when the issue of tax relief for gym membership is being considered that the Minister will support it.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The element of preventative care is crucial from the perspective of diet, lifestyle management and the ways in which people exercise. The gym membership piece is interesting but exercise is available in lots of different ways. I am seeing different forms of community exercise groups. There is a fantastic facility in a GAA centre in south Sligo and in other places. What you are doing is turning up as part of a community and going through the different machines. Whether people are post-hospital or post-diagnosis, using those safe, community facilities to build up their strength and bone mass is an important part of preventing illness, future falls and recovering. Of course, it is an extremely difficult situation to have the fear of falling particularly in the winter when weather is bad, and hospitals are already under pressure from respiratory illness. We have seen this winter in particular that combination of respiratory illness and falls from a prolonged period of bad weather. It does not help anybody and makes living as an older person that bit more difficult.

Healthcare Policy

15. **Deputy Marie Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of women who have applied for and who have travelled abroad under the endometriosis surgery abroad interim scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17509/26]

Deputy Marie Sherlock: My question is regarding the endometriosis surgery abroad interim scheme. We all want women to be treated in Ireland, and I know there is progress being made towards that. However, we can all agree we are some distance away from being able to see that in Ireland, both in terms of diagnosis and care. My question concerns the number of people who have applied under the new scheme and the number who have been treated, which is probably a small number. Since the new scheme was published I have had quite a number of people approach me because they are confused.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: We met women with endometriosis at the beginning of September 2025 and this scheme was put in place six weeks later. It was put in place for a specific reason, which was that we wanted to make access to surgeries as easy as possible. There are already two schemes, which are the cross-border directive and the treatment abroad scheme. In many ways those required women to pay upfront when what we wanted to do was pay the upfront cost for them. I understand we set up a dedicated two-year scheme to keep it in line with EU rules and that was launched on 18 October 2025. I need to be cautious with regard to patient confidentiality in my response but I can say that a dedicated email address was established. I think we have received approximately 80 communications with that email address. They do not necessarily relate to that scheme but to the operation of other schemes as well. It has provided a single point of contact, which has been useful because the information was too fragmented before. We have had 20 completed applications since it opened on 18 October and approximately ten women have travelled abroad for surgery under that initiative. That is not the total number of women whom we have supported to travel. We have also supported women to travel under the cross-border directive and the treatment abroad scheme

because they have been at different stages of their care and have taken different approaches. This has opened up a scheme for people who want an upfront cost paid.

However, the focus on it through centralising it in this way has enabled a better conversation with the other schemes as well. There have been a number of different questions on it, which is natural with any new scheme, many of which we are smoothing out. This includes referrals by consultants and different issues. I met officials from the national women and infants health programme, NWIHP, and today I have the good fortune of getting to meet up to 100 endometriosis patients in the Department with clinicians.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: The meeting last September was hugely important, and very welcome, but there was a large degree of alarm weeks later when the scheme was published that the names repeatedly mentioned at that meeting of the surgeons operating on women in Romania and Greece were not on the list. I have a very real concern that there is a lot of confusion about the most appropriate persons to treat complex endometriosis and that there is a large degree of deterrence, and women are not going to apply to the scheme or maybe they have engaged with the Department to ask questions about surgeons who are not on the list, and, ultimately, will be excluded from the new scheme. The reality is that we do not have numbers because they have not been properly coded in terms of who has been travelling abroad up to now and where they have been going under the treatment abroad scheme. That has been a real problem.

The second key issue I have a concern with is that the surgeons on the list are very much gynaecologically-focused but endometriosis is a whole-of-body inflammatory condition. My concern is that the list is very narrow, while being very long.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: When a new scheme is established, it must be done in a legally robust way. It is necessary to identify a reason these clinicians and not those clinicians are included. For example, the European Endometriosis League, EEL, and the British Society for Gynaecological Endoscopy, BSGE, criteria were picked. All of those clinics that were on those very defined lists automatically came onto the scheme. The clinics that the Deputy is referring to in Athens and Romania were not among those accredited by the EEL or BSGE. We said this clearly at the time. We asked NWIHP to engage further to see had they and could they meet the clinical standards to enable them to be within the scheme in a legally robust way. NWIHP has engaged with Athens and Bucharest. That process is not complete. I expect there will be some positivity and some negativity in relation to that. A relationship has also been developed with Bordeaux, which is, of course, much closer. There is a dedicated centre there and we are going to include that on the improved list. It is a live and iterative list that we are trying to develop all the time but it has to meet the clinical guidelines as well for our clinicians to refer people on to that scheme, which was one of the barriers in the past.

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

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: We have to keep it clinically safe as well and within the rules for the future.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I appreciate that. Hopefully, we will agree that there has been an issue in this country in that the clinicians operating here have not fully understood endometriosis, so there have been barriers to referring on. There is a challenge in this regard. NWIHP has to have the confidence to be able to put centres on a list. The reality, though, is that women have had to find centres using their own wit over the past number of years to get the appropriate care. If any lesson is to be learned from this experience, it is that we need to listen to them in terms of where they have got the appropriate care. These are the women who have gone before and are currently seeking assistance now. It is not good enough just to say that we will solely listen to the clinicians in this country, because there has been an issue that they have not been providing the services that women have needed here. There is a circle to square. It is not acceptable that the centres that have been used are excluded, and I hope they will be added.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: If I were to come back and give the Deputy the specific reasons there might be a concern about one clinic, she might take a different view. Perhaps we might have that conversation privately, because I suspect she does not have the complete information that I have, which is not a fair balance. We might perhaps speak about that separately.

She is correct that in the past there was a reluctance to refer patients abroad because clinicians did not know where they were referring them to. That is a cultural issue as much as anything else but we have overcome that now. I would not, though, classify all clinicians in that space.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I did not-----

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: But the Deputy did. Let me just be careful. We have clinicians who have been taking their own time to go and see others through surgeries so that they might learn more. We have developed different education pathways and fellowships over the past number of months, particularly with clinicians who really wanted to do better in Ireland and access the opportunity to do better in Ireland. I want to support those clinicians who are taking those steps. On Friday, the Royal College of Physicians is hosting its first conference on endometriosis with the Institute of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. This is because of the weight we have placed on its importance. It is about clinicians at the highest level in the institute and the college responding and putting their focus onto this issue. I have seen them step up, and I would love to see that acknowledged.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): With the permission of the House, we will go back to Question No. 12. Is that agreed? Agreed. This will be final question of this session

Health Services

12. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Health the number of people in the south Lee area awaiting paediatric and juvenile primary care psychology; the number

waiting over six months, 12 months and two years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17839/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Primary care psychology for adolescents is a huge issue. I am concerned that sometimes it slips under the radar. This service provides important support, but, unfortunately, from my experience in replies to previous questions, the numbers on the waiting list in south Lee are significant, including over a year for some people.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: As the Deputy will be aware, primary care psychology provides a broad range of supports and treatment for mild to moderate mental health conditions. His concern is particularly the south Lee area, so I might get to that. Currently 2,445 children and young people under the age of 18 are waiting to access primary care psychology in the south Lee area, with 198 waiting for between 26 and 39 weeks, and 1,792 waiting longer than 52 weeks. That is an aberration and should not be the case. It simply has to be improved. Several key initiatives have been deployed by HSE South West to try to improve access to the services. This is having an impact, to be fair. In 2025, 30% more patients were seen in the region compared to 2024. The Deputy and I, however, want that rate of improvement to continue.

Furthermore, the regional director of psychology has established a child psychology service waiting list improvement initiative to drive improvements in accessing key areas such as workforce planning and development for the region, waiting list and capacity solutions and clinical service innovation. Local recruitment, last month and this month, will lead to retaining graduating trainees in permanent posts mapped to primary care and CAMHS and adult mental health services priorities. A number of psychology assistant posts from a new national panel created in December 2025 will be allocated to both the IHA south and west, and north and east to reflect the fact that the longest waiters are in the south Lee and north Lee areas.

We also have the primary care psychology waiting list initiative to try to target. That has had some success since 2021, removing more than 15,000 children from the waiting list nationally. Additionally, we have put in funding of €4.75 million in budget 2026, which will remove a further 3,000 from the national wait list this year, a number of whom will be from the south Lee area. I am not comfortable with the levels of waiting in the area, as I know the Deputy is not, and I expect a continued reduction, as was the case from 2025, which was better than 2024. We do have a lot of work to do.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Can the Minister clarify the figure of 198? How many weeks is that in excess of? It was the figure right at the start of the answer.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am sorry. I did not hear the Deputy.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Deputy gave a number of 198 people waiting over a certain number of weeks. I did not catch how many weeks it was.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: There were 1,792 waiting longer than 52 weeks.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: That is a huge number. It is maybe a slight improvement, but very comparable to what was there before. This time last year about 70% of the posts in primary care psychology were absent. That is not in the reply and I am sure the Minister will not have those numbers in front of her. Part of the problem here is that there is a gap in recruitment. My big concern in relation to primary care psychology is us not making the investment there. The threshold to get into CAMHS now is so high because of the pressure it is under. Therefore, people who are at a relatively high level of suicidal ideation, as well as people dealing with things like ADHD, are not being seen quickly enough and their condition is therefore escalating. The other concern I have, potentially, is with people ageing out, that is, people who reach 18 without having been seen.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I agree with the Deputy. We increased the number of psychology doctoral training places to 111 at the end of 2025. This was up from 49 places in 2021. It is not just about the doctoral level. We want to create psychology assistant posts too, where we can make sure that people with a master's degree can work to support doctoral-level psychologists to increase workforce expansion. Not everybody has to have a doctorate. People can have a master's degree and still do important psychology work under the supervision of a different level of clinician.

We are trying to find different ways to expand the workforce. Locally, at the moment - literally last month - we are trying to retain graduate trainee posts and permanent positions in the south west and recruit four psychology assistants from the national recruitment panel established in December 2025, who will be allocated to support waitlist reduction in the longest waiting areas. We have 15 trainees exiting the doctoral training programme, which will be back-filled to ensure there is a pipeline of new psychologists to engage in that work. I completely acknowledge the challenge, measure of improvement and focus on recruitment. The Deputy and I are going to want to see that delivered for young people who need psychological support in that area.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It is vitally important that we make this early intervention. The nature of primary care is that people are not triaged. It is very much a question of how long people are on the waiting list. CAMHS can triage people according to severity. The nature of primary care is, of course, that one comes in and is waiting the time one is waiting. That is all. All that time somebody's condition can be escalating. That can cause behavioural issues in school, an increase in the severity of suicidality and issues in terms of anxiety escalating. All of these problems escalate if we cannot address that.

It sounds from what the Minister is saying that many of the vacant posts which existed a year ago still exist. That is a concern. I make the point, and I have made it before, that one of the concerns I have, in terms of getting people into psychology, is that to try to reach the point of being able to do clinical psychology, one has to get experience. That is a barrier to people from low-income backgrounds. One has to be able to gain that experience and not everyone is able to get a paid position that provides clinical experience. I am concerned about people who are not seen and who have been on the waiting list for a year or whatever. When they turn 18 years of age, they are the back of the queue for adult primary care psychology.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I cannot answer that for the Deputy this morning but it is an important question. We might put this series of questions to Andy Phillips in respect of that region. I am sorry I cannot answer that question for the Deputy.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Housing Provision

146. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to do to address the month on month rises in homelessness. [18167/26]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: On Friday, the Minister's Department published the latest homelessness figures. They show record highs of homelessness, with more than 17,000 people, including more than 5,000 children, homeless. Since Deputy Browne has been Minister, homelessness has increased by 12% and child homelessness has increased by a significant 16%. Will the Minister set out what additional actions he intends to take to reduce the flow of adults and children into homelessness and get people into emergency accommodation more quickly?

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): I thank the Deputy for his question in relation to my plans to address the month on month rise in homelessness. Addressing homelessness is a priority for my office, the Department and this Government. Our new housing plan is an integrated housing and homeless plan based on two key pillars: activating the supply of 300,000 more homes; and supporting people to have a home of their own.

Increased supply is key to addressing homelessness. The Government is focused on making sure everyone has access to a good quality and affordable, secure home that suits their needs in their local community. More than €9 billion in capital funding will be made available for housing in 2026. Our new plan recognises that homelessness is the single most pressing social issue we face and introduces a number of key measures to address homelessness. Ensuring the implementation of these measures will be a priority for me in 2026.

Meeting the Government commitment to eradicate homelessness requires a whole-of-government response. The national homeless action committee, NHAC, which I chair, supports the co-ordination of this response by Government, local authorities and their service delivery partners. The most recent meeting of NHAC took place yesterday, on Wednesday, 4 March. I will continue to work with the committee to ensure a renewed emphasis is brought to collaborating across Government to implement actions in the new housing plan.

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. This includes the provision of social and affordable housing, HAP, homeless HAP and our strong tenancy protection legislation in order to ensure a fully aligned all-of-government approach under the plan. The programme for Government includes a commitment to a holistic cross-departmental approach to homeless prevention. Work has commenced on developing a national homeless prevention framework to ensure all possible measures are being taken across

Government to prevent homelessness. It is intended that this framework will be in place later this year.

Addressing family homelessness is absolute priority for me. Under the new housing plan, we will develop a dedicated child and family homeless action plan as well.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Minister's party and Fine Gael have effectively been in government together since 2016 and since then the total number of adults who have been forced into emergency accommodation because of their failed housing policies numbers 55,000. I ask the Minister to think about that for a moment. That is more than a capacity crowd at the Aviva Stadium. It is greater than the population of Longford or, indeed, of Drogheda. Rather than this being the Government's priority, the policies it is implementing are making this crisis worse. It is not delivering a sufficient volume of social and affordable homes. It slashed funding for vital homelessness prevention schemes last year, and this year it has reduced funding further and further restricted its use for tenant in situ. The Government has introduced a set of changes to rent setting in the private rental sector that is going to widen the gap between what people can afford and the market rents. Given that we have 20,000 or so eviction notices a year, more families and singles are going to end up homeless. I asked the Minister what new or additional measures he is going to take but he has not given any. For the second time, I invite him to tell us what he is going to do differently this year than last year to get a grip on this crisis he is making worse.

Deputy James Browne: I have already outlined the several of the measures we are taking. Through our national homeless action committee along with homeless organisations, we are developing new strategies around child and family homelessness, and there are also our programmes around other homeless prevention. What the Deputy does not mention when he mentions the 55,000 figure is how many we have prevented going into homelessness or how many we have exited from homelessness. Since 2014 this country's population has increased by some 800,000 people. That is a challenge. We acknowledge there is a housing crisis in this country. What we are doing is trying to ensure people have the homes they need in their local community. There has been a challenge in driving the supply to meet the demand in this country over the past number of years. We saw a significant increase in homes being delivered last year, more than 36,000 homes and a 20% increase in housing delivery. We are stepping up even further in homeless prevention and exits and have significantly increased the amount of capital funding available to exit people longest on our homeless lists out of homelessness as well.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Yet the numbers of adults, children, families, singles and pensioners continues to rise almost every single month. By pushing up market rents, this is going to get worse. When we published our analysis based on RTB data of the cost of the market rent reset, the Minister rubbished it. He said it was not true. Yet, we already have evidence. A few days after the introduction of the new change, a tenant renting a one-bedroom apartment in Leopardstown moved out. The apartment was being rented for just over €2,000 until the middle of February. The property went back on the market on 1 March and the rent increased by 15%. That is almost an extra €4,000 in rent being charged, exactly in line with the RTB data and our analysis.

The Government is allowing additional funding to be used for homeless exits but it is robbing Peter to pay Paul. It is reducing the funding to prevent people from becoming homeless. What it gains in exits, it will lose in preventions and more people will become homeless. None of what the Minister has said is new. Is he going to take any new different measures to get a grip on this crisis that he and his party colleagues are making worse?

Deputy James Browne: I have set out numerous new measures we have announced in the past number of months to address homelessness. We know the only way we are ultimately going to address the housing, rental and homelessness crises is through increasing supply and not calcifying these crises in permanency, as is proposed by Sinn Féin with its measures. In the new tenancy legislation, we have some of the strongest, if not the strongest, tenancy protection measures in the European Union. We have security of tenure - people know how long they can stay in their homes. This was introduced for the first time in the history of the State. We have effectively ended no-fault evictions for the majority of tenants.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Minister has not in his own constituency.

Deputy James Browne: That has now been brought in. The only way a landlord can increase their rent with an existing tenant leaving is if that tenant voluntarily leaves and the Deputy is very much aware of that as well. We have to drive the supply. The Deputy is finding all sorts of accusations in relation to our proposals but he is not putting any forward himself other than calcifying the crisis in permanency.

Housing Provision

147. **Deputy Conor Sheehan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the action he proposes to take to address the growing housing deficit given that Government never met their targets for social and affordable housing delivery under Housing for All; if he will revise the targets contained within Delivering Homes, Building Communities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17104/26]

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I want to ask the Minister today about the targets for social and affordable housing delivery under Housing for All. Given that it has become abundantly clear that the Government will not meet the targets this year, and it has never met them for social and affordable housing, will the Minister revise the targets contained within the new housing plan in order to take account of this and deal with the growing housing deficit?

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy. Under Delivering Homes, Building Communities, the Government is targeting the delivery of 300,000 new homes by 2030, including 72,000 social homes and 90,000 affordable supports. The latest Central Statistics Office, CSO, figures released show that a total of 36,284 new dwellings were completed in 2025, an increase of 20% year on year, the highest annual total since the dataset years began in 2011. Record level of social and affordable housing delivery have been achieved in recent years, with preliminary 2025 figures indicating further record levels of delivery.

Since 2019, new-build social housing delivery by the State has been tracking in and around 25% of the overall housing output, which is a very significant investment by the State in the provision of social housing. In conjunction with growing cost-rental delivery, it puts the State in a very strong position to meet, over time, the Housing Commission recommendation that social and cost-rental housing should comprise at least 20% of the entire housing stock.

I am confident that the new social and affordable targets set out in Delivering Homes, Building Communities can be achieved, supported by tangible measures set out in the plan, including streamlining and expanding affordable housing supports; the new single approval process for all new-build social housing projects up to a value of €200 million; mandating the use of standard house layouts and specification for social housing; and facilitating the use of modern methods of construction through standardised design approaches. We have also introduced a revamped renewal programme focused on tackling dereliction and vacancy in social housing; expanding the role and remit of the Land Development Agency; expanding and streamlining the operation of the land acquisition fund; financially incentivising local authorities to exceed annual own-build social housing targets; and funding ring-fenced social and affordable new-build housing delivery teams in each local authority.

In addition, the housing activation office will identify and seek to address barriers to the delivery of public infrastructure projects required to enable housing development and support increased delivery of the national development plan. Record levels of funding have been committed for new social and affordable housing totalling almost €20 billion.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: The Minister's rental reforms are going to increase homelessness, certainly in the short term. One of the leading issues in regard to addressing homelessness is having an adequate supply of social and affordable housing. Based on the quarter 3 construction status report, the Minister is only going to, as of that date, meet 30% of his target for social housing delivery. In 2024, 10,596 were delivered against a 12,930 goal. Is the Minister going to revise the targets he has for an average of 12,000 new social homes in his current housing plan in order to deal with that deficit? The targets in that plan are too low given the demand that already exists, given the issue with the Minister's rental reforms and given the fact that a 56% increase in social homes is needed just to close the deficit.

Deputy James Browne: I do not accept that the new legislation is going to drive up homelessness. We know that notices to quit are the single greatest driver of homelessness. We know that the average tenancy is about 3.6 years. The new six-year tenancies of minimum duration will, I have no doubt, drive that 3.6 years significantly longer and reduce notices to quit, with people coming in and needing housing under new tenancies.

In regard to last year, just over 36,000 new homes were built. Some 25% of those were new-build social homes. That shows the Government is fully committed. Most local authorities are now stepping up to the mark in delivering social homes but we need every local authority stepping up to meet its targets because the funding is there for those local authorities to deliver on those social homes. What we did last year was deliver 9,089 new-build social homes. That is an increase of 1,256 homes, or 16% compared to 2024. This is the highest number of social homes newly built in the history of the State. That shows the Government's commitment to new-build social home delivery.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Going by the Minister's response, he is saying that 9,289 new-build social homes-----

Deputy James Browne: It was 9,089.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: There were 9,089 built. That is still, over the lifetime of Housing for All, beneath the target of that plan. I am asking, in particular, about the 2026 budget allocation. For example, that does not take into account that there was an underdelivery of around 4,000 units under the previous housing plan and the Minister has already underestimated the level of need in his new housing plan. He has not actually taken into account that the figures suggest that overall, under Housing for All, the Government did not reach its targets.

The fact of the matter is that the Minister's measures are already having an effect in his own county. We have not seen housing assistance payment, HAP, levels increase and the market rent reset is going drive rents up and increase homelessness because people will not be able to pay the rent.

Deputy James Browne: I do not think it can be glossed over that last year, we built the highest number of new-build social homes in the history of the State. What has to be understood is that-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Minister missed his target again. What was the target? He missed the target.

Deputy James Browne: -----we were coming from a standing start because the Deputy will know-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Minister has been in government for a decade.

Deputy James Browne: Stop trying to shout me down, please.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Minister missed his targets. He should be honest.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Broin.

Deputy James Browne: The consistent Sinn Féin tactic is whenever I say something they do not want to hear, they start shouting me down. The Deputy has to have respect. He does not have to like what I have to say but he has to listen to me.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I do not think I shouted.

Deputy James Browne: And it continues.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I politely interjected. The Minister's target was 10,000 and he missed it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Broin.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: The Minister did not meet his target.

Deputy James Browne: Is the Deputy going to let me speak? I thank the Deputy. It is the highest number of new-build social homes in the history of the State but we came from a very low standing start. As Deputy Sheehan will know, the last time the Labour Party had the Department of housing-----

Deputy Conor Sheehan: The International Monetary Fund, IMF, was there.

Deputy James Browne: -----it built 75 new-build social homes in the entire State.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: The IMF was there because Fianna Fáil crashed the economy.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Sheehan.

Deputy James Browne: We have taken that from 75 to 9,089.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Fianna Fáil crashed the economy.

Deputy James Browne: We left them with too many houses; that was the problem. The Labour Party turned a crisis of too many homes into one of too few in four and a half years. Well done.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Fianna Fáil slashed capital funding for social housing.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Minister to resume his seat. If that continues, I am just going to move on to the next question. The Deputies are asking the questions. The Minister is attempting to answer and if that crossfire continues, I am not going to allow it. Show some respect for what is going on here. We will move onto the next question and I ask the Minister to not interrupt Deputy Ó Broin.

Housing Schemes

148. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to address the unaffordability of cost rents. [18168/26]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The price of cost-rental accommodation is far too high. There is a growing number of working people, singles and couples, who earn too much to access social housing but because of the application of the affordability rule, they are not able to access cost

rental. Can the Minister confirm that he shares my concern with respect to this matter and set out what he is going to do to assist the Land Development Agency, LDA, and approved housing bodies to bring down the cost of cost rental so it is affordable for all those people seeking to access it?

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy for raising this question in relation to the unaffordability of cost rentals. As the Deputy is aware, the cost-rental scheme was introduced by this Government under the previous housing plan and is continued and expanded in the new plan. It is designed to address the affordability challenge in the rental sector and to provide secure, long-term homes for moderate-income households. This is why, under the new Delivering Homes, Building Communities plan, we have committed to growing the provision of affordable cost-rental properties.

Though cost rental was only introduced in 2021, over 4,500 new homes were delivered by quarter 3 of last year and a substantial pipeline is now in place.

There is huge demand for these homes as they become available. While we are not yet at the stage of supplying as many as are needed, we are getting there. The cost-rental homes already delivered and those in the pipeline are meeting a real demand, are incredibly popular and are providing a much needed, secure and affordable element in the rental sector. Let us be clear that cost-rental housing did not exist in this country five years ago. From a standing start in 2021 to now, because of the action of this Government and the unprecedented levels of funding provided in successive budgets, rental properties are being made available at heavy discounts to the private market rental rates. This State intervention is ensuring those on moderate incomes who would otherwise not be able to afford to rent are moving into decent homes with monthly rents they can afford.

We are providing substantial funding to local councils, the LDA and the approved housing bodies, AHBs. Since the launch of cost rental in 2021, approximately €2.25 billion in Exchequer funding has been approved for cost-rental projects. Beyond my Department, significant funding is also being provided by the State's Housing Finance Agency. The lowering of VAT on new apartments to 9% in budget 2026 will also assist in delivering new homes to the cost-rental sector, with lower costs meaning lower rents. The nature of my Department's funding in the form of non-repayable grants and investments and long-term loans at extremely low rates means rents can be set below full cost recovery levels and far below comparable rents in the private market.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Earlier this week the Minister visited Oscar Traynor Road, where there are two- and three- bedroom cost-rental units. The two-bedroom units cost almost €1,600 per month and the three-bedroom units cost almost €1,800 per month. That means people need a net income of €54,000 to be able to access the two-bedroom units and €64,000 for the three-bedroom units. This tells us that a huge group of people who are not eligible for social housing, but whose incomes are below those levels, are locked out.

Approximately 26% of applicants to the LDA's cost-rental stock are excluded on affordability grounds. For three-bedroom schemes run by local authorities and AHBs, it can be as high as 50%. The Minister has not even acknowledged there is a problem. We are all strong supporters of cost rental. If the Government had listened to us or to such organisations

as NESC and the ESRI in the past, we would have been doing this a decade or more ago. However, right now, there are thousands upon thousands of working people who cannot access social housing, do not earn enough for cost rental and have no housing options. Does the Minister accept there is a problem? What will he do to address it?

Deputy James Browne: The visit to Oscar Traynor Road was a huge day. It was great to see a huge turnout. As the Deputy will be aware, the scheme has a mix of social, affordable and cost-rental units. It is a significant mix. If I recall, there are approximately 850 homes being delivered there in total and they are being delivered ahead of schedule. It is one of many large schemes now being delivered by Dublin City Council. Cost-rental schemes are oversubscribed. I am trying to ensure - I am keeping a close eye on this all the time - that there is a scaling in affordability so that people can access the homes they need in line with what they can afford, whether that is through social housing, affordable purchase, cost rental or helping people to be able to buy homes with the help-to-buy scheme and the first home scheme under which people can purchase homes themselves. That is what we are looking to do on the affordable side and we are always monitoring the various schemes.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Minister's response is genuinely remarkable. He does not even accept there is a problem despite the fact that the data from the AHBs and the LDA confirms it. What is worse, LDA tenants are effectively paying corporation tax as part of the rent. That amounts to 15% of the rent they pay. Although the LDA has been given an exemption from corporation tax for new developments, that will not be passed on as an affordability measure, as per the Government. Worse, the LDA has just hit almost 500 of its tenants with rent increases that are entirely unjustified and those increases will range between 2% and 5%. This is at a time when rents should be coming down.

I will give the Minister a third opportunity to respond. There is a growing number of people who earn too much to qualify for social housing and not enough to qualify for cost rental. Does he accept this is a policy problem his Department needs to examine? Does he accept, for example, that solutions such as passing on the corporation tax reduction and discouraging cost-rental landlords from increasing the rent would assist in tackling the genuine affordability problem for thousands of working people?

Deputy James Browne: I very much have answered the question. We are always assessing the various schemes that come under the Department of housing to ensure there is availability for people at various levels of income. These schemes are way oversubscribed. We need even more cost-rental properties. That indicates there are people who fall into that bracket. We need to ensure, as I said, there are social, affordable, cost-rental and other schemes, whatever they may be, and the private supports we provide to people to be able to buy homes. I keep all those things constantly under review to keep a balance and that is what I will continue to do. I will continue to keep it under assessment.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Hearne on Question No. 149.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: With 21 seconds left, the Minister cannot accept there is an affordability problem.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Does Deputy Hearne wish to put his question-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: That is utterly shocking.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: -----or will I just move on to the next one?

House Sales

149. **Deputy Rory Hearne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to ensure transparency in the home-buying process, to curb ghost bids and gazumping, and to curtail bidding wars that are leading to higher house prices; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18166/26]

Deputy Rory Hearne: House prices are completely out of control and have been for a long time. They have increased by 68% since 2020 when Fianna Fáil took over the housing Ministry - 68%. In Dublin, the median price of a home is €500,000. That is half a million euro for a home. What is the Minister doing to address the issues that are contributing to inflation in the market, such as dysfunction in our housing market, ghost bids, gazumping and opaque bidding processes? What is he doing to address that?

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy for his question, which centres on the home-buying process including ghost bids, gazumping and bidding wars. I recently took over responsibility for the Property Services Regulatory Authority from the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration. It regulates property service providers, including estate agents. Estate agents already have to comply with key statutory obligations regulating the home bidding process under the Property Services (Regulation) Act 2011, which provides they shall not imply to any person that an offer has been received unless it has in fact been received; they must retain for a period of six years a record of all bids received; and they must confirm in writing to all potential purchasers receipt of their submitted bid. Furthermore, where the Property Services Regulatory Authority receives a complaint alleging fake bids, it has powers to request a copy of all bids received - the record of bids document - and has investigative powers to ensure those bids are genuine.

The ESRI published a report last month, *Buying and Selling Property in Ireland*, which outlines how aspects of the Irish housing transaction system influence buyer and seller behaviour and provides insights on features of the Irish market that warrant consideration for reform. The matters raised in the report overlap policy, legislative and regulatory areas across the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration and my Department. Along with my colleague, the Minister for justice, who has responsibility for the conveyancing process, I will reflect on the recommendations in the report. Any reform proposals will require deeper examination, including assessing impacts on the balance of rights of sellers and buyers in areas such as when a bid becomes legally binding; the rights of buyers to get an independent survey after bid acceptance; where legal responsibility for repair sits after the sale of a property; the merits, drawbacks and implications of closed versus open bid models; and the pros and cons of the various methods that auctioneers capture when displaying updates on bids. I have asked

my officials to consider further reform in respect of the regulation of property service providers and the wider recommendations in the report.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Does the Minister accept that we have a serious problem in our housing market? We can look at it in terms of the gap between advertised sale prices and actual selling prices. We have a problem with that massive gulf and it is ordinary people - families and individuals - who are being squeezed on house prices, which are absolutely unaffordable. What is happening in the housing market can be seen on the Crazy House Prices Instagram page. People are highlighting it. This is going on right now. There is case after case of people being gazumped. There are ghost bids with people putting in a bid in with a price, then it says it has been withdrawn, then it says it does not exist and all the time the house prices are going up. The Minister can do something about this. We need action quickly on this, not just another report that sits on a shelf. We need action. Does the Minister accept there is a problem around bidding in the housing market that is adding to house price inflation?

Deputy James Browne: The Government has accepted there are issues. That is why it set up the expert group. The programme for Government committed to a broad package of measures to assist home buyers under the home buyers help package, many of which have already been progressed by the implementation group of the task force on conveyancing and probate, arising from the previous actions under Housing for All.

11 o'clock

The ESRI report itself focused on behavioural aspects of the Irish housing transaction system within the current supply and demand context, and with studies showing how aspects of the system influence buyers' and sellers' behaviour. The task force was set up. There is an implementation group. Those measures are being implemented. We are also continuing to review in the Department what is happening in terms of the home buyers' market.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I am very concerned because what we saw from the previous Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael Government was a commitment to address gazumping, ghost bids and the problems in the market. I am deeply concerned because the Minister is again making commitments to review it but I am not sure about the timeline for delivering changes and action on this. You can read article after article about this. We have examples of estate agents using AI photos to show potential properties and the ads regulator not enforcing. There are massive problems in our housing market that are adding to house price inflation. We cannot just let this be a review of a policy that sits on a shelf. We need to see action and I want the Minister to outline a timeframe for action on this.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy. As I said, we have had our task force and we have the implementation group. Many measures have already been implemented and the rest of those measures are being implemented at pace. I am happy with the work the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, is doing in this area. I am reviewing the new report that has come from the ESRI to see if further measures are needed on top of that and I will make those decisions. Where measures are needed, I will implement them.

Housing Policy

150. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if plans by local councils to increase rents for council and HAP tenants reflect the commitment in the Delivering Homes, Building Communities plan to review the rents paid by social housing tenants, or if even more rent increases are planned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18049/26]

Deputy Paul Murphy: Across Dublin City Council letters are dropping for council tenants and HAP tenants telling them the people least able to afford to pay are going to see massive rent increases of 30% on average. Dublin city renters are getting organised. I saw there was a big meeting last night, a big meeting the week before and a big meeting the week before that. Eoghan Ó Ceannabháin is involved in organising those people. The same is happening in South Dublin County Council in advance of a planned rent rise. The question is whether this is part of national government policy and just the thin end of the wedge that is going to see council and HAP rents rise and rise.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I thank the Deputy for the question. Currently, local authorities charge rent under the Housing Act 1966 and this is known as the differential rents system. It is a critical piece of the State's welfare apparatus that subsidises housing costs and supports households who cannot meet their long-term accommodation needs from their own resources. The making or amending of such rent schemes is generally a matter for the executives of local authorities within the broad principles set out by my Department, including that rent levels should be based on income and reflect tenants' ability to pay and also that they contain a hardship clause under which tenants can pay a reduced rent for a specified period and under certain circumstances. Local authorities should review their rent schemes regularly to ensure they are equitable and appropriate to the household means. The Government's priority is to accelerate the delivery of social housing, with a significant funding package to support this ambition. It is therefore increasingly important that social housing supports are targeted appropriately and managed efficiently. Central to this is ensuring that the social housing rents charged remain appropriate to household means and that charging structures protect the most vulnerable households, including those with children. The current system of 32 individual rent schemes has its strengths. However, rents can vary widely and disparate approaches mean social tenants on similar incomes can pay significantly different rents for similar properties merely because of the local authority area they reside in. The new housing plan Delivering Homes, Building Communities commits to reviewing rents paid to local authorities and AHBs with a view to introducing a national framework that provides a consistent and equitable system of rents and protects vulnerable households.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Can the Minister of State tell me whether, in the national framework the Government is going to work towards, rents are going to come down for any council tenants or are they just going to rise? That is the simple question. The Delivering Homes, Building Communities document is extremely worrying because it suggests moving away from a differential rent-based system in which people's rent is based on their income and what they can afford to pay, which is an extremely fair system. Instead the document refers to the Housing

Commission recommendation of "Merging social and cost rental housing over time to form a single affordable rental sector, based on the principle of cost recovery". In other words, it will no longer be based on the principle of how much people can afford to pay but how much it costs to build the homes. That would be an extremely retrograde, regressive step. It would be a move in exactly the wrong direction and would result in even bigger rent increases for those who can least afford to pay.

Deputy John Cummins: The Deputy asked whether it will result in increased or decreased rents. As I outlined in my initial response there are significant differences in rent schemes from local authority to local authority. Somebody with a given income in one council may be paying more than someone on a similar income in a different local authority area. There is a national framework contained in the housing plan. Options will come forward to the Minister in the second half of this year. Obviously we will look at what the best system and approach is at that point. It is true to say that in some local authority systems, it ranges between 10% and 20% of income and different approaches are taken to secondary earners. We set a broad framework. It is probably appropriate at this point that there be a more streamlined system where local authorities cannot have as broad a range as they have had heretofore.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I am not against a streamlined system in principle but I do not think any council tenants are going to believe the Minister of State that the Government is going to streamline this downwards to the lowest levels. Instead, everyone will hear that it is going to streamline this to the highest possible levels. That will mean even more rent increases for people who simply cannot afford to pay. I am telling the Minister of State that council tenants are getting organised in a very significant way. In Dublin City Council it is going to be a massive campaign. It was only lost by one vote. Unfortunately, the Labour Party and the Green Party voted to increase people's rents. We are building a big campaign to reverse that in the next budget. In South Dublin County Council we are a year ahead of where the city council is and we have every chance of stopping this rent increase coming in. Will the Minister of State explain to me what the idea of merging the cost rental and social housing systems would look like? What does it mean to go for it being based on the principle of cost recovery? If the Government implements that, is it not the end of the differential rents scheme?

Deputy John Cummins: I thank the Deputy. In the premise of his follow-up question, he is determining the outcome of this review. He is stating the outcome of it will be that we will go to the highest rent provided by a local-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: Will you promise me you will go lower?

Deputy John Cummins: I did not interrupt you, Deputy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: No, I am interrupting you though.

Deputy John Cummins: I did not-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Murphy, you should not interrupt.

Deputy Paul Murphy: You tell me if you are going to go lower.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Murphy-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: I am just asking the question.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: -----address your remarks through the Chair.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I would ask the Minister of State whether the Government is going to reduce them.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You are out of order. I ask the Minister of State to conclude his answer.

Deputy John Cummins: Deputy Murphy had an opportunity to make his comments. I am responding to him. He is determining the outcome of the review. I am saying that a review is under way and that proposals will be brought to the Minister in the second half of this year. There are varying discrepancies between some local authorities. I am not determining what the outcome will be. Some local authorities have a higher percentage and some have a lower one. I am not going to determine what the outcome of the review will be until it has been undertaken.

Question No. 151 taken with Written Answers.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Rental Sector

152. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to reduce unaffordable rents in the private sector. [17818/26]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Minister has introduced legislation allowing landlords to reset rents upwards, which is unbelievable when rents are already unaffordable for the vast majority of people and we have an unprecedented homelessness crisis. Does the Minister have any plans to make rents affordable in the private rental sector or is he just admitting this is a Government that is about increasing rents in order to benefit landlords who profit from the housing misery that results from unaffordable rents?

Deputy James Browne: Affordability very much is at the heart of the Government's housing policy, as embodied within the new housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030. The Government is targeting the delivery of 300,000 new homes by 2030, including 72,000 social homes and 90,000 affordable supports. The plan reinforces and expands the range of existing measures being implemented by Government to tackle the issues of supply and affordability, thereby supporting the increased provision of new homes to

purchase and rent. Further Government measures introduced to support renters include the increase in the tax credit for renters under budget 2025 to a maximum of €1,000 for each renter in a household. Budget 2026 extends the rent tax credit, which was due to expire at the end of 2025, for a further three years to the end of 2028. The programme for Government commits to extending it. Record levels of social and affordable housing delivery have been achieved in recent years, with preliminary 2025 figures indicating further record levels of delivery. I am providing substantial funding to local authorities, the Land Development Agency and to approved housing bodies to support increased delivery. The national development plan has committed record levels of funding for new social and affordable housing, totalling almost €20 billion. Since the launch of cost rental in 2021, around €2.25 billion in Exchequer funding has been approved for cost rental projects. Beyond my Department, very significant loan funding is also being provided from the State's Housing Finance Agency. The lowering of VAT on new apartments to 9% under budget 2026 will also assist in the delivery of new homes into the cost-rental sector at lower cost.

The Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act of 2026 came into effect on 1 March, introducing a new national rent control for all tenancies which limits rent increases to inflation as measured by the consumer price index up to a maximum of 2%. For new-build apartments and student-specific accommodation, however, rent increases are capped at the level of inflation CPI only. These changes were introduced to promote greater investment in the rental market, to increase supply of rental properties.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: That is all just meaningless drivel for the people out there looking for affordable rents.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Hear, hear.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is unbelievable. Average incomes in this country are €55,000 to €60,000. Many if not most people earn less than that. Take-home pay is €3,300 to €3,600 a month after tax. If you are looking for a three-bedroom apartment in Dún Laoghaire, you will not find anything below €3,000 today. Most of them are €4,500. I will read out a few figures in my area: €3,800, €3,050 and €3,650. More than 100% of the take-home income of the average worker is needed for the rents that are being looked for today. Suzanne, whose family is in an overcrowded two-bed, is looking for a three-bed. She is paying €1,700 and that is what is available for her and her two kids. She is going to end up homeless or staying in overcrowded accommodation, as are many people. It is an impossible situation and the Minister has got nothing at all to say to people.

Deputy James Browne: We do have a lot to say to people. We have already delivered a record number of homes last year. Since Housing for All came in, we delivered 36,000 homes last year. We have provided tax breaks for renters as well. We know the only way we can address the homeless crisis, the rent crisis and the housing crisis is through increasing the supply. We cannot calcify the current situation forever. I know it is popular for Deputies opposite to say they want an eviction ban and to freeze rents. They are just going to exacerbate the situation as the population increases as a result of more people coming into this country,

which is fantastic. The diversity is wonderful for our country but we have to drive the supply. The State cannot provide all homes to deliver that.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Seriously, young working people looking for accommodation are goosed with this Government. The Minister says supply is the answer. I am on the budget scrutiny committee. The Department of Finance in the Future Forty report is projecting that supply will not reach the level where it is possible, theoretically, that prices could come down until the end of the 2030s. We are stuck. Suzanne, who is looking to get from an overcrowded situation and is facing those rents, is goosed until the end of the 2030s. Another couple I am dealing with, who have two kids, got a notice to quit and are now living with neighbours. They have to wait until the end of the 2030s. We can actually control rents. They do it in other countries. Why will the Minister not control rents? Why does he allow rents to reach these unaffordable levels? Why does he allow people to be evicted? Why does he allow landlords to reset rents up to the highest levels when there is nowhere that can be afforded by average working people looking for a roof over their head?

Deputy James Browne: Short-term protectionism is only exacerbating this situation. I want to give people hope. We delivered over 36,000 new homes last year. That is the highest number of homes since Housing for All came in. We delivered an awful lot more homes 20 years ago. In my view, the kind of protectionism we brought in has undermined the supply of those homes. We need to get back to delivering at least 50,000 homes a year. Going back 20 years, at one stage it was 90,000. I think those numbers were questionable, which is why we now rely on CSO data. There was still significantly more than we are delivering now. We need to ensure we have that framework and deliver the supply of homes people need right across the country. We are in a housing crisis. I am the first to admit it. The only way to get out of it is through supply, not through more and more protectionism.

Question No. 153 taken with Written Answers.

Vacant Properties

154. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of applications received and approved under the vacant property refurbishment grant and the croí cónaithe fund nationally to date; the total funding allocated and drawn down; the average processing time for applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17619/26]

156. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage for an update on the operation of the croí cónaithe scheme in Carlow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17327/26]

169. **Deputy Joe Neville** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of properties which have been brought back into use under the vacant property refurbishment grant in north Kildare since 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17855/26]

191. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage for an update on the operation of the croí cónaithe scheme in Kilkenny; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17328/26]

198. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of applications that have been approved for the vacant property refurbishment grant in Cavan and Monaghan since its introduction; the number of grants that have been paid out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17477/26]

207. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when the vacant above the shop grant will be introduced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17539/26]

255. **Deputy Martin Daly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the average processing time for vacant property refurbishment grant applications in Roscommon–Galway; the number of applications awaiting decision or payment; and the steps being taken to address delays. [17593/26]

Deputy Tony McCormack: My question is about the number of applications received for vacant property refurbishment grant and the croí cónaithe fund since the launch of the scheme, the number of applications approved to date, the total amount of funding allocated and drawn down under both schemes, and if the Minister of State will make a statement on it.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I propose to take Questions Nos. 154, 156, 169, 191, 198, 207 and 255 together.

Tackling vacancy and dereliction is a key objective of this Government as reflected in the new housing plan, delivering homes and building communities. The vacant property refurbishment grant, which is funded under the croí cónaithe towns fund, provides a grant of up to €50,000 for the refurbishment of vacant properties for the occupation as a principal private residence and for properties which will be made available for rent. A top-up grant of up to €20,000 is available where the property is derelict, bringing the total grant available for a derelict property up to €70,000. In order to qualify for the grant, the property must be vacant for two years or more at the time of application. Since its introduction in 2022, the vacant property refurbishment grant has been a key support to bring back vacant and derelict properties into use as homes. To the end of 2025, over 16,000 grant applications have been received nationwide and over 4,514 were paid out, amounting to €247 million. My Department publishes data on applications for the grant on its website on a quarterly basis, which includes the number of applications, approvals and the total number and value of grants paid per local authority.

Prior to the decision being made on grant applications, local authority reviews the applications to ensure that grant conditions are met and the required supporting documentation has been submitted. They will then arrange for a qualified person to visit the property to check the refurbishment work being applied for and to assess the proposed cost.

Once this process is complete, the local authority will make its decision on the grant application, which is then issued to the applicant. Applicants have 13 months to complete the works from the date of approval but in exceptional circumstances where an applicant cannot complete the works applied for under the grant within this 13-month period, the local authority may grant an extension of the approval period at its discretion. Following confirmation of a successful application and the works being completed, the local authority will conduct a final property visit to review that the work has been completed in line with the grant application. Once the local authority is satisfied all required documentation is in order, it will then pay the grant. Payment of the grant at the end of the process is to ensure the applicant has carried the works applied for and approved and to safeguard that the grant is related to the works completed. The average processing time for applications received in the past year from date of receipt to date of decision is 67 days. The average processing time for applications received where all required information to support the application is received at the outset over the same period is 48 days. I propose to attach the information requested as part of the Official Report.

The vacant homes unit in the Department monitors delivery of the grant and engages with local authorities on an ongoing basis, identifying issues and providing support and guidance in relation to the administration and processing of grant applications. Support is also provided to local authorities by the property optimisation unit within in the Housing Agency. This engagement supports efficient delivery of the grant and a consistent approach by local authorities in grant administration throughout the country. In line with the action contained in the housing plan, additional annual financial support of up to €100,000 per annum will be provided to local authorities to assist with grant administration. Building on the success of the grant and in line with the agreed action in the new housing plan, the Government in December approved extending availability of the grant to 2030, with 20,000 grants to be paid. Approval was also given for the introduction of a vacant above-the-shop grant, with a package of up to €140,000 to be made available in cases where a vacant above-the-shop space is being converted or refurbished for residential use and the commercial elements remains. The additional grant amount for these properties recognises the complexities involved in bringing this space into residential use. The package includes an expert advice grant of up to €5,000. Alongside these changes, approval was also given to provide an additional top-up of existing grant levels where an entire commercial building is converted into more than one residential unit. An additional €20,000 will be made available for the creation of a second residential unit and a further €20,000 where three or more units are created in the building. This will be on top of the existing grant of €50,000 to €70,000 as appropriate. The Department is progressing work on the vacant above-the-shop grant and the expert advice grant. It will be for made available for delivery by local authorities in the coming weeks.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

The vacant property refurbishment grant is one of the many measures introduced and being introduced to tackle the scourge of dereliction and vacancy head-on. It has proved very successful and the changes now being made, build on that to maximise the number of vacant and derelict properties being brought into use as homes across across our villages, towns and cities.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I recognise what the Minister of State and his Department are doing and that he is doing everything in his power to speed up housing delivery. The vacant

property refurbishment grant and the croí cónaithe fund are important initiatives in that regard. Bringing vacant and derelict homes back into use in many respects should be the low-hanging fruit in tackling the housing crisis. These homes already exist within our communities and with the right support they can be turned back into homes relatively quickly. However, a number of applicants have contacted me to say the application and approval process can take quite a long time and there can be uncertainty around timelines for decisions and payments. For people trying to organise building works and financing, that uncertainty can create real difficulties. Will the Minister outline if the Department monitors processing times across local authorities and if there are differences between these areas? What steps are being taken to ensure local authorities have the resources and guidance necessary to process applications quickly so that these homes can be brought back into use without unnecessary delay?

Deputy John Cummins: From a Department perspective we are monitoring processing times by local authorities. There is a significant discrepancy between the lowest and highest. I have outlined that the average processing time is eight weeks but I acknowledge that some local authorities are significantly above that. We are working with them to ensure we can get that down to the average. I understand the complexities and difficulties associated with projects like this from a financing perspective, trying to line up contractors and difficulties that can occur. We are providing funding to local authorities. We are trying to assist them in reducing processing times to ensure what is an excellent scheme is rolled out effectively across the country.

Deputy Tony McCormack: While these schemes are very welcome, their success ultimately depends on local authorities fully buying into them and driving them on the ground. Does the Minister of State believe all local authorities are engaging with the scheme to the same extent? Are there areas where uptake or processing is slower than expected? If there are differences, what steps is the Department taking to ensure best practice is shared and that every council actively supports applicants so that we can maximise the number of vacant homes brought back into use?

Deputy John Cummins: Every local authority is engaging with the scheme and has paid out grants but, as I said, processing times at both the front end and back end of the process vary from local authority to local authority. That is a challenge. We are working with local authorities to ensure all of them come within a much shorter range than is the case at the moment. We will continue to work with the local authority sector from a financing perspective in terms of the staffing required, and every local authority has a vacant homes officer and has been provided with €100,000 for support and administration of this grant scheme. An excellent scheme has been introduced by the Government, with 16,000 applications, 12,000 approvals and 4,500 grants paid out. That is 4,500 vacant and derelict homes that now have families and individuals living in them today, with up to €70,000 in grant support provided by the Government.

Regeneration Projects

155. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to provide an update on the funding for inner-city flat complex regeneration in Dublin. [17587/26]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: As the Minister knows, some of the worst quality rental accommodation in the State is the inner-city flat complexes owned by Dublin City Council built in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. There is widespread damp, sewage problems, overcrowding and decades of poor maintenance. While Dublin City Council has a comprehensive and ambitious plan to address those issues, the Department continues to put far too many barriers in its way. Will the Minister provide an update on funding applications and approvals specifically for the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s inner-city flat complex regeneration proposals?

Deputy James Browne: Within the programme for Government 2025, Securing Ireland's Future, a commitment was specifically made to continue to accelerate social housing regeneration schemes in Dublin. This commitment is reiterated in the new housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities. Where local authorities propose the complete redevelopment of flat complexes such as O'Devaney Gardens and St. Teresa's Gardens, my Department is making a number of funding channels available to local authorities and approved housing bodies for such regeneration, including the social housing investment programme, the affordable housing fund, the capital advance leasing facility and cost-rental equity loans.

For flat complexes proposed for refurbishment and remedial works, my Department is making funding available through our estate regeneration programme. Dublin City Council has completed a number of regeneration projects, including 72 units at Dominick Street east and 100 units as part of Dolphin House regeneration.

The council has contractors on site for a number of other regeneration projects, such as Constitution Hill and Dorset Street and mixed-tenure redevelopments including the Donore project at St. Teresa's Gardens, An Droichead Órga at St. Michael's Estate and the Montpelier development at O'Devaney Gardens. These three mixed-tenure regeneration projects will deliver over 2,000 homes once all phases are completed. I have provided funding approval for a number of regeneration projects where the council is working on the design, planning and tendering, including Dolphin House phase 1b, School Street, Constitution Hill and Glovers Court.

My Department is working with the council on a remedial works programme for four existing blocks in Pearse House. A funding proposal is with my officials for review, with a decision to be made in the coming weeks.

The Department is also working with Dublin City Council on a proposal for remedial works on three blocks in Oliver Bond House and for the future regeneration of the remaining blocks. The Department remains committed to the regeneration of flat complexes in Dublin city and will continue to support well-conceived regeneration projects put forward by the city council.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The Minister is developing a terrible habit of spending most of his time talking about everything other than the actual question, which relates to the currently tenanted flat complexes, such as Oliver Bond House, St. Michan's House and Pearse House,

where the Department is preventing, blocking and delaying the approval of funding. Initially it was because the national planning framework required that density be increased, and following the intervention of Dublin City Council and many of us on this side of the House that policy shifted. The current policy is that there can be no decrease in density as part of bringing these older flat complexes up to standard. That is simply not possible. We cannot ensure that the hard-working, rent-paying residents in Oliver Bond House, St. Michan's House, Pearse House and others get 21st-century minimum standards for rental accommodation without reducing density. There is no urgency or understanding, in my view, of the scale of the problem. What we want to know is when funding will be released so that the State, the largest landlord in the country, has the highest possible standards for its rental accommodation when, right now today in Dublin, the worst rental accommodation in our city is rental accommodation the State owns and the Minister is refusing to fund.

Deputy James Browne: I thank Deputy Ó Broin and I am surprised at his comments. The national regeneration and refurbishment programme is the largest regeneration programme in terms of funds in the history of the State. The remediation of local authority social housing estates and flat complexes in the country's most disadvantaged communities is one of my key priorities. This includes those defined by the most extreme social exclusion, unemployment and other issues in these local communities. That said, given the critical shortage of housing across the State, unnecessary or unjustified reductions in density are not supported where such reductions result in a significant loss of homes. We cannot stand over or justify this. The local authorities know the Department's position. We are moving at speed but we need the local authorities to put forward plans that meet the Department's requirements for what we will fund, which is regeneration but not losing homes. We cannot afford to lose homes in the current situation of a housing crisis.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The only surprise that will be expressed following this debate is the surprise of the residents in the inner-city flat complexes listening to a Minister who clearly does not understand the scale of the problems. Someone living in an overcrowded flat that was built to 1930s or 1940s standards, which is riddled with damp, stinks of sewage and has a range of problems from rats to crumbling façades, needs to have that apartment fixed. This is not a question of density; it is a question of providing the funding so the State's own social rental homes meet minimum standards. If the properties were in the private rental sector, the local authorities would inspect and enforce. If these properties were in the AHB sector, the tenants would take their landlord to the Residential Tenancies Board. Right now, because of what the Minister has just said, because he has admitted what the barrier is, we are forcing social housing tenants, council tenants and working and rent-paying tenants to live in substandard and what are effectively illegal properties. When will the Minister wake up and realise the scale of the problem and release the funding to do one thing and one thing only, which is to bring these homes up to modern standards?

Deputy James Browne: I very much do understand the scale of the problem. The funding is available to address every one of those issues and they need to be addressed because it is totally unacceptable that people are living in these types of conditions, but it has been made about-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: "But". That is the problem. It is the "but".

Deputy James Browne: It has been made about density instead of being about regeneration. We fully support and will fund the regeneration. It needs to happen. It could have happened by now. We want it to happen at speed-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: But the Department is not approving the funding applications.

Deputy James Browne: Because the local authority made it about density instead of regeneration.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: No, the national planning framework makes it about density.

Deputy James Browne: This needs to happen and it needs to happen quickly.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: We told you. There is a national planning objective, legally binding, in the national planning framework.

Deputy James Browne: It needs to happen in terms of ensuring people have the quality homes, updated homes and upgraded homes they deserve to live in, instead of it being made about density, which Deputy Ó Broin has made it about and so has the local authority in the past.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: No. Your national planning framework made it about density. What utter nonsense.

Question No. 156 taken with Question No. 154.

Further and Higher Education

157. **Deputy Catherine Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage for an update on the development of the national centre of excellence for traditional skills; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16774/26]

Deputy Catherine Callaghan:

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: The 2025 programme for Government includes a commitment to explore the creation of a national centre of excellence for traditional skills. In furtherance of this commitment the Heritage Council established a task force on traditional skills. The task force met five times during the course of 2025 and is due to meet again later this month. The task force has to date commissioned three pieces of work, including an audit of available traditional skills courses and an assessment of the current and future demands for traditional building skills.

A key finding of the group to date is that the market for skilled traditional tradesmen is experiencing an acute supply shortage driven by an ageing workforce, insufficient new entrants

and the long-term erosion of training pathways. It is envisaged that policy recommendations aimed at addressing these issues will be made to the Government by the Heritage Council later this year. It is important to note that in addition to their importance for heritage, the transmission of traditional skills from one generation of practitioners to the next relies on an effective system of education and training. As such, and alongside stakeholders such as the Heritage Council, the Department intends to work closely with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to address the supply of skilled traditional tradespeople. To this end, and in parallel with the work of the task force, Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board has an active further education and training college application, with plans to develop a national centre for traditional building skills. The application was lodged with SOLAS in 2024, and in February 2026 my colleague the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science announced that Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board would be in a position to appoint a design team for this important centre later this year.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I thank the Minister of State. He has almost answered my next question. It is very heartening to hear we are all thinking along the same lines. It is very important we recognise that over recent years there has been a growth in appreciation for the role of traditional craft works in Irish society. Skills such as thatching and stonemasonry have often been looked at in a nostalgic way as cherished emblems of an older Ireland. I believe, however, and I recognise from the comments of the Minister of State, that traditional skills have a place not only in Ireland's past but in its future as well.

Traditional skills will play an important role in the 21st century through the development of the specialist courses in Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board, which the Minister State mentioned. Recently it held the first thatching course in 15 years in Sheepstown in County Kilkenny. That is probably a testament to the rich potential the sector has. As the Minister of State has said, it is critical that apprentices can learn these skills while there are still expert craft persons to train them. He has given some assurance already, but he might reiterate that every possible measure is being taken to expedite the delivery of the national centre of excellence and training in traditional skills.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank Deputy Callaghan. It is a programme for Government commitment, which is as strong a commitment as we can get, to explore the creation of a national centre of excellence for traditional skills. A task force has been established and it has commissioned work. There will be a report from the Heritage Council to the Government in respect of the work of the task force later this year. By way of interest, one of the items of work the task force completed was a survey of skills by RED C. It indicated very strong public support for traditional skills, with 91% of people saying traditional skills should be preserved and 88% people saying they should be taught in schools. In 2024, Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board made an application to SOLAS to develop a national centre for traditional building skills.

In February 2026, the Minister for further and higher education announced that the board would be in a position to appoint a design team for the centre later this year.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I was at the announcement when the Minister, Deputy Lawless, came to KCETB. It was a brilliant announcement and a very positive day. Deputy John McGuinness was also there. I emphasise that we would like to see it delivered to ensure progress continues.

There is a unique cultural value to Irish traditional craft. Irish craft is renowned worldwide for its intricate design, high level of cultural significance and unbeatable quality. In Carlow, Borris Lacemakers provides an excellent example of a unique local product that has achieved international significance, with the lacemakers recently being chosen, alongside other craftspeople, to represent Ireland in the European Parliament.

Despite the unique opportunities that exist in the craft sector, a recent Heritage Council survey noted that only 9% of respondents advised they had enough apprentices to satisfy consumer demand. For example, there are only 15 to 20 experts to service more than 2,000 thatched buildings in Ireland. Without people and training, this conservation work will be tendered overseas. That will cost the Irish Exchequer an awful lot more.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: With regard to the ongoing work of the task force, I mentioned the RED C survey on public attitudes to traditional skills. There was also an audit of traditional skills courses on the island in 2025. More particularly, there is an economic assessment of the demand for traditional skills, which goes back to the point Deputy Callaghan made. The report on the public attitude to the provision of courses is complete and the demand survey is in its final stages. That very much feeds into this. I have no doubt that, like Deputy Callaghan, the Leas-Chathaoirleach, Deputy McGuinness, will have a keen interest in the Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board progressing its application for a national centre for traditional building skills with the Department of further and higher education. As I have said, the Department and the Minister gave the go-ahead in February 2026. The board will be in a position to appoint a design team for this important centre later this year.

Housing Provision

158. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when the direction to local authorities will issue to allow victims and survivors of domestic abuse to move from one local authority list to another and retain their years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17577/26]

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: The Minister will be aware that last month, as I have done many times before, I raised the issue of victims and survivors of domestic abuse being able to carry time they have accrued on waiting lists from one local authority to another, primarily where that is necessary for their own safety and that of their children. The Tánaiste confirmed that the Minister would be issuing a direction to rectify this. I am looking for an update on that.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy for her question in relation to this matter. Supporting individuals and families who are experiencing or are at risk of experiencing homelessness, including victims and survivors of domestic abuse, is very much a priority for me, my Department and the Government. The response to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is a cross-departmental multi-agency issue, with the Department of justice co-

ordinating overall policy. Responsibility for the development and provision of services to support victims rests with my colleague the Minister for justice, working in conjunction with Cuan, the statutory domestic, sexual and gender-based violence agency, which is under the remit of the Department of justice.

It is currently not possible for a household that was previously on one social housing waiting list to carry over the time spent on that list when applying to another local authority. However, in line with a commitment in the housing plan, a protocol to allow households fleeing domestic, sexual and gender-based violence to transfer time spent on a social housing waiting list to another local authority will be established and implemented this year. My Department has already engaged with local authorities and the County and City Management Association to develop this protocol. The structures to progress this commitment are in place. This includes a dedicated group of local authority directors of housing, which is working with my Department to ensure the protocol is workable, meets the needs of those who can benefit from it and is finalised as soon as possible.

Notwithstanding this commitment, local authorities will prioritise allocations to those households they consider to be most in need at any moment in time. Local authorities may also provide for exceptional or emergency cases, allowing immediate housing for qualified households outside of normal waiting list priorities should circumstances require. Households may also move and relocate between housing authority areas under the housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme where the household income is within the relevant income limits.

Furthermore, in 2017, my Department issued policy and procedural guidance to local authorities on the role they can play in assisting victims and survivors of domestic violence. The issuing of this 2017 policy guidance was a significant action under the section national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, which was for the period 2016 to 2021. It has since played an important role in addressing the housing needs of victims.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: That is not exactly what the Tánaiste said. He said, "the Minister for housing has said he will issue a direction to all local authorities to make sure that issue is rectified." It should have taken the Minister two seconds rather than two minutes to answer. Either it is going to issue or it is not. What the Minister is saying is that a protocol is being developed. That is very welcome, but the Minister might provide some clarity in his follow-up. It seemed there was a little bit of slippage there as regards the normal rules on allocation applying. I know exactly how houses are allocated, as does the Minister.

I have used the example of a woman in my own constituency and I am going to use it again. I do not know how many names I have now used for her. Jesus, I will nearly use the woman's correct name; I have raised the issue that many times. Let us call her Margaret for the moment. Margaret has been on the Dublin City Council housing list for almost 13 and half years. She is about to be housed in the area where her former partner, who is out of prison after nearly killing her, is living. She cannot go back there. The Garda has told her not to. While she waits for the protocol to be developed and possibly issued at some point, what should she do?

Deputy James Browne: I assure the Deputy that there is no slippage on this. This will be established and implemented this year. Once the protocols are finalised, I will be issuing that direction to the local authorities to ensure that people can travel from one local authority to

another when fleeing domestic violence without losing time spent on the first authority's list. In fairness, I have generally found my own local authority quite reasonable and understanding in this regard. However, there has been an inconsistency across local authorities. We want to ensure we are not dependent on the views of an individual director of services or head of housing. We want consistency right across every local authority so that, when people are fleeing domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, there will be a level of compassion and understanding. As I have said, people will not have to depend on compassion and understanding; rather, they will have this as a right.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I fully agree with the Minister. The officials I deal with in Fingal County Council lack neither understanding nor capacity but they do lack basic direction from the Government. As the Minister has said, basic and all as this is, it will take at least until this year to get that done, although it is welcome. As I have said, it is an issue I have raised many times. The Minister will be aware of it. It is not going to affect a huge number of people but it will have a serious impact for some people. I trust it is in order to send my own local authority a transcript of this debate to show that this is coming because I do not want this woman to lose out for the sake of a couple of weeks. I hope the council will be able to fully adhere to the protocol when it is issued.

Deputy James Browne: I recognise that the Deputy has raised this on many occasions. She has been very consistent on it. This protocol is coming. It would be welcome if, in anticipation of the protocol, local authorities accepted what they know is now going to come.

Defective Building Materials

159. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when he will request that the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland, SCSi, draft a follow-up report on construction costs for the defective concrete blocks grant scheme, considering that the last one was almost two years ago and costs have considerably increased in that period. [17183/26]

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Minister will know that his predecessor, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, asked the SCSi for the costs of building a typical home in the areas affected by defective concrete blocks. That was two years ago and the costs have increased substantially. That means the gap between what the State will pay families through the grant scheme and the actual costs is getting ever wider. Will the Minister ask the SCSi to get this done?

Deputy James Browne: I thank Deputy Mac Lochlainn for raising this important issue with regard to the SCSi and the draft follow-up on construction costs under the defective concrete block grant scheme. My Department keeps costs relating to the defective concrete blocks scheme under continuous review. As the Deputy is aware, following updated costs reports from the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland and advice from an expert group established to consider the matter, a further increase from the original grant rate set down in the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 was provided for on 23 October 2024. The scheme cap has risen by 10% to €462,000. Increases in the scheme

grant rates of between 7.4% and 8.7%, as set out in the 2023 regulations, were also approved on 7 November 2024.

It was agreed the uplift in the rates would be applied retrospectively but primary legislation was required to amend the original Act to allow for this. The Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks (Amendment) Bill was initiated in Dáil Éireann on 2 October 2025, passed by both Houses of the Oireachtas and signed into law. The main provisions of the 2025 Act provide that increases in the grant scheme cap and rates from October and November 2024 can retrospectively benefit homeowners who incurred qualifying costs under the grant scheme since 29 March 2024. I have signed the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks (Amendment) Act 2025 commencement order to give effect to these provisions, which came into operation on 25 February 2026, with related regulations also adopted on that date.

As for provisions of section 51 of the 2022 Act, a full review of the Act will commence later this year following its first three years in operation. It will offer an opportunity to review various issues arising in terms of the remediation of defective concrete blocks. I will consider whether the area of rates should form part of that review or a separate review.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Minister and his Department officials continue to insist the people of Donegal, Mayo, Sligo, Leitrim, Clare and Limerick are receiving 100% redress based on SCSi costings. It should be remembered that does not include the foundations and other matters. This has to be based on real-world prices. The prices he is working off are at least two years out of date. Indeed, the data used in the March 2024 SCSi report are from 2023. I am going by his standards. He tells me he is giving people 100% redress based on SCSi costings, but those costings are at least two years out of date. It is very simple. The SCSi is a tremendous organisation and has always been professional and co-operative. The Minister should ask the society to do an up-to-date report so people are not tens of thousands of euro short. It is a simple request. Can he do it?

Deputy James Browne: We continuously keep the scheme under review through consistent and regular stakeholder engagement. An implementation steering group for the defective concrete blocks grant scheme has been in place since 2023 and comprises officials from relevant local authorities, my Department, the Housing Agency and homeowner liaison officers. This regular stakeholder engagement is augmented by regular meetings.

We have done a review of the costings, implemented it and passed the legislation. I am looking at whether such a review will form part of the wider review this year or will be done as a separate review, but it will be done this year.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Please just accept our testimony. I can only speak with authority about Donegal but I listened to families in Mayo and Clare recently when they were before the Oireachtas housing committee. It is crystal clear we do not have anything near 100% redress in the west. That means the scheme currently benefits those of a certain age who can project-manage or can access €40,000, €50,000 or €100,000. The Minister heard me give an example and I could give many more of people having to find almost €200,000 and being locked into mortgages for another 15, 16 or 17 years. That is the reality and it is cruel.

The last time SCSi reported, it took a year and a half for legislation to be brought forward for people going through the scheme. I ask the Minister right now to send a letter to the SCSi. It is a tremendous organisation. It will carry out the work, which is to the benefit of the people, once he asks it. Will he do it now? What would delay him any longer?

Deputy James Browne: I am very conscious of the distressing situation people in Donegal and other counties are going through. I have been to Donegal and spent considerable time listening to people and getting a better understanding of the distressing situation they are in. The wider review has to start on or before July 2026. It may start sooner if the review comes in in relation to IS 465/2018 being changed because that in itself triggers a review. There is another review in relation to the cost. It will be a question of the most effective way of getting the review of rates done.

Questions Nos. 160 to 162, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Defective Building Materials

163. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when he will advance the plans to relocate the families at a location (details supplied), living in defective concrete block homes, away from the dangerous flood plain they were built on. [17184/26]

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: This issue relates to Elm Park in Buncrana. I thank the Minister for his engagement to date on the issue. He met with the families in Donegal. I thank the Minister of State with responsibility for the OPW, Deputy Moran, and the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan. I welcome the announcement before Christmas that the Minister is agreeing to relocate the families. They have been waiting a long time, first, for co-operation of all families in agreeing to relocation and then they had to get all their houses tested. Every house is affected by defective blocks. They are just pressing for a time frame.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy for the question, which relates to Elm Park in Buncrana and advancement of the plans to relocate families. The Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 commenced on 22 June 2023. It underpins the current grant scheme and the related regulations that were adopted on 29 June 2023. I visited Donegal last year and met with many of the affected residents. I understand the flooding issue pertaining to Elm Park, where nine homeowners are particularly affected. Some of the homeowners impacted are eligible to avail of the defective concrete blocks scheme funded by my Department but they are understandably worried about availing of the scheme and remediating their homes without the flood risk being addressed. The OPW has a plan to undertake flood relief works. The residents are understandably concerned about the length of time before the flood works would be completed and have asked that consideration be given to relocation options. I appreciate the genuine concerns of residents based on their experience of recent years; indeed, I have seen the videos myself. Therefore, I am disposed towards finding solutions to the flooding issue based on the needs of those affected and to finding a workable solution. In the past, the OPW has used relocation schemes in some small and specific

circumstances and I have asked officials in my Department to find a method of relocating the families that come under the scheme.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, worked with the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, who was in Donegal in recent weeks, where he met with residents and saw the condition of these houses. There is an urgency in that some of the houses are in appalling conditions, are clearly unsafe and families are still living in them. At the same time, they live on a dangerous flood plain. Of course, those houses should never have been granted planning permission. We inherit the legacy of what came before us.

I appreciate the Minister has agreed to the principle of relocation but there is anxiety that this could drag on for a long period. This is urgent. The residents need a solution. They have worked in partnership with the Minister and demonstrated that all the homes are affected and have to be demolished. It is a common-sense proposal. The flood defences will not have to be built and the area will return to a flood plain. It ticks every box in relation to common sense but we need urgency. I appreciate the Minister's forbearance and work on this to date but getting this over the line would be a huge relief for everybody.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy and the other Deputies in Donegal for their work in this area. I have met with the families and seen the videos. We know flood relief schemes take a considerable time. That relocation proposal needs to be advanced. I will continue to work with the residents and with the Deputies from Donegal on coming up with a scheme as quickly as possible. The current legislation did not necessarily envisage relocations but we have brought forward new regulations that will allow a relocation model in very limited circumstances.

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Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy David Cullinane: Across the State, households are watching the price of fuel surge in real time. In the days since the US-Israel strikes on Iran, the cost of home heating oil has skyrocketed. We are hearing from people across the country and, in most cases, the price of a delivery has effectively doubled. The average price for 500 litres is now just under €800. Since my colleagues and I have raised this issue publicly over the past number of days, I have been inundated with emails from people describing what is happening. One household told me that on Saturday, they were quoted €525 for heating oil. Days later, the same supplier was charging €859. When prices jump like that in a matter of days, people draw a very obvious conclusion: somebody is cashing in on a crisis.

It is not just one case. A worker who contacted me ordered oil at €498 at the weekend. Within days, the same supplier was charging €700. Another worker, a carer who travels long distances for her job, paid €447 for 500 litres last month. This week she checked again and the price had jumped to over €800. For her, as she put it to me, higher diesel and heating costs mean that she may have to take a second job just to stay afloat. I also heard from pensioner

households, who placed orders earlier this week, only to be told the price could not be confirmed until the day of delivery. When they checked again, the costs had nearly doubled. They had to cancel their order because they did not have the money to pay for it. This is the reality facing people right here, right now today. Workers, carers, farmers, pensioners and rural households have no alternative to heating oil. This is price-gouging with companies exploiting a crisis to squeeze more profit out of households already under severe pressure. This is an emergency and a crisis for each and every one of those families.

The Government's response so far has been completely out of touch. This morning, we heard Ministers saying families may feel acute pressure in the coming days. What an understatement. Another Government TD said on television last night that it is premature to talk a the cost-of-living crisis. What planet are they on? There is a cost-of-living crisis right here, right now facing so many families. The Government does not seem to understand what people are facing. This is not something that might happen in the future. People are in crisis today. People cannot wait. If their home is cold tonight, it needs to be heated tonight, not next week, next month or in six months. It needs to be heated tonight, yet those families do not have the money to pay. These are real people facing a real crisis. The message, it seems, from the Government - and I have listened over the past number of days - is to wait and see.

The Minister for enterprise, Deputy Burke, said he will meet the industry on Friday to talk about pricing structures. Unfortunately people have seen this movie played out before. Ministers met big retailers about grocery prices. What happened? Grocery prices went up. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien did something similar with energy companies. What happened? Energy prices went up. There is little point in Ministers having cosy chats with companies. We need to see real action on price-gouging and real action from this Government in relation to supports for families. Here is why. One in four people has less than €500 in savings. An increase like filling a home heating tank wipes out those savings. Many more do not have any savings. People see companies cashing in on a crisis. They see a Government, frankly and shamefully, standing idly by while it happens. I will ask the Tánaiste directly and plainly: what concrete and immediate steps will he take to stop this rip-off and protect households facing these outrageous fuel price hikes?

Deputy Matt Carthy: Well said.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. The Government has been working round the clock on the very serious situation in the Gulf and the Middle East. We have been working on it from a whole range of aspects, including the economic aspect, which I will get to now in relation to the question. The first and most important thing we have been doing in the here and now is working to protect Irish citizens abroad and to get them home. I welcome the fact, as we meet today, that we are now seeing hundreds of Irish citizens arrive safely back in Dublin. We have seen some commercial flights resume activity. We have plans in relation to chartered flights. Across the House, I know everybody welcomes that work.

I thank the Minister, Deputy McEntee, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and officials on the ground who have been working really hard in what has been a very stressful and anxious time. There is absolutely no doubt that the conflict in the Middle East and the Gulf is going to have an economic impact. It is going to have a potential inflationary impact. It is going to have an impact in on commodity prices, including oil and gas. It is also important

to say that the scale of that impact will depend on the length and the depth of the conflict that is under way. My Department, at my request, is currently carrying out a macroeconomic analysis in terms of what we believe the impact to be on a whole variety of indicators. We will publish that in our spring forecast at the end of this month.

The Minister, Deputy Burke, has been extraordinarily proactive this week. He has done exactly what a responsible Minister would do in formally communicating with the body that has responsibility for consumer protection and competition. The Government's view that we have been receiving, as it sounds like the Deputy has as well, many reports across the country as what many people are referring to as price-gouging. People are putting up the price and causing panic and fear for people, quite frankly. I have seen the text messages telling someone to get the fill of oil now or it is going to go up. That sort of behaviour is causing real concern as well. The Minister has worked with the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, which has said it will open an urgent investigation into the concerns. I note the Deputy has been asking people to contact him with any concerns that they have. I encourage him and every other Deputy to please pass on all of that information to the CCPC. I also encourage all our citizens to use the helpline to pass on any information as well. There are laws in this country, which must be upheld. The CCPC has a range of powers to investigate and prosecute where there are breaches of law. It can impose fines of up to €10 million in certain circumstances, or 10% of a company's turnover. There is a confidential whistleblowing service as well in relation to any suspected cartel behaviour too. The Minister is meeting the industry representatives tomorrow, which I had presumed the Deputy will welcome. Meeting the industry representatives and suppliers is an important thing to do. The Minister will discuss with them the sharp increases that we have seen in recent days. They will be asked to explain how their pricing structure has changed so drastically so quickly. That is an important thing to do.

We keep everything under review in terms of assisting. As the Taoiseach and I have both consistently said, we are monitoring this situation extremely closely. On Monday, I will meet with European counterparts at the Eurogroup. The issue of energy affordability is specifically on the agenda. It is important that we continue to monitor everything and keep everything under review. It is also important to say that real action is being taken in the here and now to help people with energy costs. Next week, 50,000 more households will qualify for the fuel allowance. That will be backdated to 1 January. That means up to 50,000 households will receive the fuel allowance for the first time. They will receive up to €380 in a lump sum payment, as well as them being entitled to it going forward. That is progress and real action. We continue to monitor the situation to keep everything actively under review.

I have to be honest too. I do not doubt the Deputy's bona fides or anyone's bona fides on this. We are a couple of days into a conflict here. We cannot do anything that is knee-jerk. Something that might seem like the right idea today could indeed be the wrong recipe next week or the week after. We are monitoring this, we are working on this and we will act where required.

Deputy David Cullinane: I am not knee-jerk because I understand what families are going through

The Tánaiste: As do I.

Deputy David Cullinane: They are faced with rent hikes and grocery price increases.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Hear, hear.

Deputy David Cullinane: They are faced with insurance cost increases, and now energy price increases, which have skyrocketed over the past few days. Not a single word of what the Tánaiste said will bring any comfort to families who are under fierce pressure. I do not believe that the supports he said are in place are in fact in place. One of the measures the Government brought in was to increase the carbon tax, which has increased the cost of fuel on families, not made it any cheaper. The Tánaiste's approach is that his head and those of Government representatives are in the sand. I do not believe they really get it. If they did, they would have supports in place. I am asking the Tánaiste to speak directly to those families and to the people who contacted me. What should they do? They are faced with those hikes now. A bill comes in the door, or their tank at home is empty and needs to be filled, but they have no money, or whatever money they do have simply will not be enough with all the other bills. What message is the Tánaiste giving them? What do they do? He should speak to them, because I have not heard a single word from him about what they should do.

The Government's head is in the sand when it comes to the cost-of-living crisis.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy may not have been listening to my reply. Let me say it again. Practical action that will help 50,000 more Irish households will take place next week. The Deputy likes to say that this will not matter to anybody, but 50,000 households will qualify next week for assistance with their fuel who do not qualify for it today.

Deputy Matt Carthy: That will not even cover the increase in the past two days.

The Tánaiste: Deputy Cullinane does not need help. Give him a chance. He was picked to do it today. In addition to the 50,000 households, we also took a decision in the budget to reduce the rate of VAT on people's energy bills and keep it there for years ahead. We also took a decision to reduce the public service obligation, PSO, on people's energy, as well as increase the fuel allowance. The Taoiseach, the Government and I have been consistent on this. We will continue to keep under review-----

Deputy David Cullinane: "Under review" does not mean anything.

The Tánaiste: -----any measures that are needed to assist households and deal with price impact.

Deputy David Cullinane: Out of touch.

The Tánaiste: We will do things in a way. We are five days into a major global conflict.

Deputy David Cullinane: We are years into this Government.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy nor Mystic Meg, Lord rest her, could predict where this conflict is going to go. We are working to protect and get our citizens home and seek de-escalation. We are working at a European level to see what further actions are appropriate in terms of energy affordability. That is what a responsible Government does. I wish to let the people watching in at home know that we are acting and we will take further action-----

Deputy David Cullinane: What they have heard is that they are on their own. That is what they have heard.

The Tánaiste: Please do not scaremonger them.

Deputy David Cullinane: They heard that they are on their own.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The war in the Middle East is in its sixth day and the price of oil and gas is continuing to skyrocket. People are now being charged absolutely extortionate prices for home heating oil. The Tánaiste saying he is going to monitor the situation and keep it under review is of absolutely no use to people facing big bills right now. The increases are absolutely outrageous. How are elderly people on pensions supposed to pay these extortionate costs? This includes vulnerable people and those with medical conditions. They need to be able to heat their homes. They will be going cold either because they are rationing their heating or they simply cannot afford to fill their tanks.

Families with young children who are already struggling to get by are also feeling rising panic. They do not have a spare €500 sitting in their bank accounts to heat their homes. They are already living day to day, with every cent in their budget accounted for. What they are now seeing is an avalanche of price rises coming towards them on everything from groceries and childcare costs to energy bills, and they get virtually no support from the Government. Instead, all the Government seems to do is introduce measures to push up prices even further and make their lives even harder, such as the recent changes to rents that are causing soaring rent rises in new tenancies.

On Tuesday, the Taoiseach was clear that price-gouging is going on. Yesterday, the Minister, Deputy Chambers, accused companies of profiteering. That is all we get from this Government - empty words and meaningless rhetoric but no action or meaningful support. We are now told that the Minister, Deputy Burke, is hauling in representatives from energy companies for a meeting. This echoes the infamous supermarket summit in 2023. Back then, the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, talked tough about putting manners on supermarket chains. He called a meeting with them and promised that prices would come down. What actually happened? He turned up, wagged his finger and went home. Nothing changed and prices continued to soar. The meeting was nothing more than an exercise in optics, something the Government could say it was doing when, in reality, it was sitting on its hands, just like it is doing today.

We are now in an extraordinary position where we have a succession of senior Ministers talking about profiteering and accepting that price-gouging is going on but, in the next breath, saying they will not take any meaningful action. A review by the toothless consumer agency is not going to cut it when people have bills to pay today. The Social Democrats have proposed a fully costed, targeted €400 energy credit that would provide some relief to people. The

Government has refused to adopt it. Will the Tánaiste now change his position and introduce this measure?

The Tánaiste: It is unfair to the work of the CCPC to call it toothless. Last year, it got six convictions and its first ever criminal conviction. It is a body that can levy fines of up to €10 million. I hope, before the Deputy gets into the litany of his view about what the Government should do, that he will join with us in welcoming the fact that the CCPC, which has significant powers, has opened an urgent investigation into allegations of price-gouging in relation to the energy situation. I encourage everyone in this House to pass on any information they have in this regard. There is an independent agency. The Deputy and I cannot stand up and decide to convict people for price-gouging. What we can do is seek an urgent investigation into it, which we have secured. That is an action that a responsible and effective Minister has taken.

If he were not meeting the companies tomorrow, the Deputy would be questioning why he were not. Sometimes, he cannot win. Earlier in the week, the Opposition asked why the Minister just sent a letter. The Minister is doing what a Minister should do, that is, sitting down with the companies and industry representative bodies tomorrow, in addition to the urgent investigation under way by the CCPC. I thank the Minister for the work he is doing in this regard.

To say there is no support from this Government for families is just not true. This Government has taken many actions to assist people right across the country, such as free school books, hot school meals and increases to pensions and the carer's allowance. There are more people in work than ever before. We saw less than one hour ago figures come out on our economic growth that show that real incomes are now rising. Real incomes in Ireland are rising. You would not think that in here with the conversations we have.

Deputy Rory Hearne: So are arrears.

The Tánaiste: Real incomes are rising. The Social Democrats often call for targeted supports. I listened to their proposals. They are not in favour of energy credits for all different people. The Opposition has many different views. The Social Democrats call for targeted supports. Next week, we will bring in a targeted support in which 50,000 households will benefit from a fuel allowance payment for the first time. It will be backdated to 1 January. These are working families in receipt of the working family payment. They will receive up to €380 in one lump sum. We are continuing to work on this intensively.

The priority this week has been trying to get people safely home from a dangerous region. We are also working to try to map out the potential economic impact of this. While I do not want to make a direct comparison with Ukraine because prices and inflation rates are not in that space, let us just take it as a comparison of when we last saw a major conflict break out. What did we do? We worked together at European level. We worked with other European countries. It was not about one Department doing something here or one country doing something there. The Deputy will remember that, by Europe working together, it brought us to the point of the windfall tax legislation. On Monday, I will meet with fellow European finance ministers to analyse the impact in terms of energy affordability and supply. The Taoiseach will attend a European Council meeting where this will be an agenda item as well.

As he said yesterday, and as I say today, we will keep this under review and we do not rule out actions that may be needed to assist people or the economy. What we cannot do, five or six days into a conflict, is try to predict where this will bring us economically in the time ahead because it depends on the length and depth of the conflict. We have got to make sure that any response is the correct one in helping to secure our economy.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Tá díomá mór orm le freagra an Tánaiste. Tá níos mó agus níos mó daoine nach féidir a gcuid billí a íoc. A total of 320,000 homes are in electricity arrears before these prices increased in the past few days. That is the scale of the problem we are facing in the country. What the Government is doing is not addressing that. With regard to the fines being issued and the CCPC, when was the last time it issued a significant fine to a large company? It has issued small fines to small companies and retailers around price information, but when has it issued fines in the millions of euro for this kind of price-gouging that is going on? When has it taken that kind of action?

People are faced now with a serious issue as to how they will heat their homes and where they will get the money to do so. The Tánaiste saying that the Government will monitor the situation and keep it under review is of no use to them. They need the Government to act now. Will it take action for people who cannot heat their homes because of the electricity arrears they are already in and these huge increases in the past few days?

The Tánaiste: We are acting. We did not need a conflict in the Gulf or the Middle East to take action on energy costs in Ireland, which are too high. That is why more people than ever before in the history of the State are eligible for fuel allowance. It is why we have increased the amount of fuel allowance and are bringing the working family payment recipients into it--

Deputy Eoin Hayes: It is not enough.

The Tánaiste: -----for the first time next week and backdating it to 1 January. That is practical action. It is not abstract. There are people tuning in today, whether watching this on their television screens or listening on the radio, who will benefit. A total of 50,000 households in Ireland will benefit next week from a fuel allowance payment-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Some 320,000 households are in arrears.

The Tánaiste: -----that they have never benefited from before. Many people in arrears will benefit from the fuel allowance as well. The Government has to look at all of these issues.

Deputy Rory Hearne: That still leaves a gap of 250,000 households.

The Tánaiste: It does not.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Yes, it does.

The Tánaiste: Deputy Hearne, over-----

Deputy Rory Hearne: Some 50,000-----

The Tánaiste: Over 400,000 homes qualify for fuel allowance support, which makes up more than a quarter of the homes in the country.

That maths just does not add up. More people are qualifying for fuel allowance than are in energy arrears in Ireland, according to the Deputy's own figures he just shared with us. We will continue to work on this situation intensively. I do not doubt anyone's bona fides; we all want to assist people. The first thing, though, is to call out price-gouging and to not add to it by buying into the narrative that fuel prices should be going up right now. There is a lag in any impact on changes in wholesale prices and what people should be seeing at the pump and that should be called out. The CCPC has an important job to do in relation to this. The Minister is working on this too and we will continue to work to monitor the economic impact of this conflict as it unfolds.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Stanley.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I agree around the cost of living and particularly the cost of energy to households at the moment. That has obviously escalated further this week. We have one of the highest gas and electricity prices in the European Union. Added to this is the fact that householders are paying almost double the cost of electricity that data centres are paying. The average cost per household is 36 cent per unit while for data centres, it is 19 cent per unit. They are clearly using their financial clout to get their way but householders and small businesses are effectively subsidising them. Added to all of this now are the latest price hikes on oil and gas due to the illegal war by Israel and the United States in the Middle East. As an example of how much fuel has gone up in the past couple of days, one company in Laois was charging 99 cent on Monday morning and by yesterday morning it had gone to €1.57. For a litre of kerosene, some companies are charging up to €1.71. The number of households with arrears for electricity has hit a record high at 319,459, a jump of 20%. One of in four households is in arrears with gas. Workers and households on low and middle incomes are particularly hard hit. The fuel allowance has been extended but there is a cohort not being caught with that. The hikes in energy costs come on the back of higher rents, higher mortgages, higher insurance costs, higher college fees, higher grocery costs and it goes on and on.

One group that is really struggling is people with disabilities. They have additional costs due to their additional needs. A Government report from 2020 found that the additional cost for people with disabilities was between €8,700 and €12,300 annually. They tend to need and use more energy because they are at home more. In the budget prior to the general election, they got cost-of-living measures, additional fuel allowance, living alone allowance and energy credits. When there is no election, they get zero. They got nothing this year. The budget came and went and they did not receive anything. Their representative group estimates their income is down by €1,000 per year on what they were getting in 2025 but the response so far from Government is that they should go to the community welfare officer for an exceptional needs payment. The vast majority of people on low and middle incomes would not qualify for that. What is needed now is a targeted single energy payment. I say targeted because I do not want

money thrown all over the place. I got an energy credit a year and a half or 15 months ago from the Government. We should not be getting an energy credit. We need to target it at those who need it, such as those who are on the median income or on low incomes. They need to get it. Will the Government now move to assist these people and introduce a one-off payment for that? Will it also move in terms of the price-gouging? I heard the Tánaiste say the Minister is meeting the companies but he also needs to strengthen the powers of the CCPC.

The Tánaiste: We have intentions to further strengthen the powers of the CCPC and we look forward to working with people across this House in relation to that. I agree with the Deputy on that point. I also agree with him on there not being a need for a universal energy credit anymore. I agree that TDs do not need energy credits. There are people who need assistance. We can debate this and different parties will have different ideas but the targeted way the Government is going about it is through the expansion of the fuel allowance. The Deputy makes the case that he would like to see it further expanded to cover more people. We are adding 50,000 more households next week.

I hear the point about the data centres and I want to respond to that. I do not mean this in relation to the Deputy but people can see a headline and think that that does not sound fair. It does not when you see the headline but when you look at the detail, it is not comparing like with like. The data centres have to pay significant fixed costs for the infrastructure, as is right and appropriate. The tariff might be lower but the actual amount they are spending on the energy infrastructure is a hell of a lot higher, as it should be, than a household. That is an important point.

Regarding people with disabilities, the Government has been very clear on this. We have increased the level of investment in disability services this year by around 20%, with €618 million extra. That was the priority - investing further in disability services with much-needed investment. We have said very clearly that we will devise a cost-of-disability payment. The Minister, Deputy Calleary, has opened the consultation process on that. We are eager to get everybody's idea and views as to how best construct that. We have increased the weekly disability payments, the weekly carer's payments, the weekly pension payments and we kept the likes of the Christmas bonus. I have to reject the Deputy saying nothing was done.

We have seen inflation fall from a very high level, and we have to be honest about this. For the first time in a long time, we have seen real incomes in Ireland rising again. We need to make that point. These figures are there for all to see. They are not my figures; they are published by the CSO. Incomes are now increasing in this country again. If we get into a position of a prolonged conflict in the Middle East and in the Gulf region, what we have to watch and be honest about is the adverse affect that could have on inflation, on commodity prices and the shocks that could cause to the global economy. That is where our priority and our focus has to be now. I am conscious people are anxious and worried. I can fully understand that with what they are seeing on their television screens, the text messages they are getting about heating and the things they are seeing at the pumps. However, this country is approaching this moment of potential economic shock from a position of strength where we have more people in work than ever before, where the economy is performing well-----

Deputy Rory Hearne: There are 300,000 already in arrears.

The Tánaiste: -----where we have built up financial buffers. That allows the Government to make an informed evidence-based responses in the time ahead. That is exactly what we intend to do. Governments right across Europe are grappling with this. That is why will also have that engagement at a European level, starting with European finance ministers on Monday.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Tánaiste for his reply. He said the Government will make an informed evidence-based response. That is fine but the evidence is there. There are in excess of 320,000 households in serious arrears and we are only talking about electricity there. It is one in four is in arrears with gas. There is a real problem. I have constituents contacting me - people who are on middle incomes - who just cannot make it all go around. I am sure the rest of the Members are hearing this as well.

I wish to highlight one extra factor. Progress is being made with retrofitting but it is slow enough. Some 75% of homes in the midlands and in counties like Laois are basically on solid fuel or oil. That tells you they need an energy upgrade. They are caught because they have high energy costs. There is a particular problem here for people in County Laois and in the midlands. I know they cannot be targeted specifically but there is a real issue. There is an immediate problem. I am not asking the Government to throw money all over the place. I am asking it to do a targeted one-off payment to help those people and householders who are really struggling and cannot make ends meet at the moment. I am asking the Government to introduce that one-off payment to help them, people with disabilities and low- and middle-income workers.

The Tánaiste: I am extraordinarily conscious of the fact that people at home following this debate and people in workplaces are feeling an extraordinary sense of economic anxiety. However, I also have to make sure we have the best data and best analysis available in terms of the economic impact this conflict may have in our country, on the eurozone and on the global economy. That enables the Government to then decide how best to intervene should that be required. I made the point earlier today, and I make it again, that working at a European level is important. That is what we did as a country at the start of the brutal Russian illegal invasion of Ukraine. It brought about policy changes, regulations and decisions at a European level that allowed, for example, for a windfall tax, and the benefits of that being utilised for our citizens. As the Taoiseach said yesterday and I say today - we are completely *ad idem* on this - we keep all of these matters under review. We have taken a number of practical measures already to assist people, including the expansion of the fuel allowance to 50,000 more households next week, the reduction of the VAT rate on people's energy bills, the reduction of the PSO and increasing the rate of fuel allowance. We will continue to work on this intensively in the time ahead.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Mr. John Barrett, an established civil servant at assistant secretary general grade and an executive director of An Garda Síochána, was purportedly abruptly dismissed on 18 September 2024. The Government has been formally notified of the legal contention that the dismissal as unlawful on five separate occasions, namely, on 5 July 2024, 18 November 2024, 20 January 2025, 28 July 2025 and, again, earlier this week. The central legal issue is rather straightforward. Section 5(1) of the Civil Service Regulation Act 1956

provides that the dismissal of an established civil servant requires the will and the pleasure of Government.

Yet, Mr. Barrett received a letter signed off by an official of a lower grade, purporting to convey a ministerial direction. I ask the Tánaiste directly if his Government took a decision to authorise the dismissal of Mr. John Barrett. Was a memorandum brought to the Cabinet? If so, on what date did the Government exercise the statutory authorisation? If not, how was the dismissal lawfully effected in compliance with section 51? Beyond the statutory questions I have put to the Tánaiste, he has also been put on notice on five separate occasions of the fact of serious allegations regarding the process leading to the purported dismissal, including that the dismissal compliance was attributed to a senior garda whose office has now officially denied making it, and that Mr. Barrett was not furnished-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy O'Flynn, this is-----

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: -----with the complaint upon reply. Protected disclosures were made-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy O'Flynn, this will be a matter for the legal process.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: -----of alleged wrongdoing. I will get to that. If the Leas-Cheann Comhairle will bear with me, he will understand where I am coming from. The parallel process was initiated without transparency and there has been a prolonged non-compliance with High Court discovery obligations. I am not asking the Tánaiste to determine the truth on the floor of this House, which rectifies the matter for the Leas-Cheann Comhairle, but there are other people there. I am asking the Tánaiste if he will accept that as a former Taoiseach, as Tánaiste and as a senior member of the Government, he has a duty to ensure-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy O'Flynn-----

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: -----that the dismissal of an established civil servant is compliant with statutory constitutional fair procedure.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy O'Flynn, that is out of order.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: This is about the Constitution. This is what it is about-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is out of order.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: -----and it is about the statutory procedure. That is what it is about. Will the Tánaiste's Government confirm that-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is out of order in terms of the legal aspect of that case.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: The Tánaiste has now had this before him for 19 months. Has the Government authorised the dismissal and will he confirm it? If not, who in the Government, or who else, has purported to exercise the power that is reserved for the Cabinet? This is not merely an unemployment dispute. It goes to the heart of collective responsibility and Cabinet responsibility under Article 28 of the Constitution and the statutory framework of the Government Civil Service. I put it to the Tánaiste again-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You need not, Deputy O'Flynn.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Did the Government authorise the dismissal of Mr. John Barrett?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy has asked a number of questions of the Tánaiste, parts of which I believe are out of order. I ask the Tánaiste to reflect on that. If he can answer any of the other parts that might be relevant to him, the Government or the office, I ask him to do so.

The Tánaiste: This is where I perhaps need the guidance of the Leas-Cheann Comhairle or the Oireachtas. In my time in this House, I have never known that we would discuss the employment circumstances of any individual civil servant on the floor of Dáil Éireann. Frankly, without getting into the individual, I do not have any such information available to me today. It is a starting point anyway, but on whether it would be appropriate to discuss any individual person, I always thought that the rules of the House are that you should not be naming people. I am quite confused as to where to go in relation to this. To be helpful to the Deputy, I suggest that we get the transcript of what the Deputy has asked. Truthfully, I do not have information available to me in my files today or in my recall. I am happy to suggest that we get a transcript of what the Deputy has asked and perhaps the Ceann Comhairle's office could adjudicate on any appropriate areas where the Government could assist the Deputy in providing information. If that is appropriate, I am happy to do that.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: The Tánaiste has had this information for 19 months.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: He was notified on 5 July 2024, on 18-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy O'Flynn-----

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I am talking now. On 28 January 2025-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy O'Flynn, you are out of order.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: On 18 November-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You are out of order.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: What is out of order is the Tánaiste not answering a question-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No, the Tánaiste-----

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: -----on a constitutional and statutory obligation of the Cabinet and who made the decision.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste-----

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Will he answer the question? Did the Cabinet make the decision or was the decision made by a lesser official, which is in conflict with both-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste has suggested that he will come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: -----the Constitution and the statutory responsibility of this Cabinet? I am asking for the simple truth.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Sorry, just one second, Deputy O'Flynn.

The Tánaiste: This comes under Standing Orders.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste has explained things. I have tried to explain things to you, Deputy O'Flynn.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I have explained section 1 of the 1956 Act three times now.

Deputy John Cummins: Respect the Standing Orders.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I am going to have to rule the question out of order. If Deputy O'Flynn accepts what the Tánaiste has said, he will check to determine what can be said to the House and will reply directly to the Deputy or the House, whatever is deemed legally correct to do. We will move on from there.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy has made a number of comments on the record of the House. Let us have the transcript of that and I will certainly seek guidance from the Oireachtas as to what parts of the question, if any, the Government should provide any information on to be helpful to the House.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you. We will move on.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: The Government's primary care strategy, which includes Sláintecare and the primary care infrastructure programme, aims to significantly expand primary care centres across the country. The original programme identified over 130 primary care centres. More than 100 of these centres have now been completed and are operating nationally, including one in Longford town, which serves a town with a population of 10,000. However, a number of centres remain delayed due to procurement issues, site acquisition problems or changes in delivery models. Communities and local areas in Edgeworthstown, Granard, Ballymahon and the surrounding hinterland have been waiting many years for delivery of primary care centres. In response to parliamentary questions I submitted since being elected to the Dáil going back to January 2025, we received replies from the HSE that the planning was currently progressing through design phase with a view to lodging for planning permission in Edgeworthstown. In Granard the HSE was exploring options to purchase and proceed with a capital funded centre. In Ballymahon clarifications had been sought from tender parties and tender evaluation was to take place in mid-January followed by the tender award thereafter. Further replies to parliamentary questions in late 2025 showed that basically everything was at a standstill.

Given the length of time these projects have been discussed and raised repeatedly by me in parliamentary questions and in the Oireachtas, can we outline what the current plan is for delivering primary care centres in these towns and their communities? When can we expect to hear progress on their delivery? The Edgeworthstown, Granard and Ballymahon projects are stalled with tenders submitted. All we get in replies now is that we are reassessing our options. These have been discussed for years. The people of Longford and the people of these towns deserve first-class facilities. When will I see the delivery of first-class primary care centres in the towns of Ballymahon, Edgeworthstown, Granard, their surrounding areas and more importantly their surrounding communities?

I acknowledge and thank the Minister for Health for the significant funding in the capital plan for 2026 for St. Joseph's Care Centre, a project announced by the Tánaiste a number of years ago. It is a multi-million euro investment into a state-of-the-art centre. However, we need state-of-the-art primary care centres in our satellite towns. With the announcement regarding wastewater treatment plants that can now be used for planning permission, we will see expanded development in a number of those towns with those wastewater treatment plants being put in ahead of the capital infrastructure in years to come.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Carrigy for this question. I will first say how delighted I am to hear of the significant investment plan at St. Joseph's. I thank the Deputy and our colleague and friend, Councillor Peggy Nolan, for her tireless advocacy in relation to that. I remember meeting her about this on a number of occasions. Along with the Deputy, she was rightly a strong advocate for it. That is good news for St. Joseph's and good news for Longford. I look forward to the investment plans announced by the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, progressing and to the benefits they will bring to people in St. Joseph's. It is a wonderful place that needs capital investment.

I take seriously the point about Longford being an area where we want to see more housing supply. I hope the decisions we have taken over the past number of days, particularly on developer-led approaches to water infrastructure, will speed up the delivery of housing in rural and regional Ireland, including County Longford. I take the point that as we increase our

housing supply and population, we will need to see an increase in our health and social services as well. Therefore, the issue of the delivery of primary care centres in County Longford is an important one that the Deputy has been pursuing for some time. We have seen significant progress on primary care centres across the country. We now have 180 opened and a further seven under construction. It is the truth that as of today Longford is served by just one primary care centre, which is Flancare primary care centre in Ballyminion, just outside Longford town.

While good services are provided there, including GP services, ophthalmology, counselling, community intervention, social work, immunisation, health promotion, some diabetic retinal screening, pulmonary services and addiction services, it is clear there is a need for a significant expansion in the primary care network. The HSE has advised that a satellite speech and language therapy service is now being offered to children two days a week from Ballymahon medical centre. It is in a room being rented from the HSE. I know that it is not yet in a primary care centre, but it is a new service that I think is making a difference to children in the area.

My note here tells me that, as the Deputy told the House, there have been some issues. The HSE advised a preferred developer for Edgeworthstown primary care centre last year that it would not be progressing with the project and that it was reviewing the most appropriate options to proceed with the development and conducting an overall health service needs assessment for the county as a whole. It is looking at the needs in Granard and Ballymahon as well. The Department of Health and the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, are currently waiting to hear back from the HSE in terms of its service needs assessment for the county. We are very eager to get that as a Government. We want to be in a position to progress the roll-out of primary care centres, so I urge that the work be completed as quickly as possible. On foot of the Deputy raising this question in the Dáil today, I will perhaps arrange for him to have a meeting with the Department of Health and the HSE capital team in this regard. We have capital funds available. We have a variety of ways in which we can roll out and deliver primary care centres, but we need that service needs assessment to be concluded as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: I thank the Tánaiste once again for his support, along with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, in respect of significant investment in St. Joseph's Care Centre. I would welcome a meeting with the HSE capital team to speed up this service needs assessment, which has been dragging on over the last 12 months. The people of Longford need first-class facilities, the same as every community in our country. My priority is to make sure we get those facilities in the towns of Ballymahon, Granard and Edgeworthstown. As the Tánaiste said, we are going to see a significant increase in population in those areas, where planning permissions were turned down previously on the basis that there was no capacity in the wastewater treatment plant system. With the new developer-led proposals that went through Cabinet in the last number of days, we will see a significantly increased population. We want the services in those towns to service that population level when it comes in. Therefore, I would welcome an opportunity to sit down and meet that HSE team to make sure we progress and secure the funding to deliver these much-needed projects. I thank the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: I think that is right. County Longford is a county that has so much going for it and so much potential if we can put the public services in place that are badly needed. The purpose of the Deputy's question today is health. I know his passion and commitment around third level education access as well. We are seeing the benefit of the Technological University

of the Shannon in counties like Longford. I look forward to continuing to work with the Deputy and support him in this work.

I have heard what he and the people of Longford have said, particularly in relation to the need for clarity on the next steps to delivering improved primary care facilities in the county, especially in Ballymahon, Granard, Edgeworthstown and the communities and areas they serve. I will arrange through my office for the Deputy to have a meeting with senior HSE capital representatives. I will obviously link in with the Minister for Health, as I know the Deputy has been. She will be supportive of his work in this regard.

From our point of view as a Government, we have significant capital to spend now. The challenge here is speed and wanting to roll out things as quickly as possible. It is about getting that service needs assessment back and clarity from the HSE on what it would like to see done in the county. The Government will not be found wanting in terms of responding positively.

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

Deputy David Cullinane: It was revealed this morning that the Minister for housing, Deputy James Browne, will jet off to an event on the French riviera paid for by developers, large corporate landlords and vulture funds. We must bear in mind that this is the same Minister who is rolling out the red carpet for these funds, the same types of funds that will make a fortune from the Government's rent hike Bill. Documents show that officials expect private market sponsors to pick up the tab for what is called the "Ireland Pavilion", from where the Minister will conduct business. It seems very cosy to me. Does the Tánaiste accept that it is a mistake to allow developers and big landlords to fund an event for the Government such as this and for a Government Minister to be attending such an event paid for by those same big corporate landlords and developers?

The Tánaiste: I think the Deputy would have a much bigger concern if we came in here and said that the Government and the taxpayer were going to pay for the advocacy of an industry body. It makes entirely appropriate sense that industry would meet the costs of its portion of any conference or the likes. In terms of any public servants attending, those costs will be met from within the Government Department. Contrary to the Sinn Féin view of the world, we need private investment to build private homes and apartments in this country. It cannot just be about State housing. We are spending more money than most European countries in relation to putting direct Exchequer funding into housing. I am proud that we are doing that and prioritising housing, but we also need private investment. The Housing Commission is clear in relation to this point. I certainly view the point made by the Deputy the other way around, in that I definitely do not think the taxpayer should be picking up the tab for industry bodies that are well able to fund these things themselves.

Deputy David Cullinane: So it is cosy.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: This Sunday is International Women's Day. Five years ago, the Labour Party introduced legislation to afford workplace leave to women experiencing early miscarriage or those going through fertility treatment. It passed on all Stages in the Seanad

and on Second Stage here in the Dáil, and I was struck by the enormous and heartfelt cross-party support. The then Minister, Deputy O'Gorman, commissioned research and very clear recommendations were made that early miscarriage is a workplace issue. Does the Tánaiste believe that women should be afforded workplace leave if they experience an early miscarriage? Will this Government legislate to give effect to providing women with that leave when it matters most?

The Tánaiste: Yes, I do, is the truthful answer. I thank the Deputy and acknowledge her and her party's work on this issue. As she rightly acknowledged, I think there is a political consensus that this is an area that we should see progress on. I know that the Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, is doing work in relation to this matter too. I hope the Government will be in a position to have proposals on this shortly. I will certainly ask the Minister to update the Deputy directly.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: Last week, I appealed to the Tánaiste to intervene on behalf of the 400 children and teachers in St. Patrick's national school in Celbridge. What we know today is that the school is closed. The Department of education knew about the problems in the school as far back as last summer. The Tánaiste has been at pains to tell us this morning that he has capital. The community of Celbridge needs capital. It needs investment and a plan in the short, medium and long terms for those children and parents who are at home. What is the plan for those children and their education going forward?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue again. I acknowledge that he raised it last week and on many other occasions. His colleagues in Kildare have done so as well. My understanding is that the Department of education made contact with the patron and school authority. I understand arrangements are being considered, possibly while we are here. I understand a meeting is under way now to ensure the school reopens as quickly as is possible. The Department has received a number of emergency works applications from the school. There has been a back-and-forth discussion. Frankly, I do not think it is helpful to read it out. This needs to be sorted. The Department needs to sort it as well. We do not need to be penpals international here. We need people in a room working out these issues so this school can reopen as a matter of priority. I know the Minister, Deputy Naughton, is very engaged on this issue. As the Deputy will know, she visited the school on 14 January this year. I will ask that the Deputy be given an update after that meeting today.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The staff of the ambulance services are currently balloting for industrial action. The ballot will take place over the next four weeks. Should this develop into strike action, the impact will be catastrophic. The reason for this ballot is that changes have been implemented unilaterally by the HSE and the management of the National Ambulance Service. One of the changes will mean that trainee paramedics who have completed their degrees and have been working with ambulance crews over the last three years will no longer enter into full-time positions in the National Ambulance Service. Additionally, the situation currently is that staff are deployed to another base only if it is no more than 45 km from the one where they are currently stationed. Management now wants to change that to have three regions in the country, which could mean going over 200 km and more. What will people with

mortgages do? Imagine what it would mean in terms of people having to travel at the end of a 13- or 14-hour shift.

We badly need additional staff in the ambulance services, as the National Ambulance Service has only about 60% of the numbers we need. We have spent €16 million on training 400 of these staff currently, and then we are going to make it as hard as possible for them to come into the service. The iron-fist approach of management has to be halted. I am asking the Tánaiste and the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, to intervene, restore some level of common sense and ensure that these young, highly skilled workers are brought into the service and strike action is averted. We cannot have strike action in the ambulance service. There is a complete breakdown between the unions and the management here. It has been an iron-fist approach, and someone needs to have a chat with the management in the HSE and the National Ambulance Service.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue and bringing it to my attention. I will certainly speak with the Minister for Health on foot of him raising this issue here today.

I would make the point broadly that any dispute gets resolved by people engaging. I certainly hope we do not get into a position of seeing an industrial dispute that causes a disruption to service. I know nobody will want that, including people who do an excellent job in the service. I hope we can find through the mechanisms available an opportunity for substantive engagement. I will certainly pass on the Deputy's views to the Minister for Health.

Deputy Brian Stanley: It is four weeks.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: A deeply disturbing case emerged before the courts of a vulnerable woman with an intellectual disability who was sexually assaulted in a swimming pool steam room. The man responsible has been convicted and yet the sentence imposed was reduced after the court considered difficulties for a foreign national serving a sentence in this jurisdiction. Let us be clear what this means; a woman who lives with the consequences of oral rape-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is this a legal case?

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: It is finished. It has gone through the courts.

Let us be clear what this means; a woman who lives with consequences of rape for the rest of her life saw the punishment of her attacker reduced because he is not from this country. Justice must be blind to nationality. The only people who deserve special consideration are the victims of these attacks. Does the Government believe it is acceptable that the nationality of an offender is taken into account and should result in a reduced sentence considering that particular type of offence and the seriousness of sexual crime? Will the Government now examine the sentencing framework to ensure that such consideration can still give justice to the victims of Ireland? Victims must come first.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: You never care when it is an Irish man of course. Never once have you raised a case like that. Ever.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I did not know you were made Tánaiste.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: You only care if the perpetrator is a foreigner, you do not care otherwise. You do not care about women, stop pretending.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy O'Meara.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Using gender-based violence to be racist should be called out.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Is the lady speaking for the Tánaiste?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No. Sit down. The Deputy is out of order and Deputy Coppinger is out of order.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am making a point.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: You are making a point on somebody else's time. That is what you are doing.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy O'Meara.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I will not stop calling you out.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Would the Tánaiste like to reply?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Tánaiste cannot reply to matters that were being dealt with legally, or those matters. We should all know that.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: It is about the policy.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: No, it is not about policy.

The Tánaiste: The rules do not allow me to reply. The Deputy knows that.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I am only asking for justice for a victim. It is very disappointing.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I raise access to fibre broadband in Rathcabbin village which is in lower Ormond in the very north of my constituency. Rathcabbin is just off the main Birr to Portumna road, very north Tipperary. We have a strange situation where the village itself is in the blue zone so therefore should be provided for by commercial operators. The rural areas around the village are in the amber zone, and provided for in the national development plan through National Broadband Ireland. The rural areas for the most part have fibre broadband

connection, but the commercial operators have not gone into the village yet, which is a very difficult position for the people of Rathcabbin who already suffer with bad phone reception in parts as well. For families, people trying to working from home and businesses operating, can the Tánaiste engage with the commercial providers to try and put pressure on them to get into Rathcabbin and give the people there the connectivity they deserve?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Meara for raising this issue in relation to Rathcabbin and the affect this is having on his constituents in a very practical and real way. Broadband has become such an important part of how we live and work. It is an essential part of the infrastructure and utilities we all need. I will certainly ask the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, to engage directly. This is an interesting example of State intervention at one level and commercial intervention on another. We need to make sure nobody falls between the stools. I will ask the Minister to engage with the Deputy directly on this.

Deputy Colm Burke: The living city initiative in Cork is confined to a very small number of areas, Shandon, St. Luke's, South Parish, and there is now a need for the regeneration of the city centre area. I am looking to know if serious consideration will be given to extending the boundaries of the living city initiative in order to progress and encourage the development of properties which are currently vacant. There is a huge change over the past number of years in the sense of the development of new offices outside of the city centre area. As a result, many of these buildings are unoccupied on the first, second and third floors. I am wondering if the living city initiative could be extended and included in the review of the overall plan in relation to the future of Cork and the taskforce that is to be set up.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Burke for his time in Cork last Friday and for facilitating the meetings we had with the CEO of Cork City Council, the Cork Business Association and indeed, the Port of Cork and many others. I found it to be a very useful series of engagements. What is very clear is that the people of Cork through the local authority and others are about to embark with Government support on this whole look at – they do not like the word taskforce in Cork, we use it in Dublin – the future of Cork report and regeneration and rejuvenation will be a part of that. What came up at our meetings last week was the idea of the current maps not addressing all of the potential there could be. The Deputy will understand I do not make budget or tax commitments outside of the budget cycle, but if the whole of this issue was looked at in the round as the Deputy suggested as part of the future of Cork report, I would be willing to engage enthusiastically on any findings that might emerge from that.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I raise the issue of St. Patrick's School in Celbridge. It is closed today because of safety concerns. I raised this a couple of weeks ago and over the past few years. I mentioned it is held together with duct tape. We managed to speak to the Minister, Deputy Naughton, last night, and she said members of the Department are going out to inspect the school today. I asked would she issue us with the safety report and hopefully the school could open again. The parents need to know that for transparency. She told us there is a programme of works to be done. We need information on a timeline today so we can give that to parents this evening. The parents, staff and students deserve transparency and reassurance on this. I ask the Minister to outline what steps her Department is taking to ensure proper, safe facilities to secure an immediate return of these students to the school. Parents were left

without childcare for their children today. They have waited almost 19 years for a permanent school building, and they were left with 24-hours notice about getting their children minded today.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Cronin for raising what is a very serious matter that has caused significant worry and concern and as she rightly says, huge inconvenience for parents before we even get into the educational impact, which is also real. I acknowledge she has raised this in this House before. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to come back to Kildare Oireachtas Members including the Deputy, today. I have been told there is a meeting taking place between the school and the Department today. I am also told - the Deputy knows more locally than I do - that significant works have been carried out in the school, remediating flooring, electrical issues, drainage and guttering. The Department believes this should address many of the safety issues. The point I made to Deputy Farrelly is the point I make today. We need one set of facts. We need the Department and the school to agree a way forward. The Department needs to take a hands-on approach in resolving this. The Minister, Deputy Naughton, is doing just that. I will ask her to come back to Deputy Cronin today.

Deputy John Clendennen: Last week I submitted a paper to the Department of Tourism, Enterprise and Employment to protect customers, an equal playing field for businesses, to address bid rigging and to dismantle cartels. We saw the conflict that is taking over the Middle East at the weekend. We have seen the price of brent crude oil increase by 26% in global markets over the last 90 days and we have seen the same increase domestically of 50% to 60%. I welcome the expansion of the fuel allowance but despite that, there is economic anxiety about what is happening. Will we see greater powers for the CCPC to ensure there is timely conclusion to such actions and more impactful consequences when people are found guilty of malpractice?

Second, if we see prolonged conflict in the Middle East, will there be financial intervention from the Government or will it at least consider it as soon as possible?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Clendennen for raising this issue. He is entirely right; there is a real sense of anxiety in general, including economic anxiety. What is going on in the world is frightening and deeply concerning. As I said yesterday in the finance committee and today in the Dáil and as the Taoiseach has also said, the Government keeps all of these matters in terms of interventions under review in terms of the impact of prices, and we will continue to keep this under review. We have to get a sense of the economic impact. It is a very different economic reality if this is something short versus if it is something that goes on for weeks and months. We continue to monitor it. We also need to work on it at European level and that is why I will engage with Eurogroup colleagues on Monday, specifically on the issue of energy affordability which is an agenda item.

I thank the CCPC for the work it does. I happened to have an opportunity to meet with it at the Cabinet committee on the economy. It is our intention to give the CCPC further powers and there will be legislation forthcoming in relation to that. In the here and now, within its existing powers, it has opened an urgent investigation into reports of price gouging.

1 o'clock

I would encourage all Members of the Oireachtas to provide any information or evidence they have in relation to price gouging for that investigation.

Deputy John Connolly: Yesterday, the National Transport Authority, NTA, provided an opportunity for Members to raise issues with it regarding public transport in our constituencies. When I asked about expanding and developing further bus services in Galway, particularly the 424, the NTA advised me that the budget for 2026 has not yet been defined so it could not provide me with an answer. Of greater concern was the fact that, when I asked it about the development of the new Dublin Road bus corridor in Galway city, which has been in the Galway transport strategy since 2006 and includes 4 km of priority bus measures, it advised me it could not give a commitment yet because its capital budget is unknown.

We know about Galway's transport problems. The Dublin Road bus corridor is a crucial infrastructural project to ease Galway's traffic and transport problems. It is ready to go, it has full planning and there is no judicial review. I ask for a commitment from the Government to make sure this project proceeds.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Connolly for raising this matter, which I will immediately raise with the Minister for Transport because we have provided significant capital uplift to the Department of Transport, quite rightly, for both road and public transport projects. I am aware there are specific issues around congestion, traffic and transport links in Galway. We are eager, as a Government, to see progress on them as well, specifically on the 424 bus route and the Dublin Road bus corridor as well. I will ask the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to get clarity for the Deputy on that. He will come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Matt Carthy: At a time when petrol and diesel costs are rising again and when the Tánaiste's Government has indicated that it intends to raise carbon tax even further, does he understand the anger of people who cannot drive on their local roads because of the conditions? People in rural areas, as well as paying for huge fuel costs, are forking out for motor tax, local property tax, which the Government has increased, and soaring insurance prices, yet many local roads are in the worst condition in decades. In that context, it is unacceptable that funding provided to local roads has actually been reduced in counties like Cavan and Monaghan. In fact, in Monaghan, for example, the allocation for local roads improvements has been reduced by nearly €800,000 this year compared with last year. That is happening at a time when the cost of repairing roads is also increasing, so the funding cuts are even more unacceptable. Will the Tánaiste ensure that the local road funding allocations are reviewed as a matter of urgency so that people who are paying all these charges actually have roads that are in a fit condition to drive on?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Carthy. I will certainly engage with the Minister for Transport on the specific issues he has raised in relation to Cavan-Monaghan. We are increasing the amount we are providing to the Department of Transport, increasing the amount of capital funding and announcing additional road funding allocations. I need to get a better understanding of the situation in relation to Cavan and Monaghan so I will ask the Minister---

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Deputy Matt Carthy: Have the Tánaiste's representatives not been telling him?

The Tánaiste: My representatives keep me very informed. In fact, Deputy Carthy will be glad to know-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Government cut the funding for local roads by €800,000.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Carthy.

The Tánaiste: This is the problem with the Deputy. When you try to answer a question-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: But the Tánaiste is not answering it.

The Tánaiste: -----in good faith, he immediately resorts to partisan politics. That is his choice. Senator Joe O'Reilly and Deputy David Maxwell raised this matter at the Fine Gael Parliamentary Party last night, Deputy Carthy will be glad to know. I also told them the Minister will be looking into the issue. I will give them the news as well.

Deputy Matt Carthy: That is not good enough. We need a review.

Deputy Michael Collins: Pathfinder in Galway is made of six members who are therapists and advanced paramedics. This group is at the front line of emergency calls for our elderly. When a 999 call comes in for an elderly person who has fallen, Pathfinder is dispatched first to access and treat, if possible, the elderly person in their own home. Councillor Noel Thomas tells me that for over 80% of its callouts, it can treat the person where they are. This eliminates the stressful ordeal for the elderly person of having to be brought by ambulance to a crowded accident and emergency department. The HSE and the Minister are ordering this group to cease its operations for the month of March and to instead work in the accident and emergency department of Galway hospital in case there is a surge in patients. They did the same thing last year and there was no surge, so why are they doing it again and disrupting the great service that Pathfinder delivers? Will the Tánaiste ask the Minister to explain how this makes any sense and to please leave Pathfinder doing this vital service uninterrupted for the month of March?

The Tánaiste: I want to answer the very serious question but I want to make the point that the Deputy must win the award for the party leader most effective at naming his councillors in this Chamber, particularly in the context of a by-election. I say that from a point of admiration. I must learn further from the Deputy. Senator Seán Kyne is ours.

There is a serious matter, though, that the Deputy raised and I genuinely do not want to take from that. In regard to Pathfinder, University Hospital Galway tells me it is using the period of the next two weeks to focus on de-escalating the hospital after what has been an exceptionally busy period in the past two months. The regional executive officer, at the request of Bernard Gloster, the CEO of the HSE, has put a plan in place to take the pressure off the Galway sites and all services are assisting with that. The National Ambulance Service, though,

is an essential service and while all staff, including Pathfinder, will play their part in supporting what is a temporary plan, there is absolutely no question of the service ending. I assure the Deputy and the House of that today. I have spoken to the CEO of the HSE on this and he has assured me of it as well. I will also ask him to come back to the Deputy on it directly.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I am going to be the third Member to raise issues with the National Ambulance Service this morning-----

The Tánaiste: Sure.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: -----which should give the Tánaiste a sense of the scale of the crisis there. For the first time, newly qualified paramedics are not being offered permanent contracts. Instead, this cohort of graduates are only being offered short contract extensions and the opportunity to reapply and compete for their own jobs. Up until now, paramedics who successfully completed the training programme transitioned directly into permanent contracts. In December, this cohort of graduates was given the same assurance that permanent contracts would be offered to them once they got their results from University College Cork, UCC, but this promise has been broken. Last week, just after receiving their exam results, they found out they would have to compete for their current positions and that this would affect not just the current paramedics but also those who are currently in training. All graduates and trainees had a legitimate expectation that they would be offered permanent contracts. Why has the rug been pulled from under them?

At a time when the National Ambulance Service is understaffed and staff morale is so low, this is an act of self-sabotage. Many of these graduates have made major financial commitments including mortgages, rents and childcare, all based on the expectation they would be given permanent jobs in their current location, not in another region across the country. Will the Tánaiste do more than talk to the Minister? Will the Government step in here and ensure this decision is reversed?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Rice. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has responsibility for the delivery of health policy and the oversight of the HSE, so I will speak to her directly on this. I take the point that newly qualified paramedics are a scarce commodity with regard to their skill set at a time when we are trying to increase the numbers we have working in our ambulance service. The Deputy is right; ambulance service issues come up in this House regularly. We will want to do all we can to retain them within the health service but I will ask the Minister to come directly back to the Deputy on the issue. I will also ask Bernard Gloster, the chief executive of the HSE, to update me on the matter and we will come back on it.

Deputy George Lawlor: A few days ago, the Minister, Deputy Browne, referring to the eviction of 36 families, said there had been misinformation which, he said, is insinuating that this move by the landlord is a reaction to the new rental rules. He was backed by the Taoiseach, who fobbed off Deputy Ivana Bacik on Leaders' Questions and Questions on Policy or Legislation. He said that claims by the Opposition were insinuations that this move is a reaction to the new rental rules.

A couple of hours ago, presenter Alan Corcoran on his "Morning Mix" programme on South East Radio played the audio from a doorbell camera video, which I can give to the Tánaiste, of one of these evictions being served last Friday. The agent for the landlord, armed with a batch of envelopes, declared to the tenant, "Bad news. Have you heard about the new rental rules? So, we're serving eviction notices". The tenant asks, "So, we're getting kicked out then?" The agent said:

Maybe not. It's just that the new rules are coming in on 1 March.

[...]

We think it is probably better just to sell up and get out. We're giving ourselves the option. Today we're only giving ourselves the option that we can do that. We don't know how it's going to pan out over the next fortnight. Next week, there'll be loads of radio shows and political debate [...]. We'll make the final decision probably in about ten days.

Is this how landlords in this modern, wealthy country can treat its people? Evictions are absolutely linked to the new tenancy laws introduced by this Government. Please, this has to be investigated and these tenants must be looked after in the way they deserve.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Lawlor. I know Alan Corcoran and I will listen back to his programme and the information the Deputy has just put on the record of the House. I am sure the Minister for housing will do so as well. My starting point in this conversation is that the new rules are not meant to affect existing tenants.

Deputy George Lawlor: We warned.

The Tánaiste: Laws do need to be complied with by landlords and existing tenancies need to be respected. We do have oversight mechanisms in relation to anybody who breaches those rules, including the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB, and other mechanisms too. It deserves a substantive reply because, clearly, this has affected quite a large number of people. I will ask that the Minister, Deputy Browne, hears the information the Deputy has.

Deputy George Lawlor: He has it.

The Tánaiste: In that case, I will ask him to come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I welcome students from my alma mater, CBS High School Clonmel, their teacher Claire Bell and SNA Michael Power.

The expansion of Scoil Aonghusa special school in Cashel has been a key priority of mine since I was first elected. I thank the Tánaiste and the previous Minister for education, Deputy McEntee, for their support. This centre of educational excellence caters for the complex needs of 150 students. The tender process is complete and the contract has been approved. There is an outstanding issue around a letter of acceptance. Will the Tánaiste engage with the current Minister for education so that this letter of acceptance can be issued to allow us to begin the detailed design planning phase and, in parallel, the construction phase, as this is a modular unit expansion?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Murphy and join him in welcoming CBS High School Clonmel. I met a very busy Deputy Murphy - he is very busy; he works hard - last night coming back into the Dáil with Capri-Suns and Hula Hoops and the likes in anticipation of the students' visit today. I hope they will get an opportunity to enjoy that hospitality. He was genuinely looking forward to having them here today. They are welcome to the Dáil and the Oireachtas.

I thank Deputy Murphy for raising this important issue. I know he is in ongoing contact with parents and teachers at Scoil Aonghusa in Cashel and that he worked with the then Minister for education, Deputy McEntee, on it previously. This will deliver 14 special education classrooms of ancillary accommodation. The selected modular provider has recently submitted the required documentation to the Department to enter into that contract. The documentation is being reviewed by the Department and was shared with the school this week with a view to the project proceeding as quickly as possible. It is expected that designs will be ready for local authority review in the quarter 2 of the year. However, I will certainly speak directly to the Minister, Deputy Naughton. We want this to be delivered as quickly as possible. I know how important it is to special education in the Deputy's area.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Tánaiste will be aware that pensioners who worked in Bus Éireann and CIÉ have been waiting for over 18 years for an increase at a time of cost-of-living increases. Many of them are under severe pressure. They have been told numerous things, that a pension increase has been agreed between the unions and the company and is awaiting sign-off of a statutory instrument, and that it is with the Department of public expenditure or the Minister for Transport. Ultimately, this has been agreed. It is meant to have been signed off. They are anxious to see it agreed in the next month or two because the pensioners, the former CIÉ staff, are under pressure. This included an increase to the lump sum people received and, therefore, people who are retiring in the next month or two could lose out on that if this is not signed off. Will the Tánaiste tell us where this is at? The increase has been agreed. When will the statutory instrument be put in place?

The Tánaiste: I am going to check that for the Deputy today with the Minister for Transport and the Minister for public expenditure and reform because everyone is eager to bring this to a conclusion. The Deputy's point about being able to provide clarity to people is reasonable, so I will ask the Ministers to come back to the Deputy urgently on that matter and try to provide clarity for those workers.

Considering St. Patrick's school has been brought up a couple of times in the House today, I will add that I have just received an update that the meeting with the Department was constructive and the board of management is now due to meet later this evening to discuss next steps, so I hope that can provide progress for St. Patrick's school in Kildare.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That concludes Questions on Policy or Legislation.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Did the Leas-Cheann Comhairle not put my name on the list?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I was only testing to see whether you were there.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I hope I will get a bit of extra time for the shock of that.

It is International Women's Day on Sunday and I hope thousands will march all around the country. We will meet at 1 p.m. at City Hall in Dublin, in case anyone would like to join here or in other cities. Yesterday, thousands of students and staff at UCD gathered to show their solidarity with a medical student who was raped, and with all survivors. The Tánaiste is a former Minister for higher education. I ask him to do all in his power to intervene with UCD to see that this student progresses with her medical degree as near as possible to her original graduation date. Is it not wrong that the only person to suffer in this whole debacle is the victim, who was drugged and raped at a medical students' organised event? An image of her was shared, which I saw and it is disgusting. She became pregnant and had to have a termination and then lost out on doing her exams.

This is a pattern with victims in UCD and other colleges. They have to drop out. They have to do their exams online. They have to finish their degrees online and it is a serious issue. I urge the Tánaiste to please ask UCD and its school of medicine to spend more time resolving this than they are spending spinning against this student-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: -----which they did up to recently, when doctors signed an open letter. The school have impugned her character and her mental health, which is a disgusting thing to do-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy Coppinger.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: -----and they also warned medical students yesterday not to attend the protest, asking if they felt safe at a protest against violence. There is something rotten in that school of medicine.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Coppinger for raising this issue. I extend my full solidarity and that of everyone in this House and every right-thinking person to the victim. Far from discouraging the students who gathered in protest, I commend them on what they did. Sharing abusive images of a person is obviously abhorrent but it is also a crime. I am informed there is a Garda investigation into this and I hope the full rigours of the law will be applied. I will also ask the Minister for higher education, Deputy Lawless, to come back on the points the Deputy made about that specific student being supported.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: He might meet her.

The Tánaiste: I will certainly ask the Minister if he would consider meeting her. That could be useful and important. In the past, Dr. Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin highlighted some serious issues to me and did some very good work. I found my meeting with her to be very helpful and insightful so I will certainly ask the Minister, Deputy Lawless, to consider meeting the victim too.

An Bille um Ainm agus Seoladh Gaeilge an Duine (Síneadh Fada), 2026: An Chéad Chéim

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tairgim:

Go gceadófar go dtabharfar isteach Bille da ngairtear Acht chun cruinneas in úsáid ainmneacha agus seoltaí i nGaeilge, lena n-áirítear síneadh fada ar ghutaí, a chosaint, trí cheartúcháin a éascú ar thaifid de réir an Achta um Chosaint Sonraí, 2018, trí dhualgas a chur ar rialálaithe a chinntiú go léirítear meas ar ainmneacha agus seoltaí custaiméirí agus úsáideoirí seirbhíse faoin 1 Eanáir 2030, agus tríd an reachtaíocht a leasú faoina ndéanfar rialáil ar chonarthaí amach anseo do chóras na bpostchód náisiúnta; agus do dhéanamh socrú i dtaobh nithe gaolmhara.

Cosúil leis na busanna, bímid ag fanacht orthu ar feadh tamall fada - sa chás seo, le breis is 100 bliain - agus tagann dhá cheann le chéile. Seo an dara Bille tionscnaithe agus foilsithe as Gaeilge ina iomláine. Tá ceann inniu agus bhí ceann inné uaim. An cheist atá ag déanamh tinnis dúinn inniu ná ag déileáil le ceist an tsínte fhada ar ainmneacha do dhaoine a bhfuil ainmneacha breá Gaelacha acu. Is iad Aer Lingus, Banc na hÉireann, an tÚdarás Náisiúnta Iompair agus Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte roinnt de na comhlachtaí a deir le daoine le hainmneacha Gaelacha in Éirinn: "Your name is invalid". Níl faic invalid faoi ainm Gaelach in Éirinn. Sa bhliain 1366 a tháinig an coincheap seo d'ainm invalid isteach in Éirinn le Reachtanna Chill Chainnigh. In 1518, dúirt Bardas na Gaillimhe "neither O nor Mac shall strut or swagger through the streets of Galway". Coilíneachas a bhí i gceist agus cos ar bolg ar na Gaeil. Tá an lá sin thart. Ar bhealach, tá an leithcheal fós le feiceáil ón Stát agus ó chomhlachtaí móra a chuireann iachall ar dhaoine a n-ainmneacha a Bhéarlú nó a mheasú ón mbrí ársa Ghaelach atá ag baint leo. Cuirfidh an Bille seo an éagóir sin ar ceal.

Déanann an Bille seo cearta an duine maidir lena ainm a dheimhniú, mar atá aitheanta i gCoinbhinsiún na Náisiún Aontaithe um Chearta an Linbh, tríd soiléiriú go bhfuil sé de cheart ag duine a shonraí a fháil ceartaithe de réir GDPR, ainmneacha agus seoltaí Gaelacha an duine le síntí fada, mar ba léir ón gcás a ghlac Ciarán Ó Cofaigh, agus é ag lorg go gceartófar taifead ar a ainm agus é faoi chúram in ospidéal na Gaillimhe. Ghlac sé an cás sin in 2019. Beidh dualgas freisin ar rialaitheoirí na gcomhlachtaí príobháideacha san airgeadas, san fhóntas, sa chumarsáid agus san aerthaisteal ach go háirithe ó 2030 a chinntiú go mbeidh deis ag custaiméirí agus úsáideoirí na seirbhísí a n-ainmneacha agus a seoltaí a thaifead i nGaeilge, nó bheidh pionós le gearradh ar na comhlachtaí nach ndéanfadh amhlaidh.

Anuas air sin, beidh dualgas ar an gconradh don chóras Eircode amach anseo cloí le hAcht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla, 2003, maidir le logainmneacha Gaeltachta a bheith i nGaeilge amháin, agus gan Béarlú a dhéanamh ar sheoladh nó sonraí an duine, rud atá tar éis fearg an phobail agus gearán chuig an gCoimisinéir Teanga a spreagadh le blianta anuas. Molaim an Bille seo.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Molaim mo chomrádaí, an Teachta Ó Snodaigh, as an mBille seo a thabhairt os comhair na Dála. Is Bille tábhachtach é seo maidir le cearta teanga, scríofa go hiomlán i nGaeilge. This is an important Bill, recognising the importance of Irish in everyday life. Countless people are forced to alter their name or home address because so many systems in this country do not respect the language of the country in which they operate. Aer Lingus

and Bank of Ireland tell us we are invalid characters. Whatever about being a character, we do not want to be told we are invalid. This is the norm in every other country I have lived in. I was in Spain for a few years and there was no problem with tildes and other accents ach níl sé seo fíor in Éireann agus mo náire orainn faoi sin. Athraíonn an Bille seo é sin. Seán need no longer be "Sean", Ciarán will no longer be "Ciaran" and with the help of God, and my mother, Réada will not be pronounced as "Reeda" anymore. Bheadh mo mhamáí sásta leis sin. Tá sé tábhachtach go mbeadh meas againn ar ainmneacha daoine. Léiríonn an Bille seo an meas sin ar ainmneacha Gaeilge.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: An bhfuiltear ag cur in aghaidh an Bhille?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): No.

Cuireadh agus aontaíodh an cheist.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Iarraim ar dhuine de na Teachtaí tairiscint a dhéanamh go dtógfar an Dara Chéim in am Comhaltaí Príobháideacha.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tairgim: "Go dtógfar an Bille in am Comhaltaí Príobháideacha."

Cuireadh agus aontaíodh an cheist.

Electricity Regulation (Amendment) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Pa Daly: I move:

Bill entitled an Act to amend the Electricity Regulation Act 1999 to give the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities (CRU) the legislative remit to monitor wholesale and retail prices in the energy market; to increase the frequency and level of reporting; to monitor and regulate hedging practices; to strengthen its powers to monitor anti-competitive behaviour of gas and electricity suppliers; to give it an expanded role in consumer protection; to strengthen its power to address energy affordability; and to provide for related matters.

Ba mhaith liom an Bille seo a mholadh chomh maith. Tá dhá Bhille agam inniu chun déileáil leis na costais mhaireachtála. We are introducing two Bills that will help to end Ireland's energy rip-off for good. If adopted, the Electricity Regulation (Amendment) Bill 2026 and the Electricity Regulation (Amendment) (Standing Charges) Bill 2026 could facilitate Ireland to finally tackle Ireland's extortionate price of energy, which is the highest in Europe, according to Eurostat. Ordinary households are being fleeced by energy companies. They are stretched to breaking point and are forced to choose between heating their homes and filling fridges. Trust in our energy markets is wearing dangerously thin. Average household Bills have more than doubled over the past few years, as the Minister of State will know, and that is a direct result of Government inaction.

There are record numbers of households in arrears. A staggering 500,000 are behind on their bills and Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents seem to think the way our energy market is functioning is acceptable. I do not agree. I do not accept ordinary households should have to pay what data centres pay for their electricity. I do not accept energy companies can use wars and invasions as an excuse to jack up household bills and I absolutely do not accept that heating your home is some sort of luxury.

The rip-off is not inevitable but a political choice made by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents. Energy companies operate in our society not in a vacuum and every bill they issue lands on the kitchen tables of workers, pensioners, students and parents. Yet, while wholesale energy prices have fallen sharply at multiple points in recent years retail prices have remained stubbornly high. The explanation we are given time and time again is hedging. Hedging can be used to stabilise prices but when used without transparency, accountability and oversight, companies can hide their inflated margins and delay price reductions. That is not stability but exploitation. The ESRI agrees and has called for an independent review. When companies hedge at high prices and then refuse to pass on savings, consumers pay twice through inflated bills and through the erosion of trust in the a system that is supposed to serve them. Right now the public is being asked to trust a system that gives no visibility, no guarantees and no recourse. Allowing price-gouging is not a technical issue nor an economic inefficiency but a moral failure and a political choice. The decision is to prioritise profit margins over human dignity and the companies are getting away with it. It is the choice to squeeze households because they cannot choose to stop heating their homes and the companies calculate people will endure an extra bit of hardship because they have no alternative, which is not acceptable.

By adopting this legislation Government can end the regulatory vacuum in our energy markets by closing the loopholes that allow energy companies to fleece ordinary people while they run off into the sunset with their massive profits. This legislation will give the energy regulator the power to tackle price-gouging and sanction anti-competitive behaviour by energy companies, enhance transparency through the introduction of a new duty for energy companies to publish data on their pricing strategies and address the fact energy companies can set their standing charges because currently they are free to do what they like meaning households are literally paying hundreds per year before they switch on a light. Sinn Féin also wants to see data centres pay their fair share through the restructuring of network charges and the PSO levy. Households should not be paying six to eight times more, which is outrageous. The legislation will mandate the energy regulator to take energy affordability seriously and make it a priority. Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents have a clear choice as to whose side they are on. Will they protect massive profits or will they stand up for workers and families?

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

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): It is not being opposed on First Stage.

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 Pa Daly: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Electricity Regulation (Amendment) (Standing Charges) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Pa Daly: I move:

Bill entitled an Act to amend the Electricity Regulation Act 1999 to give the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) the legislative remit required to effectively monitor and regulate standing charges on electricity and gas bills, and to provide for related matters.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Ba mhaith liom mo chomrádaithe, na Teachtaí Daly, O'Rourke agus O'Hara, a mholadh as ucht an Bhille seo a thabhairt os comhair na Dála. We have two Bills which are both very important and will explicitly tackle Ireland's energy rip-off and price-gouging once and for all. They are the Electricity Regulation (Amendment) Bill 2026 and the Electricity Regulation (Amendment) (Standing Charges) Bill 2026. We in Sinn Féin have been calling on the Government to tackle price-gouging and empower the regulator to deal with this as long as I have been elected. We have more than 320,000 households in energy arrears, as well as some of the highest electricity bills in Europe, when we used to have some of the lowest.

This Bill shows there is a political choice for Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and their Independents. They could take substantial choices to tackle that issue if they wished, instead of washing their hands of the situation and leaving vulnerable people at the mercy of a very volatile market. They could, for example, empower the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, to prioritise the affordability of credit in its decision-making, as the Bill sets out. This is critical as things are only getting worse. It is a damning indictment of this Government that it is allowing an increase in the number of data centres, which are increasing demand on the grid, while doing nothing to protect the most vulnerable, who are at breaking point. The regulation and restructuring of standing charges and the PSO levy as expressed in our Bills will ensure that data centres pay their fair share and that households will not foot the bill.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I am very happy to co-sponsor the introduction of these two vital Bills. As families and small businesses struggle with the relentless cost-of-living crisis the Government continues to act as a mere commentator while energy companies line their pockets. The standing charges Bill addresses the enduring scandal of unregulated standing charges. It is unacceptable that energy companies have free rein to hike these charges by hundreds of euro without any oversight. That is hundreds of euro a year before a single light is switched on. That is a massive cost baked into every family's budget. Our Bill would require companies to justify these charges to the CRU and they would have to prove any increase related to their fixed costs rather than their profit margin. The Bill gives the energy regulator – the CRU – teeth it so desperately needs to hold energy companies to account.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I am also pleased to co-sponsor these Bills, which are important legislation to end Ireland's energy rip-off. There are 320,000 people in arrears on their electricity bills, which is an enormous jump of 20,000 households in just a month. At the same time, Government has failed and refused to empower the regulator to tackle price-gouging and hold companies accountable for skyrocketing bills.

The two Bills being introduced are critical to addressing this and ensuring that the CRU can protect consumers. This is very important legislation, especially because it comes at a time households are being hammered by the cost of living. People in my constituency are reporting huge increases in the cost of home heating oil, a doubling in the cost in many cases, with the price going from under €500 to over €800 for 500 litres of oil, as well as increases in the cost of petrol and diesel. This is another example of companies price-gouging. There is absolutely no doubt about that whatsoever. We have not seen any response from Government other than saying there is price-gouging and they might refer it to the CCPC. On top of that, the Government is going to proceed with carbon tax increases in the next number of weeks, which will add more to household bills. The Government is completely out of touch with the reality of the cost-of-living crisis across the State. It needs to take action, it needs to hold companies accountable, it needs to scrap the carbon tax increases and it must introduce a cost-of-living package without delay.

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

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): 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 Pa Daly: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.22 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.15 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.22 p.m. and resumed at 2.15 p.m.

Situation in the Middle East: Statements

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): We meet at a critical moment for the Gulf and the wider Middle East. We are all deeply concerned by the outbreak of conflict since Saturday, the scenes of death and destruction we are witnessing, the impact on our citizens across the Gulf caught up in this conflict, the consequences for some of our closest partners in the region, the situation facing our peacekeepers serving in UNIFIL and by the potential for this conflict to intensify and further threaten international peace and security. Responding to the effects of this crisis has been a priority for this Government and for me and

my colleagues in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. My position and the position of Government is clear - the current military operations by the United States and Israel have no mandate or authorisation from the United Nations nor has any attempt been made to seek such an authorisation. Ireland's position on the use of force outside such a context is well established and known. Ireland's position is equally clear that all states must abide by international law and the principles of the UN Charter. I was equally clear and strong in my engagement at the emergency meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council on Sunday - indeed, Ireland was among those making the strongest remarks on this point. The UN system, however imperfect, is an essential security asset for small states including Ireland. If the UN fails and if the Security Council is unable to act, it is because member states do not empower it to do so. It has always been Ireland's position to support the UN and the international multilateral system. This is the approach we have taken since the start of this conflict and will continue to take. Our priority must be to quickly end this conflict and for urgent de-escalation. We urgently need to get back to the path of dialogue and diplomacy.

There is a real risk, as we can all see, of this conflict widening, as it already has. I call on all with influence to use it constructively in the interest of peace. We have made crystal clear our condemnation of the Iranian regime - its brutal repression of its citizens, malign role in the region and support for Russia's war on Ukraine. Our position on Iran's nuclear programme is clear - Iran cannot develop a nuclear weapon. We had strongly supported the joint comprehensive plan of action - Iran nuclear agreement. When it ceased to function, we urged Iran to engage meaningfully in negotiations to address the legitimate concerns of the international community. I regret that more time was not allowed for dialogue and diplomacy. I remain convinced this is the best way to address these issues. We are instead confronted with reality of conflict.

Over the past days and today I have spoken to many of my counterparts in the region to express our solidarity and to discuss how we can find a way out of this situation. Earlier today, I took part in a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council which Gulf ministers attended. The attacks by Iran on Gulf states, many of which have large Irish communities, and on Jordan and Türkiye, are unacceptable. These countries have not attacked Iran and have shown commendable restraint in the face of attacks on them. In the meeting this morning, I expressed our solidarity and support and thanked them for the support and assistance they are providing to our citizens. We are deeply disturbed by attacks on civilian infrastructure, including hotels, hospitals and residential apartment blocks.

We are all shocked and appalled by the loss of so many young lives in the bombing of the school in Minab. This is devastating for their families and communities. The killing of children can never be justified. It must be condemned in all circumstances. It is utterly unacceptable and we have to be clear on this.

The future of Iran is particularly uncertain following the killing of supreme leader, the Ayatollah. Iran has imposed a communications blackout so accurate information is not available. In the absence of the supreme leader, Iran's leadership is constitutionally led by a council made up of the President, the Chief Justice and Ayatollah Arafī, a member of the guardian council. In practice, the military commanders and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, IRGC, leaders seem to be in the driving seat. From speaking to some of our colleagues in the region, they are of the view in particular where civilian infrastructure has been attacked

in those countries which are not part of this conflict, it has been led by the military commanders and the IRCG.

Ultimately, the future of Iran must be determined by the people of Iran and in a way that creates stability in the region. Iranians should be free to express their views without the fear of further violence. I acknowledge the Iranian community here and those who are very scared and worried for their family members and friends.

The path to such an outcome is far from certain and a risk of continuing instability is real.

Let me turn now to one of the most pressing priorities for my Department that has been caused by the current escalation in the Middle East. As all Deputies in the House are aware, a large number of Irish citizens are resident in Gulf countries, in particular in the United Arab Emirates. Approximately 24,000 citizens across the region have registered their presence on the citizen's registration platform. The most recent figure I have seen is more than 24,400, and we know this figure increases on a daily basis. More than 16,000 of these have registered for the first time since the weekend.

I fully understand, as we all do, the anxiety, stress and concerns of Irish citizens across the region, with continuing strikes from Iran. Of course we also understand the stress and anxiety of their families and friends in Ireland and other parts of the world. I assure the House that my Department, including officials working in our embassies in the region, is actively engaged in supporting Irish citizens who are affected, and will provide all possible consular assistance. Our crisis centre has had extensive contact with Irish citizens and their families who have been affected, including residents and holidaymakers. Since Saturday, when I stood up the consular crisis team in my Department, officials have managed more than 2,300 queries from citizens in Ireland and across the region. My officials are working with existing EU consular mechanisms to co-ordinate assistance across the region. They are engaging with other embassies, the Government and airlines. They are doing everything they can to provide the most up-to-date support and advice to Irish citizens.

For Irish citizens in the region the advice is to shelter in place, and this continues to be the best advice, to avoid unnecessary movement, and to follow the directions of the local authorities. We take this advice from the local authorities on the ground. Irish citizens should also actively monitor advice issued on social media by the local Irish embassies. This is the quickest way for people to get the most up-to-date information for their own region. We know there is differing advice and various things happening throughout the Gulf region. Travel advice published by my Department has also been updated to advise against travel to Iran, Israel and Lebanon and to avoid non-essential travel to all other countries in the Gulf region.

I continue to work closely with my EU counterparts. As I have said, I participated in an extraordinary meeting of European Union Foreign Ministers on Sunday, which took place virtually, on the current conflict in the Middle East. During the meeting, I and many colleagues emphasised that our priority is the safety of our citizens living in the region and of those who have been caught up simply by the fact they were transiting through on holidays. Many residents there now wish to come home. EU Foreign Ministers agreed on the importance of close co-operation and co-ordination among EU member states on consular matters. My Department is working with, and is in constant dialogue with, existing EU consular mechanisms to try to co-ordinate assistance across the region where we need to expand it.

There is, of course, as we know and as we have seen in recent days, extensive flight disruption across the region. This has already impacted many Irish citizens, including those in regions not immediately affected by the conflict. Much of the airspace in the region was closed in the initial days of the crisis, and this in itself created a significant backlog of people wishing to get home. It is likely to remain the case in the coming days that there will be limited airspace, whether in the UAE or the wider region. I have instructed my officials to activate plans for an assisted departure from the region in response to this.

Appropriate, timely and effective action has been a priority for the Government in relation to this crisis. The first Government charter flight for Irish citizens is due to depart the region later this week, provided that security and operational considerations permit. As Deputies are aware and can appreciate, this is an incredibly complex and fast-moving situation. The plans are conditional on the prevailing security that can impact the movement of citizens by land, as we are asking people to move from where they are to Oman, and the necessary permission from local air traffic control authorities for the flight to depart.

This first charter will be targeted at Irish citizens currently in UAE, particularly those who are non-resident. We have tried to identify those who are vulnerable and who may require assistance most urgently. This very much depends on the individual and what their needs are but we are engaging directly with citizens and trying to provide as much support as possible to those who need it. In particular, those in transit will be included in this group. These citizens are being contacted by my officials since yesterday, and this ongoing outreach will continue until all of those eligible have been contacted. It is important to say at this point that many people who have been contacted have chosen not to avail of the flight. As more commercial flights become available the decision is being taken by individuals to remain and potentially get those commercial flights. We understand this and appreciate that everybody has to make their own decision in this regard.

The consular crisis centre in my Department has had extensive contact with Irish citizens and their families in Ireland who have been affected and continues to co-ordinate the consular response as the situation evolves. My officials are also working to assist as best they can a small number of Irish citizens currently resident in Iran, most of whom have been resident in the country for many years. We are supporting them and most, if not all, have indicated they do not wish to leave the region. Of course, we continue to keep close engagement with them. I spoke to the ambassador resident there this morning in this regard. Diplomats from all of our embassies in the region are actively engaged in supporting Irish citizens who are affected. I had the opportunity to meet all of them virtually this morning.

Our travel advice remains that Irish citizens should not undertake travel to Iran and our advice at this time to citizens in the country and throughout the region is to shelter in place. Citizens should follow the directions of the local authorities and the advice issued on social media by the Irish Embassy in their country of residence. This is the best way to get the most up-to-date information.

In parallel, from the very outset we have been in close contact with the airlines operating in the region. It is very welcome, and we all saw the scenes in Dublin Airport last night, that the first flight, with Emirates, arrived from Dubai to Dublin. Before then, many Irish people were availing of commercial flights to the UK and other parts of Europe. Through our consultation and engagement with the airlines it is very welcome that the first flight to Dublin arrived last

night. A second flight from Dubai to Dublin is scheduled to be taking off this afternoon and I anticipate and expect we will have more direct flights to Dublin over the coming days. This twin-track approach of planning for assisted departures while remaining in close contact with the airlines will continue.

The resumption of commercial routes, however limited, remains the best possible way of ensuring that as many of our citizens who need and wish to do so can leave the region. I acknowledge that citizens in the region may be concerned if they are not contacted by officials today or if they do not receive an update from their airline. I reiterate again that any citizen in the region who wishes to leave should contact the consular crisis team in Dublin. We have been encouraging people to register their presence in the region, and I appreciate and acknowledge that a significant number have done so. This is not a registration of intent to leave, or a statement that people wish to leave. I ask Deputies that in their engagement through social media channels and otherwise they encourage people who wish to leave to contact the consular crisis number in Dublin if they have not already done so. This team has been set up specifically set up with the only objective of engaging with people to make sure this information is known so we can then pass it on to our team working through the details for our charter flight and so we can more generally identify those who wish to leave. I assure the House that the Department will continue to offer consular assistance through the team and through our missions in the region and we will update with further guidance as things change. I hope and expect that further commercial options will become available in the coming days targeted at non-residents and those who are in transit, and providing opportunities more generally for those who wish to leave the region.

In addition to these aspects of the conflict, I am also aware of the potential economic impacts. We have seen disruption to shipping through the Strait of Hormuz. Some 20% of global oil and gas supplies pass through this narrow waterway. There has been an increase in the price of oil since markets opened on Monday. I and my Department are carefully monitoring the potential economic and trade impacts arising from this instability in the region, which is a significant export market and a major global hub for goods and energy. Earlier this week, I briefed a meeting of the trade forum on these concerns and, importantly, I had an opportunity to hear from representatives of the business community which is represented in that region and beyond. This will remain a priority as we navigate our way through the days ahead. The Tánaiste answered questions this morning and gave a very clear commitment that we will respond where necessary and we will make it absolutely clear that there should be no changes to fuel prices at our pumps today. There should be absolutely no impact based on what is happening today. The longer this goes on the more challenging it will be, which is why it is important, not just to prevent loss of life but more generally for economic and international security, that this conflict comes to an end immediately.

As the House is aware, Ireland has a deep connection and commitment to Lebanon, going back many decades. For far too long, other people have made Lebanon their battleground, and we have sought, both politically and especially through the work of our Defence Forces, to assist the people of Lebanon in regaining the stability and prosperity that were once the envy of the Middle East. It is deeply distressing, therefore, that the actions of Hezbollah, and of Iran, have once more dragged them into conflict.

This morning I was due to be in Paris at a conference organised by France to bring together international support for the Lebanese Armed Forces, LAF, to help them restore security and control over their country. That meeting has had to be postponed. In recent months, the LAF have done a great deal, tripling their presence in the south of Lebanon, the area where UNIFIL is deployed. The Government of Lebanon had announced a phased plan for the LAF to secure the disarmament of Hezbollah and other groups so that Lebanon would no longer be a hostage to armed militias and it had completed the first stage of that plan. In response to the renewed Hezbollah attacks on Israel, the Government of Lebanon moved to outlaw all military activity by Hezbollah and instructed the LAF to move ahead with disarming the group.

I condemn the missile attacks by Hezbollah on Israel. These are utterly unacceptable and must stop. However, I must equally condemn Israel's military response, its aerial bombardment and its launch of ground operations. This is a direct violation of Lebanon's sovereignty as a state. It puts civilian populations at risk. It has not given Lebanon the chance to try to remove this threat by other, more long-lasting, means. I fear that a unique chance to break the cycle of violence between Israel and Lebanon may be lost and that greater instability and destruction may lie ahead.

In these circumstances, our attention and that of Deputies here will be particularly on the safety of our own personnel, our own troops in UNIFIL. I am regularly briefed by the Chief of Staff and am pleased to again confirm that our peacekeepers are safe. Our forces in UNIFIL will continue to do their duty to fulfil their mandate and help achieve security for all the people. However, we must be very clear that any ground incursions or attacks near or in and around the UNIFIL mandate put our troops at risk. This cannot be tolerated.

This House will also be concerned, as are we all, about the impacts of this conflict for the people of Palestine. I spoke with my counterpart, the foreign minister of Palestine, this morning and once again reiterated our full support for the Palestinian people. I regret that the conflict in Gaza risks being overshadowed by the current escalation and that there is a risk that the momentum that had been established to end the Gaza conflict will be disrupted.

I was also dismayed to see the closure of crossings into Gaza immediately following the outbreak of the current conflict on Saturday. While one of these crossings has reopened, this is quite simply not enough and I call on Israel to reopen all remaining crossings. We will continue to work to ensure that the humanitarian situation on the ground in Gaza is urgently addressed. The situation remains no less urgent than it was before the current escalation began. Turning the tide on widespread malnutrition is likely to take months and substantial humanitarian aid at scale is required. While one of the crossings has opened up, that is quite simply nowhere near enough.

I also call on Israel to lift restrictions on the transportation of supplies into the West Bank. While international attention is focused on Iran, the situation in the West Bank remains extremely serious. Israeli military operations have displaced at least 40,000 people since January and have caused widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure and homes. People are being killed on a daily basis. Recent decisions by the Israeli authorities to expand their control of the West Bank and to expand settlement activity are part of an established pattern to create a new *status quo* in the occupied Palestinian territories. This is unacceptable and needs to stop. I will continue to work with EU partners on appropriate action in response to these continued breaches. I raised this directly with other foreign ministers on our call this morning.

This conflict has the potential to have lasting impacts across the gulf and the wider Middle East. We call for a cessation of hostilities, for urgent steps to de-escalate and for restraint. We need to see a return to diplomacy and we need the UN to have a role. Responding to the effects of this crisis will remain a priority for this Government, as will ensuring the safety of our citizens in the gulf region.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): As the Minister has outlined, the Government's highest priority in the current conflict is the safety of Irish citizens in the region. This is a priority and concern shared by all here in this House. I am grateful to those Deputies and Senators who have been in contact with my office to raise individual cases. The profile of the Irish community in the region is diverse. It is a mixture of those who are ordinarily resident there, those who were in transit to other destinations and those who were on holidays, visiting loved ones or travelling on business. It is a large population of Irish abroad. Dubai is the third largest transport hub in the world and it is a very popular destination in the region.

The consular situation is unique and complex. Our staff in embassies and at the consular crisis centre are working around the clock to respond to those in the region and to concerned family members here at home. It is positive that, as the Minister has laid out, we yesterday saw one commercial Emirates flight from Dubai to Dublin. There will be an additional flight tonight. We hope and expect that further direct commercial options will become available in the coming days. In the past number of days, we have seen a number of Irish people succeed in taking indirect flights to Ireland from Abu Dhabi or Dubai through destinations such as London and Paris. The latest report from the UAE Government is that it is able to get 48 flights per hour out of Dubai airport through the air corridor it has established.

There are approximately 24,000 citizens across the region registered on the citizens registration platform. The vast majority of these, about 16,000, registered since Saturday. Many of those are permanently resident in the UAE, Qatar and elsewhere and have no desire to journey home at this time. We ask those people to heed the advice of the local authorities, wherever they are situated. Our embassies in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh will amplify those messages so I ask people to follow their social media channels and regularly check updates from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade at *ireland.ie* or on its social media channels.

We are conscious that, of the more than 24,000 citizens *in situ* in the region, a certain cohort are deemed vulnerable. They are caught in transit or have complex needs and requirements. A first charter flight for that cohort of vulnerable citizens will depart tomorrow. Until such time as it is no longer needed, the Government's approach will be to plan for further assisted departures while remaining in close contact with airlines on commercial flight options. Those departures are largely from Muscat in Oman. Up to 300 people can be accommodated. We saw the first flight from Italy land last night and a flight from Germany the day before. The British authorities have also started flights. We are working in concert with European partners.

I understand that many Members will have received correspondence from citizens frustrated that they do not have the answers they want. We are extremely grateful to those in that position for their patience and understanding. We all know that disrupted travel, delays and cancelled flights are stressful. At a time of conflict, it is hard to fathom the level of stress, fear and

concern, particularly among those travelling with young children or those who are a long way from home and who may be isolated.

This is a highly complex and unanticipated situation. Our teams in the Department of foreign affairs are working around the clock. Since Saturday, the consular crisis team has responded to over 2,300 queries. The capacity of that team has been steadily increasing in recent days and will be kept under close review. Department of foreign affairs officials are also working closely with the airlines. As I have said, another commercial flight from Dubai has been confirmed for tomorrow. There has been a considerable amount of engagement with the local authorities.

As the Minister of State with responsibility for the diaspora, I visited Abu Dhabi and Dubai a number of months ago to carry out a diaspora consultation. There are now over 14,000 Irish people living in Dubai alone. There are another 2,000 or so in Abu Dhabi and over 2,000 in both Qatar and Saudi Arabia. It is a large, vibrant and engaged community. The authorities in the UAE have been particularly to the fore in covering accommodation costs for those stuck in transit and in providing clear information and reassurance to the local community. We have a wonderful Irish network, particularly in the UAE, who are providing very important reassurance to each other. We are seeing the collective come together through WhatsApp groups, online channels and phone calls home. I can only imagine everyone in the Chamber is getting the calls from family members here who are worried about their children and loved ones and who are looking for any sign of reassurance. The spirit within the diaspora is really strong and deserves acknowledgement in the Chamber.

On that note, we are also aware that there is a small number of Irish citizens in Iran. The majority of these people have strong family ties and have been resident in Iran for many years. A number of Irish people have already left Iran over the past number of years for various reasons. While Irish diplomatic staff were temporarily relocated to Dublin a number of months ago, the embassy is functioning from the offices of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and consular assistance is being provided to Irish citizens in Iran who have requested it. From talking to a number of Irish citizens who have family members in Iran, I am very aware that, due to the communications blockade, it is extremely difficult to make contact with family members. It is sketchy at best.

The situation we are watching unfold across Iran and the wider gulf region and into the Middle East is unprecedented. The Government's position has been clear. Ireland has consistently condemned the Iranian regime for its violation of its citizens' human rights, for its malign role in the region and for its support for Russia's war in Ukraine. Many of us will have seen the exact same types of drones that have been besieging Ukraine for the last number of years now being activated. We note the request from the United States Government for assistance from the Ukrainian Government with regard to defence mechanisms.

The Irish Government has been equally clear Iran cannot be allowed to develop a nuclear weapon. Our view was the legitimate concerns of the international community could best be addressed through dialogue. We regret more time was not allowed for diplomacy; we now face conflict in its place.

The brutal response of Iranian authorities to protests in January leading to the death of at least 7,000 Iranian people was horrendous and rightly condemned in the House by Members

of all parties and none, although some did not. There has been a near-total communications blackout since then, making it impossible to verify what is really happening on the ground. Iran must restore telephone and Internet connectivity immediately. Ireland has consistently called on Iranian authorities to halt all violence, suspend executions and release those detained. Ireland supported new sanctions on Iran in response to the appalling repression, including the designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organisation by the EU in February. The future of Iran remains uncertain following the killing of Ayatollah Khamenei. That Iran has sustained its capacity to conduct and expand military operations indicates the regime was not dependent on one figure. Our sincere hope is that after this horrendous conflict has passed, the people of Iran can hope for and attain a better future. We will work with EU partners to support that in whatever way we can.

We should not underestimate the determination of the current regime to cling to power, regardless of the cost to the Iranian people and the wider region. Ultimately, the future of Iran must be determined by the people of Iran and in a way that creates stability in the region. Iranians should be free to express their views without the fear of further violence.

The attacks by Iran on Gulf states, Jordan and Türkiye are deeply concerning. These countries have not attacked Iran. Iran's attack on them is a violation of their sovereignty. Its attacks on civilian infrastructure are violations of international law. Our sympathy and solidarity is with our Gulf partners. All attacks must be halted. The escalating conflict unfolding across the region is unprecedented. The situation is fast moving and unpredictable, with reports of growing numbers of civilian deaths and casualties.

Ireland's position is clear and unwavering. The UN Charter and international law must be upheld by all countries. The current military operations by the United States and Israel have no mandate or authorisation from the United Nations, nor has any attempt been made to seek such an authorisation. Ireland's position on the use of force outside such a context is well established and known.

Diplomacy and dialogue is the only viable option. It is not too late for those involved to come to the table. It is not too late for those with influence to use it constructively. All parties to the conflict must be aware of and abide by their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law, regardless of how abhorrent the Iranian regime has been. Attacks on civilian infrastructure, including schools, hospitals and residential buildings, wherever they are, are violations of international law.

Our priority is to bring this conflict to an end quickly. We need to see urgent de-escalation. We call on all parties to exercise maximum restraint, and for an end to hostilities. The level of death and destruction in the region in recent days is extremely worrying. Our primary concern is, of course, for the Irish citizens of the region but the economic impact that will be felt by every household as the conflict goes on is not lost on us. We have seen that before and inevitably will see it again. The Government will not be found wanting in terms of support for Irish citizens but the easiest way for that to be addressed is for this conflict to end.

I will offer a word on the wider region. While we are all following the headlines from the Gulf states and the safety of our friends and family members there remains paramount, we must not lose sight of the situation in the wider region. In this regard, we are closely monitoring the situation in Lebanon. As the Minister mentioned, we have a strong connection with Lebanon

honed through years of our Defence Forces' presence through UNIFIL. Our Minister has maintained daily contact with our Chief of Staff and with the troops on the ground. Those troops are contacted regularly by the family liaison officers and their families are kept well abreast, with good Wi-Fi connectivity making that possible.

Hezbollah attacked Israel on 8 October 2023 in supposed solidarity with Hamas in Gaza. The destructive war that followed was finally halted - not completely, but largely - by the ceasefire of November 2024. Since then, Lebanon has been making a real political effort to turn a new page, establishing a new Government, revitalising its security forces and tackling the huge challenges of political and legal reform and economic reconstruction. Much had been achieved. Now, for the second time in two and a half years, Hezbollah has gratuitously attacked Israel, knowingly embroiling Lebanon in a conflict that was not theirs. I condemn Hezbollah's attacks on Israel. It has provoked the type of response from Israel we have, sadly, come to expect. This is the nature of Iran's support to Hezbollah and other militant groups over many years, with money and weapons. They are intended to cause mayhem and destruction around the region whenever Iran is threatened and to distract attention, no matter what effect this has on the local people. We have seen this in Lebanon, Syria, Gaza and Yemen.

While, of course, Israel has a right to defend itself, Ireland regrets that it has chosen a wholly military response and not given Lebanon a chance to remove the threat by its own sovereign and more long-lasting means. Israel's actions in south Lebanon had already been an obstacle to progress: retaining positions in Lebanese territory which it had pledged to vacate, overflying and bombing targets in Lebanon at will and even aerial spraying Lebanese farmland near the border with chemicals to prevent its use for agriculture.

In addition to direct attacks on Hezbollah targets, Israel has issued what it says is an order to the people of south Lebanon to evacuate north of the Litani River once again. We have no hesitation in saying that it is wrong when Hezbollah try to drive people in northern Israel from their homes; it is equally wrong, therefore, for Israel to do this to people in south Lebanon. Ireland calls on both Israel and Hezbollah to cease their attacks, comply with the terms of Security Council Resolution 1701 and allow Lebanon to rebuild in a way that will bring peace to people on both sides of the border.

When we think of the repercussions of this war on the wider region, we think of the most vulnerable. In Gaza, the humanitarian situation remains dire. The fragile ceasefire in place for almost five months has not delivered the surge of humanitarian aid expected and demanded. On Saturday, Israeli authorities announced the closure of all crossing points into the Gaza Strip. This exacerbates the humanitarian situation, further restricting supplies of essential goods and services. Israel subsequently announced that the Karem Abu Salem-Kerem Shalom crossing would reopen for the "gradual" re-entry of humanitarian aid. Rafah border crossing remains closed, however. "Gradual" is not enough. All border crossings to Gaza should be opened. Existing food stocks inside the Gaza Strip are insufficient. Palestinians in Gaza have suffered an inordinate amount in recent years. There is no logical reason to further curtail the entry of essential humanitarian supplies. Ireland calls on Israel to cease imposing arbitrary restrictions and regulations on the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza. It is essential that the UN, particularly UNRWA, and other humanitarian organisations are facilitated in full to carry out their life-saving work in Gaza. Ireland has consistently remained focused on the humanitarian

situation in Gaza. This is a top priority for the Government. It is something we have consistently championed at EU level, to ensure that the people of Gaza are not forgotten.

The situation in the West Bank, too, is of deep concern. Israeli military operations have caused widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure and homes in recent years. The scale, speed and severity of displacement and demolitions is unprecedented. Recent decisions by the Israeli Government in relation to the West Bank contravene international law and are part of an established pattern to create a new *status quo* in the occupied Palestinian territory. Since the outbreak of this conflict at the weekend, Israel has imposed a comprehensive closure across the West Bank, imposing even further restrictions on movement between towns and villages, tightening checkpoints and limiting intercity travel. These actions are on top of economic measures taken by Israel across the West Bank, which are suffocating the economy. Israel has been withholding clearance of hundreds of millions of dollars in tax revenues collected on the behalf of the Palestinian Authority under a 1994 agreement known as the Paris Protocol. This is part of a systemic undermining by Israel of the Palestinian Authority, its reform agenda and the viability of the two-state solution. Ireland is not blind to these realities and will continue to support the Palestinian Authority and drive the implementation of the two-state solution, in line with international partners.

The Government of Ireland remains committed to addressing the consular needs of all citizens inadvertently caught up in this conflict. We will endeavour to ensure the safety of our citizens in the region as a top priority. Our citizens are diverse in the region. Their family members here at home are anxious, worried and frightened. They just want certainty for their loved ones. We will, understandably, have firm, constructive and robust political debate on wider issues but I ask all Deputies present to put the 24,000 or so Irish citizens to the forefront of their mind - not just them but their mothers, fathers, grandparents and children who are living in all our constituencies. They just want their loved ones safe; they just want their loved ones home. We are committed to our position as a country with a long track record of support for international law, the UN and peace across all countries of the Middle East.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Ar an gcéad dul síos, aontaím leis an méid atá ráite ag an Aire Stáit. Gan dabht, ba chóir go mbeadh ár saoránaigh mar thosaíocht ag an Rialtas. Ba cheart don Rialtas a chinntiú go bhfuil siad slán sábháilte agus go bhfuil cumarsáid mhaith leo agus lena gcuid teaghlach. Tá sé sin fiorthábhachtach. Tiocfaidh mé ar ais chuige sin.

Sometimes when you speak to people about politics, the international issues are not necessarily the first thing on their lips. They think about the bread and butter issues. This issue is something that does concern people. There is a very clear understanding among the general public that this conflict is particularly dangerous, without logic, without basis and at risk of spilling into something much greater and wider, with long-lasting ramifications for the region. It is important that we recognise that this was an act of aggression, it was an illegal act and it was against the UN Charter. Most of all, it was profoundly dangerous. Democrat and Republican Presidents for 20 or 30 years have made it almost an article of faith not to blindly enter into a conflict with Iran, in the knowledge that it was potentially a tinderbox for the entire region. We do not know how true that is going to become. We do not know the ramifications but what we see already, within days, is that this is now spilling into Bahrain in terms of civil unrest, it is clearly spilling into Lebanon, it is resulting in threats to Türkiye and it is potentially destabilising in terms of Syria, Yemen and other countries. As the Minister adverted to, it is

drawing the world's eyes away from the genocide that has been committed in Palestine and the potential for even greater neglect of the Palestinian people in terms of the ongoing killing and deprivation of aid. This is a particularly dangerous war. It is important that the Irish Government calls it what it is: a breach of international law and against the UN Charter. The Irish Government has not been quite so weak as the Governments of some other European countries, but there are other European countries that have said clearly what this is. People have focused on Spain, but I also want to instance Norway. Greater leadership needs to be shown.

Micheál Martin made a great play of the flaws of the UN at Leaders' Questions on Tuesday. He is right; the UN is not perfect by any manner or means. It contributes to the degradation of organisations such as the UN when the international community generally offers clear and firm condemnations - very often, rightly so - of countries in the global south, but it is not called out so clearly when the United States, Israel or other countries in the developed world breach international law. We all had lots of discussion about Mark Carney's speech, and this the very kind of thing he was speaking about. It undermines the multilateral order when we do not call something like this - a clear breach of international law, a breach of the UN Charter and an extremely dangerous war - for what it is. One of the points the Spanish Prime Minister made very well was that in recognising why this war is wrong and dangerous, we are by no means undermining our capacity to condemn the Iranian Government for what it has been responsible for in recent months and years. I have condemned on multiple occasions the brutal repression of protestors, the extrajudicial killing, the repression of political dissent and the repression of women's rights. That is crucially important - absolutely - but there is no contradiction there. I think Pedro Sánchez articulated that quite well.

For all the talk from the United States of the people of Iran, ultimately this is not in the interests of the people of Iran. Marco Rubio let the cat out of the bag when he said that they responded because Israel was going to strike. He said the US felt that if Israel was going to strike, it needed to get its retaliation in first, in effect. That was an extraordinary statement of how US policy is being dictated by the Israelis. He has tried to walk that back to some limited extent, but that statement and his response to it reflects the fact that there is no plan here, as far as I can see. That is one of the most frightening things. There is no plan here. The Pentagon is distancing itself from the White House. Marco Rubio is putting something out there and walking it back. JD Vance is missing. I do not know what is going on with him. What on earth is the plan? What is the objective? How do you say that when this conflict has achieved some kind of objective, you can settle some kind of peace? There is nothing like that. They have just decided to go to war with no sense of how they are going to get back out of it. Who is going to suffer most of all? It is the people of Iran and the people of this region.

I saw a tweet yesterday from RTÉ News. It stated, "The war in the Middle East has so far been defined by two images: Iranian drones and missiles plunging to the ground and exploding, and interceptors streaking into the skies to stop them". I am not one who particularly likes to say that RTÉ's coverage is forever off the wall. There is good stuff, bad stuff and whatever. I have to say that I really disagree with that. Yes, the drones and everything that goes along with them are a significant feature, but for me the defining image of this conflict is the image of dozens of girls wrapped in their shrouds having been bombed at their school. There are different reports, but it looks like well over 100 - it is certainly in the area of 140 - schoolchildren and schoolgirls were killed. I do not know how anyone cannot see that as the

defining image. The drones and so on are a reminder. War has been a feature of life for all of human history, unfortunately. We must come to terms with what that means. Ultimately, it carries a heavy price. It carries a heavy price that we can see that the Iranian people and the people of the region are bearing.

It is right to say that we must urge for diplomacy and call for restraint. It is difficult to be optimistic when you hear the rhetoric that is coming from the US Government and the Israeli Government and when you see that a ship was sunk with no effort to try to save the survivors. Again, where does that stand in international law? It is quite shameful not to rescue people in distress. Unfortunately, the track record of the United States, supported and encouraged by Israel in this instance, in terms of military interference in the Middle East has been disastrous. There have been decades of invasions and occupations. This latest action risks repeating that tragic history. The Irish Government must use its voice and bring every political lever to bear in the interests of diplomacy. Unfortunately, this came off the back of negotiations which Oman claims were making progress. Unfortunately, they were simply discarded in the blind rush to war without logic, reason or an objective or rationale.

We have spoken about the situation in Lebanon, which is extremely dangerous. I too condemn the attacks from Israel and Hezbollah in both instances. As much as I state clearly that this is an attack that is unjustified, I condemn very clearly any response from Iran that involves targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure, whether in the Gulf region or any countries surrounding it. It is important in all instances to condemn attacks on civilians. That is true in Lebanon as well. The Israeli Government is talking about clearing, as it would see it, the area south of the Litani River, which is obviously the area in which Camp Shamrock, the long-standing Irish presence through UNIFIL, is based. We send our thoughts to the Irish personnel. I know it is a worrying situation for them. I know they are committed and dedicated to their task. There is no fear of that and no question of that. They are proud of their role, and I am sure they will do all within their power to ensure it is fulfilled. It is of course a worrying time. I ask the Minister to ensure that the Opposition, generally speaking, is kept apprised of the situation there. It again demonstrates the dangers of this war and the huge consequences it has for the people of the region.

The volatility of this conflict demonstrates to me the value of our neutrality. Our neutrality does not relate simply to where we deploy our troops; it is also central to the notion of an independent foreign policy philosophy that allows us to ensure we can - and we should - call out breaches of international law and breaches of human rights from wherever they come.

3 o'clock

We are a small nation. We will never be a major military power but we should be able to create a situation in which our place in the world is not to be swept along by one side or the other by the tides of the great powers but, rather, one where we are able to stand on our own two feet as a neutral State and plot our own course in terms of our philosophy and foreign policy. This illustrates all the more why neutrality is vitally important at a time when arguments are being made to undermine it.

In the time I have left, I will mention Palestine. It is unusual to have statements on the Middle East without Palestine being the first item on the agenda. Certainly, it must remain on our minds. Israel has committed a genocide, as far as I am concerned. It has attempted to wipe

out Gaza. We have a so-called ceasefire in which hundreds of people have died since it began. It is hard to see it as a ceasefire and I am not sure whether the people of Gaza experience it that way. There is increased settler violence in the West Bank without consequence or retribution. The Rafah crossing is shut again and humanitarian aid is being restricted. Humanitarian personnel, including medical personnel and a number of key agencies, are restricted in their access. One issue on Gaza I encourage the Minister and Minister of State to bring up in their engagement internationally, particularly with the US, is to ensure that medical personnel who want to get in to assist the situation are given access. They are being denied access on spurious grounds. It is having a huge impact on public and maternal health and the ability to respond to attacks, injuries and the humanitarian situation on the ground.

On the consular side, I acknowledge, as ever, the professionalism and dedication of the Department of foreign affairs' staff. They put in long hours in situations like this. They are dedicated. From talking to people, some may have had difficulties contacting the embassy initially, given the pressure it was under. It is right and welcome that there is now a centralised situation in Dublin. Understandably, the bulk of people are in the UAE, with maybe the second biggest group in Saudi Arabia, but there are Irish communities in Oman, Qatar, Bahrain and so on. There are people trying to think ahead as to whether evacuation notices will potentially be issued in some of those countries that do not have flights at this moment. I think Bahrain and Qatar are in that category. In those circumstances - I know the Minister will not comment on this because she would be worried about creating fear, speculation and so on - it is important there is dialogue with people in those countries because they are worried about how they will respond if an evacuation notice is issued and there are no flights available. There is a particular group about which I might correspond with the Minister to allow her to respond.

We will need further chartered flights because there are at least 2,000 people who are anxious to leave. Obviously, there are only a few hundred seats on a flight. When it comes to the cost, while I understand these flights are expensive, it is crucial that people who might be effectively running out of money, such as people whose holidays have gone on longer than planned or who were over visiting family, are able to get on these flights. An additional chartered flight will undoubtedly be needed.

I wish to respond on the energy stuff. I listened to the Tánaiste earlier. It was as if there were not a problem in this regard already. It was as if there were not already a cost-of-living crisis and people under pressure. He talked about not having a knee-jerk response to a situation that is five or six days old. We have some of the highest electricity prices in Europe, generally speaking, and some of highest petrol prices in Europe. People are already at the pin of their collar. The cost of energy is one of the key issues for people, whether households or small businesses. I am entirely underwhelmed by the response of the Government to the energy and cost-of-living crises anyway but when we see the cost of home heating oil shooting up in recent days in response to what is happening in the Gulf, it is clear that more action is needed. It is the wrong time to increase the carbon tax and we warned the Government about the energy credits. Some 320,000 people are now in arrears, which is a record high. There must be a response to the pinch on energy costs for people.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I begin by saying that the genocide in Gaza and the resulting inaction and silence by the EU made it quite clear to Israel and Trump's America that they had a free hand to do whatever they liked in the region, causing an unprovoked war of aggression that has

caused chaos right across the Middle East and left an untold number of dead. Yes, we have seen horrifying reports of crackdowns on recent protests in Iran, and any loss of life when protesting for greater democratic rights and freedoms is to be condemned. That does not justify the slaughter of further innocents by foreign airstrikes, however. There can be no moral high ground in this regard, especially when three generations of a family were wiped out to take out a foreign leader.

This took place against the backdrop of negotiations to achieve a new nuclear deal, something which the world had been crying out for since Donald Trump tore up the first deal to appear strong on foreign relations to his audience on Fox News. Just three days before US-Israeli strikes, the Omani foreign minister said that significant progress had been achieved but then bombs landed in Tehran and across Iran. That included the bombing of a school, as the Minister mentioned, in Minab that left at least 160 innocent children, and their loved ones waiting to collect them, dead. Days later, the Americans and Israelis still collectively deny their hand in the slaughter. We are supposed to believe that these killers are investigating the source. They only have to look at their high-tech satellites that were covering Iran that day and they will know in minutes. That is what we have created by standing back and being too cowardly to say, "Stop. No more". We have allowed a normalisation of this behaviour that has eroded international norms and literally blown apart any semblance of the observation of international law.

A decapitation strike against the Iranian leadership is not an action of countries interested in reaching a peaceful resolution to nuclear proliferation. Rather, it is the action of an emboldened and rogue nation that thinks it can do whatever it wants because there will be no real consequences. If a country is truly serious about negotiations, it does not wipe out the negotiators or as many of the leaders as it can find.

For decades, Israel wanted a US President to launch these types of attacks against Iran, and now Netanyahu has one. An Iranian frigate was torpedoed off the Sri Lankan coast, despite posing no threat to Israel or the US. The US sunk it with all hands and the submarine responsible did not even pause to help the survivors. It was decided that leaving sailors to drown was a war crime a long time ago, yet Trump's spokespersons are bragging about it now.

The Spanish have shown us real moral leadership in the past few days. The refusal to be a part of the killing shows a backbone entirely absent when it comes to the use of Shannon Airport. An Taoiseach travels to Washington in one week. It is imperative that Ireland is not used to lend legitimacy to this war of aggression that has brought destruction across the Middle East. There can be no repeat of last year's laughing and carry on in the Oval Office while civilians right across the Middle East, including many Irish expats and holidaymakers, are waiting in suspended terror for the next air raid siren to blow. We must use whatever leverage we have in both the EU and UN to bring an immediate end to this conflict before more lives are lost.

We must bring the apartheid State of Israel to account for its destabilising influence across the whole region by a cancellation of the association agreement that allows it to trade with the EU. We failed to do so when it murdered over 100,000 innocent people and children in Gaza or when it levelled and ethnically cleansed villages and towns. When was the last time the Government spoke about the man-made famine in and blockade of Gaza? A peace deal is broken every day when people go without the basics, like water, food and shelter. Israel has

now drawn the whole region into the conflict. Who is next? What is next? We cannot afford to stand back this time. We cannot afford to wash our hands of it when we will be standing in the midst of an American President who has facilitated a genocide so that a holiday resort can be erected on top of Gazan graves. We must work in the UN to achieve a resolution for an immediate ceasefire and do what we can to show Israel that its actions are unacceptable.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Over the past few days, we have seen Iran's cities bombed, its leader assassinated and civil infrastructure destroyed.

Among the targets hit was a girls' elementary school, where people, including innocent schoolchildren, the most vulnerable members of society, were slaughtered. These facts alone should give world leaders, including the Irish Government, pause for serious thought. These developments risk pushing an already volatile region closer to a much broader war.

My party has repeatedly condemned the Iranian Government's appalling human rights records. Protestors have been brutally crushed, women subjected to severe discrimination and violence for demanding basic freedoms, and political dissidents imprisoned. However, the policies of any government do not grant another state the right to bomb its cities and murder its citizens. International law does not operate on the basis of whether we approve of a government. The United Nations Charter sets out clear rules for the use of force. Military action is permitted only in cases of imminent self-defence or when authorised by the UN. These principles exist precisely to prevent powerful states from deciding unilaterally when force can be used. For nations like Ireland, international law is not an abstract concept; it is the foundation of a system that protects states from the arbitrary use of power. That is why events like these matter so deeply. The Middle East has endured decades of conflict, western interference and geopolitical rivalry. We have seen repeated military attacks and invasions justified in the language of "security" and "stability", from Iraq to Libya to Syria, yet the outcomes have only been shattered societies, prolonged instability and immense human suffering.

It is also impossible to understand today's situation without acknowledging the shameful history of US interference in Iran. In 1953, the United States and Britain orchestrated the overthrow of Iran's Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, after he sought to nationalise his country's oil resources. The coup destroyed Iran's democracy and replaced it with a dictatorship of the Shah, setting in motion the chain of events that ultimately brought Iran's current rulers to power. Today, the Middle East is under immense pressure. The genocide in Gaza has outraged people, and rightly so, across the globe. Lebanon faces severe political and economic strain and Syria continues to grapple with the consequences of years of conflict.

Against that backdrop, further escalation by Israel and the United States against Iran is wrong in itself but it also carries enormous risks. There is a risk of widening the conflict, drawing in other actors and triggering consequences that would be felt far beyond the region itself. We are already seeing signs of that wider impact. Here at home, people are already experiencing the knock-on effects through rising fuel prices. However, beyond the economic consequences lies a fundamental issue. Ireland has long taken pride in an independent foreign policy grounded in respect for international law and a commitment to military neutrality. Those principles have allowed Ireland to speak with credibility and consistency on the international stage. However, what we are seeing from this Government is not leadership; it is hesitation,

equivocation and the instinctive deference of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael when powerful states break the rules.

The Taoiseach has spoken of being concerned and called for restraint on all sides but he has refused to do the one thing leadership demands, which is to clearly condemn the US and Israel for a flagrant violation of international law. This silence is not neutrality; it is timidity. Last week, the Taoiseach told me directly that Ireland can stand militarily with states engaged in conflict. That language undermines Ireland's proud tradition of military neutrality. Neutrality matters precisely at moments like these. It means we do not align ourselves with aggression and we defend international law consistently. Across Europe, leaders such as Spain's Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, have shown far greater courage by speaking clearly, defending international law and calling out violations wherever they occur. That is what principled leadership looks like.

What we are seeing instead from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael is caution and hesitation. Neutrality is not simply a historical tradition; it is a deliberate policy choice reflecting Ireland's belief that diplomacy and international co-operation offer a more sustainable path to peace than military escalation. The people of the Middle East have endured far too much violence. They deserve a future defined not by war and instability but by peace, security and dignity. Ireland should be using every diplomatic channel available within the European Union, the United Nations and beyond to press for de-escalation and a return to negotiations.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Before I discuss the issue of the Middle East, I preface my comments with reference to the consular response to our citizens who have been stuck, indeed trapped, in the Middle East. Our consular response has been really good. We need to remember our missions are not set up or orientated towards the mass evacuation of citizens or people stuck in transit. There will be difficulties and we hope people will remain safe. We will continue to work and keep pressure on to ensure we have flights out of there but the evacuation of people is a very difficult situation. The setting-up of the crisis group here centrally has been a good thing and the lines of communication, at least for us, to the Minister's office at the Department of foreign affairs have been good.

It is a situation that is almost beyond words and description. Deputy Ahern and I will have 15 minutes between ourselves to try to put our words to this crisis and situation in the Middle East, but we have never before been faced with this kind of conflict or war that is being exercised in the first instance by the United States and Israel upon Iran. There are no angels or good guys in this war. Iran's tyrannical regime is just that. It is an abhorrent regime with extrajudicial killings and the systematic oppression of women, the LGBTQ community, dissent and political opposition - the list goes on. It is an horrific regime.

What Israel and the US are doing is the breaking of international law. The Minister's opening comments were the strongest she has made in terms of condemning the United States and Israel and saying they have no mandate or authorisation from the UN, which is de facto saying the attacks and the war are illegal without actually using those words. It is important we use those words. One of the most important things the Minister said in her contribution was, "Ultimately, the future of Iran must be determined by the people of Iran and in a way that creates stability in the region." In the first instance, it should be about creating stability, democracy and peace in Iran, which would then have further positive impacts for the region,

but I will return to that. We are where we are in this horrific place because of the actions, predominantly, of Donald Trump and the Israeli Government.

The international anti-nuclear weapons regime has been successful in keeping Iran from developing a nuclear weapon through negotiations, the IAEA, the United Nations and sanctions. It is not easy, and Iran has been pushing and pushing towards developing a nuclear weapon, but negotiations have kept that at bay to this point. Negotiations were taking place and agreements were in place and Trump, being the tin-pot hard man that he is, ripped them up, and look where he is now. He has begun a war that has no strategy or concept of what victory would look like, such as victory in any war can be. He is taking on a country that is unconquerable. It may be next to Iraq but it is not Iraq. Iran is a country of huge mountain ranges and high plateaus. It is absolutely unconquerable. This President, with Israel, has begun a war for which there will be no end and no peace negotiations that we can see. That he is going to continue to rain missiles such as those that, on day one, killed over 160 girls in a school in Minab brings a sense of despair to all of us that there is no concept of how this can be ended in any possible way.

I commend Pedro Sánchez on providing leadership within the European Union and calling this war what it is, an illegal war. We should be following that leadership. We in Ireland should be using our experience of bringing peace to our own island. We should be the voices, the amplifiers and the accommodators of what could bring peace to Iran.

I know the Minister has invitations to meet credible groups of democracy grassroots networks in Iran. We cannot believe that the answer to this war will be whoever is left from the revolutionary guard that Trump will want to cut a deal with. We cannot believe it will be Reza Pahlavi, the son of the Shah, who presided over a decades-long corrupt regime and is now a poster man for the far right and is being endorsed by people like Tommy Robinson and Nigel Farage.

Real democracy will come from the grassroots, from the new political groups in civil society and from the women and feminist networks that are operating under the most appalling oppression to try to provide some hope for the people of Iran. They have nobody articulating support for them in our part of the world. If we are to be productive, proactive and positive in some way and if Donald Trump will not listen to us when we call a halt and want a ceasefire, we can engage with these groups as a country that is militarily neutral, but not politically neutral. We do take sides, and we will take sides with those who believe in peace and those who believe in democracy. They are there. They are buried on the fringes of Iranian society, but they are there and they need a voice in our part of the world. We have to be that voice.

It is a very dark time. We are in the midst of the intensity of missile fire and continued attacks. Iran has now thrown its missiles out, causing further destabilisation in the region, such as in the Emirates, where we have so many citizens and where people are living is under attack. I hope the UAE, which has positioned itself internationally as one of the safest places in the world but has continued to support violence in Sudan, will now look at its own foreign policy and realise it is not the safest place in the world and can be subject to attacks like anyone else. I hope it will ask itself what it is doing around the world. They need to look at themselves and pull back and help bring peace to Sudan, which they are destabilising and where they are participating in the killing of so many thousands of people.

This has and will continue to overshadow what is going on in Palestine and the killings that continue in Gaza and the spread by Israel into the occupied territories. We cannot allow that to fall off the agenda. Our comments on Lebanon and our history with Lebanon have been strong and we need to push back to support the UNIFIL mission, which is unfortunately on the wind-down again because of US and Israel pressure. People are now fleeing Beirut in mass numbers because Israel is on the march. Ireland has a big voice. We do not have military power and nor should we. We are a militarily neutral country, but we have a political voice and we are not politically neutral. We should be calling out breaches of international law when we see them, and we are seeing them with the United States and Israel. We should be a voice. We have expertise on this island that can engage with people on the ground. Even in countries such as Iran that are shut down, we can be proper pro-democracy voices, not agents of what the United States may view as regime change. We know what real peace looks like. We know how difficult it can be. We know how long it takes. We know the hard yards. We can bring a bit of our experience, even in the darkest of times. I ask the Minister to look at the invitations on her desk and to meet with the people who can make a difference to the future of Iran.

We should not be sharing shamrock in a couple of weeks' time. It feels almost trite to say it because in the overall scheme of things it is not that important, but the symbolism is. No one in Ireland at the moment feels that Donald Trump is a friend of ours or a friend of global peace. In fact, he is not. I ask that at this stage we reassess our approach to that St. Patrick's Day visit. Our thoughts are with all the victims who are living under intense bombardment and facing death on a minute-by-minute basis in Iran and throughout the Gulf region. We should do everything we can to articulate a true path to peace.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I first and foremost send my solidarity to the innocent people in Iran and the broader Middle East who are caught in the middle of this illegal war between a brutal and repressive Iranian regime, a genocidal Israeli regime and an increasingly fascist and autocratic American regime. By the way, this is not a "situation" in the Middle East, which is the title the Government has put on this speaking slot. This is an illegal war and a flagrant breach of international law, prosecuted in the first instance by the US and Israel. Even the title of today's statements betrays our Government's lack of backbone in calling it out as such.

I also send my solidarity today to those who have fought for decades for democracy in Iran and continue to do so, and I pay tribute to all who have given their lives for that cause. It is the Iranian people, not Donald Trump or Benjamin Netanyahu, who must choose their next leaders. We must be clear that the US and Israel do not have the best interests of the Iranian people in their minds when they do this. They are in it for themselves, but there are civil society groups and leaders in Iran calling for international partners to help them facilitate an international dialogue to enable a self-determined transition in Iran. We want Ireland and our Government to play a leading role in that process, but we will not get there by pussyfooting around in how we describe what is happening. This is an illegal war, so will the Minister please be clear on that, ask the Taoiseach to be clear on that and condemn the US and Israel for it? It represents a flagrant breach of international law and US constitutional law. This is not a war of self-defence on America's part. There was no imminent threat. This is a war of opportunism. Benjamin Netanyahu saw an opportunity to take out the Ayatollah, something he has been trying to do since the 1990s, and his lapdog Donald Trump has been more than willing to do

his bidding for him with, even for this Trump Administration, a shocking lack of foresight or a plan for what comes next.

We know the Iranian regime is tyrannical, totalitarian and deeply repressive. We have seen it murder thousands of Iranian people just in recent months. We in the Labour Party have been consistent and forceful in our condemnation of that Iranian regime and in our support for pro-democracy movements and women's rights campaigners, and no one more so than my colleague Deputy Smith, who has been the loudest and most consistent voice in this House in calling out the brutal Iranian regime. However, as our party leader, Deputy Bacik, said during Leaders' Questions earlier this week, two things can be true at once. We can oppose an authoritarian regime and still insist that international law is upheld. There is no evidence basis for this war. There was no imminent threat. A number of things have got us to where we are today. As Deputy Smith discussed, Donald Trump ripped up the Iran nuclear deal, the JCPOA. That has set the course for where the Middle East is today. Its impact has been profound and completely undermined the ambition of nuclear non-proliferation.

In Europe, too, we need to be honest about our own role in the path towards this war. For years, the US and Israel have been given *carte blanche* to behave however they like and to run roughshod over international law without any meaningful consequences. As a community of nations, and as individual states in Europe, we have acquiesced, appeased and stayed silent, and so we have emboldened the Trump and Netanyahu regimes and allowed them to believe the normal rules do not apply to them. No real effort has been made to impose sanctions at European level. Here at home, the occupied territories Bill has effectively been abandoned despite election promises. Israel has been allowed to level Gaza, murder with impunity and continue to expand its illegal settlements in the West Bank.

If the Taoiseach is still intent on travelling to the US for St. Patrick's Day and visiting the Oval Office, it cannot be another exercise in pandering. The Irish people will not allow our heritage to be used to shamrock-wash the flagrant breaches of international and domestic law carried out by Donald Trump. Ireland is in a unique position to have an annual face-to-face meeting in the White House with the President, but what good is that if we are simply going to use it to gloss over the erosion of democracy and international law at the hands of our supposed ally? The Taoiseach must have the moral courage and steel to speak up at this unique opportunity for the UN, for peace and for upholding international law. I will not hold my breath.

We call on the Minister to ensure the Taoiseach does not continue his policy of appeasement towards Trump. While we can condemn the Iranian regime and its authoritarianism, the actions of Israel and America completely undermine the international rules-based order.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: To start, I agree entirely with the Minister that first and foremost in this debate our thoughts have to be with the 24,000 citizens of this country in the Middle East. I too commend the diplomatic teams working there to ensure their safety. This has to be our priority, and the Government is right in adopting that approach.

Before I turn to the geopolitical situation, I will comment on a number of specific impacts here. There has obviously been a discussion around what has been happening with fuel prices and the price gouging going on. The Minister will also be aware from her former brief that quite a number of import and export businesses rely on trade coming from the region. They

are going to experience significant disruption. It is important the Government keeps an eye on what happens in this space and that the necessary supports are provided to those businesses, if necessary.

I reject the idea that the Taoiseach is engaged in some sort of appeasement. The Taoiseach is very committed to defending international law. We have been very strong in this country and in this Government in talking about the importance of multilateralism. I am very proud of the tradition of multilateralism, in both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, where support for our membership of the United Nations and of the European Union is embedded within our parties. That will continue. This involves listening to and engaging with all parties, and not cheap stunts like calling for the expulsion of ambassadors and so on. Our approach talks about real diplomacy and fully understanding all the geopolitical issues involved.

In recent months and years, we have witnessed horrors in Gaza and the West Bank. I call out the genocide that has happened and the disgraceful actions of the Israel Defence Forces. I spoke in the first debate we had on the Middle East. I checked back over the Official Record and I was the only Deputy to mention Iran's role in all of this and its role in terms of using its proxies, Hamas and Hezbollah. We need to reflect on the fact that all these conflicts are linked.

I heard a number of colleagues opposite praising Pedro Sanchez. I have a lot of time for Pedro Sanchez, and I think he is correct that the actions of the United States and Israel are wrong. He is also committed, however, to geopolitical solutions to issues and he has also called out those who have opposed giving a loan to Ukraine to ensure the country can continue to defend itself. The reality is that the only reason Ukraine has not been reduced to the rubble we have seen in Gaza is that the State of Ukraine has been able to stand up against the might of Russia and support to do that has been provided by Europe. Those who oppose giving assistance to Ukraine now are guilty of complicity in the genocide being committed by Russia against the Ukrainian people. I requested a debate in this House two weeks ago on Ukraine to mark the anniversary of Russia's illegal invasion. It did not happen. I again ask in this geopolitical context that it would happen. It is important that we debate what is happening there because what is going on there is very much linked to what is happening in the Middle East. Let there be no mistake about the relationship between Tehran and Moscow, and the fact that Iran has been supplying drones to Russia, drones that are being used against the Ukrainian people.

I have no doubt about the actions of the United States and Israel that are wrong but we do need to start to talk about Iran, its role in the world and this idea that somehow Donald Trump has no respect for international law but the mullahs in Iran do have some sort of respect for it. That is complete nonsense. If we look at Iran, this is not a new war. Iran has been engaged in a hybrid and grey-zone war against so many countries over such a long period. Even if we look back over the past few days, where has Iran bombed? It has not just tried to target the United States and Israel. It has also directed its weapons against Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, UAE, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. There are certainly questions about all those jurisdictions. We know that Iran is not some innocent party in all of this.

Iran has been the master for many years of hybrid or grey-zone warfare. It thinks about what it can get away with. It has proxies in Yemen, Lebanon and Palestine, including Hamas and Hezbollah. These are organisations that have caused untold damage. Let it not be forgotten that Hezbollah was responsible for the 2022 killing of UN peacekeeper Private Seán Rooney.

Remember as well that the individual convicted by a Lebanese military tribunal of that killing, Mohammad Ayyad, allegedly sought refuge in Iran and was protected there. Iran, therefore, provided safe harbour to somebody convicted of the killing of a peacekeeper and Iran funded the killing of that peacekeeper because of its ongoing support of Hezbollah. When it comes to cybercrime, Iran is one of the four countries globally that is by far the most involved in cybercrime, including against this State.

I have not even started to talk about how women and minorities, particularly the LGTB community, are treated by the authorities in Tehran. If people identify as LGTB or in any way show any sort of affection for somebody of the same sex, they face the death penalty. This is morally wrong. Ever since the mullahs came to power in 1979, when we talk about Islamic law being enforced, it means non-compliance with it will meet with a violent response from the Iranian authorities. There is mandatory veiling. In fact, gender apartheid has long existed in Iran.

I strongly believe that we do need to call out what the US and Israel have done but there is something else we need to call out in this House. We see members of the Irish-American movement protesting about this and claiming to speak on behalf of the Iranian people while real Iranians are having to organise counterprotests to say they know what is going on in their country. This is the perfect example of what Thomas Piketty, the French economist, referred to as the Brahmin left, the left that has long since given up really caring about workers and is more enthused about telling people in this country and other countries how they should be living. By the way, I love the fact it was some of the same people who were telling the Iranians how they should be living who only a few weeks ago met with a counterprotest from Venezuelans who welcomed the removal of the dictator Maduro.

Up to 30,000 people have been killed in the protests in Iran since the start of this year because they engaged in peaceful protest against discrimination by the regime. I, for one, do not believe that the removal of Ayatollah Khamenei is a bad thing. I strongly condemn attacks on any innocents, whether it happens in Iran, the West Bank, Israel, Syria or any other country. The removal of the ayatollah and the despotic regime, however, is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, I believe that in the long term, it will be a good thing for the region.

We need to go further, however. We need to ensure international law is respected. We need to lead a campaign when it comes to reform of the UN.

I am a strong supporter of our neutrality, but our neutrality means our hands should not be tied by members of the Security Council. We will not get a peacekeeping mission in Lebanon because the US will veto it. There will not be a peacekeeping mission in Ukraine because Russia will veto it. China's economic interests, as we saw in the Balkans but also in other regions, will ensure that China will veto many of those missions as well. Those who argue in favour of maintaining the triple lock are actually in favour of destroying Irish neutrality. They are in favour of handing over our powers to decide on our future defence and security policy to Washington, Moscow or Beijing.

It is very easy for us in this country to speak about the horrors happening in so many other parts of the world. Ireland is not perfect, but I always point out to people that we are incredibly lucky to live in an open, safe, prosperous democracy where people can peacefully protest outside our national Parliament, and as we know, there are peaceful protests outside every day

of the week. Real people are being impacted, however, by the decisions happening and by what is going on in the Middle East. In our debates on this, we cannot allow an anti-Americanism to creep in. Friends will call out the United States, but let us have no doubt that the Iranian regime is a hateful, despotic regime that needs to be removed. This country needs to stand with the ordinary, innocent individuals of Iran and particularly those brave people who have been protesting against the actions of the Khamenei regime over the past number of years.

As a country, we need to recommit ourselves to multilateralism. We need to support the stance that was taken by Mark Carney, the Canadian Prime Minister, at Davos. The Government and the Taoiseach have provided the right path in terms of the approach we are taking. For smaller countries and middle-ranking powers, it is important that we co-operate and work together. Our principled approach on this, whether it is dealing with Tehran, Washington, Moscow or Beijing, must be that we will always stand up for those things that have always been integral to this State, namely, human rights, the rule of law and the protection of democracy.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I call on Deputy Ó Murchú, I welcome the members of the Filipino Multicultural Society, who are here at the behest of Deputy Devlin. They, as well as our other guests who I am sure are on their tour, are most welcome. I hope they enjoy the proceedings.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: First and foremost, I commend the professionalism and dedication of our consular staff. Many of us have engaged with those working out of our embassies across the Middle East at this time and those working in Dublin. I have no doubt nearly everybody in here has been contacted by those who have found themselves stranded, in some cases in relatively precarious scenarios where they may have medical conditions and other circumstances. I have no doubt there will be a need for further charter flights and that far greater resources will need to be provided. We need to ensure we do absolutely everything from the point of view of looking after Irish people who are stranded down to what has been not only a breach of international law but a crazy act by genocidal Israel, and America following on its coattails, and not for the first time in the Middle East carrying out acts that are not even beneficial to America from the point of view of its own foreign policy and strategy. That is, unfortunately, par for the course.

It has been said by many here that oil prices have shot through the roof, whether at the forecourts or in the purchase of kerosene. Action has been taken straight away, with nothing about reserves or hedging or anything else. It is absolutely right that the Minister would call in the industry. We need to see action.

Regarding the CCPC, we will be very interested in what the Minister, Deputy Burke, says will be an investigation that should take in or around a month. We need to see action straight away. We have stated for some time that the regular people of Ireland are under severe pressure with the cost-of-living crisis, and it goes without saying that this only adds to it. While we will attempt to keep manners on those who gouge, we also need to provide support for those who are under severe pressure. Those with disabilities are high among them. I again call for an emergency cost-of-disability payment to be delivered.

Iran is not a state that any of us is going to stand up and defend. We are all aware of its many sins over many years. However, how did this Islamic Republic come to power in 1979? It followed the chequered history of America in the Middle East. It was a coup to ensure the Shah would be in a position to ensure American interests were absolutely protected and that there would be no chance of the nationalisation of those resources, particularly oil, which America cared about. It is obviously an utterly repressive regime, and we are now dealing with the outworkings of it. If anyone remembers the Iran-Contra affair, the Americans illegally sold weapons so that the CIA could make money to provide it to the Contras in Nicaragua to fight against the Sandinistas. American foreign policy has not just gone rogue with Donald Trump; it did not start in a particularly great place. We also know that when America had an issue with Iran, it decided it would use its great friend Iraq and Saddam Hussein. That did not blow up in any way, shape or form.

We do not know where this ends. We do know what is happening to civilians across the Middle East at the moment and our thoughts are with them. We are aware that 185 civilians were killed in an attack on a school, many of them schoolgirls. We have all seen the pictures. Not only have we seen a ship attacked by the Israelis and the Americans, but what was almost worse was the fact the survivors were not saved. I do not know what we can call that but a war crime.

I will give Benjamin Netanyahu one thing: he is consistent. He is not only a genocidal maniac who wants to ensure there is no Palestinian state, but he is absolutely committed to this attack on Iran, which is absolutely illegal and needs to be condemned by this Government. Let us be clear: Marco Rubio let it out of the bag when he stated that the Israelis were going to do it anyway, so America followed on. It is an absolute disgrace. The Government has to be stronger on this. The EU has failed miserably.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I call on Deputy Gibney, we have a very special guest, who has just compered the International Women's Day event here in the Oireachtas, Ms Julie Dwyer, and her family, the McCracken family. They are some of the finest musicians and singers in Wexford. They are most welcome, as are our other guests in the Gallery.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I too extend a welcome to the McCracken family. I do not think there is a musician in Wexford who will not have visited the Dáil by the end of this term. It is lovely to have them here for International Women's Day.

I wish to start by addressing the consular response. My colleague our spokesperson for foreign affairs, Senator Stephenson, spoke about her disappointment that for many people in these regions, the first contact they received was a link to a PayPal account asking for payment of €800 for a flight. Unfortunately, the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, who has left the Chamber, responded in the press today essentially criticising Senator Stephenson for not mentioning children and so on, which she did in her contribution in the Seanad this morning. She has been very comprehensive and clear on this. We do not have an issue with the payment *per se*. What we have an issue with are clear reports coming through that people are finding communication difficult.

For some people, the first communication they have had is essentially asking people to pay €800 for a flight home from an active war zone before they board the flight. That is really quite

horrificing right now. This is not just a consular crisis; this is a war zone suffering active bombardment. The Minister compared it to the Covid response and bringing people home during Covid. I am sorry; that is not the same. The only reason this is different is people are not being moved as they would normally be from a war zone by the Department of Defence. Instead, it is being managed in different ways. I appreciate that and, once again, it is not the concept or the principle of a fee that is the problem. It is the fact that people are being asked to pay it before they have even gotten the flight. In some cases, that will be a family with a number of people who have already paid for flights home and not flown and now they are being asked to put further money towards ensuring their own safety.

I was on a television show with the same Minister of State on Tuesday of this week and my first message on this whole response was that I was still in shock that the Government was not condemning the attacks by the US and Israel. I still find it shocking. I welcome that the Minister has gone a little further today in her tone but the Government is stopping short of condemning what the US and Israel have done in breaking international law and essentially starting this conflict. We have just heard 15 minutes from Deputy Malcolm Byrne, who spoke about the horrific Iranian regime. None of us are denying that. He gave about 30 seconds of lip service to condemning the US and Israel. I find that disproportionate when what we are seeing on day five of this is a result of the attack by the US and Israel. I appreciate that Iran is engaged in grey-zone warfare, as he described it. I appreciate the oppressive regime that has been putting Iran's people down for so long and I certainly acknowledge that it is responsible for the deaths of thousands of protestors in the past few weeks but what the US and Israel have done is go to the tinderbox that is the Middle East and drop a lit match. We are all living with the repercussions of that. The Government not being able to outrightly and forthrightly condemn that is something I really have a huge issue with.

When we were on that panel show together on Tuesday, the Minister of State focused on the consular response. I took that in good faith and said to him live on air that I acknowledged that the Government is prioritising vulnerable people, and I acknowledge the good work being done when that first charter flight was announced. I am genuinely dismayed that what followed from that is that those people are getting a link sent to them with a PayPal request for €800 before they even board the plane.

The chain reaction that has been set off is under much discussion here today but I want us to remain steadfast in not forgetting where this started, which is the US and Israel choosing to do this, with motivations as yet unclear. The Trump Administration is jumping around between regime change and nuclear disarmament as it suits it. It does not have a plan. It never had a plan. Trump likes invading countries. That is clear a year and a bit into his term. It is also clear that he has found what he likes to do and is going to continue doing it. He has invaded seven different countries since his return to office: Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Nigeria and Somalia. He has indirectly been responsible for further attacks by Israel by providing it with arms and other countries too. He has also attacked ships in Latin American waters and, of course, on top of all of this, he has cut USAID so that any of the normal humanitarian, peacebuilding and peacekeeping responses we might expect to see in the wake of such a conflict are not going to happen because he has crippled the globe with his actions. All of these are weapons of mass distraction to avert our eyes here in Ireland and domestically in the US from his domestic failings, his tanking popularity and the atrocities he is levying across our world. We cannot forget where this is coming from.

We can absolutely condemn the Iranian regime and the fact that it has retaliated with the strikes it is carrying out across multiple countries within the region and further afield but we cannot forget where it came from. This Government must condemn that. In condemning it, what the Government would be doing is saying that it respects rules-based order and multilateralism and that when somebody breaks that rules-based order, whether they are friend or foe, we condemn it. That is what multilateralism is. That is what respect for a global rules-based order is. We do not pick and choose when we decide to condemn the breaking of international law; we do it consistently so that it means something. Multilateralism is a proactive position. It is not something we do passively. We live it and breathe it. We exercise our membership of both the European Union and the United Nations through practising the condemnation of the breaking of international law and supporting those countries that are victims of it.

Neutrality is also a proactive position. I raise this now as many will do during these statements because the current incursion by this Government into our neutrality has been to chip away at it for years. What the Government is trying to do with this defence legislation passing through the Houses at the moment is put the final nail in the coffin of our neutrality by removing the triple lock. The triple lock was the reason we were not engaged in the Iraq war a couple of decades ago and the removal of the triple lock will mean that we do have that same guard-rail against this increasingly volatile world. That is why the triple lock is so important and why we have to double down on it now. We are proud of our long history of commitment to peace and our moral compass in a world where a powerful few are increasingly trying to oppress the many. We are proud of what we have achieved through diplomacy, peacekeeping and neutrality. Our leaders are being pushed into this and being pushed to back away from our neutrality by lobbyists for big weapons company. More wars mean more profits. Our triple lock on peace stands in their way.

Our Government has a choice. It can stand up to the arms industry and fight for a world where co-operation, safety and peace flourish or it can give in, putting us, our children, grandchildren and our neighbours across Europe at greater risk of violence and danger. Irish peacekeepers are known across the globe for bringing safety, stability and hope. We can remain strong because we refuse to surrender to pressure from arms corporations that profit from violence. The triple lock is our guarantee to that. Most people in Ireland agree that our position on peacekeeping and neutrality makes us stronger. Keeping the triple lock intact by stopping the defence (amendment) Bill is the only way we can truly copper-fasten our commitment to peace and basically triple lock our future in this increasingly volatile world.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The US and Israel are bombing Iran in a clear breach of international law. We have seen this playbook in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is not about regime change for the people of Iran; it is about regime change for US and Israeli interests. You do not bomb a school, killing hundreds of children, while claiming to stand for peace. Israel is bombing Lebanon. It is continuing its genocidal war in Gaza. The Government must call this out for what it is. It is wrong, illegal and it will not bring peace. This is about neocolonialism in the 21st century. It is about control over oil, resources and countries. This is about two out-of-control bully boys and warmongers, Trump and Netanyahu, who are trying to reshape the world in their dystopian view of what humanity should be. It is not about peace.

Why is the Government cowering in silence? Why will it not condemn this illegal war and the US-Israeli bombing of Iran? Why will it not condemn it? The Government knows Trump is just distracting from his domestic failures and from his population, which is suffering from a cost-of-living crisis while billionaires rake in more and more. Thousands are being killed and the lives of Irish peacekeepers are being put in danger, as well as thousands of Irish people in the region. The Government must stand up, condemn this breach of international law and take the action that shows we - and I know it is where the people of Ireland want us to be - are on the side of peace. It is about us asserting a neutrality that stands for peace, not facilitating warmongers.

4 o'clock

We know our airspace and airports are being used by the US military and Israel to facilitate the transport of weapons. How can we stand over this? The Irish people do not agree with it. We are calling on the Government to stop all US and Israeli military use of Irish airspace and airports. *Caithfidh an Rialtas stop a chur le húsáid aerspás agus aerfoirt na hÉireann ag fórsaí míleáta na Stát Aontaithe agus Iosrael.*

We must implement the occupied territories Bill. That is an action the Government could take right now and it would send a message that we stand on the side of peace. The Government should send a message of solidarity to the Spanish Government that we stand with Spain, with a Spanish Prime Minister who is willing and brave enough to call this out as what it is, a breach of international law.

Least of all, how in God's name can Ireland play Israel in a game of soccer with a genocidal war going on? The Government should support the FAI to boycott that game that will legitimise apartheid and a genocidal war. We can build an alternative to this dystopian world of ever increasing war and invasion. What is Trump and Netanyahu's endgame? There is none. It is endless war, bombing, taking over countries, people being killed and children being murdered. There has to be an alternative and Ireland, with its history, knows the impact of colonialism and imperialism. There is an alternative. It is the United Nations, our neutrality and standing with governments like the Spanish one and calling it out for what it is. It is wrong. It is illegal. Of course, there is an alternative. Bombs do not bring peace; negotiations and diplomacy do.

Investing in and supporting people brings about peace. The Government should be leading a genuine movement for peace, bringing governments together that want to rebuild the United Nations as a place that can create peace. Ireland cannot be complicit in another illegal war for oil. We will not stand for it. The people of Ireland do not want to see that.

The other aspect of this that needs to be called out is the cost-of-living crisis. This war is now putting us into a cost-of-living crisis on top of a cost-of-living crisis. The Tánaiste said earlier that the Government will keep under review how it responds, acting as though there were not already a cost-of-living crisis going on. There are 320,000 people in arrears on their electricity bills. One in every four gas customers is in arrears. People are having to choose between eating and heating. Why is the Government not immediately moving to implement the targeted energy credit we proposed, along with a cost-of-disability payment, an emergency payment? These are two things it could do right now. With the cost-of-living crisis, people will be choosing tonight - they are already choosing - between heating and eating. The cost-

of-living crisis is out of control and this war, with the spike in prices, will make it worse, in particular when we do not have protections against the profit-gouging and price-gouging that is going on. The Government is only using words. We have not seen real action to tackle that. We know profit- and price-gouging are going on. We have seen it, we are living it and the Government must take action to stand up and ensure the people of Ireland do not pay for Trump's war.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: There is no doubt we are at a moment of grave international instability so let me begin by acknowledging a number of things. The Iranian regime is a deeply repressive one. Its sponsorship of proxy terrorist groups, its terrorism in parts of the region, destabilising activities in the region and its well-documented oppression of its people cannot be ignored. The brutality of those networks and the fear Iranians have of their government is well-documented.

We also need to state clearly that no state, however powerful, should act unilaterally outside international law and United Nations mechanisms, as imperfect as they are. When the US chooses to bypass the UN framework, it weakens the system designed to prevent escalation of global conflicts. The rules cannot only apply to some nations. They must bind the powerful too. Today innocent people are paying the price. Innocent Irish citizens are sheltering from bombardment in the Gulf region. People with no part in the geopolitical rivalry are living in fear. Across the region, civilians are being killed and, as is always the case, every innocent life lost diminishes us all.

The immediate priority must be a ceasefire and an urgent de-escalation of what is taking place, not tomorrow, not when it is politically convenient for one side or the other, but now. I say that to the United States, Israel and Iran. There have been comments about there being two bully boys. Unfortunately, we have many more than two bully boys in this situation. Equally, there have been comments about what happened last weekend. However, in the same way as 7 October did not start the issues in Gaza, the incidents of last weekend did not start the tension between the United States and Iran. There is a long, documented history of aggression on both sides of that conflict.

When attempts made to deal with the invasion of Iraq at the United Nations in 2003 are compared with the absence of any such attempt, even vain attempts or attempts made for pageantry purposes, it is clear the current US Administration feels it can act without even attempting to use international mechanisms for resolving disputes.

What should Ireland do? We need to return to our core principles and our support for the multilateral rules-based order. It is not an abstract ideal. It is the only viable alternative to chaos and increasing violence. If we concede that states can act unilaterally, we will return to a world that is governed more by might than by right.

We must also be honest that the United Nations requires reform. Even if a state were to bring forward grievances and seek redress, the Security Council would not provide it. The Security Council reflects the power realities of 1945, not 2025 and the following years. Africa has no permanent representation. South America has none. Entire regions of the world are excluded from permanent decision-making authority at the Security Council and that democratic deficit weakens the legitimacy of the Security Council and, in turn, compliance

with its resolutions. Non-compliance with UN resolutions is eroding the trust and confidence the world has in the United Nations.

People may ask whether the United Nations is on the precipice of the same kind of collapse the League of Nations ultimately fell to. There is no doubt that reform is difficult, but it is necessary. We also know how difficult it is to secure and sustain peacekeeping missions. Vetoes are abused. Mandates are difficult to secure and consensus is fragile. We now need to focus on what is important to Ireland and our values. Ireland has long been a proud supporter of the United Nations and peacekeeping under its banner. As we have seen the groundhog develop at the Security Council, it has called into question our reliance on the triple lock mechanism. I do not support a situation where China, Great Britain, the United States or Russia can exercise a veto over where and when Ireland sends its Defence Forces. Even small numbers of Irish troops with respected expertise in peacekeeping require the permission of the 20th century imperial powers. It does not work in today's world. Respect for the UN does not mean surrendering sovereign judgment in the interests of the five permanent members. The protective framework of the UN is vital but it does not surpass our sovereignty, which was hard-won.

If we are serious about peace, the answer cannot be unilateral escalation, like we have seen in the Middle East in recent years.

We must see a renewed commitment to international law, genuine reform of global institutions and equal application of the rules to all states, large and small.

Deputy William Aird: The escalating conflict in the Middle East is causing profound distress and uncertainty. Middle East strikes are continuing on the sixth day of war. I begin by expressing my deep sympathy for all innocent victims of these attacks. The images and reports emerging from the region are heartbreaking. Civilians are bearing the brunt of violence they did not choose and cannot control. Their suffering must remain at forefront of our thoughts and actions.

Ireland has long had connections with the Middle East. Many countries in the gulf are home to large Irish communities. The crisis is being felt directly by our citizens. We have Irish people living and working across the region and many of them now face heightened risk and disruption. We have Irish holidaymakers who travelled in good faith and suddenly found themselves caught in a rapidly deteriorating situation. There are Irish citizens transiting through the Middle East from third countries for work, education or family reasons. They are now dealing with cancelled flights, border restrictions and uncertainty about how to get home safely. I acknowledge the tireless work of the Department of foreign affairs and our consular teams who are providing essential support to our citizens. Their efforts are ensuring Irish people, wherever they are, are not left without guidance and assistance. I stand firmly behind the work they are doing.

The consequences of this conflict are not confined to this region. Global instability has already begun to impact international oil markets and we are seeing immediate and sharp increases in oil and fuel prices here. Households and businesses are feeling this pressure. International events can influence global markets but consumers in Ireland are entitled to fairness and transparency. Consumers deserve clear explanations when fuel prices, in particular, rise overnight. We all know that much of the fuel being sold today was purchased

weeks ago at lower prices. I am told by the retailers, who I know well, that when they get their deliveries every day from the ports, the oil comes out at the market price of the oil they have to replace on that day. The Minister, when he has his meeting tomorrow, will be able to explain to us public representatives, and indeed to everybody in the country, the true facts behind all that, which a lot of people do not know. If stocks were bought at a lower price, consumers should not be paying wartime rates. We have seen overnight increases on garage forecourts. Consumers have seen prices rise to €1.80 per litre for unleaded petrol and diesel at some forecourts. A price of €846 is now being quoted for 500 litres of home heating oil. The same volume was approximately €494 this time last week. I was contacted by a haulier whose fuel card provider – you would know all about this, a Cheann Comhairle - imposed a 12.5% price increase from midnight on Tuesday and that is before VAT.

All oil includes five taxes and these equate to 60% of the cost. From a litre of diesel at €1.72, the Government gets €1.03. In a war situation we as a Government will have to consider temporarily cutting excise duties for fuel to lower the cost to the consumer. This is why we have to have strong regulatory oversight. We must ensure our consumer protection framework is robust and responsive. It must be capable of acting quickly when markets shift in ways that raise legitimate questions. Irish families must not be left exposed to unjustified price hikes at a time when global uncertainty is already causing anxiety. As a country with a long-standing commitment to peace, diplomacy and humanitarian principles, Ireland will continue to advocate for de-escalation, protection of civilians and full respect for international law. We will work with our Europeans and the wider international community to support efforts that prioritise human life and create space for dialogue. Above all, we stand with the innocent victims, those grieving loved ones, those displaced from their homes and those living in fear. We stand with Irish citizens seeking safety and clarity and we stand for fairness, transparency and stability at home as we navigate the economic impacts of this crisis.

I would like to say, a Cheann Comhairle, that I have finished a couple of seconds before my time.

An Ceann Comhairle: Very well noted, Deputy. I move to Deputy Ó Súilleabháin.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Over 24,000 Irish citizens who had been living peaceful, happy lives in the Middle East are now stranded due to a war waged by the US and Israel. Their parents are worried. This Government must do everything possible to guarantee their safety and welfare and to get back home to Ireland those who wish to return here. Hard-pressed Irish householders, farmers and businesses are being fiercely hit in their pockets, whether directly or indirectly, because of this Israeli-US war. They are being ripped off and fleeced by rocketing fuel costs, some of it price-gouging by companies. As Deputy Aird referred to, the Government is responsible for almost two thirds of this cost through its gouging. These international issues like Iran are therefore highly relevant to the Irish people, no matter what any of the foreign-funded, pseudo-patriotic charlatan groups online might like to tell us. Aside from our neutrality, they are highly relevant to everything and directly hit us in our pockets.

However, most horrendous of all is the human cost of war. Mothers and fathers have buried 165 children after an attack on a girls' primary school by the United States and Israel. We can see from Gaza to Iran that this is what liberation by these western monsters looks like in reality.

Line upon line of tiny white shrouds is the defining image of this conflict for me. We know Netanyahu is a genocidal monster with a seemingly insatiable bloodlust for destruction and endless war, which he is still carrying out against the West Bank as well as Gaza. After the full-scale assault against Iran, he even admitted this was the day he had been dreaming about for 40 years. He has often spoken of conquering Iran so that the plan for a two-state solution with Palestinians living side by side with an Israeli state is completely unviable and will not have any backers across the Middle East. That is the reason Netanyahu wants to destroy Iran. There is no other. He sees this US Presidency as his best possible opportunity of fulfilling his 40-year-old fantasy. Trump said that the US attacked Iran because the country could not, in his words, allow it to have a nuclear weapon. This is the same person who said back in June that Iran's nuclear facilities had been "obliterated". We know Israel is in the only country in the Middle East with a nuclear warhead and of course the US is the only country that has ever used one.

We have heard all this total rubbish before. Back in the early 2000s I can remember the oft-repeated lie about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, which we all knew was a lie. One million deaths and the partial destruction of that civilisation later, everybody found out it was a complete lie. Unfortunately it was just regurgitated by many sections of the media and the political establishment. You wonder when they will ever learn. I guess they already knew what the truth was because they have been providing cover for western war crimes. There are a multiplicity of news sources these days so there is no excuse for wilful ignorance. We do not know where these reckless and illegal actions are going to lead us, in terms of the potential chaos across the Middle East.

It is a potential Pandora's box, a tinderbox really. We know Iran may have a brutal, fundamentalist regime that has been massacring its own people but there is no evidence Iran is building a nuclear weapon. That is according to the head of the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency, Rafael Grossi. We know that Israel and the US have no regard whatsoever for the welfare of the ordinary Iranian people, whose decision it is to make.

Just one day before the strikes began, Oman's foreign minister announced that Iran had agreed to submit to full UN verification. Diplomacy was working. The UN Secretary General said that the military operation was squandering the opportunity for a negotiated resolution. Instead, Trump, supposedly the hard man who yet seems to be Netanyahu's poodle, chose bombs over diplomacy and a deal which experts say Iran was open to. This is not strength. It is an absolutely reckless foreign policy gamble. We do not know where it is going to lead us. A lot of these people are quite compromised, as we learned from the whole Epstein episode. What has been Ireland's response as a neutral State, apart from allowing a war port to be used in Shannon? The foreign affairs Minister, Deputy McEntee, said that she cannot really say whether the US or Israel's strikes on Iran are illegal under international law. I wonder why not. Why is it so hard to state the truth, as Spain was prepared to do? It is also a member of NATO. Why are we so beholden to the White House that we cannot utter the truth? Surely the truth matters in all these things.

Deputy Paul Murphy: "Death and destruction from the sky, all day long" was what Pete Hegseth, Secretary of War, said with glee from a podium. The man is a psychopath. He comes across as a psychopath. It is like he has styled himself on a film villain. He represents a psychopathic regime in a psychopathic system. Who is this death and destruction being rained

down on? Well over 1,000 Iranians have now been killed. Although it has gotten shockingly little attention, we know that in one bombing of a school, over 160 young schoolgirls and teachers were murdered. On RTÉ and mainstream media, I have heard this being relativised by those who say we do not really know what happened here and so on. It tells us something about the distinct value of human life. If 160 schoolchildren were killed in many other places in the world, it would rightly be the number one item on the news for weeks and weeks, as of course it should be. Here, it is quickly forgotten because it is inconvenient and because it reveals the reality of what is happening. What is happening is a criminal, brutal, imperialist assault. The war being launched by the US and Israel against Iran and Lebanon threatens to become a fully regional war. It is an extension and a consequence of the impunity that Israel has been treated to after over two years of genocide of the Palestinian people. Where have we seen the targeting of schools before? Oh, yes. That is a strategy that Israel has deployed in Gaza again and again.

It is a war that is based on lies, as they always are. Donald Trump said yesterday that if they did not hit within two weeks, Iran would have had a nuclear weapon. He said: "When crazy people have nuclear weapons, bad things happen." That is a lie. He knows it is a lie. It contradicts what he said before and what has been said by all the UN experts and so on. It is interesting; it is like a playing out again of the same lies about weapons of mass destruction that we heard in respect of Iraq, to try to create a public opinion - it is not working in America or elsewhere - that would be supportive of this military adventure. It is weapons of mass destruction without even the dodgy dossiers, without even going to the bother of manufacturing the evidence this time. Who will pay the price? First and foremost, the ordinary Iranian people, the ordinary people in Lebanon and other people across the region will do so. Then people in this country and elsewhere in the world will be subject to price gouging and massive price hikes as they get hit and the Government does not defend them.

The Irish Government response has been utterly shameful. It is refusing to tell the basic truth. It is refusing to say that this is contrary to international law. You cannot bring yourselves to say it. It is refusing to condemn the bombing of a school, and refusing to condemn this imperialist assault. It speaks volumes about the position the Irish Government has gotten itself into as completely subordinate to US imperialism; in reality, it is a poodle of US imperialism. I listened earlier to the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, condemning Hezbollah for attacking Israel and then regretting the response from Israel, while recognising Israel's right to defend itself. This stuff is absolutely crazy. Black is white, the world is upside down. Where is Iran's right to defend itself in this? Everyone in this House would recognise the right of Ukraine to defend itself against imperialist assault by Russia. Does Iran not have a right to defend itself against imperialist assault? Do the people of Lebanon not have a right to defend themselves against an invasion and an attempt to create a greater Israel which is happening right now, a land invasion by Israel in Lebanon?

The European leaders who are turning a blind eye, or else applauding and assisting the US assault on Iran are going to look like big hypocrites if Trump does decide to invade Greenland. All of a sudden they will rediscover international law. The Irish Government is complicit. It is complicit in this illegal, criminal, imperialist war on Iran. It is complicit because of the use of Shannon Airport. Two US Air Force aircraft stopped at Shannon Airport before flying straight to the main European hub used to transport weapons for use in Iran. The Garda protected one of these aircraft, according to an image published by Shannonwatch. That is

utterly shameful. We have to get the US military out of Shannon Airport. Follow the example of the Spanish; do not facilitate them at all.

I also make a final appeal, on the last day of the Dáil before Micheál Martin is going to go and hand over the bowl of shamrock to Donald Trump. Do not do that. Do not allow him to use the Irish national day to present himself as a friend of the Irish, to greenwash himself and to cover up the war crimes he is currently engaged in.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The failure of the Government, and the Minister and Minister of State who spoke for the Government today, to condemn the attack by Israel and the United States on Iran is an absolute disgrace. The world is now paying a price for the bloodlust of the psychopaths who run Israel and the psychopaths of the Trump Administration who are attacking Iran and setting the entire region on fire, precipitating economic consequences for literally everybody in the world. The Irish Government cannot bring itself to condemn that. It cannot bring itself to condemn the slaughter of 160 innocent schoolgirls massacred by the Americans and the Israelis. In the last two hours, a 12,000-seat football stadium in Tehran was destroyed by a US-Israeli attack. A football stadium, which also had swimming pools, cycling facilities and dormitories, was levelled. What has that got to do with anything other than bringing death, destruction and horror to the world?

There is a lot of interesting commentary saying that the Americans and the Israelis do not know what they are doing or what the end game is. It is totally wrong. They know exactly what the end game is: they want to do to Iran what they did to Gaza. They want to extend the genocide that we witnessed for the last two and a half years in Gaza into Iran. They want to destroy it. That is what it means when they attack schools and murder schoolchildren, and they attack football stadiums, just like they destroyed all the hospitals, all the schools, all the universities and all the water infrastructure and killed 75,000 people at least in the genocide in Gaza. They now think they can do it again in Iran because they got away with it against the people of Gaza. They continue to get away with it by ethnically cleansing the West Bank, so they think they are going to get away with it in Iran and dominate and control the entire region. It is suggested that Donald Trump does not know what he is doing, but he knows exactly what he is doing.

He is going to make America great again. This is about the US empire and doing what it did in the past in El Salvador, Chile, Nicaragua, Cuba, Iraq and Afghanistan and what it is doing with America's and the West's cat's paw called the Israeli State, the genocidal regime that has been ethnically cleansing the Palestinian people since 1948 and has now reached the level of committing a genocide. Now, it wants to extend the fire, death and destruction all over the Middle East in a way that is now threatening the entire world. We said if you do not sanction this regime, we will all pay a price. Now, literally every single person in this country is paying a price for the bloodlust of Trump and Netanyahu in their pocket. Twenty thousand Irish people in the Middle East are paying the price with their security, having to shelter and flee from the fallout of the death and destruction Israel and the Trump Administration are inflicting.

The Irish Government cannot condemn it but worse it is complicit in it by allowing the US military through Shannon Airport while it prosecutes this slaughter and while it threatens to set the entire Middle East on fire. It is facilitating it as we speak, just as was done by previous Irish Governments when they facilitated the US-led war on Iraq in 2003, also based on a pack

of lies about weapons of mass destruction, supposedly about taking out a dictator which led directly and indirectly to 1 million people dying and 4 million people at the time being displaced in the biggest refugee crisis the world had ever seen until that point. That also triggered the destabilisation of Syria and led to an even bigger refugee crisis which the world is still seeing the consequences of. It led to the rise of ISIS and Al-Qaeda. This is the consequence if you let these people away with it.

Is the Irish Government seriously going to go over and hand this guy a bowl of shamrock next week? It is disgusting. It is such a betrayal of our tradition of neutrality and anti-imperialism that we are going to get down and bend the knee to these bloodthirsty warmongers who are setting the world on fire. It is really revolting. I do not believe the Government has the support of the majority of people. Most people can see what is going on, the price we are going to pay for it and the economic price they are starting to pay themselves as well as the horror beginning to unfold across the Middle East. There is a logic to this. I will disagree with Deputy Paul Murphy, in that when Trumps says it is dangerous when certain people get nuclear weapons, he is absolutely right - he is dangerous. Donald Trump has nuclear weapons and Netanyahu has nuclear weapons. Israel is the only country that will not sign nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Even Iran signed that and was willing to do a deal over this stuff. Even though I have criticisms of that regime, the Omani foreign Minister has confirmed it. This is pure bloodlust, warmongering and imperialism by America and Israel and the Government is complicit in it. It is shameful.

Deputy Colm Burke: The Russian invasion of Ukraine in March 2022 was President Putin's war of choice. The current attack on Iran by Israel and the United States is a war of choice by Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Trump - their war, their choice. The build-up to both wars was very similar. Russian forces massing on the border of Ukraine and American forces massing in the Middle East. President Putin, President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu have much in common. All three are land grabbers and all three worship at the altar of power. "Might is right" is their motto. There is one difference between the two Presidents - President Putin never portrayed himself as a man of peace whereas President Trump fantasises about winning the Nobel Peace Prize. Under international law, there is no legal basis for this war in Iran. The Canadian Prime Minister, Mark Carney, was correct when he said that a rupture has taken place in the international order. Benjamin Netanyahu's life-long political ambition was a final showdown with Iran; he now has his wish. It is also obvious that American policy in the Middle East is largely controlled by Israel. The US decision to wage war on Iran was very much an Israeli decision. US Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, clearly indicated that was so in his first comments on the war. As regards Israel and Iran, America would do well to remember the wise words of their first President, George Washington, in his 1796 farewell address to the American people when he said, "The nation which indulges towards another a habitual hatred or a habitual fondness is in some degree a slave." Ukraine and the Middle East also highlight what Freud called the death drive. There are leaders of countries and of military and political organisations who are wedded to and take pleasure in aggression, destruction and killing.

Of course, in any war, the innocent will be among the first victims. In the first 24 hours, more than 150 primary school girls and their teachers were killed by a bomb.

The 2015 nuclear deal with Iran was not perfect but was working. Under pressure from Israel and Saudi Arabia, President Trump withdrew from the deal in 2018 and imposed massive

sanctions on Iran. During his Presidency, President Biden was unable to restore the original deal. In October 2025, Iran formally announced the termination of the agreement. President Trump's recent negotiations on a new deal with Iran were largely a smokescreen for preparations for war. The dogs of war are once again unleashed in the Middle East. The only certainties are destruction and the killing, maiming and displacement of people on a massive scale. Western intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq brought only chaos and suffering and the outcome in Iran is likely to be the same. The war with Iran will cause a new wave of refugees into neighbouring countries but also into Europe. The Islamic Republic of Iran has been a violent oppressor at home and supporter and facilitator of terrorist organisations cross the Middle East.

While the main focus is on Iran and its neighbours, Israel has seized the opportunity to attack and invade Lebanon, bombing at will and displacing tens of thousands of people, all while Israeli settler terror groups, fully supported by the Israeli security forces, continue a policy of creeping annexation of the West Bank. The Bible says Israel shall be a blessing to all the peoples of the Earth. The question for Israelis today is whether Israel is a blessing or a curse for the Palestinian people, Lebanon, Syria and Iran. The fact that Benjamin Netanyahu is facing corruption charges and an election this year is a relevant factor. President Trump also faces a verdict on his Presidency in the November mid-term elections. Being a wartime politician can often bolster public support. We see how the consequences of war in the Middle East are not confined to the Middle East. The flow of energy around the world has been disrupted and price rises and inflation will follow. We in Ireland need to look at our own defence and security. Our geographical location has protected us and we have been protected to a great extent by the NATO alliance. Our membership of the EU is central to Ireland's well-being, prosperity and security.

As a mature democracy, we must be prepared to protect the security and values of the democracies in Europe. As a matter of urgency, we should have a serious engagement with farming organisations and food producers on improving food security. We are dangerously dependent on imports for many basic foodstuffs such as flour, fruit, vegetables, sugar and many other products. We need a much stronger emphasis on growing our own food. I welcome the decision by the Minister for agriculture to support the building of new large commercial flour mills; growing the wheat must be the next step. Likewise, we have not done enough on wind energy. We should have been able to fast-track the delivery of wind energy at sea. We are so dependent on imports of oil and gas, and when a war breaks out in no matter what part of the world, it immediately affects us. We need to plan forward.

It is important to thank all of the staff in the Department of foreign affairs and our security forces for the work they are doing, and everyone assisting those who are trying to come home and are stuck in the Middle East. I thank them for their work and their dedication and commitment over the past three days.

Deputy Paula Butterly: I thank the Minister for her clear and constructive decision-making over the past number of days. I also acknowledge the staff and all those who have been working around the clock to ensure Irish citizens feel safe in unsafe circumstances and have been reassured the State is there to support them.

As we gather here today against the backdrop of a conflict that has inflicted profound suffering across the Middle East, the escalating civilian loss, the displacement of families and the destabilisation of an already fragile region demand not only our attention but our collective moral responsibility. Moments such as these require leadership, collective leadership and, above all, responsibility. At moments like this, Europe must not speak in fragments but with one unified voice, firm in principle, clear in purpose and unwavering in its commitment to human dignity.

De-escalation cannot be a slogan; it is an necessity. Every day that this conflict continues, the humanitarian toll will deepen. The first duty of the European and similarly minded international communities must be to halt the cycle of violence. That means pressing for an immediate cessation of hostilities, ensuring unimpeded humanitarian access if and when needed, and insisting that international law is upheld by all parties. De-escalation is the only path that prevents further loss of life and creates the space for diplomacy to function. De-escalation alone is not enough. Europe must act as a coherent block and not a collection of states responding at different speeds and with different priorities. Our credibility depends on unity, our influence depends on consistency and our values demand that we stand together when peace and stability are at stake.

A co-ordinated diplomatic, humanitarian and strategic European approach is essential if we are to steer this crisis towards resolution. In tandem, we must also look beyond the present moment. When the bombs fall silent the work of rebuilding will begin and it will be immense. Post-war recovery cannot be an afterthought. It must be planned now, with the same urgency we bring to calls for de-escalation. The repercussions of this war, whether it lasts a few days, a few weeks, months or years will be felt for far longer than the war itself. We will not be left rebuilding only buildings but also relationships that have been fractured and potentially broken. Our world has changed and we must accept this and forge a path with those who share our same values.

When the war ends, who will pick up the pieces? Europe has a responsibility to support reconstruction that is sustainable, accountable and rooted in the needs of the people most affected. This means investing in humanitarian relief that transitions into long-term development. It means supporting governance structures capable of delivering stability and justice. It means ensuring that displaced families can return home safely and that communities shattered by conflict have the resources to rebuild not only their infrastructure but their trust in a peaceful future. Crucially, it means recognising that lasting peace requires political solutions and not merely the absence of violence. Europe must be ready to facilitate dialogue, support inclusive political processes and help to create conditions in which grievances can be addressed without resorting to arms. Europe must be ready to lead.

The Middle East has endured too many cycles of destruction followed by fragile calm. If we are serious about breaking this pattern then our actions today must be guided by clarity, compassion and collective resolve. Europe cannot control every outcome but we can choose to be a force for stability, for humanitarian protection and for a peace that endures. Europe can say "enough is enough". How Europe chooses to approach this crisis will say much about our values, our position in the world order and how we will deal with future international issues. Unchecked power leads not to peace but only to further crisis, moral decay and tyranny. Let

us choose unity, let us choose diplomacy, and let us choose to help rebuild a future where the people of the region can live not in fear but in hope.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá sé rithábachtach go bhfuil an díospóireacht seo againn an tseachtain seo. Ba chóir go mbeadh muid ag caint ar cheisteanna idirnáisiúnta i bhfad Éireann níos minice toisc gur tír bheag imeallach ó thaobh na hEorpa muid ach go bhfuil ceangail againn timpeall an domhain. Féachann a lán daoine - nó d'fhéachadar go dtí le déanaí - ar Éirinn mar ghuth calma síochánta a bhfuil meas ag a lán den domhan uirthi. Is trua go bhfuil an meas sin ag dul in éag toisc na gcinntí ar ghlac an Rialtas seo agus roinnt rialtas eile le déanaí taobhú le Meiriceá nó gan seasamh leis na Náisiúin Aontaithe. Is ceann de na bunfhadhbanna atá ann é seo. Toisc nach bhfuil muid ag seasamh leis na Náisiúin Aontaithe, nach bhfuil muid ag cáineadh cad atá ar siúl san Iaráin agus nach ndéanaimid go leor ó thaobh na Palaistíne, táimid anois ceangailte leo siúd atá ag déanamh ísliú ar chumhachtaí agus seasamh na Náisiún Aontaithe timpeall an domhain. Gan an chumhacht sin agus gan an sórt conartha sin go mbeidh an meas céanna ag daoine ar na Náisiúin Aontaithe, tá deireadh leis na rialacha idirnáisiúnta a chinntigh go dtí seo nach raibh coimhlintí ar an leibhéal atá á fheiscint againn le déanaí.

Feicimid anois Rialtais Mheiriceá agus Iosrael ag déanamh ionsaí i ndiaidh ionsaithe gan aon seasamh idirnáisiúnta leo. Tá siad ag briseadh na rialacha atá leagtha síos. Tá ionsaithe Iosrael ar an bPalaistín mídhleathach, ionsaithe a dhéantar le cabhair Mheiriceá i gcónaí. Tá na hionsaithe ar an réigiún sin a chonaic muid an tseachtain seo mar an gcéanna leo siúd a chonaic muid ar Gaza agus ar an bPalaistín le blianta beaga anuas. Inniu, tá bagairtí agus ionsaithe á ndéanamh ag Iosrael ar an Liobáin agus ar an Iaráin. Tá siad seo go huile agus go hiomlán mídhleathach agus ba chóir go mbeadh an Rialtas seo á gcáineadh.

Seachas a bheith ag rá nár chóir gur tharla sé seo, ba chóir don Rialtas cáineadh iomlán a dhéanamh ar an Uachtarán Trump agus ar an bPríomh-Aire Netanyahu. Níl a fhios agam cé acu an máistir agus cé acu an puipéad. B'fhéidir go bhfuil an bheirt acu ag teorú a chéile. Tá an bheirt acu go huile agus go hiomlán ciontach as cinédhióthú sa Phalaistín agus anois tá siad ag triail leis an rud ceannann céanna a dhéanamh i ndeisceart na Liobáine agus san Iaráin. Tá siad ag ligean orthu go bhfuil cead acu dul timpeall an domhain ag léiriú gurb iadsan fórsa póilínachta an domhain.

Chonaic muid é seo cheana féin sa tslí inar chaith Meiriceá le Veiniséala. An é Cúba an chéad náisiún eile a bheidh faoi ionsaí ag Meiriceá? Chonaic muid cheana féin Stáit Aontaithe Mheiriceá ag teannadh a smachtbhannaí ar Chúba agus é ag triail leis an tír sin a thachtadh mar atá déanta ag Iosrael leis an bPalaistín.

Tá sé tábhachtach go seasaimid go soiléir leis an nguth sin agus leis na Náisiúin Aontaithe. Tá sé tábhachtach seasamh leo siúd atá faoi ionsaí iomlán ag gach uile shórt diúracáin ó Mheiriceá agus ó Iosrael. Is léir cé chomh mídhleathach atá an t-ionsaí agus cogadh barbarach seo nuair a fhéachtar ar an tslí ar caitheadh leis na páistí scoile agus leis an bhfrigéad Iaránach, nach raibh aon áit in aice leis an gcogadh ná ceantar na hIaráine. Caithfear é sin a cháineadh amach agus amach.

Caithfimid seasamh i gceart. Tá obair á déanamh ag Teachtaí anseo tríd an ngrúpa parlaiminte atá againn a thugann tacaíocht agus a tharraingíonn aird ar cheist na Palaistíne. Táimid ag déanamh ceangal le tíortha eile chomh maith chun labhairt amach. Is cóir é sin a

dhéanamh. Ba chóir don Rialtas seo labhairt amach i gcoinne Mheiriceá agus Iosrael, go háirithe sa chás seo. Tá aon duine a sheasann leo gafa le briseadh na rialacha idirnáisiúnta.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I have great empathy for the people and citizens right across the Middle East. This morning, I spoke to a mother whose daughter is in Abu Dhabi. For the past number of nights, she has been awoken from her sleep by missiles and bombs. She is located beside a US military base. What is happening is really frightening. It is devastating. Many Irish citizens are out in the Middle East and are really anxious and worried for their safety. Many of those individuals have registered with the Department or with the embassy in the UAE. I know there is frustration at the lack of information. While this is, of course, a time of great uncertainty, I ask the Minister of State to work with the embassy to make sure there are regular updates and that our Irish citizens abroad have the latest information. This database already exists. There is huge fear. That information will help and assist those individuals.

The evacuation flights that have been organised are very welcome but €800 is a significant fee for many individuals. It is almost double what a chartered flight costs. The British Government is offering flights for about £350. I ask the Minister of State to look at that. This is really a crisis situation. These are vulnerable people identified by the embassy and they deserve every opportunity to get home in a reasonable fashion.

I will also raise the very important issue of the cost of fuel. This crisis in the Middle East is going to cause devastation right across Ireland as a result of its impact on the cost of living. The price of home heating oil has increased by almost 50% in recent days. I have been speaking to hauliers and logistics companies and they have been telling me about increases of 10 cent and 20 cent per litre of fuel. It is an extraordinary cost. There is price gouging going on here and that must be examined. These prices shot up overnight despite the fact that the oil and the fuel in the pumps had been purchased prior to this crisis. This is an issue and it has happened before. This price gouging is not new. It must be investigated. We cannot allow opportunism in this situation.

I welcome the fact the Taoiseach recently outlined that he is concerned about price gouging and has recommended that the CCPC take a look. However, what about the Government's price gouging? What about the fact the cost of fuel is rising year on year? It is excessive and wrong. We were the only party in this Chamber to vote against the climate action Bill and we did so because it locked Ireland into increasing carbon tax. Irrespective of this crisis and what is going to happen to the cost of fuel over the coming weeks, the Minister of State's Government has committed to increasing carbon tax. This is despite the fact we do not know what the cost of fuel is going to be. That is wrong.

We have to give rural Ireland and the logistics companies a break. The truth is that we are an island country with a rural population, particularly along the west coast. Every single piece of food in our shops comes on the back of a lorry. Every item of clothing we wear comes on the back of a lorry. Literally everything a household needs comes on the back of a lorry. The Government's quest to drive up the cost of fuel directly correlates with the cost of living. We cannot afford this any more. The cost of living is rising very high and the cost of fuel is a significant and direct contributor to that. On behalf of all of the people across Ireland who are struggling to pay their bills, I urge the Minister of State to suspend carbon tax and to reduce

the cost of fuel during this crisis. In the past decade, this Government has taken more than €35 billion in tax on fuel, and a significant portion of that comes from carbon tax.

I come from a rural constituency where we do not have the necessary public transport. The Minister of State's Government decided to introduce a carbon tax, offering a stick to push people onto public transport, but those options are not available. As a result, people have to get in their cars and drive. It is wrong that the Government is driving up the cost of fuel without providing those alternatives.

With regard to the tax take, the trajectory is extraordinary. I have gone through the data and we have submitted a number of parliamentary questions on this matter. The tax take on fuel continues to rise. Although there was a slight reduction during the Ukrainian situation, in monetary terms the rise is on a significant upward trajectory. Let us take carbon tax as an example. In 2019, the Government took in €360 million. Last year, in 2024, that figure rose to €920 million, and it is going to continue to rise for 2025 and 2026. Carbon tax levied on natural gas raised €64 million in 2020, rising to €125 million in 2024. That is a doubling of the tax take.

I ask the Minister of State to suspend the increase in carbon tax that is going to come into play in May of this year, just a couple of months away. The tax burden on fuel must be reduced. Carbon tax must be suspended until this crisis is over. Commuters cannot afford it any longer. We have already had increases in tolls in recent years.

5 o'clock

There are many parts of Ireland where motorists are hit with a number of tolls on the way to work. Haulage companies cannot afford this. They tell me they cannot take the hit and will pass on this increase. Who will be disproportionately affected? The answer is consumers who are already struggling. There are so many people struggling.

I have listened to the Government talk of its concerns about fuel, the cost of living and so on. It could do something today about this crisis. It could reduce the tax take on fuel. It is already the majority of the cost we pay for fuel. I talk to rural commuters all the time. They ask what alternative they have. If you are living in Ballyhaunis and working in Castlebar, living in Newport and working in Westport or living in Killala and working in Ballina, you do not have the option of getting a bus. Buses are simply not an option. You cannot get to work on time and get home to collect your kids. You have no alternative to the car. This is an act against the Irish people. This is wrong. We cannot continue to subject Irish people to increasing costs, irrespective of what that future cost will be.

I spoke to another businessman, a man in the construction sector whose margins are really tight. The cost of construction is rising every week and this man has a number of vans and lorries on the road. He is massively concerned because he will have to pass that on to the consumer. In this case, the consumer is a prospective homeowner who cannot afford it either. That is the consequence of this.

We have not even talked about electricity costs. They are the highest in Europe. That needs to be looked at. Consumers in Ireland pay significantly more per unit of energy than data centres. How is that fair? How is it the case that struggling families in Mayo, Donegal or Cork are paying more per unit of energy than data centres, and the highest in Europe? All of these

things are driving the cost of doing business and driving inflation. I ask the Minister of State to reduce the cost of fuel during this crisis, to give our businesses and consumers a break and to try to keep down the cost of living in Ireland.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the situation in the Middle East. I am sure all of our thoughts are with the people, especially the more than 20,000 Irish citizens, who have been caught up in this conflict. It is a worrying time for them and their families as they deal with the uncertainty of this situation.

I pay tribute to our officials in the Department of foreign affairs who are working on the ground in difficult circumstances to get Irish citizens home and to provide consular assistance to them. Plans for the Department of foreign affairs charter flight are welcome, with priority for vulnerable people and those with medical needs. Unfortunately, it seems the instability will continue in the short term. The charter flights must continue until all Irish citizens who need to leave the region can do so or until commercial flights and services resume at scale.

Like all Deputies, I want to see an urgent de-escalation and an end to the conflict. In the meantime, all sides should exercise maximum restraint, have regard for international norms and protect civilian lives. Expansion of the conflict to neighbouring regions in the past 24 hours has been alarming and risks a wider destabilisation. That is very concerning and risks a humanitarian and economic crisis. I welcome confirmation from the Minister that the Irish troops stationed in Lebanon are safe. This will be a worrying time for them and their families and it is important good communication continues to keep them up to date on the situation.

Turning back to Ireland, it is very regrettable some businesses seem to have used the crisis to increase prices. We have all seen reports of jumps in home heating and fuel over the weekend. Prices seemed to increase within hours of the crisis breaking out. This is completely unacceptable, and I call on the Minister to take action and seriously engage with regulatory authorities. Price-gouging to the degree reported is unacceptable and the Government should consider introducing new, maybe emergency, legislation if existing powers are insufficient to deal with it. This further underscores the need for wind and solar energy in Ireland.

I call on all sides to de-escalate the dangerous situation and move towards an end to the conflict while upholding international norms and the rule of law and protecting innocent lives.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I am glad to have the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Government to statements on the consular aspect of this crisis. It has been a deeply frightening and uncertain time for citizens who are resident in the region and those visiting or transiting through the region. It is clear all Deputies share my deep concern for the safety and well-being of our citizens. The work of the consular crisis centre in responding to citizens and supporting embassy personnel across the region has been vital. This crisis response will continue at scale for as long as it is required. The expansion of the embassy and consular network over the lifetime of the Global Ireland strategy means we have a strengthened presence across the globe. This enables us to promote and defend Irish interests and values. It also supports broader provision of consular assistance.

I thank all Deputies for their sincere and heartfelt contributions to what is, once again, an extremely difficult debate taking place against a backdrop of ongoing violence following

military action by the United States and Israel against Iran and Iran's military action in response. It is clear from contributions that we are all extremely alarmed at the rapid escalation of the conflict in recent days. It is heartbreaking to see a region, parts of which have suffered so much in recent years, plunged once again into such violence. One of the most shocking and horrific scenes thus far was the attack on a school and the loss of innocent young lives. Given the stakes involved, it is profoundly wrong and extremely regrettable that more time was not allowed for dialogue and diplomacy. Even now, the international community is right in calling for an immediate de-escalation.

We were under no illusions about the nature of the Iranian regime. We have repeatedly condemned its malign role in the region, the brutal repression of its citizens and its supply of weapons to Russia's illegal war in the Ukraine. We have been clear Iran cannot be allowed to develop nuclear weapons but the unsanctioned response is equally wrong. I was always brought up to believe two wrongs never make a right. Our position is that the best way to address concerns is through dialogue and diplomacy, however slow or frustrating progress may be. We have instead been faced with actions from multiple parties that have further undermined essential principles of the UN Charter and international law.

Ireland's position on the use of force where there is no UN mandate or authorisation is well established and known. For fear that anyone is in any doubt, let me be clear: it is wrong and it is illegal. Ireland's position is equally clear that all states must abide by international law and the principles of the UN Charter, regardless of who the states involved are. International law and international humanitarian law cannot be set aside, regardless of how abhorrent the Iranian regime has been. Let the Government's position be very clear on this. As in any conflict, all parties must abide by their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law. Attacks on civilians or civilian infrastructure, wherever they are, are violations of international law.

The UN system, however imperfect, is an essential security asset for small states, including Ireland. If the UN fails, it is because member states do not empower it to act.

As conflict has now broken out, we are faced with a situation that has rapidly escalated within a period of just a few days, bringing greater risk and suffering to the wider region. In particular, the attacks by Iran on countries in the Gulf are a matter of serious concern. We have seen Iranian attacks on airports, residential buildings and energy infrastructure in other Gulf countries. Attacking civilian infrastructure is unacceptable and inexcusable, especially as these states are non-belligerent. They are very clear violations of international law. Let us remember that the Gulf states have advocated for dialogue with Iran and have sought to prevent war. The attacks by Iran are a complete betrayal, an inexcusable effort to drag them into a conflict in which they are not involved. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, has spoken to a number of her colleagues in the region to express her sympathies and support.

As mentioned, many of these countries are home to large Irish communities, with more than 20,000 Irish citizens living in the Gulf region. The outbreak of violence has therefore presented Ireland with an extremely complex consular situation. I echo what the Minister stated earlier, in that the number one priority of the Department of foreign affairs right now is supporting our citizens in the region and their families. Our officials, including those in the region, are providing all appropriate consular assistance to all citizens who need it, including in regards to travel. A very large number of Irish citizens in the region are already registered on our the

citizens' registration platform. I urge those who have yet to do so to register as soon as possible. As this is a fast-moving and unpredictable situation, it is important that citizens register to ensure that they are able to get the latest information available.

It is very welcome that one flight was able to leave Dubai yesterday with Irish citizens on board. The news that a first chartered flight for Irish citizens will also depart in the coming days, providing security and operational considerations permit, is also welcome. This first charter will be targeted at Irish citizens currently in the UAE, particularly those who are non-resident, are vulnerable and require assistance most urgently. For those citizens in the region who are concerned that they have not been contacted by officials regarding a flight, or who have not received an update from the airline, I assure them that the Department will continue to offer consular assistance through the consular crisis team and our missions in the region. We will update citizens as soon as we have further guidance.

I also stress that it is expected that further commercial options, although limited, will become available in the coming days, targeted at non-residents and those who are in transit. The resumption of commercial routes, however limited, remains the best possible way of ensuring as many of our citizens who need and wish to leave can leave the region. This twin-track approach of planning for assisted departures while remaining in close contact with airlines will continue. We also continue to be in close contact with all other EU partners, with a particular focus on identifying opportunities to collaborate and support our citizens. I ask people to bear with us as the Department seeks to manage what is a really complex operation.

I pay tribute to all of our officials, particularly those in the embassies across the region, who are working tirelessly in very difficult circumstances to provide consular assistance to those who need it. We should remember that they are working in a security situation that remains very unstable.

Aside from the situation in the Gulf states and its consular impact, I echo what was said earlier in terms of our serious concern over how this conflict is now spreading. It is particularly unfortunate that Hezbollah has now joined Iran in the conflict. The firing of rockets by Hezbollah is a serious escalation of the conflict and further destabilises an already unstable situation. The security situation in southern Lebanon was already extremely fragile in the face of ongoing Israeli military actions and the following rocket fire from Hezbollah. Lebanon has now been the victim of an Israeli air strike and ground operations. Let me be clear: these Israeli attacks disregard UN Security Council Resolution 1701, are a breach of Lebanon's sovereignty and run counter to Israel's own long-term security interests. Ireland has also been consistently clear that Hezbollah must cease all military activity and demonstrate it is prepared to disarm and cede control of weapons to the Lebanese Government as required under the resolution and the Taif Accords.

In addition, I restate our grave concern regarding the impact of the current situation on an extremely perilous humanitarian situation in Gaza. Israel has once again interrupted the delivery of food and essential supplies, worsening the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza. Israel must immediately remove all restrictions on aid access and facilitate essential supplies and services in reaching people along the Gaza Strip. We all call on Israel to lift all measures that restrict the daily lives of Palestinians in the West Bank, including the entry of vital supplies.

The focus of the international community now must be to call on all sides to exercise maximum restraint and for those with any influence to use it constructively. The risk of the situation in the region escalating further is real and must be avoided. The continuation of this conflict will only exacerbate the existing challenges in the region, deepen division and put more people at risk. Our goal must be to quickly end this conflict and de-escalate regional tensions. This position is consistent with Ireland's long track record of support for international law and the UN. The UN Charter and international law must be upheld by all countries. We hope for a better future for Iran and Iranian people and will work with all partners to support that. Ultimately, the future of Iran must be determined independently by the people of Iran in a way that creates stability in the region.

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 Jen Cummins - To discuss the market that is to be restored to Newmarket in Dublin 8.

Deputy Martin Daly - To discuss the effect of herpes zoster vaccination on dementia.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss the severe cuts to SNA allocations across schools in County Kerry.

Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss the need for adequate classroom provision for Gaelscoil Chluain Dolcáin.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí - To discuss north city arterial main, NCAM, project communication failures and public disruption.

Deputy Tony McCormack - To discuss electricity grid capacity and connection issues in the Cappincur area of Tullamore, County Offaly.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the review of the Garda vetting process.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the need for a full-time Garda station in Rush.

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

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the remaining sections of the Athenry relief road.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss the significant waiting lists at the Deansgrange driving test centre.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman - To discuss the demolition and rebuild project for three primary schools on the Navan Road, Dublin 7.

Deputy Cathy Bennett - To discuss the Government response to rising energy prices.

Deputy James O'Connor - To discuss ambulance provision for the east Cork area.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss repairs and a new building at Dunboyne junior and senior national schools.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney - To discuss the closure and liquidation of the Southside Travellers Action Group.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss Gaelcholáiste Mhuire, Parnell Square.

Deputies Aengus Ó Snodaigh, Catherine Ardagh - To discuss progress on school buildings for St. Seton's, Ballyfermot, Dublin 10.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - To discuss public transport issues in Wicklow.

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss progress on the northern distributor road and Cork city northern transport project in 2026.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the HSE's failure to offer 76 newly qualified paramedics full-time jobs upon graduation.

The matters raised by Deputies Jen Cummins, Tony McCormack, Colm Burke, Louis O'Hara and Sinéad Gibney have been Selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Electricity Grid

Deputy Tony McCormack: I wish to raise a serious issue relating to electricity connections in the Cappincur area of Tullamore, County Offaly, where two important projects are currently stalled due to ESB capacity constraints. The first concern is the Cappincur recycling centre, which suffered a devastating fire on 1 March 2024. Anyone who has experienced a fire in a workplace understands the uncertainty and hardship it creates for both workers and owners. To their credit, the owners rolled up their sleeves, rebuilt the facility, complied with every regulatory requirement, completed all necessary works and are now ready to reopen and provide employment again in what is a critical environmental sector. However, despite everything being ready, the plant cannot reopen because it is still awaiting a reconnection from ESB Networks. The operators have been engaging with ESB Networks since last September seeking that reconnection. Workers are ready to return to their jobs, yet the facility remains unable to open.

The second issue concerns Waterways Ireland's new craft centre of excellence, which is also located in the Cappincur area. This is a major public infrastructure project that will support the maintenance of 120 locks across the 420 km of navigable waterways and provide a base for approximately 70 staff. Waterways Ireland has been engaging with ESB Networks for over two years, with a formal connection estimation in August 2025. Both of these projects have now been informed that ESB Networks requires a further two-month review of grid capacity in the Cappincur area before it can confirm when connections or reconnections can be delivered. Depending on the outcome of that review, delays of up to 12 months or longer may arise.

Another aspect that is particularly concerning is the timeline involved in even notifying these organisations about the review process. In the case of both the recycling plant and Waterways Ireland, engagement with ESB Networks has been ongoing for months. In the case of the recycling plant, engagement has been ongoing since last September. In the case of Waterways Ireland, it has been for more than two years. However, it was only recently confirmed that a two-month capacity review was required before any timeline could even be provided. In fact, it was only when my office made direct inquiries that clarity was provided that such a review was even under way. That raises a very fair question. How can it take nearly six months for customers to be informed that a review is required before a connection or reconnection timeline can even be considered?

The longer this situation continues, the more precious taxpayers' money is wasted through delays to a major State infrastructure project. That money should be delivering infrastructure and services for the public. Certainly, it cannot be redirected to resolve the reconnection issue facing a private recycling plant that is ready to provide employment.

The Government is investing significant sums into electricity infrastructure through the national development plan, with billions of euro directed towards strengthening and expanding the electricity grid. ESB Networks has a major capital programme to upgrade the network to support electrification, economic development and the transition to renewable energy. While all of that investment and reform are welcome, the situation in Cappincur raises a fundamental question - does the system currently have the capacity to deliver connections efficiently and effectively? We cannot have businesses, public bodies and workers left waiting indefinitely for connection or, worse again, a reconnection. What exactly are the grid constraints affecting the Cappincur area of Tullamore? Why are both projects now subject to two-month capacity reviews before any connection timeline can even be indicated? What immediate steps can be taken to ensure connections at both Cappincur recycling centre and Waterways Ireland are delivered without further unnecessary delay? Workers and businesses in Offaly cannot be left waiting indefinitely for electricity connections.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I thank the Deputy for raising this important topic. I will outline the ongoing initiatives for developing capacity in the electricity grid and relay the advice received from ESB Networks on the matter received. The Government does not have a role in the delivery of electricity infrastructure on the ground. This is in line with the 2012 Government policy statement on the strategic importance of transmission and other energy infrastructure, which states: "The Government does not seek to direct EirGrid and ESB Networks or other energy infrastructure developers to particular sites or routes or technologies." The Government, however, can assist and is assisting to ensure the right environment exists to enable the delivery of this critical piece of infrastructure.

The Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, an independent regulator accountable to a committee of the Oireachtas, has responsibility for the economic regulation of the electricity system operators, EirGrid and ESB Networks. System operators are tasked with building, safely operating and maintaining a fit-for-purpose electricity system. Our electricity grid is made up of two interlinked networks, namely, the transmission network operated by EirGrid, which allows us to transport electricity around the country, and the distribution network operated by ESB Networks, which brings power to communities, businesses and homes.

In December, the CRU published its final determination on price review 6, PR6, setting out the investment that will take place in our electricity system over the coming five years. PR6 represents the largest ever investment in our electricity grid and will see up to €18.9 billion invested by EirGrid and ESB Networks between 2026 and 2030, with a baseline of €13.8 billion guaranteed. PR6 will enable the delivery of major upgrades and developments to the electricity network across the country, facilitating housing growth and heat and transport electrification, all while enabling and driving industrial and economic growth in Ireland.

The Government is committed to delivering electricity infrastructure. That is why we are investing €3.5 billion in equity in EirGrid and ESB Networks. The equity injection will support the ability to finance the unprecedented investment in our electricity system under PR6, with €1.5 billion transferred to ESB Networks last December to support the financing of our onshore electricity infrastructure. The remaining €2 billion will transfer to EirGrid over the next five years to support its investment in offshore transmission infrastructure.

Now that the investment plans for the next five years have been published and funding for the grid secured, it is critical that, as a country, we deliver the infrastructure. That is why the Government has established numerous task forces to accelerate electricity generation and grid infrastructure. In 2024, under the accelerating renewable electricity task force, the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment established a future grid working group. The working group brings together key delivery staff from across the Department, the CRU, EirGrid and ESB Networks. It is tasked with accelerating delivery of the grid, identifying issues that are impeding grid delivery and potential solutions to same, along with identifying priority grid projects. The work of the future grid group has fed into and is supported by the work of the accelerating infrastructure task force under the Department of public expenditure, infrastructure and reform. In December, the Government published the Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan to help deliver efficient delivery of infrastructure across Ireland. The action plan contains 30 time-bound measures to address 12 barriers to infrastructure development previously identified by the work of the task force. The national electricity grid must deliver connections locally and provide a quality electricity supply for new and existing customers.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. I hear what he is saying but the concern locally is that this situation could drift for a long time. I understand the Government does not have any say over what ESB Networks does but, at the same time, it has influence. Both projects have effectively been told that ESB Networks needs two months simply to complete a capacity review and only after that will it be known whether further reinforcement works are required. If that review concludes that upgrades are needed, we could be looking at delays of one year or more. That is not acceptable. It means that a recycling plant, which has already been rebuilt after a devastating fire and has been engaging with ESB Networks since last September seeking a reconnection, could remain idle with workers waiting to return to employment. At the same time, a major State infrastructure project could remain delayed, leaving taxpayers to continue to bear the cost while construction timelines slip further and further.

Businesses and public bodies understand that infrastructure takes time. What they cannot plan for, however, is the situation where it takes months just to be told a review is to take place and then potentially months or years more before a connection can be delivered. Will the

Minister of State engage urgently with ESB Networks and the CRU to determine whether temporary capacity solutions, interim connections or accelerated network upgrades can be put in place to ensure these projects in Cappincur are not left waiting indefinitely? The workers, employers and public bodies involved have done everything asked of them. They now need the system to deliver for them.

A recycling plant rebuilt after a fire and a major State infrastructure project are now sitting idle in Offaly while everyone waits months just to find out whether the electricity can be turned back on. That cannot be acceptable.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Deputy for his contribution on the matter. I acknowledge that he has raised a serious and specific query regarding an issue in his constituency. As I said, the national electricity grid must deliver locally. That should mean providing quality electric supply for new and existing customers. Under the grid connection policy set by the CRU, connection applications are dealt with on a sequential, first-come, first-serve basis. As I outlined, the Government has invested heavily in acknowledgement that the grid is at capacity and that there is a need to improve and enhance it. I have already outlined just how much money the Government has put behind this investment. Under my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Chambers, we have also established the infrastructure delivery task force to ensure infrastructure is delivered effectively and in a timely manner and barriers that have been identified are removed. This is critically important for the development and maintenance of our economy going forward.

The Deputy has raised a specific issue relating to Cappincur. I appreciate that businesses and projects in that area need certainty. I will bring back the message he has delivered this evening to my colleague, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to determine whether we can get certainty for the projects in question in Cappincur.

We do and should expect ESB Networks to be able to identify, in a more timely fashion, exactly what is going to be needed. If a long lead-in time is needed for infrastructure improvements, it should be able to give the businesses in question the time to plan accordingly. As I said, the Government has invested heavily in acknowledgement that infrastructure improvements are needed. We want to see those rolled out in a timely fashion.

Regeneration Projects

Deputy Jen Cummins: I raise an important issue in my constituency, most particularly in Dublin 8, where I live. For many centuries, there has been a market in Newmarket. There is also the Iveagh Markets. There were markets all over this city but, sadly, we have seen the closure of many of them throughout this city.

The Iveagh Markets have been closed for some time and Newmarket has become a place that would not inspire people to go and visit it because it is a bit soulless. There was a market there a number of years ago that brought the community together. This is an urban area. There are people who have lived there for decades and people who have moved in. What was really uniting about everything was that this market brought people together. It was an indoor market. There were different varieties of markets that happened on weekends. There was a fruit market and a vegetable market, a flea market, and a permanent space where you could go and have a

coffee with your neighbours, and it was immensely important to our neighbourhood. Unfortunately, people love building in Dublin 8. They love building hotels, apartments and tourist attractions because the area is very attractive to tourists with all the historic parts we have. However, we live there and we want to have an area that is more than just a tourist attraction. When planning permission was put in for a new building that would go there, part of that planning permission was that a market space needed to be made available there. That has been subject to observations and objections over the last number of years as the place lies idle.

I have been contacted by so many people about this issue for almost two years, including when I was campaigning before the different elections, and people are really angry. That place is vacant. There is nothing in there. It is completely soulless and there are markets that want to happen in that area. There is an organised outdoor market at the moment. It happens in the summer to autumn time. It was really lovely. People came back and said it was great to have the market back there again. It is outdoor, however, and we all know what that means. Yesterday was boiling hot, today it is lashing rain and I heard it has been snowing in Tallaght. You could not have a market that would be reliable outside. We need indoor markets.

I have been contacted by somebody who would love to run the market there. They have been told that it would cost €66,000 per annum. That is not a like for like. It is not a culture- and community-based sum being charged. It is a serious amount of money. I would love to know what markets are so successful that they can pay that much rent. People are angry and disappointed and it is wearing the community down. We have this view now that this lovely opportunity has just been taken away from us. What can be done when things are part of planning permission and are granted on the basis of planning permission and then they are being priced out of it? The local community and markets are not able to apply for this. They are being priced out for a reason. The people who own that building clearly do not want to have a market in there. What can be done by the Department to ensure this does not happen again? We have seen this in Dublin 8 with other areas. Dublin 8 suffers in the context of planning permission. I do not know if the Minister of State has been to my community but there is very little green space, so often access to things like green spaces is cut off when student accommodation or co-living is built. It is part of the planning permission that the developer should have it open to it but it applies for retention afterwards. It is not good enough and it is happening time and again in Dublin 8.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Deputy for raising the matter. I can confirm that I drive through her constituency probably every day getting to Leinster House and I have been in it many times. My brother lived down from the Iveagh Markets in Francis Street, so I know it well.

The Iveagh Markets complex, a protected structure located on Francis Street, Dublin 8, was designed to provide accommodation for street traders. It opened in 1907 but, unfortunately, ceased operations in 1996 and has remained disused ever since. Today, the building is in a state of severe dereliction due to prolonged neglect and damaging interventions, with parts of the structure currently deemed unsafe. Dublin City Council has identified that the first step in resolving the issues with the building is to carry out essential stabilisation and repair works to prevent it from deteriorating any further. Dublin City Council has identified major works that

will be required, to include the reconstruction of floor areas, roof and external wall repairs and the rebuilding of collapsed or demolished brickwork sections.

Under urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, call 2, which was announced in 2021, Dublin City Council was allocated €179.7 million in URDF funding for two proposals across the north and south inner city, comprising 27 different projects. In 2023, almost €9.5 million of funding from the URDF was made available to Dublin City Council for the Iveagh Markets project when it was substituted for another project from the south inner-city proposal. The proposal brought forward by Dublin City Council was to secure the fabric of the structure through a programme of essential works to be carried out to prevent this protected structure from further deterioration. Following the completion of essential stabilisation and repair work, this significant part of the city's architectural heritage will be secured, allowing Dublin City Council to develop long-term sustainable proposals for its reuse.

Initially the focus was on making the building safe for access, inspection, and survey work. Following a comprehensive dilapidation survey in 2019 and further assessments by the appointed integrated design team, it was determined that immediate interventions were required to facilitate safe entry and roof-level access. These stage 1 works included the installation of a crash deck, limited structural repairs and enabling surveys. They were procured through the Dublin City Council framework for building repair contractors and were substantially completed in October 2024. The current focus is on the main emergency stabilisation works, informed also by the 2019 dilapidation report and the extensive surveys and inspections completed by the internal integrated design team. These stage 2 essential stabilisation and repair works are required to safeguard the structure for the future and are expected to cost approximately €13.5 million. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage gave approval for the final business case for these works in August of last year. These works began last December and are expected to be completed over the next two years. The completion of these works will allow Dublin City Council to consider the viable options for the future use of the market.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I thank the Minister of State for that answer but that is not what I was talking about. However, I am glad he has given me that answer because I can go back and let the people know what they already know about the Iveagh Markets. I was asking about the market on Newmarket. Newmarket is an historic part in the Liberties that is not the Iveagh Markets. I am delighted with this answer because I can go back to them but they and I already know this answer. What I am asking the Minister of State about is the market that does not exist any more on Newmarket because planning came in and a big fancy building was built. They have built lots of fancy buildings in Newmarket but part of the planning permission was that a market needed to go in there. The problem is that the developer is pricing any market stall-holder or market organisation out so that they will not be able to do it and it keeps putting in for permission for change of use. This is difficult for the Minister of State because he has been given a different answer but I really need to know what can be done when planning permission has been put in and we have been told as a community that a market will go in there and then it has not because it is priced out.

Second, the cultural aspect of our city has to be about the residents who live in the city 365 days a year. It has to be about what makes it wonderful to live in the city. I am very proud of living in the city and of being a TD for Dublin South-Central but I do not represent tourists. I

represent the people who live in my neighbourhood. If the cultural and community activities are only for people who come for short visits, that is not good enough. What can be done to prevent that happening but also, more importantly, what can be done in this situation in Newmarket where this market is being priced out and is going to disappear? How can I help the community to prevent this from happening and how can the Government put in place legislation that disallows this sort of thing happening?

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Deputy for her kindness in her response in acknowledging that I was given the wrong answer to the question that was submitted. I appreciate that. My understanding from listening to her follow-up is that Newmarket was a community market that operated in an open space and subsequently ceased trading, and planning permission was approved for a development of a structure of some sort. I am not quite sure what the structure was but it was a building of some sort.

As part of that planning permission there was a condition that a market would also be provided in the future for the community. The developer who got that planning permission is marketing the market at €66,000 per annum, which is in excess of €1,000 per week. That is excessive by any stretch of the imagination for someone to conduct a market.

It is clear to me that what the developer is trying to do is to be able to go back to Dublin City Council and say there is no demand for a community market, but if you price something so high you will not get a demand. I hope the Deputy will use her good offices to identify to Dublin City Council what is potentially happening in this space. I am taking this all on what the Deputy is saying. I am not aware of it. If somebody is being granted planning permission to maintain a community space in an area, they should maintain the community space in the area, be it for a market, a playground or whatever. It is critically important in our communities that amenities for the communities are maintained. We need to see progress. We need to see commercial and residential buildings built and sometimes they have to be built on open spaces. However, when it is a condition of planning permission to maintain the community element and amenities in the space they must be protected, and Dublin City Council must ensure they are protected. That is its role as the authority that has given planning permission in the first instance.

Road Projects

Deputy Colm Burke: I ask the Minister for Transport what progress will be made towards the much-needed northern distributor road and Cork city northern transport project in 2026, given that only €400,000 was provided in funding under national road funding allocation in 2026, and whether this will be prioritised given that there is a huge growth in population in Cork. This is a difficult issue. We have the biggest taxpayer in the country situated in Hollyhill, Cork. Apple computers employs over 6,000 people. It started off 45 years ago with 60 people. The same road infrastructure is there now as 45 years ago. We are talking about a distributor road on the northern side of Cork city. If you are coming in from Limerick through Mallow to go to the western side of Cork city you now have a huge problem getting there. You are either coming down through the city on roads that were constructed for a far smaller volume of traffic or you have to come through Blarney, Cloghroe and back through Ballincollig. When are we going to prioritise this? We have been able to fast-track the Adare bypass. This is essential for

Cork city. We are putting in funding for the Ringaskiddy bypass, which is essential. Again, we are waiting 14 years for funding for that. This one is crucial because we have a lot of people working there who have to come through that part of the city to get to their place of work because we have a lot of people living in Mallow and north of the city. Yet, we are putting in €400,000 in 2026. I am gobsmacked that what is regarded as a priority project is being put on the back burner again. This request was put in over 20 years ago, and 20 years later we still have nothing delivered.

I do not believe this is the way we should be treating major employers in an area where we have difficulties with workers accessing their places of employment. We are doing nothing to assist them. We are doing nothing to assist the people who have to go outside the city to get housing and who are working in other parts of the city and have to come through this traffic chaos. When exactly will we give this project priority? I am talking about the northern distributor road. The route as it has been identified stretches from Carrigrohane Straight up the north side of Cork city, north of Apple computers onto the Cork-Mallow road and on to Glanmire. We seem to have parked it now that the route is identified. I believe we need to give priority to it. We need to fast-track it. The employer I am talking about employs 6,000 people. We collected €14 billion in tax in one year alone. Last year we collected another €4 billion. The three biggest taxpayers in corporate tax are paying 46% of corporate tax. Two of them are in Cork - Eli Lilly and Apple. We are telling them it is not our problem to put in roads for them. That is their problem. I do not think that is good enough. It is about time we got our act together on this and gave it the priority it deserves and identify the funding to progress this project at the earliest possible date.

Deputy Robert Troy: On behalf of the Minister for Transport, I thank the Deputy for the opportunity to address this issue in the House. The proposal for the Cork northern distributor road, NDR, is set out in the Cork metropolitan area transport strategy 2040, CMATS, which was developed by the NTA in collaboration with Cork City Council, Cork County Council and Transport Infrastructure Ireland. During the preparation, the opportunity to thread together several upgrades of existing roads was identified. This would create a coherent orbital route on the north side of Cork city. This route, which was termed the northern distributor road, was considered to address several of the access issues that currently exist on the northside of the city and was included in the final CMATS document. As the Deputy is aware, the Department of Transport published its NDP review sectoral plan in November 2025. As is noted in the sectoral plan, procurement on the NDR is expected to occur over 2028 and 2029, with a view to construction commencing thereafter. The NTA has received all required documents and approved Cork City Council to proceed with the tender for consulting services for phase 3, the preliminary design, and phase 4, the statutory process, for the Cork northern distributor road project. Cork City Council published the consultants tender in December 2025 and has since received interest from 18 consultancy firms on the NTA's framework. Cork City Council briefed councillors on this update in mid-December. Tender submissions are due by 13 March this year, and Cork City Council plans to appoint a consultant for phases 3 and 4 in May. Phases 3 and 4 are expected to take approximately 36 months to complete, which should then allow for the lodgement of a planning application for the project. Cork City Council plans to undertake another round of non-statutory public consultation after appointing a consultant, so draft designs are likely to be available to the public in quarter 3 of 2027. I look forward to

seeing this project progress over the coming years and I thank the Deputy again for raising this matter and giving me an opportunity to update the House.

Deputy Colm Burke: I am concerned that the Minister of State is saying 36 months. That is three years. We have the biggest taxpayer in the country in this part of the city. We are saying sorry that they are waiting 45 years, but they will now have to wait between five and eight years more before we do anything for them. It is not good enough to wait three years. We fast-tracked the Adare bypass because we have a lot of people flying in for four weeks, and after those four weeks they will all be gone. Apple is there 45 years. The people of Cork are there all of the time. They are not there for just four weeks out of 20 years. I do not understand why it takes three years to progress a project because that is what we are now talking about. This is not good enough where there is substantial money being earned by the State in respect of a company providing employment to 6,000 people.

That is the number employed there. This is together with all the other people who are employed in Ballincollig, on the western side of the city, or the people employed in south Cork who have to travel through the city to get to their place of employment. We are now saying it is going to be another three or four years before we even go to the stage of inviting tenders for construction, and it may very well be six years. In view of the urgency of the matter and the fact that this project was parked for over ten years, can we not now give it priority? Can we not give priority to the consultation, the drafting of the plans and to advertising to bring in the contractors to build? It is extremely important for the city and for the many people who are working in the city and on its outskirts. I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Robert Troy: It is not in my gift to say that we can accelerate the timeframe for the delivery of-----

Deputy Colm Burke: You did it for Adare for the sake of four weeks. Everything was done.

Deputy Robert Troy: I will acknowledge that the Deputy makes a very valid case to ensure we have the right infrastructure in place to serve major companies that are contributing significantly in terms of corporation tax to our country and employment for Cork and across different regions in Ireland. I have been given a document this evening to outline on behalf of the Minister for Transport the current timelines in place. The Deputy will be aware that the Government and the Minister, Deputy Chambers, in the Department of public expenditure and reform, have published a document on accelerating the implementation of critical pieces of infrastructure. I honestly do not know if that will have an impact on the delivery of what the Deputy rightly identified as a critical infrastructure in relation to this northern distributor road. There was an acknowledgement on behalf of the Government that it was taking too long for infrastructural projects to be rolled out. As a consequence of that, a group was formed, an action plan has been published and those actions are there to be implemented to ensure we reduce the time it takes to put in critical infrastructure. I honestly do not know whether that will improve the situation the Deputy spoke about. I hope it will. I will bring back the points the Deputy has raised here to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. I am sure the Deputy will use the opportunity within his own parliamentary party, which is a member of this Government, to also articulate the points made here this evening.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Minister of State.

Road Projects

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The Athenry ring road is a key infrastructural project for our town. It is fair to say that progress has been quite slow. While parts of the road have been completed, we need to see this full project progressed and delivered. Construction is ongoing at the elbow section at Ballygarraun. That is very welcome and will provide another connection to the schools and the motorway and make it quicker and easier to get around the town. The next section to be completed is the eastern section through Ballydavid. This is key because it will connect the Tuam road to the Monivea road and take a huge amount of traffic out of the town centre. Cars coming in from the likes of Monivea, Attymon and surrounding areas will be able to completely avoid the town. It will make a huge difference in reducing traffic and congestion.

Traffic is becoming a serious issue in the town. The population of Athenry is expected to grow considerably in the years ahead. We have a lot of planning permissions approved for new housing developments. That is, obviously, a very good thing, but it is absolutely critical that we have the infrastructure in place to support and cater for an increased population and increased demands on infrastructure and public services. This means proper educational facilities. Our local schools need increased capacity. In particular, we need to see the new Gaelcampus, which we have been waiting 20 years for. It will mean having improved healthcare services, access to GPs and recreation spaces and amenities.

It is important to say a lot of good work is going on locally through the Athenry town centre plan and other initiatives to enhance our public spaces and the heritage of the town. In particular, we need improved transport services and infrastructure. Our rail services are at capacity and we are still waiting for a new bus service. The eastern section of the ring road is critical to taking traffic out of the town. We now know that the western rail corridor project from Athenry to Tuam is going ahead. It is a very welcome project. The western rail corridor and this section of the ring road will intersect, so it is positive that we now have clarity on the future of the rail line in the context of this project as well, as both of them can and should proceed together. I ask the Minister of State to please provide an update on this project.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank Deputy O'Hara for his question. I welcome the opportunity to discuss this important topic with members of the House today on behalf of the Minister for Transport. I understand that the Deputy's question is in relation to the Athenry relief road in County Galway. As Deputy O'Hara is aware, and as outlined in the 2026 regional and local roads programme, the Government is strongly committed to protecting the existing road network. This network is fundamental in connecting people and places across the country. It facilitates business, education, tourism, healthcare, agriculture and the provision of critical services and activities. It is important to highlight that 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 county councils' own resources and supplemented by State road grants. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is a matter for the local authority.

Ireland's regional and local road network spans over 96,000 km and it requires significant funding to ensure it remains fit for purpose, safe and resilient. As such, on 17 February 2026, the Minister for Transport announced an Exchequer investment of €718 million for our regional and local roads across the State. This will facilitate an increase in funding allocation of €26 million this year for road protection and renewal works. The pressures on the regional and local road network mean that the primary focus for capital investment under the regional and local road grant programme is on the maintenance and renewal of the network; the implementation of the strategic regional and local road projects identified for development, subject to necessary approvals, in the national development plan; and targeted minor safety schemes across the regional and local road network. Any new road projects that seek State funding are assessed by the Department on a case-by-case basis. All projects proposed by local authorities for consideration must comply with the requirements of the infrastructure guidelines and the Department's transport appraisal framework. Given the limited funding available for regional and local road improvement works, it is important for local authorities to prioritise projects within their overall area of responsibility with these requirements in mind.

To date, two of the four sections of the Athenry relief road have been constructed. Funding was provided in 2025 to facilitate the construction of the third section, which will connect the previous two sections already constructed. The contract was awarded in 2025 for the third section following the conclusion of the tender process, and the construction programme is under way. The implementation of this project is the responsibility of Galway County Council. In 2026, Galway County Council received an allocation of €2 million for the Athenry relief road to continue construction of the third section. The Department has provided funding to Galway County Council under the strategic regional and local road grant programme to undertake surveys to allow the development of the preliminary design, including aspects of the bridge works required to facilitate the final section of the relief road. This work has been progressed in conjunction with Irish Rail. The current proposal indicates that the existing bridge over the final road section may have to be raised and there may be additional impacts on another bridge. The cost implications are being assessed on the final section of the Athenry relief road and any possible impact on the business case for the scheme.

In summary, the Minister for Transport recognises the importance of the funding provided to local authorities for the protection and renewal of the regional and local road network together with some targeted investment in road improvement projects. This funding helps to maintain a functioning, safe interconnected network that facilitates thousands of people in their day-to-day activities.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Go raibh maith agat. What I am really looking for is clarity on this project. The people of Athenry have been waiting for the ring road for a very long time. It is a hugely important infrastructural project for the town and for reducing congestion in the town.

6 o'clock

It is critical for us as a growing town and a town that is going to continue to grow significantly in the years ahead. The design work is going on for a very long time at this stage. We know what is required for the bridge works to facilitate the road and the new railway. When will this project proceed? Will these projects proceed together? That is the clarity I am looking for on behalf of the people of Athenry. We want both projects to progressing as quickly as possible

because they are both very important. That is also the position of Galway County Council. It is very welcome that we have clarity on the rail line and certainty that it is going to reopen in the future. There is no reason the rail and road projects cannot progress together and be up and running in the near future. We need the plans to be put in place for that, and funding allocated to make that a reality. I appreciate this is not the Minister of State's Department, but if a request could go into the Department to provide that clarity, it would be much appreciated on behalf of the people of Athenry.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Deputy for raising forcefully the need for clarity and certainty in relation to when the next phase of works will happen for this relief road. I have outlined the current state of play and there is no point in outlining it again but I will undertake to raise what the Deputy has said this evening with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and ask him to come back to the Deputy with any further updates regarding the state of play of the road.

Traveller Community

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I am very grateful for the opportunity to raise the issue of the closure and liquidation of the Southside Traveller Action Group, STAG. STAG has provided support to the Traveller community in my constituency and neighbouring constituencies for four decades. It provides support for some of the most marginalised people in our country, through periods when Travellers have faced horrific racism and abuse, a structural lack of support from the State and unimaginable tragedies such as the Carrickmines fire in which ten people tragically lost their lives. The announcement that STAG is closing has resulted in feelings of anger, betrayal and devastation for the Traveller community because for 40 years it has been helping Travellers with education, health supports, housing advocacy, employment and training programmes and after-school programmes. I understand that issues have arisen within the organisation and that the governance of the organisation is not for discussion in this Chamber. However, what is clearly within our scope is ensuring that Travellers in south Dublin continue to have the services they have relied on for over 40 years. We need to make sure the relevant Departments of equality, justice and social protection across government work together with the Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council to ensure the Traveller community itself is not penalised due to a situation it has not created. We need to ensure that education and health supports, housing advocacy and employment and training programmes for Travellers in my area continue and that there is a premises for these activities to take place.

These supports are vital for a community that has worse employment, educational and health outcomes and a much lower life expectancy than the settled population. If we are serious about equality, we need to address these issues for the Traveller community. STAG has been a huge part of that response in south Dublin for 40 years, and it is absolutely vital that any dissolution of the organisation does not leave these issues and that work abandoned.

I worked a lot on Traveller issues during my time in the human rights sector, and I have to say, it was an absolute privilege to work with groups such as the Southside Traveller Action Group from across Ireland that really provide for the gap in services I have described, which the State unfortunately as of yet does not provide for. The Traveller community is structurally vulnerable. What I mean by that, because the Traveller community is a very proud people and community, is its members face discrimination in areas across Irish life. They face racism that

is the last accepted racism in our society, particularly in areas like mine where historically, political leaders have not shown the kindness to Travellers that we expect and Travellers deserve, and recognition of the racism and discrimination they experience in all spheres of Irish life. Attitudes of NIMBYism are not dealt with by political leaders and, in some instances, they are even fomented by political leaders within my constituency.

This is an opportunity for me and my constituency colleagues to show up for the Traveller community in Rathdown and specifically help put forward solutions when the Southside Traveller Action Group is in crisis. I really want to work with Government on this. I want to work with the Minister of State or whoever is responsible for this area to find a solution and show up for this delicate community.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister for Children, Equality and Disability would like me, on her behalf, to thank the Deputy for raising this important issue and offering her, through me, an opportunity to respond. She sends her genuine apologies that she cannot be here to take this debate.

On 17 February, the board of Southside Traveller Action Group informed its public funders, including the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, that following an emergency meeting of the board and members, a resolution had been passed to place the company into voluntary liquidation on the grounds of insolvency. This was a deeply regrettable development as for more than 40 years, STAG played an important role in supporting members of the Traveller community and advocating for equality, inclusion and improved outcomes in areas such as accommodation support, education, training, employment, Traveller healthcare and youth services for local Traveller families. The main public funding organisations are the Health Service Executive, the Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board and the Department of Social Protection, with an application also coming from the Department of Children, Equality and Disability to support and enable front-line service delivery. The Department of Children, Equality and Disability has contributed to State funding and supports to assist the organisation in delivering vital services for many years. However, over time, governance and financial challenges have been the focus of concern and attention of all State funders. Notwithstanding these concerns, and to ensure the organisation could continue to provide services, all funders continued to make funding available while allowing the identified issues to be addressed. All funders have a responsibility to ensure that public funds are used appropriately, transparently and in line with good governance standards. The effective stewardship of public resources is essentially not only for accountability, but also to maintain public trust, and safeguard the continuity of services for vulnerable communities. It was for that reason that public funders of STAG commissioned an independent finance and governance review of the organisation, which commenced in mid-October 2025. The review had not been completed at the time of the board's announcement.

The Minister wishes to acknowledge the work of everyone involved with STAG over many years to represent and advocate for the local Traveller community in south County Dublin. Its contribution has made a real impact in the lives of many individuals and families who are among those in most need within society. At this point, each of the State funders will assess the implications of the board's decision and, in so doing, will be conscious of the need to ensure services are delivered for the community. In this regard, it is vital that services and advocacy

support remain accessible, and the needs of Traveller communities continue to be prioritised and met.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank the Minister of State. The Minister of State mentioned the governance issues that have arisen. This organisation has operated for 40 years and the governance and running of the organisation was done very well during that time. I have worked with many of these groups and it is against all odds sometimes that they survive with very little funding, a lot of volunteer power, and community spirit driving them forward. They have been operating and functioning well as an organisation for many decades. It is crucial not to lose sight of that while dealing with the current issues that arise. I am seeking assurance that, as the Minister of State mentioned all the funders being conscious of the need to ensure services are delivered to the community, that they remain accessible and that the needs of the Traveller community continue to be prioritised and met.

That means those services must be provided by alternative organisations, by the council and by funding that comes from elsewhere across Government while this issue is being dealt with.

I appreciate this is a complex issue and something that needs input from multiple sources but I want to make sure some of the good work is not lost in regard to things like the lease this organisation has, which I believe may be under threat if we do not get a solution in place fast enough. This is the kind of thing I would urge Government and the Minister to look at to make sure the 40 years of really hard work by the Southside Travellers Action Group is not lost because of the crisis that has arisen over the past year or so. For me, the difficulty is that we know how hard it is. This is one of the first groups that was ever set up to provide these services to Travellers in Ireland. The thought that we would lose that infrastructure and continuity is really devastating. One thing I really want to emphasise is that the Minister should really seek to maintain that continuity.

Deputy Robert Troy: Again, I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue, which is a priority for the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality and, indeed, for the whole of Government. The Minister acknowledges the staff, volunteers and community members who have worked with commitment and dedication over many years to advance the rights and well-being of Travellers in the Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown area. Their efforts, often in challenging circumstances, have made a real difference to so many lives. This includes the significant contribution made by Southside Travellers Action Group in supporting local Traveller families after the tragic fire that occurred at a halting site in Carrickmines in October 2015, which the Deputy also acknowledged.

The Minister and the Government are committed to working towards the effective inclusion of Travellers in all aspects of Irish life, most immediately through implementation of the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024-2028. Strong community organisations advocating for and representing local Traveller communities are essential elements in that strategy. In their response to the situation at the Southside Travellers Action Group, the public funding organisations, including the Department, will be very conscious of the need to ensure that services are delivered to the community. I will relay the messages the Deputy brought here this evening, particularly in relation to the lease of the existing premises.

On a wider level, the Minister and her officials will continue to take steps under the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024-2028 to strengthen the supports available to local organisations to help them meet the governance and financial requirements that go hand in hand with public funding while at the same time, supporting their most necessary efforts to represent the genuine and authentic voice of local Traveller communities.

Criminal Justice (Rehabilitative Periods) Bill 2018 [Seanad]: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Gary Gannon: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am very proud to stand here this evening to introduce the Criminal Justice (Rehabilitative Periods) Bill to the Dáil. This is legislation that has been championed for years, since 2018, by my friend and colleague in the Seanad, Senator Lynn Ruane. I want to acknowledge her work on this Bill from the outset. It is a Bill rooted in lived experience, in real communities and in the simple belief that people can change their lives.

I also want to acknowledge the fact that we are seeing something that does not always happen in this Chamber - broad agreement from the Government that reform in this area is necessary and overdue. I acknowledge the Minister of State for supporting the progression of this legislation because I believe that consensus and coming to an agreement in the Chamber matters on areas of importance such as this. It matters to the thousands of people across the country who have done everything society has asked of them - people who have served their sentence, stayed out of trouble and worked to rebuild their lives but who continue to carry the weight of a past conviction long after they have moved on, rebuilt and repaid their debt to society. That is what this Bill seeks to address.

At its heart, this legislation is about rehabilitation. It is about second chances and recognising that rehabilitation and recovery are both possible, and recognition of that is necessary from those who create legislation. This legislation simply means that after a person has completed their sentence and lived for a sustained period without reoffending, they should not be forced to carry that conviction with them forever in every aspect of their lives. It does not erase the conviction. It does not rewrite history or heal the hurt for victims but it allows people, after demonstrating rehabilitation, to move forward, particularly when it comes to education, employment and general participation in society.

The evidence is very clear. When people have access to employment, education and stability, reoffending drops and communities, by consequence, become safer. When people have access to employment, education and stability, reintegration into society is a societal value as a whole. Yet, the reality is that Ireland's current spent convictions system is extremely narrow and conservative. Under the existing law, many people simply cannot qualify for a spent conviction at all. A single additional conviction can exclude someone permanently, regardless of how long ago those offences occurred or how dramatically their life has changed since. That means people who offended years or sometimes decades ago and who have since turned their lives around completely remain locked out of opportunities to give back. I refer to people who have gone back to education, overcome addiction, addressed their trauma and are trying to build stable lives for themselves and their families. Yet, the door to employment or

opportunity can still be closed to them because of something they did years earlier and have sought to make amends for in every single year that has passed.

As Senator Ruane has said so powerfully when speaking about this issue in the Seanad, these archaic laws mean that people who have not offended for years and who have done everything they can to rebuild their lives are still unable to move forward. That is not justice and it is not smart policy either. Rehabilitation in the criminal justice system has to really mean something in practice.

This Bill broadens the range of convictions that can become spent while maintaining clear exclusions for serious offences. It removes the arbitrary cap on the number of convictions that can become spent. It introduces proportionate rehabilitative periods that better reflect the seriousness of the offence and the age of the person at the time. It extends eligibility for sentences that can qualify. It shortens rehabilitative periods for young people, recognising the importance of giving them a second chance to move forward. Importantly, it introduces protections so that people cannot be discriminated against in employment simply because they do not disclose a conviction that has been legally spent.

These are practical, sensible reforms that bring Ireland closer to international best practice in rehabilitative justice. They recognise a basic truth - that if someone has served their sentence and stayed out of trouble for years afterwards, they deserve the opportunity to move forward with their lives. For so many people, the barriers created by our current system show up in very real ways, with people who are unable to apply for jobs, who are excluded from training or educational opportunities, or who are trying to participate in their community - volunteering, coaching sports teams and contributing in positive ways - but are held back by past mistakes that continue to follow them everywhere they try to go.

As the Minister of State knows, I represent an area where we see so clearly how crime is inextricably linked with societal disadvantage. Issues like poverty, trauma and addiction are realities that shape people's lives. When I think about how lucky I am to hold the justice portfolio for my party - a responsibility I take enormously seriously - I often think about the people I have met not just in this role but in all the roles that have led me to the one I hold. I refer to people I have spoken to through prison visits; people who have come through the justice system; and people who have made enormous efforts to rebuild their lives after incredibly difficult circumstances. I often think about how incredibly valuable it would be if our systems were more informed by the lived experience of people who have actually been through them. It is something Senator Ruane has said before: just imagine the benefit to our social workers, social care teams, teachers and gardaí if we stopped standing in the way of people who have already done the work to change their lives, despite the wrongs of their past. If someone does the work to change their life, if they stay out of trouble and try to contribute positively to society, then surely the State should support that journey and not block it.

Failing to support rehabilitation and keeping people on the margins of society benefits absolutely nobody. So many people who will benefit from this legislation committed relatively minor offences during really difficult periods in their lives and we know that people can and do change. We see the benefits of that in our communities every single day.

This legislation simply recognises that change. It recognises the courage it takes for people to rebuild their lives and the role the State must play in supporting the process.

I again acknowledge Senator Ruane's leadership on this issue and the heart she brings to her advocacy, which is driven by constant community engagement and backed by reams of research. Her work has helped to bring this issue from the margins into the centre of policy discussion. I am genuinely proud to play a part in the legislation being brought forward today because, ultimately, this bill is about believing that people have a role to play in contributing to society and that the mistakes in people's past should not weigh them down forever. It is about ensuring that when the work is done, people can rebuild their lives. It is an important and meaningful step forward. It will help people to access employment, families to build stability and communities to become stronger. It does not take away the hurt, but it recognises that people are more than their worst day.

Many of us have heard it said that if you cannot do the time, you should not do the crime and I absolutely accept that. When crimes are committed, there are victims, there is hurt and restitution and justice are required. However, once the time is done, lives still have to be lived. They have to be rebuilt and today we can go some way towards making that process a little fairer on the scales of justice.

Before I conclude, I thank the staff in my office, Ms Eleanor O'Donovan and Ms Caitlin Hennessy, who I give an awful time to. Sometimes it is with legislation like this that I see the real work and the heart they bring to the work we are doing in the Dáil today. The fact that this Bill is passing Second Stage is a testament to their work, to the communities who told their personal stories and gave testimony and to the work and advocacy of Senator Ruane. I look forward to hearing the discussion.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Colm Brophy): I really welcome the opportunity to address Dáil Éireann today regarding the Criminal Justice (Rehabilitative Periods) Bill 2018 on behalf of the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan. Unfortunately he is in Brussels today and that is the only reason he is not here.

At the outset, I acknowledge the work that has brought us to this point, some of which was so well described by Deputy Gannon. This Bill was first introduced to Seanad Éireann in 2018 by Senator Ruane. It completed all Stages there in June 2021 and I recognise, as Deputy Gannon did, her absolute commitment, persistence and strong advocacy on this. I thank Deputy Gannon for bringing the Bill before this House for consideration on Second Stage. As someone who has been a Deputy as well as a Minister of State, I acknowledge that incredibly hard work is done in offices by the staff in those offices and they are the people who give us the ability to stand here and make these speeches. A lot of hard work goes into it and it is good to see it acknowledged.

The Bill has benefited from engagement across successive Governments, which reflects the serious importance of the issues involved. It was not opposed on Committee Stage in 2019 by then Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Charlie Flanagan. In 2021, Government approval was secured by then Minister for Justice, Deputy Helen McEntee, for the Bill to proceed, subject to the opportunity to introduce amendments. This week, as I mentioned, the Minister brought a memo to the Government seeking approval to continue with the approach of not opposing the Bill on Second Stage and I can confirm that was endorsed by the Cabinet.

A conviction can carry consequences for an individual far beyond the sentence imposed by a court. It can affect, as the Deputy rightly pointed out, everything from employment to housing, education and training. It can limit opportunity. It creates barriers that make reintegration more difficult, and it can increase the risk of returning to offending. At its core, the Criminal Justice (Rehabilitative Periods) Bill 2018 sets out to improve the opportunities available to people with convictions at the lower end of the scale who have moved away from offending and want to get on with their lives and to become productive members of society. The Bill aims to do this by amending the current legal regime dealing with spent convictions. A spent conviction is not erased from the record. It does not rewrite a person's history. Instead, after a specified period of time - referred to in this Bill as the rehabilitative period - and subject to certain conditions, a conviction is only required to be disclosed in certain specific and sensitive circumstances, for example when applying for certain types of employment or during the investigation of a criminal matter. The principle behind this is straightforward. If a person has demonstrated over a sustained period that they have not re-offended, the law should recognise that rehabilitation and allow an opportunity for a second chance.

Currently, the Criminal Justice (Spent Convictions and Certain Disclosures) Act 2016 permits a single conviction to become spent if it is handed down in the District Court, or if it carries less than 12 months' imprisonment when handed down by any other court. Seven years must also pass from the date of conviction. The Act provides for some limited exceptions to the limit of a single conviction for certain common minor offences such as the majority of convictions in the District Court for minor public order offences; and the majority of convictions in the District Court for motoring offences, with the exception that only one dangerous driving conviction can become spent. However, sexual offences, sentences of imprisonment for 12 months or more, and offences which are tried in the Central Criminal Court cannot become spent. A conviction resulting in a non-custodial sentence of 24 months or less, where offenders are managed within the community, can also become spent after seven years. This includes suspended sentences of up to two years' imprisonment.

I will now turn to the Bill, which proposes significant amendments to the 2016 Act to provide for broader access to the spent convictions regime. It proposes to extend the existing spent convictions legislation to include non-custodial sentences of up to 48 months and custodial sentences of up to 24 months. Under the current system, individuals with more than one qualifying conviction are excluded from spent convictions. The Bill would remove that automatic exclusion. However, it introduces a safeguard whereby, if a new offence is committed within an existing rehabilitative period, that person's convictions would remain unspent until the most recent rehabilitative period has expired. In doing this, the proposed system would reward those who demonstrate a sustained pattern of law-abiding behaviour.

Third, the Bill links the length of the sentence imposed on an offender to the length of the rehabilitative period. This introduces an element of proportionality to spent convictions and seeks to align the consequences more closely with the gravity of the offence. The Bill also provides for differential treatment for young adults aged 18 to 24. It recognises that this cohort is at a distinct developmental stage and proposes shorter rehabilitative periods. An amendment is proposed to the Children's Act 2001 to ensure that children are not treated less favourably than young adults in comparable circumstances. The Bill includes a provision for a review of the operation of the amended legislation to commence no later than two years after enactment, with a further year allowed for the preparation of a report for the Oireachtas. An amendment

is proposed to the Employment Equality Act 1998 that seeks to ensure that spent convictions are not a factor in recruitment and employment decisions.

The Bill, as initiated, sought to introduce significant reform to the current spent convictions regime. The reach of the Bill was further broadened by Committee Stage amendments in the Seanad following the publication of a report in 2019 by the Joint Committee on Justice. Following the 2019 report, the Department of Justice undertook additional analysis and commissioned comparative research examining how other jurisdictions approach similar issues. As part of this work, a public consultation process was carried out to consider spent convictions through the lens of sentence length and number of convictions; proportionality and youth; and the victim's perspective. There is broad agreement that supporting access to employment and training for individuals involved in small-scale offending increases the likelihood of long-term disengagement from criminal activity and reduces re-offending.

The Deputies may be aware that the Department of justice is carrying out work in this area. The Department is working with other criminal justice stakeholders to provide supports to people who have ceased offending and assist them in developing the stability needed to successfully rehabilitate and move away from offending. The Building Pathways Together 2025-2027 strategy document was published in late 2024. This is the third successive employment-focused strategy produced by the Department. The aim is to remove barriers to employment for people with criminal convictions and to support employers who are willing to take on people with previous convictions. A key contribution to the development of the strategy was inputs from those with direct experiences of the impacts of contact with the criminal justice system.

It is important that we take great care in our approach to reforms of criminal justice provisions, ensuring that serious offences remain subject to appropriate safeguards. We must ensure clarity for individuals navigating the system and functionality for those operating within the criminal justice system, such as An Garda Síochána. The Minister is committed to engaging constructively on the Bill. The Department has carefully considered the available evidence, the findings of research, submissions received during consultation and the practical implications of the proposed reforms. The Government intends to bring forward amendments to ensure that the final legislation is robust, workable and balanced.

First, we propose to amend the matrix of rehabilitative periods set out in the Bill, which links the length of the sentence imposed to the length of the rehabilitative period. We fully support the principle underpinning this approach. However, in its current form, it would introduce a significant level of complexity to the operation of vetting disclosures.

It would also give rise to a substantial increase in the number of parameters that must be considered and to practical challenges in relation to data management and retention. This would risk the system becoming cumbersome and difficult to manage for those responsible for implementing the law. For that reason, proposed amendments will simplify the matrix, while retaining the core objective of greater proportionality. Further work is needed to refine the model in order that it strikes the right balance between fairness and practicality.

The Minister intends to introduce an amendment to address an important gap in the current law, namely convictions imposed by courts outside this jurisdiction. This is contemplated in the Bill in a limited manner in the proposed amendment to the Employment Equality Act 1998.

As it stands, the law on spent convictions does not cover any sentences handed down by courts outside the State. In our increasingly interconnected world, this exclusion can create inequalities. Someone who is rehabilitated and has remained offence free for many years may continue to face barriers in Ireland simply because their conviction arose elsewhere. Therefore, an amendment will be brought forward to provide a mechanism whereby relevant convictions from outside the State may be considered within the scope of the legislation, subject, of course, to appropriate safeguards.

The inclusion of a statutory review mechanism in the Bill is welcome. Given the nature of the changes proposed, it is entirely appropriate that we assess their impact. However, the Government proposes that the review should commence after three years rather than two, which would allow more time for the collection and analysis of meaningful data. We will need to understand how the amended regime operates in practice and whether it has the intended impact on employment access and reintegration.

In the context of the proposed amendment to the Employment Equality Act 1998, the intention is that a person with spent convictions could not be treated less favourably or discriminated against by a prospective employer in relation to access to employment or conditions of employment. In the time since this Bill was last debated in 2021, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality has carried out a review of the Equality Acts and published the general scheme of the equality (miscellaneous provisions) Bill 2024. The Joint Committee on Children and Equality recommended in its pre-legislative scrutiny report that this issue should be addressed in that proposed legislation. I understand that this matter will be given due consideration during the drafting process. The objective for bringing forward these amendments is clear, namely to strengthen the Bill, ensure it is workable in practice and deliver a spent convictions regime that is fair, proportionate and capable of being effectively implemented. In doing so, we strengthen not only our justice system but also our society as a whole.

Deputy Mark Ward: I thank the Minister of State for taking the time to debate this. I welcome the Government's support for the Bill and look forward to debating any amendments on Committee Stage. That is the proper way to do business with the Opposition when a Bill comes forward that the Government does not wholeheartedly agree with because it gives us a chance to discuss amendments.

I thank Senator Ruane for the work she has done to bring this legislation to this point. The matter to which it relates is something she is very passionate about. It was mentioned the Bill was introduced in 2018. It is now 2026; we are getting there. It is testament to Senator Ruane's perseverance and tenacity that it has reached this point. I suggest that this Bill was in the making well before 2018. I was involved in similar lines of work and in the same organisations as Senator Ruane in the past, and we came across an awful lot of people who could have done with this Bill.

I thank Deputy Gannon for bringing the Bill to the floor of the Dáil. He was right to acknowledge his staff because they often go unseen in the work they do for us. I was going to say that they make us look good, but they do well to make me look good. Anyway, I acknowledge the work they have done.

The purpose of the Bill is to allow a broader range of minor convictions to become spent after a proportionate rehabilitative period. This will make it easy for people who have moved on from past offences to access employment, education, housing and other opportunities without lifelong stigma. I am from an area of high disadvantage. In the course of a debate not that long ago, I mentioned that parts of my area – the area I grew up in – are going backwards on the Pobal deprivation index. It is one of the few areas in Dublin that is regressing instead of progressing. The issue that underlies everything in areas like mine is poverty. It is not just poverty of finances; it is poverty of opportunity and hope. One thing we are not poor in is trauma. Trauma is often intergenerational as a result of the fact that it is historical State-inflicted trauma. I am going back here to the industrial schools, the Christian Brothers, the Magdalen laundries and the mother and baby homes. You can see the outcomes of that intergenerational trauma in areas like mine.

The data would indicate that communities like mine are disproportionately affected by crime. Young people from my area, at different times in their lives and on the basis of their current circumstances, will make choices. The choices they make at those times may affect them as they get older. Levels of addiction in areas like mine are also disproportionately higher than in other areas. When a person does not have the opportunity to remove themselves physically from a disadvantaged area, drink and drugs often give them that opportunity. It is not called getting out of your head for nothing, and it can give a person a brief break from trauma.

Something communities like mine experience a lot more than other more affluent communities is being stopped and searched. When I was growing up in north Clondalkin, we used to play a game. I would be going to the shop for my mother when I was young and I would be stopped and searched. This happened all the time, so we used to have a game to see whose turn it was to get stopped and searched. We would have nothing apart from our football boots with us; it was just a part of growing up in the area. Due to the number of searches taking place now, you are going to come across a lot more people who may have, say, drugs for personal use in their possession. If a young person gets a charge for personal drug use, it can follow them for the remainder of their lives, whether that is in the context of job opportunities, travel or housing.

I will give an example. I have been advocate for the Irish homeless football team for a long time. I referred people to the team over the years. Senator Ruane did the same. Sean Kavanagh and his team give people who have experienced homelessness or addiction an opportunity to play football weekly. This culminates in an all-Ireland event, which, as the Minister of State knows, is held every year in Kiltipper is in his constituency. Teams from all over the State play in the tournament, and there is an all-Ireland champion at the end of it. During that process, there is also an opportunity to represent your country by travelling abroad and playing for the Irish team at the Homeless World Cup. Players only get this opportunity once. That is to give everybody a fair chance. If you represent your country one time, that is your chance gone and it is someone else's turn. I have trained with the lads every so often and know that the standard of football is really high. The competition is recognised and supported by the FAI. The players who represent their country abroad at the Homeless World Cup receive international caps. The caps are the same as the ones Roy Keane, Robbie Keane and Paul McGrath received. It is the dream of every boy and young woman interested in soccer to represent their country, and it is a fantastic achievement for the players who are selected. The Ireland team's best result was in

2005 when they finished fifth in the competition in Scotland. It has completed all over the world, including in Korea and Africa. The players have represented their country with pride. There has even been a film made. Colin Farrell made a documentary, which was very good, about it a couple of years ago.

In 2023, the Homeless World Cup was held in America. The players went through all their trials. They went out weekly and took part in the all-Ireland event, probably up in Kiltipper. What should have been one of the proudest movements of their lives quickly turned sour. The majority of the men's team were refused visas to travel to America. The result was that for the very first time since the inception of the Homeless World Cup, our men's team was not able to participate. The reason they were not allowed into America related to minor convictions they picked up when they were affected by addiction, homelessness or maybe just as a result of being from areas of disadvantage. One of the coaches who dedicates his time to looking after these lads was also refused entry. He had a conviction from decades ago, not last week or last year. He has been giving his life to give these lads a better chance. This is a real-life example of how minor convictions can follow someone for life. No matter how much an individual has grown as a person or how much they have contributed to society in the meantime, previous convictions can follow them.

Sinn Féin supports the Bill. The next challenge is to get it onto the agenda of the justice committee.

It is to be hoped it will progress from there. I look forward to any further debates. With Government support, I would like to see this progress over the next couple of months. Again, I thank Senator Ruane for the dedicated work she has done to get the Bill to this stage. I have introduced legislation, as has Deputy Gannon. It is really difficult from the Opposition to get anything to this Stage. The fact that she has managed to do it is a testament and it gives me a little bit of hope that if we just keep plugging away, we might get something through as well.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Aontaím le go leor rudaí is a bhí an Teachta Ward ag rá. Ar dtús, gabhaim buíochas leis an Seanadóir Ruane as go leor rudaí. Tá sí an-chairdiúil agus gach rud mar sin. Tá sí tar éis á lán oibre a chur isteach sa Bhille seo. Ní féidir é sin a rá faoi go leor daoine. Tá sí tar éis obair na gcapall a dhéanamh. I commend her on that. I also thank Deputy Gannon for continuing the push to support an issue to move forward in the House, and for his continuous work in this matter.

The Bill is ultimately about something very simple. It is about second chances. We all recognise that when someone commits a crime, there must be consequences. That is how our justice system works and how the majority of justice systems work in well-run countries. We also have to recognise that there is another reality. I have met a lot of constituents who have served sentences and stayed out of trouble, started a life, started a family and demonstrated that they have moved on with their life. We should allow them the opportunity to rebuild that life. That is what the Bill really should lean into.

Aontaím le go leor rudaí is a bhí an Teachta Ward ag rá. Tá mé ag tnúth go mór leis an gcomhrá ar fad agus gach duine sa Teach seo ag cur gach rud le chéile. Tá sé an-tábhachtach go mbeimid ag labhairt faoin Bhille agus go dtiocfaidh sé isteach chomh luath agus is féidir. A criminal conviction can follow a person for many years. After a sentence is served, it can affect a person's ability to get a job, find housing or access education. In many cases these barriers

make it much harder for someone to move forward and contribute positively to society, which contradicts the very essence of our criminal justice system in respect of rehabilitation. The Bill recognises that reality. The proposals for the broadening of access to the spent convictions regime really does create a fairer society where people who have demonstrated rehabilitation over time can move on past their mistakes. We have all made mistakes. I would also like to join an Teachta Ward, who is gone now, regarding the football Senator Ruane is involved in. I went into Mountjoy and we played football. I could not hit snow off a rope; I think we lost eight-nil. I am more of a rugby man.

The Bill proposes to broaden access to spent convictions. It does not erase a person's history. Convictions remain on record but it limits when they can be disclosed. It recognises that people who have stayed out of trouble for a sustained period should be able to move forward. I do believe that.

I thank Deputy Gannon for speaking to me and showing me his insight and knowledge. There is a fair and balanced approach. I welcome the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan's proposal not to oppose the Bill on Second Stage. Looking at evidence is what we should base all of our actions on, whether it be in respect of climate, energy, housing or our justice system. We know from evidence that when people can access employment, education and stable housing, they are far less likely to reoffend. It is just logic. This is not just about fairness to individuals. It is also about building safer communities and a better society as a whole.

I like that the Bill recognises the particular circumstances of young adults, particularly from my constituency of north Dublin, who are often still developing and making mistakes early in life. We should not permanently close doors for young men and women in this country. At its core, the legislation is about recognising rehabilitation, especially when someone has demonstrated over time that they have stayed out of trouble and positively contributed. I thank Deputy Gannon for reintroducing it and commend Senator Ruane. She is ferocious with her work. This Bill is unbelievable and it needs to be done. This is a sensible and balanced reform that supports rehabilitation, strengthens communities and will really help the people of north Dublin and the people of Ireland as a whole.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I thank the Deputies for bringing forward their proposals for these amendments to the legislation and for their contributions this evening. I assure them that the Government has listened and agrees with the overarching aim to provide for broader access to spent convictions.

This is a highly technical and complex Bill with consequences for a number of different Acts which touch on sensitive and difficult areas concerning the disclosure of criminal convictions. This Bill aims to extend eligibility for the current spent convictions regime to more people with longer sentences and to remove the automatic exclusion for people with multiple convictions. It increases proportionality by linking rehabilitative periods to the length of a sentence. It also provides for a formal review of the effects of these changes.

The Bill was amended on Committee Stage in the Seanad following the publication of a report in 2019 by the joint committee on justice. The amendments broadened the reach of the Bill and provided detail to the proposals. From 2019 to 2021, the Department of justice commissioned and carried out comparative research examining how other jurisdictions approach similar issues and conducted a public consultation process into the current spent

convictions regime. As noted earlier, the previous Government agreed in 2021 that the Private Member's Bill would be passed through the Dáil, subject to any amendments that would be required. The amendments that will be introduced are aimed at making this Bill work effectively so that it can deliver real benefits in practice.

As with any new legislation, it is important to commit the necessary time and effort to ensuring that the provisions will actually do what is intended and that they do not cause problems elsewhere or create unintended consequences. The Minister's officials will work with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel to draft the necessary amendments to the provisions. As it does with all new legislation, the OPC will scrutinise the Bill itself in great detail as well as closely examining the impacts it will have on the other legislation it seeks to amend. This is an essential safeguard to ensure the integrity of the law, especially where it has the potential to affect sensitive matters like the vetting protections the Oireachtas has put in place for children and vulnerable people. With the right approach, grounded in engagement between the Department of Justice, the Bill's sponsors and the OPC, the necessary amendments can be developed within a carefully designed framework.

I thank the Deputies for submitting these proposals to the Dáil for this debate and to those present for their contributions to the discussion.

Deputy Gary Gannon: It is never not a privilege to stand in this Chamber. Every single day I take a breath and realise how important the work is that happens here, but this evening was a genuine privilege. It was a real honour to be here to discuss an issue that too often went undiscussed. I thank the Ministers of State for their contributions and the Department officials for their engagement. I look forward to bringing it to Committee Stage alongside Senator Ruane. I thank Deputies Heneghan and Ward for their contributions. It was genuinely lovely to hear the kind words said about Senator Ruane and her passion and conviction for bringing a Bill of this importance to the Chamber. Given the fact that I mentioned my own staff in our office, it would be remiss of me not to mention Lynn's parliamentary assistant, Robert Somerville, who is in the Gallery today and has also done amazing work in bringing this forward. Days like today show what can be achieved in politics with some perseverance. The capacity to work collaboratively across the Chamber and the fact that this is progressing to Third Stage is a reflection of nobody else's but Senator Ruane's heart, commitment and effort.

The Government has referred to some amendments. Lots of them have merit in them and I look forward to engaging on them at the committee.

Question put and agreed to.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): Before I adjourn the House, I wish all of you an enjoyable and happy St. Patrick's Day.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 6.49 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 18 Márta 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.49 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Wednesday, 18 March 2026.