



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoín, 26 Márta 2026

Thursday, 26 March 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea) i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Library Services

2. **Deputy Pádraig Rice** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht the funding, both capital and current, allocated to Cork City Council for library services in its administrative area in each of the years from 2019 to 2025 and to date in 2026, by library; the engagements he has had with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage regarding the new Cork city library project to ensure that it is designed and developed in line with his Department's National Public Library Strategy 2023-2027 - The Library is the Place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [23346/26]

Deputy Pádraig Rice: My question relates to the development of a new library for Cork. In March 2021, the Taoiseach announced that €50 million would be spent transforming Grand Parade by providing a new public library, plaza and boardwalk. Staff at the library do a fantastic job but the building is not fit for purpose. It does not reflect the services and it is not befitting of the second city. We are five years later and we have no new library. Even more concerning is that there is very little information about this project. We urgently need an update because the people of Cork want a new city library.

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): I thank Deputy Rice for raising the matter. I concur with him that we have an extraordinary dedicated library staff in Cork city right across all sections of our library service. As the Deputy will be well aware, the current libraries capital programme 2023-2027 is investing €22.6 million in 11 state-of-the-art library infrastructure projects around the country and a further €2.6 million in 12 next-generation mobile library vehicles across Ireland. Funding of €8.3 million has been provided by our Department to support Cork City Council's public library services since 2019, through the libraries capital

programme and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund. Details of this expenditure will be provided separately to Deputy Rice as requested.

As the Deputy will be aware, the provision of library services is primarily a matter for local authorities - in this case, Cork City Council - in their capacity as library authorities under the Local Government Act 2001.

The Cork city library is one element of the overall Grand Parade quarter project, which is being funded through the urban regeneration and development fund, administered by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. My officials are in regular contact with colleagues in the URDF unit in that Department on the matter. In line with a commitment in the national public library strategy, the libraries development unit in our Department issued updated public library standards and benchmarks to all library authorities, including Cork City Council, earlier this year.

We all share the ambition to have a state-of-the-art library in Cork City Council. I got involved in politics campaigning for my own local library in Bishopstown, where we had none. Thankfully, we have a magnificent library now adjacent to Wilton Shopping Centre. Like Deputy Rice, we in this Department, with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, share the ambition to have a modern state-of-the-art library for Cork city. That is a project we will all support.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: We can have the ambition but we need the delivery and it has now been five years since the Taoiseach came to Cork and announced there would be a new city library, and there has been no development. The issue here is that nobody is taking responsibility for the project. The Government says it is the responsibility of the council. The council says it is waiting on the Government. This passing of the buck must stop. I have tried really hard to work with everybody constructively on this. During my time as a councillor, I submitted multiple questions and a motion to the council on it. My party colleague Councillor Niamh O'Connor has done the same. I had multiple meetings with librarians and council staff. We have submitted questions and got identical answers. For over a year now, Cork City Council has been giving us identical answers and no new information. We resorted to submitting freedom of information, FOI, requests to the council. They have all been refused. I have asked questions to the Taoiseach here and not got an answer. I understand a business case has finally been submitted to the Department of housing and local government. Has that been reviewed? Has the Minister of State's Department looked at that business case? We need a working group, the various Departments and the council to come together to work on this project and deliver the world-class library the people of Cork were promised over five years ago by the Government.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: To clarify for the Deputy so that he knows, it is not our Department that is responsible; it is the Department of housing. To help him again, Cork City Council is the responsible local authority. I think Deputy Rice was at the briefing we had as Members of the Oireachtas with the chief executive of the city council before Christmas, where we believe the city council identified a site. Work is ongoing. Our Department is committed in terms of our responsibility. The Department of housing is equally committed, as Deputy Rice will know. It should be put on record that this Government has been supportive and has funded Cork City Council and the regeneration of Cork city. I hope the Deputy understands that the element we

speaking about today, the library, on which we agree, is one element of the Grand Parade project and has been allocated funding under the urban regeneration and development fund. That funding has been provided. Equally, the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and the previous Minister, Heather Humphreys, provided moneys under the URDF to Cork County Council, and we committed to and have built two libraries in Macroom and Youghal. I agree that our library staff are fantastic in Cork city. Our library needs to be that flagship for the part of the city we are regenerating. I look forward to working with the Deputy and with Cork City Council to develop that project.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: The Minister of State's Department is responsible for libraries. My point here is that his Department and the Department of public expenditure and reform, the Department of housing and local government, and the city council need to work together to deliver this project, which was promised over five years ago. The real frustration here is the lack of information and the lack of public consultation on this key project. A campaign group has been set up to push for action on this project. It has set out its vision for how public authorities could engage in a public consultation. It has also set out a clear vision of what the library should look like, namely, a world-class library, a cathedral of learning in the heart of the city, and it has shared that with the Department. The lack of progress on this library is really frustrating. We have just seen delay after delay. It is not the only capital project that has been delayed in Cork city. It has now been ten years since the sod was turned on the event centre; and there is still no event centre. It has been five years since the library was announced, and there is no library. No funding has been allocated for the Luas, BusConnects is still delayed, and there is no safe injection facility and no homeless hub. The list goes on. The Government promises capital investment and projects for Cork city and it fails to deliver them time and again. We really need to see progress on a new city library in the heart of Cork city.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Deputy Rice comes in here and speaks about a cathedral of learning and it is wonderful rhetoric. I share his view. I am equally ambitious for Cork. I have been involved in public life for 21 years as a member of Cork City Council and as a Member of the Oireachtas and the library will be transformative for our city. The chief executive outlined at his briefing with us that the project in the library is one element of the overall Grand Parade project. The funding has been allocated and is ring-fenced.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Five years.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The funding is ring-fenced. It is very easy for the Deputy to come in here. I have met Colette Kelleher, the chair of the action group, and I am as committed as the Deputy is. Again, it is not our Department that is responsible.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: No one is.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy is certainly not responsible, and it is very easy to speak to the papers and come in here and shout and roar every day but he delivers nothing but rhetoric. That is all he delivers.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I call the Government to account for its promises.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Our Government will deliver a library, working with Cork City Council, which is the lead agency. The Deputy knows that himself. He was a member of Cork City Council.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere): I thank the Minister of State. We are out of time.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: We agree on the final point. We need to have a city library that is fit for purpose and our staff are the best in the country.

Cúrsaí Tithíochta

1. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht an nglacann sé leis an gcáineadh ar chur chuige na Roinne sa rún a d'aontaigh an Dáil maidir le cúrsaí tithíochta sa Ghaeltacht ag tús mhí an Mhárta, agus an bhfuil sé i gceist aige gníomhú dá réir; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [22301/26]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá brón orm as bheith beagáinín déanach. Ghlac an Dáil seo le cinneadh nuair a bhí rún os comhair na Dála maidir le cúrsaí tithíochta. Laistigh den rún sin bhí cáineadh ar an gcur chuige a bhí ag an Rialtas ó thaobh na tithíochta sa Ghaeltacht go dtí seo. Cad atá chun tarlú dá réir?

Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Dara Calleary): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta. Is fiú a thabhairt faoi deara go dtiteann freagracht as cúrsaí tithíochta ar bhonn ginearálta ar an Roinn Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreacht agus nach bhfuil ach ról tánaisteach ag mo Roinn féin i mbeartas tithíochta. É sin ráite, tá soláthar tithíochta dóibh siúd atá ina gcónaí agus ag obair sa Ghaeltacht thar a bheith tábhachtach dom. Go deimhin, tá tithíocht riachtanach chun an teanga, seirbhísí, fostaíocht, fiontraíocht agus deiseanna eile sa Ghaeltacht a fhorbairt. Agus é sin san áireamh, tá céimeanna tacaíochta á dtógáil chun na críche seo.

Tá an Bille um Údarás na Gaeltachta (Leasú), 2024 le tógáil ar Chéim na Tuarascála go gairid. Cé gurb é athbhunú toghchán bhord an údaráis príomhchuspóir an Bhille seo, ar mhaithe le tacú le soláthar tithíochta sa Ghaeltacht déanfar leasú sa Bhille ar alt 8 den Acht um Údarás na Gaeltachta chun cead a thabhairt don údarás talamh a dhíol le comhlacht tithíochta ceadaithe nó le húdarás tithíochta nó a dhiúscairt ar shlí eile chun tithíocht a sholáthar sa Ghaeltacht. Tá mé féin agus mo chomhghleacaí, an tAire, an Teachta Browne, ag obair go dlúth lena chéile ar an gceist seo lenár gcuid oifigeach agus tá obair shuntasach déanta ag an Roinn ag forbairt ráiteas pleanála náisiúnta don Ghaeltacht. Tá sé beartaithe go bhfoilseofar an ráiteas pleanála náisiúnta don Ghaeltacht sa chéad leath de 2027 ach beidh sé ag tarlú roimhe sin.

I bplean tithíochta an Rialtais a fhoilsíodh le déanaí, gealltar an ráiteas a fhoilsiú agus moltar scrúdú a dhéanamh ar fhéidearthachtaí Údarás na Gaeltachta oibriú le hUisce Éireann agus le

húdaráis áitiúla chun tacú le tithíocht a thógáil do phobail labhartha na Gaeilge. Reáchtáil mé cruinniú le gairid idir Údarás na Gaeltachta agus Uisce Éireann chun a chinntiú go ndéanfar dul chun cinn gan dua maidir leis an fhéidearthacht seo a scrúdú. Is fiú a nótáil go bhfuil obair thábhachtach ar bun ag Údarás na Gaeltachta chun fostaíocht a chur ar fáil do phobal na Gaeltachta. Ní bheadh sé cuí béim agus fócas na heagraíochta i gcomhlíonadh an ról sin a laghdú. Beidh ról tánaisteach ach tábhachtach ag Údarás na Gaeltachta maidir le soláthar tithíochta sa Ghaeltacht i dteannta ról na Roinne Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreacht agus go háirithe ról na n-údarás áitiúla.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá súil agam go mbeidh Bille Údarás na Gaeltachta ag teacht chugainn ar Chéim an Tuarascála gan mhoill mar tá obair fós le déanamh ar an mBille sin le cinntiú go mbeidh, ó thaobh an ról a luadh maidir le tithíocht, ról ceart ag an údarás amach anseo maidir leis na suíomhanna atá aige ach chomh maith leis sin ó thaobh chuir chuige. Tá ról ag Údarás na Gaeltachta maidir le pleanáil teanga, ní díreach tionsclaíocht. Déanann daoine dearmad go minic ar an ról lárnach sin atá aige. Ní gá an talamh atá ag an údarás a dhíol le AHB; s féidir leis an údarás an talamh sin a ligean ar léas. Luaigh an tAire cruinniú le hUisce Éireann le déanaí.

Mar chuid de ról Údarás na Gaeltachta, tá suíomhanna aige. Tá tionsclaíocht ar chuid de na suíomhanna sin ach d'fhéadfadh an chuid eile de na suíomhanna a bheith ina n-eastáit thithíochta dá mbeadh cead aige, nó ag dream éigin eile, an córas séarachais atá aige don eastáit tionsclaíochta a úsáid do thithíocht chomh maith.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Aontaím leis an Teachta. Tá an obair sin ar siúl. Bhí cruinniú agam le príomhfheidhmeannach an údaráis. Tá liosta déanta agus tá muid ag déanamh oibre ar an liosta sin faoi shuíomhanna cosúil leis sin. Níl sé chomh éasca sin, áfach. I roinnt de na suíomhanna sin, tá cúrsaí séarachais agus uisce réasúnta láidir, ach níl aon seirbhísí i suíomhanna eile.

Maidir le ceadúnais pleanála sa Ghaeltacht, i mbliana, bhí 53 teach nua ceadaithe as 62 iarratas i nGaeltacht na Gaillimhe. I nGaeltacht Mhaigh Eo, sa bhliain seo, bhí 25 iarratas agus gan aon teach diúltaithe. I nGaeltacht Phort Láirge, i nDáilcheantar an Teachta McGuinness, níor diúltaíodh aon cheann as trí iarratas go fóill. Anuraidh, bhí 25 iarratas ceadaithe sa Ghaeltacht sinn agus diúltaíodh dhá iarratas. Tá a lán oibre ar siúl. Tá daoine ag iarraidh a rá nach bhfuil aon rud ag tarlú ach tá a lán rudaí ag tarlú. Ag féachaint ar na deontais le haghaidh na dtithe folmha, tá rudaí ar siúl ansin freisin. Tá obair le déanamh againn leis an údarás agus tá muid ag déanamh na hoibre sin sula dtiocfaidh an Bille os comhair na Dála, rud a tharlóidh roimh an samhradh.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Níl mé ag rá nach bhfuil aon rud ag tarlú. Aithním go bhfuil nithe ag tarlú. Tá siad ag tarlú i gceantair ar leith ar luas rómhall, áfach. Caithfidh muid straitéis a bheith againn sna háiteanna ina bhfuil na scoileanna i mbaol de bharr easpa páistí. Má aithníonn muid é sin anois, is cóir go mbeidh straitéis ann. Níl de dhíth ach dhá nó trí theach le teaghlaigh iontu chun scoileanna a choimeád oscailte i roinnt de na ceantair seo. Ní mór dúinn dul isteach agus féachaint ar líon na suíomhanna atá ann agus, mar a dúirt an tAire, líon na dtithe atá tréigthe agus iad a chur ar ais in úsáid. Muna bhfuil straitéis ann, fágfar é seo. Beidh na háiteanna seo tréigthe. Beidh na scoileanna agus na clubanna CLG dúnta dá réir de

dheasca nach bhfuil aon dream ag teacht isteach. Tá tithe samhraidh sna ceantair seo, agus bíonn siad ar díol. Ba chóir go mbeadh straitéis ag an gcomhairle, ag an Stát nó ag Údarás na Gaeltachta na tithe seo a cheannach lena gcur ar an liosta tithe sóisialta nó inacmhainne le ligin do theaghlaigh bogadh isteach sna ceantair sin. Ní hamháin go bhfuil gá le tithe nua a sholáthar agus na cinn atá tréigthe a chur ar ais in úsáid, ach ní mór dúinn na tithe samhraidh atá ar díol faoi láthair a aistriú ina dtithe teaghlaigh.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá muid go léir le chéile air seo. Is é sin an fáth nach ndeachaigh muid i gcoinne an rúin mar tá sé tábhachtach go bhfuil guth láidir sa Dáil seo faoi thithíocht sa Ghaeltacht. Tá muid ag oibriú uirthi. Tá a lán freagraí ann, agus tá sé sin tábhachtach. Bhí cruinnithe agam leis na príomhfheidhmeannaigh sna húdaráis áitiúla. Chuir mé brú orthu agus chuir mé an scéal seo os a gcomhair leis na sonraí sin a fháil. Déanfaidh mé obair eile maidir leis na sonraí atá leagtha amach ag an Teachta Ó Snodaigh faoi na scoileanna atá faoi bhrú sna ceantair Ghaeltachta. Déanfaidh muid staidéar air sin le feiceáil má tá suíomh in aice láimhe ina mbeidh muid in ann rudaí a dhéanamh. Tá sé thar a bheith tábhachtach go bhfuil an infreastruchtúr sin iontu, lena n-áirítear infreastruchtúr oideachais, spóirt agus saoil do dhaoine sa Ghaeltacht. Tá muid, mar Rialtas, tar éis infheistíocht mhór a chur i scoileanna. Tá muid dírithe air seo. Beidh muid i dteagmháil leis an gcoiste tar éis na Cásca mar caithfidh muid na cáilíochtaí a ligfeadh do dhuine teach a thógáil sa Ghaeltacht a phlé. Ní mór dúinn na caighdeáin teanga agus cúrsaí mar sin a phlé. Tá muid ag súil leis sin a phlé leis an gcoiste. Tá muid ag oibriú air seo. Tá muid ag oibriú go díreach agus tá mé ag cur an-bhrú ar mo chomhghleacaithe Airí.

Fuel Poverty

3. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht the way in which he intends to assist rural communities both households and local civil society organisations amidst rising oil prices and general trends indicating a rise in energy poverty; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22887/26]

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Tá mé ag tógáil na ceiste seo thar ceann an Teachta O'Reilly. I am taking this question for Deputy Louise O'Reilly. It is to ask the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht the way in which he intends to assist rural communities, both households and local civil society organisations, amidst rising oil prices and general trends indicating a rise in energy poverty, and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy McGuinness for raising this question.

We are very aware of rising energy costs, which are being driven by the global uncertainty caused by the ongoing conflict in the Middle East. These are affecting everybody in society, including communities and civil society organisations. This week, the Government agreed on a €250 million package to alleviate the impact of the rise in energy costs caused by this conflict. These measures, which include measures administered by my other Department, the Department of Social Protection, will assist those most in need of financial support.

As regards the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, significant levels of financial support are currently being provided by Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, to community organisations under a number of different programmes and schemes. With a budget estimate for the Department totalling €611 million, funding of €260 million is available for community development programmes in 2026. A particular focus of community development is to support marginalised and disadvantaged communities and those who are most likely to be hit hardest by rising energy costs. An allocation of €74 million is being provided to the social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, and other social inclusion measures in 2026.

The community services programme, CSP, currently supports the delivery of 445 local services via 426 organisations, and we have announced new funding for CSP this year. The scheme to support national organisations, SSNO, currently provides multi-annual funding towards core costs of 82 organisations that address poverty, social exclusion and promote equality. The local enhancement programme, LEP, is providing small grants to community groups to enhance their facilities, with supports available to community centres, local development associations, social clubs, senior citizen groups, men's and women's sheds.

The financial package introduced by the Government will reduce the pressure being experienced by households and communities. At present we do not have any plans at present to introduce additional funding supports for community and voluntary organisations but we continue to monitor the situation very closely.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: On the package of measures announced this week, the general consensus among the public, and certainly on this side of the House, was that it was much too late and far too little. It does not go anywhere near the kind of intervention needed in our society at present, in light of the current crisis and illegal war in the Middle East and the ensuing increase in fuel and energy costs but also in light of the broader context of increasing energy poverty and an increasing cost-of-living crisis. It does precious little for households across the State but many of these crises are being felt particularly in rural communities.

The dependence on diesel and petrol for transport is more pronounced in many of these communities, and there is a particular dependence on home heating oil in rural communities. The fact home heating oil was not included in that package of measures in any meaningful sense has left people agog and deeply disappointed as well as angry.

I will put an additional question to the Minister. Will the fairly mean extension of the fuel allowance be paid out as a lump sum or will that be paid out on a weekly basis? People really want to know if that will be cause for intervention in a meaningful way in their lives.

Deputy Dara Calleary: There was consensus on the vote and Sinn Féin was the only party to oppose the reduction in excise duty. Every other party in the House supported it. A total of 467,204 people will get fuel allowance and there is an extension of four weeks. That is an investment of €71 million. The majority of the recipients of the fuel allowance payment live in rural counties. That is €152. My understanding, which I will clarify for the Deputy, is that it will be paid weekly. We want to get it to people as quickly as possible. That €152 extra will make a difference and will bring in fuel allowance season right to the week ending 1 May. There was a €5 increase this year as well.

For the first time, just under 50,000 families in receipt of the working family payment will also get the fuel allowance. Again, the working family payment is right across the country, including in rural Ireland.

We have said we will keep the position under review. Were we to adopt Sinn Féin's position and react to every crisis by throwing cash at it, we would not have the capacity to deliver, keep things under review and put further investments in if this situation in the Middle East continues.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Some 750,000 people are dependent on home heating oil. Many hundreds of thousands of families are already in significant energy arrears with bills. People are going cold and rationing heat and electricity in their own homes because of the wider cost-of-living crisis that existed before the war against Iran. This is the reality the proposals and the measures are not tackling and not facing up to. Nobody would criticise €152 extra paid out over four weeks to bring people up to May but it is not nearly enough. It does not address all those not receiving fuel allowance who are struggling and does not come anywhere near addressing the huge backlogs and arrears that people are in. We need to see more action.

On the community civil society organisations, many are already struggling. I was talking to SICAP and LEADER companies yesterday. They receive no core funding to implement those programmes, so they are already pinned to their collars in terms of overheads and costs to keep themselves running. It is putting those programmes and the myriad of other schemes, projects and programmes they operate in real jeopardy.

Deputy Dara Calleary: In relation to the LEADER companies, I assure the Deputy that they have substantial administration budgets. We are working with them closely to make sure they invest it. As I said, we continue to monitor the position and we will continue to do that. We can do that because we have a strong economy. We can do that because we have made decisions that are sensible and evidence-based over many years. The €250 million investment is one of the biggest in Europe when we look at what is happening in the UK where they have invested, I think, £35 million. This gives us a sense that we are doing this in a targeted way. Those 467,000 people are families on fuel allowance, and this makes a big difference to those families. For the first time, fuel allowance has been extended to working families. They are spread right across the country, in rural areas and in cities, and this is making an immediate difference. Our economic policies that are focused and ambitious mean we are in a position to put €250 million in at this point. We continue to keep the position under review. The Deputy's party's position is to throw money at everything. Were we to follow that position, we would not have the resources available that we have now.

Departmental Funding

4. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht whether consideration has been given to introducing dedicated community support officers at local level to assist community groups with accessing funding streams, including grant applications and associated administrative requirements, particularly in areas where groups may have limited capacity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [23210/26]

Deputy Barry Ward: I am taking this question on behalf of Deputy Peter Roche, who unfortunately cannot be here. His brother, Vincent Roche, passed away yesterday evening.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): This is Question No. 4.

Deputy Barry Ward: Yes, I am taking it. It was originally a question put down by Deputy Roche. He cannot be here today because his brother passed away last night. I extend my sympathies to the family at this sad time. This question relates to the idea that we would have community assistance officers in local authorities to help community groups to apply for funding and short-circuit the administration and bureaucracy involved in making those applications and help them to get what they need for the local communities.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I join with Deputy Ward in sending our condolences to Deputy Roche. I thank the Deputy for taking the question.

Our Department's mission is to promote rural and community development and support vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland. A number of programmes provide funding for staff resources to engage with and support communities, including building their capacity to access Government funding schemes. The social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, is the State's primary social inclusion programme. It provides supports to disadvantaged communities and individuals to improve their life chances.

The SICAP initiative supports collective community engagement, providing direct supports to local community groups, LCGs, and networks. This includes developing their capacity to better engage with other groups, improve outcomes in their communities, and address social exclusion issues. In 2025, SICAP supported over 2,500 LCGs and networks in this way. Additionally, the empowering communities programme, ECP, enhances access to key services and supports communities to respond to area-based poverty and social exclusion. Community workers act as a local resource, as Members will know, including supporting groups with activities such as funding applications and administrative requirements.

Separately, our Department's LEADER programme is a community-led approach to local development delivered in rural areas across the country by a network of local action groups, LAGs. The funding provided by our Department supports eligible projects relating to community groups and rural businesses, and also contributes to LAG administration costs, in terms of the budgets there, as the Minister said, to support work such as engaging with prospective applicants regarding their application.

I assure the Deputy that work remains ongoing in our Department to look at the best ways to ensure that disadvantaged communities are provided with the support they need to underpin their sustainable development.

Deputy Barry Ward: I acknowledge what the Minister of State said about the amount of funding and supports there. The Minister of State and I know that Deputy Peter Roche, in particular, has done a huge amount of work in this area. He has worked particularly in the context of helping to support community organisations in his area. The difficulty he has identified, and other colleagues tell me they see it all over the country, is not a lack of funding, because there is a huge amount of funding there for the very communities the Minister of State

mentioned, but a difficulty accessing it. Sometimes very bureaucratic and onerous processes have to be gone through. The idea behind this question is that there would be a community support officer in the local authority in the local area with the institutional knowledge and memory of how these forms need to be done, what systems need to be put in place and which boxes need to be ticked to ensure local community organisations get the most they can out of the SICAP funding the Minister of State mentioned and any of the other streams of funding available. The money is there. This is about ensuring that local organisations, which may not have a very strong organisational basis themselves, get every opportunity they can to access the funding and do good things in local communities.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy is right. The Minister and I are very much committed to making it easier for people and groups to apply, whether that is the local development group or the LEADER programme. I will be answering another question from Deputy Currie in a minute with probably the same replies. It is about working, in our case, with Pobal, as an example, to make it easier for people to apply and get that online guidance and support in the context of an application.

If I can use the phrase, there should be no wrong door in an application process. Having been involved in my own community association and GAA club and going through a myriad of funding applications, I fully concur with the Deputy that it should not be a complex process. If a process is started, it should not be necessary to go back to the beginning and start again. In many cases, applications should not have to be declared invalid. We should be able to work with and assist, as the Deputy rightly said, community and voluntary groups in respect of building their capacity to empower and enhance their own local areas. I look forward to working with the Deputy and Deputy Roche in putting in place an administrative pathway to make applying for grants easier.

Deputy Barry Ward: I welcome what the Minister of State said about there not being a wrong door. He is absolutely right. Applications should not be cancelled because of an administrative error or something like that. At the same time, we both recognise that this is public money, and there needs to be transparency and things need to be done right. That is important too.

Even in relation to what the Minister of State said about online applications, very often we are dealing with small community groups. There might be one person or a small committee involved in making the application, and it can sometimes be very onerous on them. The idea here is that there would be somebody in the local authority who knows exactly how the applications work, and who might be able to look at a group's application before it is submitted online or in paper format and advise the group where there might be a problem or where something might need to be changed, such as opening a bank account or whatever it might be. For example, many local authorities have officers who deal with European funding because of the same administrative and bureaucratic burdens on organisations in getting funding in this context. Is there a role for a community support officer to do the same thing in relation to national funding for community groups?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I would make the point to Deputy Ward that we already have a range of programmes on the ground that provide support and offer dedicated staff access and a

pathway for applications, whether this is for SICAP, ECP or LEADER. They are assisting communities and working to engage with funding and services. For me, and I know the Deputy is the same, a core feature of what we do is not just about providing support and capital investment but about ensuring we can strengthen local areas. The Deputy is right that there is the Government's piece and a transparency piece. For me, however, it must be about how we can help and assist community groups, as an example, to navigate and be aware of the different programmes. I think the local community development groups and the LAGs provide that kind of signposting and a roadmap. We will discuss further the question the Deputy asked, and the question Deputy Currie will ask in a second.

It is about ensuring we work with all groups to provide clarity but also that navigability should not be too complex.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Rural Schemes

5. Deputy Liam Quaide asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht the measures in place to ensure equitable distribution of funding across regions, including areas experiencing rapid population growth; and whether any formal methodology is used to align funding allocations with demographic need. [23002/26]

Deputy Liam Quaide: How can the Minister of State ensure that funding from his Department is shared fairly across regions, especially in areas of major population growth? Is there any clear formula for matching that funding to population growth? I ask this with particular reference to Midleton and Carrigtohill where major population increases are projected over the next decade, but where local amenities are plainly not keeping pace. By 2034, the population of Midleton is expected to grow by 100% from where it was in 2022, while the estimate for Carrigtohill is in the region of 172% in that 12 years. That is a doubling and almost tripling of the population of those two towns.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy for raising the matter. He is right that there is a complete need for clarity and certainty around the issue of funding. The community and voluntary sector is quite diverse and receives, as he said, financial support from a wide variety of Government agencies, including our Department. The Deputy has highlighted a growth population projection of Midleton and Carrigtohill, and it is important that from a whole-of-government perspective; while working with local authorities, we get it right. That is going to be the next big part of Cork that is growing.

The Government strategy to support the community and voluntary sector, Sustainable, Inclusively and Empowered communities, published in 2019, sets out a long-term vision for communities in Ireland and provides a strategic framework across government for engaging with the sector, as well as support for a range of programmes and initiatives. It included a commitment to promote multi-annual funding for community and voluntary organisations. Our Government is currently developing a successor strategy that will build upon the achievements,

structures and programmes established under the previous strategy, while also responding to new challenges and contexts.

Across the community development area of our Department, funding of €260 million has been provided this year, consistent with that commitment and the strategy for the community and voluntary sector. The most significant funding programmes provide support on a multi-annual basis, including the social inclusion community activation programme and the scheme to support national organisations. Some €74 million is being allocated to the SICAP and other social inclusion supports this year, which also includes €12 million in support for community integration work, helping to support new arrivals into our country. The community service programme also supports 426 community-based organisations with a budget of €59.4 million last year to provide services through the social enterprise model. Our Department will continue to work with the Deputy and all stakeholders, including community and voluntary and representative organisations and local development companies, to provide sustained financial support to community organisations throughout the country. The Deputy's points are well made.

Deputy Liam Quaide: What people see in towns like Midleton and Carrigtohill is residential development moving ahead much faster than amenity provision. New houses are being built at pace and more families are moving in, but the facilities which are core to community life are lagging badly behind. There is a sense that many families describe of being in a town that is thriving but impoverished in respect of the most basic communities that matter families on a daily basis, such as youth facilities, playgrounds and skate parks. Does the Minister of State accept that if funding is not systematically matched to population growth this is exactly what happens? We get housing estate after housing estate but not the facilities needed to build a connected community. We get long, frustrating drives to other towns or even villages to have basic community needs met. In Midleton, for instance, we drive to Mogeely to use the playground. Can the Minister of State say his Department has any clear way of matching funding to population growth so that we have a predictable, systematic spread of amenities or will our towns and villages still be left to fend for themselves through piecemeal schemes?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: We as a Department and Government are committed to funding and working on a variety of schemes, whether through the community central investment fund which the Minister, Deputy Calleary is announcing a call later today on, or as we have done in the past, with the community recognition fund. The Deputy referenced the issue of the playground. We have the very proactive outdoor recreation investment scheme as well as the town and village renewal scheme and the rural regeneration and development fund. We work as a Department with Cork County Council but also with Avondhu Blackwater and the SICAP in developing the piece the Deputy referenced.

The key point for us is that it is about ensuring the allocation of funding delivers. Last year we provided almost €12 million in financial support for Cork and I can give the examples of MyPlace Midleton and the Cork Cloyne Diocesan youth services, and I can quote a myriad of other examples as the Deputy knows quite well.

His point is that we must ensure that at the very heart of what we do is people, place and giving people that sense of buy-in to their local community. It is about ensuring we work collaboratively to develop not just housing estates, which are very important and necessary, but

a community where people can put down roots. We can have the piece the Deputy referenced coming off that as well.

Deputy Liam Quaide: Under the current disjointed system, families are having to spend years campaigning for basic amenities. They are being forced to become fundraisers, social entrepreneurs and project managers trying to patch together one disconnected grant after another while their town or village expands around them, and their children often outgrow the project before it is finally delivered, as in the case of playgrounds. That is not a serious way to provide basic amenities. Like so much about public service delivery, it is not fair, strategic or timely. These amenities need to be planned as part of the development of a town or village.

In towns like Midleton and Carrigtohill, housing and population are growing quickly but local provision is lagging far behind. Does the Minister of State accept that the stop-start piecemeal approach is not working? Will he commit to a clearer, fairer system - a more integrated way of funding in order that when population growth is projected, the amenities needed for community life are planned in line with it and not dependent on the remarkable innovation and drive of particular community groups?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. There is no doubt that it takes local action groups to work and get things moving, but there is a county development plan as we know well that sets out the blueprint and roadmap for investment. Everything the Deputy has spoken about this morning in terms of provision of playgrounds, community centres, you name it, the Minister, Deputy Calleary and I are very committed to. We have met with a variety of organisations in terms of demographics and projecting future needs and is critically important that we as a Department and as a Government continue to invest. That is why we have programmes such as CLÁR, LEADER and the community centres investment fund, CCIF.

I make the point that it is incumbent on the local authority as the lead agency on the ground working with the development companies to deliver and put in place that blueprint and road map. As I said in reply to Deputy Rice earlier, I got involved in politics because we had no library in Bishopstown. There will always be local activism but leadership needs to be provided by the local authority and Government. In our case, we are providing the funding and working with the council. I look forward to continuing to work with the Deputy in delivering because he is right that Carrigtohill and Midleton are pivotal to the development and growth of our county.

Tourist Accommodation

6. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht his engagement with other Departments and State agencies to support hotels in rural communities. [22908/26]

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I am taking this question on behalf of Deputy Carthy.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Deputy is a super sub today.

Under my Department's rural development investment programme, a range of schemes provide capital funding with a focus on the economic and social development of our rural areas. The schemes do not, however, include a specific focus on the provision of hotel accommodation. A limited number of projects have been supported by the rural regeneration and development fund, RRDF, and the town and village renewal scheme, which have seen short-stay accommodation facilities included, as part of a wider, multifunctional project. Similarly, while LEADER does not generally support hotel-based projects, it has supported projects related to tourist accommodation, for example, through support for glamping projects and other tourism-focused initiatives.

In all cases in terms of funding, many of those tend to be towards community, co-operative-based initiatives. More widely, the sustainability of rural businesses including tourism and hospitality is clearly enhanced by the provision of public and community infrastructure. The funding made available by my Department through a range of schemes such as RRDF and the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme, ORIS is clearly having positive impacts in this regard.

At cross-governmental level, responsibility for business enterprise and tourism resonates with my colleague, Deputy Burke, Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment. This includes responsibility for the national tourism policy statement, A New Era for Irish Tourism, which was published in December 2025 and sets out the Government's long-term approach to the development of tourism. I can confirm as part of my Department's ongoing work developing the successor policy to Our Rural Future, my officials are engaging with the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment in respect of its remit.

My officials are engaging with the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment in respect of its remit. The next iteration of Our Rural Future will include a focus on both rural tourism and rural enterprise generally. Work on the development of the policy is ongoing. It is drawing on a wide-ranging consultation process and I hope to be in a position to publish it before the summer.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: It is very welcome that this issue is under consideration and forms part of the Minister's engagement with the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment. This issue is impacting rural communities in particular. The lack of tourist accommodation, be it hotel, hostel accommodation or other kinds of accommodation such as glamping pods, is hampering economic development and economic diversification in rural areas that come under the remit of the Minister. It is also adding to the rural housing crisis that is of concern for many Departments. It is of concern to all of us here in the House but it has a particular resonance with the Minister's responsibilities. The move to short-term lets because of the absence of suitable hotel accommodation in many areas is having a disproportionate impact on those rural and coastal communities that are already under huge housing pressure. I am thinking of Gaeltacht areas such as Ardmore in my constituency. The measures that were announced a number of weeks ago to address the mushrooming of short-term lettings do not cater for towns such as Dungarvan and Tramore that are under the 20,000 threshold. We need to see action on this. I welcome that there is an understanding of the seriousness of the situation but we need to see action.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We want to try to promote enterprises and improve and promote the attractiveness of rural areas so we have developed the specific outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme. This is one of the schemes for enhancing the attractiveness of trails and of visitor attractions that in turn make a rural area more attractive or more feasible for hotel investment. Since 2020, we have invested €110 million in over 1,300 outdoor recreation projects across the country. Through LEADER, we invested over €52 million across the country, and over €9 million of that was invested in tourism-related projects and rural tourism and recreation projects.

We are having discussions with the Department of tourism in the context of the preparation of the next Our Rural Future. Fáilte Ireland has a very strong capital programme to role out at major visitor attractions. For instance, in the Deputy's constituency, the Waterford greenway is seen as the standard for greenways nationally. That has probably opened up a huge number of opportunities in the more rural parts of his constituency. That is the kind of thing we want to do. The investment in infrastructure opens up the investment for enhancement and attractiveness for tourism investment.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The Minister is right that the attractions are there. The greenways are of really high standard and the greenway in Waterford is a classic example. Unfortunately, the availability of tourist accommodation has not kept pace. On top of that we also see the use of tourist accommodation, and particularly hotels, for the State's responses to the various refugee crisis over the years. The Minister for justice has signalled a move away from that approach in the coming time. There is a concern, however, that many of the hotels that have been used will not return to tourist accommodation. There are examples of that in Dungarvan and in other areas. There has also been no recognition for the economic impact of the loss of tourist accommodation. We have the community recognition fund, for example, and many great things have come from that scheme, but there is no similar scheme to address the enterprise loss or the difficulties that have been experienced because of the loss of tourist accommodation. Perhaps it could be a conversation worth having between the Minister and the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, Deputy Peter Burke, to see if a similar scheme could operate on that basis that would somehow support this tourist accommodation coming back on stream when possible to do so, and that there would be some recognition for those tourism operators and people operating in that space who have lost business over the last years.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I agree with the Deputy. In our engagements with the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment we are looking at how we can maximise it. Deputy McGuinness referred to making an area more attractive as tourism accommodation comes back on stream. I do not see the Department getting involved in investing in commercial hotel projects. I would not like to create an expectation that there will be that kind of investment. Many hotels have reinvested the proceeds they received under the various international protection contracts back into facilities. What we will do is invest in the community-led infrastructure that makes it attractive for an operator to invest. I am looking and I am interested. We have a number of projects that are community-led and community co-operative-led. The Deputy mentioned glamping. We are looking at that kind of process, which might work in terms of social enterprise in the more rural areas. I am certainly anxious to do more in that

space around community-led tourism projects and community-led tourism conservation projects.

Community Development Projects

8. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht whether he will expand the town and village renewal scheme to allow for Dublin west villages to meet eligibility criteria; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22377/26]

Deputy Emer Currie: The Minister and the Minister of State will both be familiar with this question because I have met them previously. When it comes to funding streams and Dublin West, our Dublin 15 villages are too big for the likes of town and village renewal scheme or are too small for the urban regeneration and development fund, URDF. I would like an update on our discussions on that please.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for her question and her ongoing interest in this area. In line with commitments in Our Rural Future, my Department supports a wide range of strategic capital investment schemes, ringfenced under the rural development investment programme, to transform rural towns and villages, making them thriving places to live, work, raise families and build enterprises. These schemes include the rural regeneration and development fund, LEADER, and the town and village renewal scheme. The scheme was introduced in 2016. It is designed to rejuvenate rural towns and villages throughout Ireland. Since the launch of the scheme, more than €210 million has been allocated to over 1,900 projects. While applications for towns with populations of up to 15,000 people are accepted in certain circumstances, the scheme specifically targets funding at rural towns and villages with populations of less than 10,000. I am anxious to ensure that the design of schemes such as the town and village renewal scheme ensures that we are using available funding in the most efficient and effective manner. With this in mind, the terms and conditions of each scheme are reviewed each year. In advance of the launch of the next iteration of the town and village renewal scheme, I will examine the approach to eligible towns, including smaller villages in the Dublin West region as referenced by the Deputy.

I also of note that, under the umbrella of the town centre first policy, funding is also available to local authorities to support larger and more urban settlements. This includes the Thrive scheme and the towns and cities regeneration investment fund, which was recently announced by my colleague the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. This fund, which is currently open for applications from those towns with populations of over 9,000, builds on the success of the previous URDF.

We have also been in a position to fund some of the rural parts of Dublin, in Fingal in particular, through the town and village scheme and through the outdoor recreation investment scheme, ORIS. I would be happy to engage with the Deputy, with South Dublin County Council and with our colleagues in Fingal County Council around how we are able to do that and the kinds of projects that we fund, which goes back to our previous discussion on enhancing town centres.

Deputy Emer Currie: I thank the Minister and the Minister of State genuinely for engaging with me on this because I feel they understand the challenge we have. Our Dublin 15 villages are falling between two stools. I am talking about villages like Castleknock, where the Minister was yesterday for which I thank him, along with Clonsilla, Blanchardstown, Mulhuddart and Corduff. These are distinct communities. They are not just traffic through ways and they are not just part of urban sprawl. They want to support their businesses, they want to protect their heritage and they want to promote their village centres. What we are really lacking is that place-making ability for these villages that do have their individual sense of identity. When we support businesses and bring footfall into villages it contributes to that sense of community.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I agree with the Deputy. While the primary focus of the rural development scheme is going to remain on rural areas we have funded projects in Fingal and in south Dublin under the outdoor recreation scheme. Under the town and village scheme in Fingal, we were able to fund the development of new walking and cycling facilities and associated streetscape enhancement measures.

In Balrothery, Donabate, Rush and Ballyboughal we approved over €218,000 for village centre seating enhanced public lighting and the creation of a wayfinding strategy to include a new Fingal camino route. Where local authorities in Dublin engage with us and with the ethos of the schemes we are more than happy to engage with them. Given that Castleknock is in the Fingal area, there is huge potential particularly in the more rural parts of Dublin West, of which there are some.

Deputy Emer Currie: Those villages are entitled to apply under the town and village renewal scheme but our villages in Dublin 15 currently are not. I will touch on what our communities are doing. The Castleknock business forum was set up at the beginning of last year. The members have done a survey that points to traffic issues. They are diagnosing the problems but do not have the funding to come up with the solutions and to activate those. In Corduff, we have just launched a standard 2 report about place-making, and 146 residents and organisations took part. Again, the problems are being identified but we need the funding stream to activate the solutions. Fingal County Council is totally on board with what I am bringing to the Minister's attention. It realises there is a problem. It will facilitate our villages in Dublin 15 like Blanchardstown and Castleknock with a town centre first health check, but it brings us back to the same issue. If we do not have the specific funding streams like the town and village renewal scheme, then we are not being given the same opportunities to activate those solutions to bring people into the village, promote village life and give them that identity and the place-making they truly deserve.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The more the Deputy can engage under town centre first principles, the stronger the case, and we will work with her. The Minister of State, as a Deputy in a city constituency with similar villages, is strong on this. Working collectively, we will work with the Deputy, Fingal County Council and our colleagues. If it can be done under the town centre first principles, something we align funding to in a lot of rural areas, the more it can be done with community ownership. I welcome the initiatives undertaken in Castleknock and the other areas. If there is community ownership rather than it coming top down from the local authority or from this House, then all the better. We will engage with the Deputy. We are currently

reviewing the town and village renewal scheme for 2026. It will more likely be a 2027 initiative, but we will engage with the Deputy on it. I point her and the groups she is working with to some of the good work being done in rural parts of Fingal to get examples of protecting traditional villages amidst the growth of the city.

Rural Schemes

9. Deputy John Paul O'Shea asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht for an update on current rural regeneration and development fund projects in Cork county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22797/26]

Deputy Dara Calleary: The rural regeneration and development fund is the major capital investment programme to support large-scale ambitious projects to achieve sustainable economic and social development in rural areas. To date, the fund has allocated over €614 million to 273 projects across the country, which includes over €43 million since 2018 allocated to 27 projects located throughout County Cork. These projects are being delivered by the local authority and other publicly funded bodies including our local development companies and Údarás na Gaeltachta.

Ten of the 27 projects have been completed in County Cork to date. Examples include the first phase of the Kanturk regeneration plan and the Ballydesmond village public realm and place-making enhancement project. There are 17 active RRDF projects, which includes four projects in Castletownroche, Crosshaven, Skibbereen and Fermoy, which were successful in the latest category 2 call for proposals announced in October 2025. Last month, we were delighted to announce a call for proposals for category 1 applications. This call will focus on strategic, large-scale build projects that are ready to commence. These projects must have a lasting impact on the towns and villages and deliver on the objectives of Our Rural Future, which is our rural policy. We are inviting applications for well-developed proposals from our local authorities and other State-funded lead bodies that work in partnership with local communities and stakeholders. Full details of the call are available on my Department's website.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I thank the Minister. It is great to see that more than €43 million has been invested in 27 projects across County Cork to date since 2018 when the RRDF came into existence. There have been many in my area, as the Minister of State outlined. The first one was the Kanturk relief road, which was funded many years ago in 2018 and 2019 and has provided a great opportunity for the town to enhance. It has allowed the new national school to open up and has allowed the lands across the relief road to open up to development. It has made a huge difference to the mart, which is located on that road. Likewise, in Ballydesmond in north Cork there is a fantastic public realm project and a pocket park being opened for the community. It was great to see former Deputy, Heather Humphreys there when she was Minister to officially open it. We look forward to the Minister, with the Minister of State, visiting many projects across Cork North West and the Cork county in the coming years. It is also important to outline that category 1 proposals are also coming up and there is no doubt projects will emerge from north Cork and Cork North West during that time.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for that overview. I acknowledge that Cork County Council and the team that deals with our Department's delivery of projects, is one of the stronger performing local authorities. The delivery by our partners on the ground can be a frustration generally in relation to RRDF. It is not in Cork. To that effect, we are engaging with local authorities and delivery bodies around the country on delivery of RRDF projects. As we have an open call, the advice needs to go out. It is all very well preparing an application. We have been having the discussion this morning about the pressures of preparing an application. We also have to be able to deliver the application if it is successful. We are engaging with local authorities on that. We may have to make some tough calls on projects that have been on the books a long time. I have funding for counties such as Cork, which are hungry and anxious to succeed. I encourage every Deputy, particularly those in rural areas, to engage with the current call and with information programmes on that. There may be communities that want to engage in a major programme and the facilities are there to do that. I also thank the Deputy for his support and for the committee's support for these projects. It is important that we have cross-party support. We get that from the committee.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: It is great to see collaboration between the Minister's Department and Cork County Council and an acknowledgement that we are hungry for more. We will always accept more money when it is available. I am sure there will be applications for the category 1 call. I am sure the 17 active projects under way in Cork county will be completed as quickly as possible. I will mention one, which is the Charleville RRDF project. Over €6 million was allocated for that project and it is finally coming to the stage where we are starting the first phase of that shortly. I look forward to the Minister's continued engagement with his Department, Cork County Council and me as a public representative from that area to push that project forward. It is in a number of phases. There is a town centre refurbishment. There is public realm. There is allocation of public toilets and there is also a redevelopment of the courthouse in Charleville. It is a wonderful project for the town and the highest ever allocation for a town like Charleville to get €6 million from Government for community investment. We appreciate it and look forward to welcoming the Minister and the Minister of State when that project is in train.

Deputy Dara Calleary: That is exactly the kind of project we want to do under the RRDF. It is a project that would not have been done previously and for larger towns of 9,000 plus, there is the URDF and its successor scheme. It is important that project is done in conjunction with the community and that there is community engagement in it. One of our challenges with projects such as this is that sometimes the communities may not have been involved at the outset and as the project rolls out, there can be challenges with parking spaces and other issues people need to be informed about. We have a significant investment in what we call our capital delivery team that works with local authorities to deliver on this projects. We also have our own quantity surveyor in the Department. That examines all of the applications to ensure the costings are adequate and relevant to the current market. We also have systematic engagement to ensure delivery. There is no point in the Minister of State and I announcing projects such as that in Charleville unless they happen. We will be with the Deputy in Baile Bhuirne in April for the opening of the Coláiste Íosagáin campus, which is a significant investment. It also shows what can be done in rural Ireland with support from the RRDF and other bodies coming together.

Community Development Projects

10. **Deputy John Clendennen** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht the total investment in Offaly projects since the introduction of the LEADER programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22906/26]

Deputy John Clendennen: I thank the Minister for taking this question. I ask him to provide an update on Offaly projects since the introduction of the LEADER programme.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for his question. LEADER, as he knows, is a community-led approach to local development that has been operating for just over 35 years. We marked the 35th anniversary of LEADER just last weekend. It was introduced by the EU under the then Commissioner Ray MacSharry. The programme has evolved through successive programming periods and in 2007 it was mainstreamed into the Common Agricultural Policy and became a key intervention within Ireland's rural development programme.

Since 2007 the total amount of EU and Exchequer funding allocated to LEADER on a national level has been over €876 million. Of this, the local action group in Offaly has received a total allocation of approximately €27.5 million. This total allocation is broken down over a number of programming periods with the most recent allocation in Offaly totalling €6.2 million in respect of the current 2023-27 LEADER programme. In keeping with the multi-annual nature of LEADER, all allocations are made at the start of each programming period and funds are drawn down from my Department as projects are completed. This approach ensures local action groups have the flexibility to manage LEADER support flexibly and in line with specific local needs. To date, 49 projects have been approved in Offaly under the current programme and I expect further projects to come on line as we progress through the programming period.

LEADER has a commendable track record in delivering locally driven projects that have delivered real benefits in Offaly and all across the country. I continue to advocate for a strong and well-funded LEADER programme. I am working closely with the Minister, Deputy Heydon, on the future of LEADER in the context of the CAP talks at the moment. I am confident the bottom-up approach of LEADER can continue to support valuable projects in Offaly for years to come.

Deputy John Clendennen: I have seen at first hand, through applicants and through involvement in the LCDC how this initiative is so important to developing a county. I acknowledge Offaly Local Development Company for the work it has done to ensure the effectiveness of the programme. Offaly is one of the most counties in relation to LEADER. I also acknowledge both the Minister and the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, for their visits this year to Moneygall Development Association and the Offaly Volunteer Centre where they saw the progress that has been made under the likes of LEADER. Offaly Search and Recovery has got a new boat and St. Brigid's Boxing Club in Edenderry has got new solar panels. This is a critical funding model for rural areas. It provides an opportunity to advance and I emphasise that this should remain front and centre through the CAP negotiations as we take up the Presidency of the EU. It is something that needs to be protected and maintained for rural development. The important part it plays cannot be underestimated.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I agree with the Deputy. When the Minister of State and I visited Moneygall, the local development company put on a fantastic display. During the ploughing championships last year, it really showcased what LEADER can do across a county and the interventions it can make. On the future of LEADER, we are working, as I said, with the Minister, Deputy Heydon, and his Department. The CAP consultative committee includes my Department and other rural stakeholders. I am also engaging with Irish MEPs to discuss a range of issues. I encourage Deputy Clendennen and every other Deputy to engage with MEPs in their respective groups to ensure LEADER is properly funded within the next multi-annual financial framework. We are under no illusions. The CAP budget is under particular pressure given the competing demands. We must ensure, within those competing demands, that LEADER is progressed. It has a really strong basis. As I said, we marked 35 years of LEADER the weekend before last. The impact it has had has been transformative and we need to make sure we continue with it and it continues to grow.

Deputy John Clendennen: I thank the Minister. Previous speakers have mentioned the likes of town and village renewal and rural recreation development funds. In many cases it requires an input from the local authority and the community. The likes of the local development company also need to get involved to fund the initial feasibility plans or design plans to ensure the projects are ready to progress to the next stage. We need to ensure we try to protect LEADER as much as possible. We probably need to look at exploring how we can identify the likes of EU funding officers in each local authority. If there is going to be a potential void on the basis of LEADER being impacted - I do not want to look at this in a pessimistic way whatsoever - there is an opportunity from an EU perspective to resource funding officers through local authorities or local development companies to ensure we are maximising our benefit. A study probably needs to be done to make sure we are maximising what is available from Europe and see if there is more potential to be gained from it.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I do not disagree with the Deputy's analysis. That would be a good investment of EU funds. LEADER is not the only show in town. Since 2020 my Department has allocated in the region of €65 million in funding to Offaly. In 2025 alone we invested €1 million under the LIS, €1.2 million under the town and village renewal scheme, €1.4 million under the community service programme, €420,000 under CLÁR and €440,000 under ORIS. We are investing €12 million under the RRDF to redevelop a site in Edenderry as an art space, community library and youth space. We were with the Deputy in Moneygall for the community centre investment fund investment of €1.8 million. It shows the impact of LEADER, which was the forerunner of many of these funding programmes. The important thing is it has community involvement. It is a bottom-up approach and it is important we protect that ethos. I reiterate the necessity of every Deputy being involved with their MEP colleagues in ensuring LEADER is prioritised in the MFF discussions.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): With the indulgence of the House, we will go back to Question No. 7.

Scéimeanna Tacaíochta

7. Deputy Mairéad Farrell den Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht an mbeidh ardú ar an bhfóirdheontas do theaghlaigh agus do choláistí cónaithe Gaeltachta faoi Scéim na bhFoghlaimeoirí Gaeilge i mbliana; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [23101/26]

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Is í an cheist atá agam ar an Aire ná an mbeidh ardú ar an bhfóirdheontas do theaghlaigh agus coláistí cónaithe Gaeltachta faoi scéim na bhfoghlaimeoirí Gaeilge i mbliana. An mbeadh sé in ann ráiteas a dhéanamh ina thaobh?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá scéim na bhfoghlaimeoirí Gaeilge á riar ag mo Roinn ar mhaithe le tacú le deiseanna sealbhaithe agus saibhríthe teanga sna réigiúin Ghaeltachta do fhoghlaimeoirí, idir scoláirí dara leibhéal, mic léinn tríú leibhéal agus daoine fásta ó áiteanna ar fud na tíre. Tagann an scéim le cuspóirí an Rialtais i leith na Gaeilge, mar atá leagtha amach sa Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge 2010-2030, agus is í an scéim an príomhbhealach ina dtacaíonn mo Roinn le hearnáil na gcoláistí Gaeilge.

Is ar na teaghlaigh Ghaeltachta a chuireann lóistín ar fáil don chóras a bhíonn cúnamh na Roinne dírithe, mar is iad na teaghlaigh sin cnámh droma an chórais. Cuireann mo Roinn cúnamh suntasach ar fáil ar bhonn leanúnach faoi scéim na bhfoghlaimeoirí Gaeilge agus tá an tacaíocht seo á cur ar fáil le tamall de bhlianta anuas chun tacú tuilleadh le hearnáil na gcoláistí Gaeilge. Tá ardú ceadaithe ar an bhfóirdheontas a íoctar le teaghlaigh Ghaeltachta agus coláistí cónaithe a chuireann lóistín ar fáil le roinnt blianta anuas. Go deimhin, anuraidh cheadaigh mé an cheathrú ardú ó 2022 ar an bhfóirdheontas nuair a d'ardaigh mé an deontas aon-oíche do theaghlaigh ó €13 go €14.50, agus an deontas aon-oíche do bhrúnna agus coláistí cónaithe ó €9.50 go €10.50. Is ionann é seo ar fad agus ardú 45% ar an ráta fóirdheontais a íoctar le teaghlaigh agus méadú i gcomhthéacs na mbrúnna agus coláistí cónaithe ó 2022 i leith.

Anuas air sin ar fad, tá ardú tagtha ar na tionscnaimh eile a cheadaítear faoi scéim na bhfoghlaimeoirí Gaeilge, lena n-áirítear an scéim DEIS Gaeltachta. Cuireadh maoiniú €900,000 ar fáil don scéim DEIS Gaeltachta in 2025. Is ardú suntasach é seo ar an gciste DEIS Gaeltachta ó 2024, le leithdháileadh de €400,000. Tá ardú tagtha chomh maith ar an bhfóirdheontas a íoctar faoi na beartais scéim Erasmus Gaeltachta. Leis na beartais seo, tá muid súil le gach cineál cabhrach a chur ar fáil do theaghlaigh sa Gaeltacht. Mar atá leagtha amach sa chlár Rialtais, leanfaidh mé ag tacú leis an earnáil seo le linn théarma an Rialtais. Mar is eol don Teachta, fuair mé an t-ardú is mó i mbuiséad Roinn na Gaeltachta sa bhuiséad is déanaí. Rachaidh an t-ardú sin i dtreo infheistíocht i scéimeanna cosúil leis an gceann seo.

10 o'clock

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Níl a fhios agam an féidir i ndáiríre labhairt faoi ardú de 45% ó 2022 i leith nuair atá ardú de €1.50 i gceist ón mbliain seo caite go dtí an bhliain seo. Tá a fhios againn go bhfuil mná tí ag streachailt cheana féin agus go bhfuil éileamh ollmhór ar na coláistí samhraidh seo. Díoladh na spásanna sna coláistí samhraidh i dtréimhse de dhá nóiméad mar gheall go raibh an t-éileamh chomh mór sin. Muna bhfuil maoiniú ceart ann do mhná tí, ní bheimid in ann daoine a mhealladh chun é sin a dhéanamh. Mar gheall air sin, ní bheimid in ann an t-éileamh sin a shásamh. Is é sin an rud atá i gceist leis seo. Ba chóir dúinn an maoiniú atá ag teastáil ó mhná tí a chur ar fáil. Tuigim nach bhfuil an tAire in ann na cinntí

seo a dhéanamh go díreach agus go gcaithfidh sé an maoiniú sin a fháil ach, má táimid dáiríre faoin sprioc 20%, beidh ar na daoine sin dul chuig coláistí samhraidh. Beidh an t-éileamh ag éirí. Teastaíonn níos mó maoinithe anseo.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá sé soiléir ón ardú a bhí ann anuraidh go bhfuilimid dáiríre faoi seo. Táimid dáiríre faoin 29,000 scoláire agus beagnach 530 teaghlach Gaeilge a aithint. Táimid ag obair leis na mná tí agus leis na coláistí. Anuraidh, d'fhógair mé scéim aonuaire do theaghlaigh sheanbhunaithe chun tacú tuilleadh leis an gcostas chun troscán nua a cheannach. Is deontas suas le €2,000, nó 80% den chostas, a bhí i gceist leis sin. Fuair níos mó ná 200 teaghlach an tacaíocht seo. Is slí eile é sin ina bhfuilimid ag cuidiú. Táimid ag staidéar le haghaidh na bliana seo. Mar a dúirt an Teachta, tá suim mhór sna coláistí samhraidh. Táimid ag ceapadh go mbeidh 29,000 scoláire ag dul chucu i mbliana. Táimid ag staidéar é sin. Táimid ag obair le CONCOS. Tuigim go mór an brú costais atá orainn. Táim an-dírthe ar an taithí sin a chosaint. Is taithí an-tábhachtach é do scoláirí dul go dtí an Ghaeltacht agus a bheith ina gcónaí inti. Táim ag obair chun an taithí sin a chosaint agus a fhorbairt.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Impím ar an Aire staidéar géar a dhéanamh ar an gceist seo. In iarthar na hÉireann, tá formhór na ndaoine ag brath ar ola. Tá a fhios againn cé chomh daor is atá ola anois mar gheall ar an gcogadh san Iaráin. Tá na praghsanna sin ag ardú agus tá sé sin ag cur tuilleadh brú ar mhná tí, a bhí ag rá cheana féin go raibh níos mó airgid ag teastáil. Chomh maith leis sin, tá orthu brath ar pheitreal agus ar dhíosal chun taisteal ó áit go háit, rud eile a chuireann brú ar mhná tí. Impím ar an Aire breathnú air seo go géar. Impím ar an Rialtas ar fad breathnú air seo. Tá a fhios agam go dtuigeann an tAire cé chomh tábhachtach is atá mná tí ach táim buartha nach bhfuil an tuiscint chéanna ag daoine eile ar bhord an Rialtais faoi cé chomh tábhachtach is atá sé na daoine seo agus an tslí bheatha seo a chosaint má táimid dáiríre faoin nGaeilge agus faoin nGhaeltacht. Impím ar an Aire labhairt leis na daoine eile ar bhord an Rialtais ionas go dtuigfidh siad cé chomh tábhachtach is atá sé seo.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá tuiscint ag gach cuid den Rialtas ar cé chomh tábhachtach is atá an taithí seo agus cé chomh tábhachtach is atá an Ghaeltacht. Tá an t-ádh linn go bhfuil an tAire caiteachais phoiblí ina iarAire Stáit sa Roinn seo. Tuigeann sé cé chomh tábhachtach is atá sé. Bhí sé sin an-tábhachtach agus muid ag iarraidh buiséad na Roinne a ardú. Ní fiú ardú mór sa bhuiséad muna bhfuil sé á chaitheamh ar an nGhaeltacht. Tá sé ar intinn agam é a úsáid chun infheistíocht a dhéanamh, go háirithe sa saghas taithí is fearr, is é sin taithí shaoil sa Ghaeltacht le teaghlach Gaeltachta le haghaidh dhá nó trí seachtaine. Beidh mé ag obair le CONCOS ar an infheistíocht sin agus ar an scéim sin a chosaint.

Departmental Schemes

11. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht when applications for the next round of the community centre investment fund will open; whether it will be for new builds or refurbishments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21756/26]

Deputy Colm Burke: I know an announcement was made on this matter this morning. When will applications for the next round of the community centre investment fund open? Will it be

for new builds or refurbishments? Will the Minister make a statement on the matter? I know he made an announcement on the matter this morning, but the issue is about new builds. Will the Minister give some clarification on that particular issue?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank Deputy Burke for his question. The community centre investment fund, CCIF, was introduced by the former Minister, Heather Humphreys, to provide high-quality community facilities that are available to all groups in both urban and rural communities. Through the CCIF, to date some €111 million has been allocated for the enhancement and refurbishment of existing community centres and the construction of new centres where such a need has been identified. This is an unprecedented level of investment but there continues to be a need for further investment. The programme for Government makes a commitment to do this. I am delighted to say that this morning, my Department launched the 2026 CCIF, which will support the refurbishment of existing community centres.

There are two categories of funding under the 2026 scheme. Category 1 will provide funding up to €25,000 and category 2 will provide funding of up to €100,000. The scheme will open for online applications at the end of May and all successful projects will be announced before the end of the year. I encourage any community group interested in enhancing its community centre to use the coming weeks to decide on its funding priorities and begin preparing its applications. To that effect, there are a range of resources available to assist potential applicants. There will also be a number of information sessions provided, the first of which will be held on 8 April. Full details of these resources, information sessions and the fund are now available on the Department's website.

In regard to new builds, we are currently trying to complete the programme of new builds that was announced in 2024. I hope, subject to budget allocations, to have a new-build allocation in 2027. Our priority at the moment is to complete the 12 projects that were announced in 2024 and we are working through that as we speak. There is such a demand for refurbishment. The indications we have to date are that some of the community centres that have had investment in refurbishment have seen activity levels increase by up to 90% and we want to continue to do this.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Minister and accept that the announcement this morning was very welcome. I come from a parish where 11 acres were purchased 50 years ago, and we now have 45 acres of sports and community facilities involving the GAA, the rugby club, soccer facilities, a playground and a walkway. That has been developed over the past 50 years as a result of community efforts and with the help of sports capital grants. Likewise, in the area where I served as chair of a community centre in Blackpool, more than 40 organisations use the facility there, which is extremely important for the local community. Therefore, it is important to make decisions about providing refurbishment. The issue I have in regard to new builds is that there are challenges in Glanmire, which is a new town in real terms, with over 25,000 people. Likewise, there will be huge development in Blarney. The need for planning for proper community facilities is so important for those areas and that will involve new builds.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I know from speaking to those involved that one of the motivations behind the approach taken during Heather Humphreys' time in office was the need to help the exact kind of community that Deputy Burke has spoken about. There was massive

development back in the seventies and eighties. Perhaps there are three of us in the Chamber who are old enough to remember AnCO. I will not say which three people I am thinking of. Through AnCO and through the skills of the people involved at the time, many community centres were built across the country in the seventies and eighties. When it became very apparent that they needed substantial investment in terms of energy and facilities, that was the initial intention of the CCIF. Some €30 million was then approved for 12 new community centres in nine counties. Eight of those projects have construction workers on site and the remaining projects are going through tender and design. I hope that, subject to budget, we will be in a position in 2027 - the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer shares this priority - to focus again on new builds and on new communities such as those referred to by Deputy Burke. It will be competitive. One of the biggest topics we hear about in terms of community centre investment is the need for new builds. We will have a very competitive process. New communities that do not have facilities and need the kinds of facilities that a community centre can give and the kind of hub that a community centre can give will be the focus. Subject to budget, I can assure the Deputy that that will be the focus for the 2027 scheme.

Deputy Colm Burke: In relation to new builds, a big challenge is sufficient land being set aside where a large amount of housing is being built. The planning authorities are falling down on this. I have seen this in the Glanmire area, for instance, where over 25,000 people live and a proper community centre has not been developed. Sarsfields GAA club has provided really good community support. Without it, there would not be a community facility in real terms. We need to do more forward planning on this issue. Likewise with Blarney, there are over 3,000 houses to go in there over the next few years. Land needs to be set aside now. There should be communication with local authorities to make sure that is part of the planning process. The Department cannot give the money if the land is not there to build the facilities on. Without those facilities, there is a huge gap in the community. When I was in Blackpool as chair in 1994 and 1995, I had 30 people employed under a community employment scheme in the community centre. There were huge challenges in employment there at the time. It made a huge contribution to the area.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I was out yesterday with Deputy Currie and the Minister, Deputy Chambers, in Castleknock at the community centre to see the work it is doing with community employment and Tús. A community centre is not just a building; it is a hub and a magnet for activity. It is really the heart of activities. That is why we want to support the programme to ensure facilities are improved in existing centres as well as new ones. Some 190 CCIF projects have been approved in Cork since 2022. The Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I were in Rylane in December to see the sod-turning of a new build. I endorse what Deputy Burke said in relation to local authorities and their responsibilities particularly in areas that are growing. We had this discussion earlier, which the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, led. They should be identifying in their development plans space for recreation and community centre activities. We have the funding streams in place. They should work with us to do that. We will be happy to engage - we are engaging with local authorities. I praise what is happening in Cork with the proactive local authority working with us. We work with them to provide the funding. If they provide the sites, we work with them in relation to the funding.

Community Development Projects

12. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht the position regarding supports provided at a local level in community centres targeted at addressing social exclusion; if he will consider increasing funding in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22369/26]

Deputy Barry Ward: The Minister will be aware of many community organisations around the country which focus on social exclusion. Are better supports available for them, conscious of the supports already available? Social exclusion is an issue that permeates society and has a massive effect. It is incumbent on us to deal with it. If we do not, it creates all kinds of other problems. Can we create greater supports and funding for those organisations?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank Deputy Ward for his ongoing advocacy, targeting, commentary and genuine commitment to the delivery of community-led supports. He has raised this matter on numerous occasions privately and in the Dáil. The Minister and I share the Deputy's view on tackling social disadvantage. The social inclusion and community activation programme, SICAP, is our country's primary social inclusion intervention programme, overseen by our Department. It is a national programme delivered in rural and urban areas by local development companies, LDCs, to help those in greatest need. SICAP supports people and community groups that face disadvantage providing targeted supports in areas such as employment, mental health, education and community engagement, improving quality of life for those facing social exclusion and inequality. The Minister and I are very much aware of the ongoing need. We are committed to the provision of supports and structures. That is why as a Government and we as Ministers in the Department were delighted to have secured an additional €1.5 billion in the budget this year, bringing annual funding for SICAP to over €50 million. We are also of the view that supports should be provided to staff of local development companies in local communities which use community centres as a hub. Our Department's CSP currently supports 426 community-based organisations with a budget of €59.4 million, an increase of €4 million from last year to provide 445 local, social economic and environmental services through a social enterprise model. We will have further news on the CSP in light of the programme for Government commitments later in the month.

Deputy Barry Ward: I thank the Minister of State. We in Ireland consider ourselves to be a fairly happy nation. Even the happiness index published recently shows that we are up there. Yet, report after report shows that loneliness in Ireland and other countries in the western world is growing all the time. Organisations such as men's sheds, community groups and church groups do amazing work bringing people together, avoiding social exclusion, providing a vehicle for people to communicate with each other and build networks and friendships which is important. Are they predominantly focused, as we live longer and better lives, on people in the older cohort? Is there more we can do for people in the younger cohort? We have pubs and cafes, of course, but they are not always the best place for people to come together. Will the Minister of State consider enhanced supports particularly for groups that deal with social exclusion, loneliness and isolation for younger ages groups? Is there something to be said for increasing supports in that regard?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Deputy Ward raises an interesting point. Sometimes we miss that cohort of young people. Rightly, we focus on men's sheds, women's sheds, older people's social services and that integration piece. As we saw today in the announcement by the Minister, Deputy Calleary, of the CCIF, the community centre is the hub and the visible piece that leads to the ongoing delivery of integrated supports, which directly reduces social exclusion for older people, in particular. The Deputy made a good point. Perhaps working with the Ministers, Deputies Foley, Calleary and Naughton, we can look at a further model in terms of what we are already doing. Let us be honest - we need to listen and engage all the time. We have an ongoing conversation around online safety for young people but there is a piece in particular post-Covid where demand continues to grow in our Department, reflecting the complexity of life today in communities. I am open to the conversation around what structures and supports we can put in place for that younger age group, perhaps working at a cross-department level. The Deputy's points are very well made.

Deputy Barry Ward: I acknowledge all of the supports available already. The bodies that tend to be supported by SICAP funding and some of the other funding streams the Minister of State mentioned tend to be community organisations, which is welcome. In the context of what I was saying about the younger age groups, sports clubs also have a role, and they are successful, but they are not really in the remit of what the Minister of State has been talking about. I mention places where people can gather socially. For example, we know we have a problem with the nighttime economy and the availability of spaces for people to mix outside the pub culture. Is there any role for this kind of funding not so much for commercial supports but to facilitate the existence of cafés particularly after 9 p.m., places where people can gather? I mention supports for them perhaps in the context of a sports club or another community group or organisation. Is that outside the remit of the Department or can it be considered?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: What Cork City Council has done on the nighttime economy with no-alcohol cafés for young people is an example the Government as a whole must look at. Our Department has a variety of schemes and programmes that reflect the whole ethos of what the Deputy is trying to achieve. I am open in terms of eligibility criteria in the new call for applications under a variety of schemes, such as the CSP or SICAP, to looking at how we can broaden the remit while mindful that we do not have an infinite budget and will have loads of applications. We need to have a conversation as we emerge from Covid and in a new world around our attitudes to alcohol and online. What the Deputy is saying reflects a new Ireland. We must open to engaging and putting a new structure in place. I would be happy to sit down with the Deputy further and engage on that. I do not want to speak for the Minister but I am sure he would also be open to having that conversation.

We must look at how we can allow these young people to make a contribution and have them involved and engaged in our community networks and, as Deputy Ward said, not just forget them, think they are all being looked after and that they have migrated to an online space that is very difficult, truculent and complex. The points Deputy Ward has made are worth considering and I certainly look forward to further engagement with him on it.

Questions Nos. 13 to 20, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Social Enterprise Sector

21. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht the reason that almost two years into the implementation of the National Social Enterprise Policy 2024–2027 a number of key milestones have been missed; the actions he is taking to ensure that no further targets are missed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22993/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We are almost two years into the implementation of the national social enterprise policy for 2024 to 2027 and a number of key milestones have been missed. What actions are being taken to ensure no further targets are missed? We have had engagement on this before and I have met SERI, a group representing a number of social enterprises in the State. It is about ensuring we have a framework that works.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank Deputy Ó Murchú for the question. In July 2024, prior to my appointment, the Department launched Trading for Impact, the national social enterprise policy, which was developed in partnership with the social enterprise sector. It has five key objectives, which are to build awareness of social enterprises, help them grow their financial sustainability, contribute to the green transition, deepen alignment from local to international level, and improve our understanding of social enterprises and their impact.

A stakeholder engagement group was established in June 2025, including public and private stakeholders, to co-ordinate delivery of the policy. Three working groups have now been established to address social financing issues and gaps, increase participation in public and private procurement, and raise awareness and make their impact more visible. Through these structures, work is continuing to support and grow the sector. The Minister, Deputy Calleary, and I were pleased to secure €400,000 of additional funding through the Estimates process to support this work.

Areas of focus include a new Dormant Accounts Fund scheme to grow financial sustainability, which I expect to launch very shortly, and engagement with stakeholders, including the Office of Government Procurement, to increase procurement and sustainability for social enterprises through traded income. They also include phase 2 of a pilot voluntary quality mark for social enterprises to help build their visibility, and the census of social enterprises, which will be launched in the coming weeks, to better understand and support the sector and help to set the direction of future policy.

While there was some delay in commencing implementation of the policy in late 2024, and I remind Deputy Ó Murchú that there was an election and a Government needed to be formed, significant work has been undertaken since my appointment and that of the Minister. We are committed to seeing this policy delivered. I assure Deputy Ó Murchú that the officials in our Department and other Departments, in partnership with the stakeholders, are working to ensure that all of the actions will be implemented over the lifetime of the policy. Deputy Ó Murchú mentioned SERI and I congratulate the former Minister, Richard Bruton, on his appointment as chair of SERI. We look forward to working with him to further develop the issue Deputy Ó Murchú has outlined. I have met many social enterprise groups since I became a Minister of

State and I can tell Deputy Ó Murchú that I am very excited about this sector. I look forward to working with him to see it succeed further.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I accept there was a busy period in 2024 but work has to continue through the public service, the Civil Service and the Department. I will take on board the Minister of State's commitment to delivering on these targets because it is absolutely necessary. I assume from what he has said that he will have, and I hope there will be, engagement with SERI. I was approached on the fact that it had a number of questions. It is looking for an ecosystem where social enterprise can flourish, from local start-ups to those that have a capacity for international expansion. At the minute, they cannot access enterprise supports through LEOs, Enterprise Ireland or Skillnet. An amount of €340,000 per year is allocated to deliver 57 actions, which were set previously under the national social enterprise policy. Will funding be committed to the programme for Government seed fund?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I look forward to working with Deputy Ó Murchú in this particular area. Since my appointment, when I assumed responsibility in this area, we have engaged extensively. I have visited and met many stakeholders and social enterprises. To say the least, I am absolutely excited by the work being done. The objectives will be met. The stakeholder engagement group has met and it has a programme of work. It is committed to engaging on this and engaging with us further. I assure Deputy Ó Murchú the officials in the Department are engaging with colleagues on this matter on an ongoing basis. Deputy Ó Murchú should feel free to raise any issues with me. It is important to recognise that the Trading for Impact policy was developed in partnership with the sector. It is about partnership, le chéile and working together. Implementation of this policy must be done in partnership for it to succeed. I look forward to the stakeholder engagement group continuing its work. It has met four times since it was appointed and it has established three expert working groups to provide recommendations and advice and to help it implement the individual actions under its remit. I look forward to working with Deputy Ó Murchú because this is a brilliant, breathtaking and refreshing area to be in.

Message from Select Committee

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): The Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade has completed its consideration of the Arbitration (Amendment) Bill 2025 and has made amendments thereto.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Legislative Programme

70. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the progress on the drafting of the Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory (prohibition of importation of goods) Bill 2025; if she will outline the recent advice she has received from the Attorney General; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [23431/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: This question has been frequently debated in recent months and years. The Government was elected on the basis of both parties committing to pass the occupied territories Bill, not a watered-down version of it. In any event, the progress we have seen on any occupied territories legislation has been quite halting since the election of this Government. When are we going to see that Bill on the floor of the Dáil?

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank the Deputy for raising this question. He is right that this something we have debated and discussed many times, and not just the Bill itself but the ongoing devastating conflict in Gaza in the Middle East. That conflict has now, unfortunately, escalated and widened and is now including many more innocent civilians. Everything that this Government and the previous one have done and everything the people of this country have done has been with the sole intention of making sure we can bring about a lasting peace. It is about making sure that those innocent civilians who are impacted by this ongoing conflict are protected and assisted in every way possible and that we have a pathway towards a two-state solution. That is something that we all agree on here and that we all want to achieve. Whether it is the recognition of Palestine, decisions we have taken at European level, the humanitarian assistance that has been provided or progressing this legislation, every objective here has been to ensure a lasting peace and to protect civilians on the ground.

The Bill itself is not straightforward and we have always been very clear in saying that, given the need for any legislation to be implementable on the ground but also the fact that requests on the legislation and the possible scope of it have changed and varied. In June 2025, the Government approved the general scheme of the Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory (prohibition of importation of goods) Bill. The main purpose of the Bill is to prohibit the importation of goods into the State from Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory, in line with the programme for Government commitment. Legally, the regulation of external trade in services is considerably more complex than is the case with goods at EU level. Obviously, the Oireachtas committee itself had done a body of work on this and had asked for this to be looked at. There is greater complexity when it comes to implementation than is the case when it comes to trade in goods.

The Government has received the Attorney General's advice on the question of whether the inclusion of services in the Bill is permissible under EU law. As the Deputy can appreciate, I cannot discuss here advice provided by the Attorney General to the Government but what I can say is that the advice reflects the very significant difficulties that going beyond our programme for Government commitments and adding a prohibition on services to the legislation would entail. Following detailed consideration by my Department, clarification has been sought from the Attorney General on a number of legal issues related to the advice provided and I expect to receive that very soon.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: My concern and that of a lot of people is that we are going to continue with this dance whereby the Attorney General sends something across to the Government, the Government looks for clarification, the Attorney General sends something back and we are at this slow-bicycle race forever. The urgency of this is very clear. For all of the talk of the ceasefire, the Board of Peace and so on, the situation on the ground is desperate. The Minister is quite aware, I am sure, that at the minute aid organisations are being restricted

from going into Gaza and that settler violence is on a scale we have not seen in quite some time. Torture is being used. There is the appalling story of a two-year old child being tortured in front of his father with a view to extracting who knows what. There is talk of sexual abuse in forms of interrogation and many other appalling stories are coming out of Gaza, all because there has not been accountability. It is important that there is accountability.

There are actions Ireland can take. I would not overstate our influence but we should use what leverage we have and this is clearly one instance of it. We need to get this Bill onto the floor of the Dáil and debate it. Let us have the debate on the amendments. We currently have no clear sense of when this is going to come forward and that is not acceptable.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I agree with the Deputy that what is happening is appalling. I fully agree that what we are seeing is appalling. The ceasefire is not a proper ceasefire. Over 400 people have been killed since then and proper aid is not being let in. I visited the area myself at the beginning of the year and saw that goods that are by no means, or could ever be described as, a threat are not being let in. Enough food is still not being let in. We are doing our utmost. Our focus, and my priority at the outset, is to ensure that aid gets in because that is the most immediate need. Parallel to that, we need to determine how we stop what is escalating in the West Bank. I fully agree we are seeing an increase in settler violence and displacement. What I also know, from talking to my European colleagues and from the actions we have taken in the past that have helped to lead us the ceasefire, albeit an imperfect one, is that we are most effective when we act in unison and work together at a European level. A number of European countries are progressing legislation and looking at what we are doing as well. We are engaging with them, and where we make movement together and where we are looking at legislation that can actually be enacted and be impactful, we can make a bigger difference. That does not mean we are not doing anything in the meantime. We are providing assistance and increasing our assistance in ways other countries are not. We are also calling at every opportunity for progress on the peace board, the board that has been put in place to try to develop and ensure that people on the ground are starting to see a normal way of life again. However, a lot more work needs to be done and I appreciate that.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The manifesto commitments were different from the programme for Government commitments but both Government parties had access to the Attorney General's advice at that point, which was that while it is challenging to do, there is no particular obstacle to acting on services as well as goods. The Minister talked about other European countries. Ireland is now but one of five that are examining this. One of those, Spain, has effectively completed the action and another, Slovenia, is quite well advanced, as I understand it. Spain has been able to bring services into the ambit of the legislation, albeit in relation to advertisements. The fact that Spain has been able to do that and that there have been much less successful infringement proceedings against the Spanish Government demonstrates that it is possible to do this under EU legislation that there is no obstacle to acting on services. What I want to know from the Minister, first and foremost, and I ask her to be as clear as possible, is when a Bill is going to come before these Houses. When are we going to be able to debate it and pass it?

Deputy Helen McEntee: In terms of the programme for Government commitment, it was relating to goods and we were very clear on that. The Oireachtas committee then asked that we would look at services and it is important that we engage with the committee and its recommendations on any legislation. That was the advice that was asked of the Attorney General and that was the advice that I received soon after coming into the Department, just before Christmas. Questions needed to be asked and those have been asked of the Attorney General. I expect to get a response from him soon. Once we have that response, we will progress the legislation. It is not the case that we receive a Bill and it moves straight into the Houses. There is always engagement with the Attorney General. I would again stress that where we have made real progress for people on the ground and seen the ceasefire progress and where pressure has been put on Israel and other parties, it is where we have worked together, not where one country has moved forward on its own but where we have moved forward collectively.

I agree with the Deputy that what is happening on the ground is appalling. It is not acceptable and it is not in line with the ceasefire or what has been agreed. In fact, when I met with colleagues in Washington from all sides of the houses, both Republican and Democratic, they all agreed that what is happening in Israel, and in the West Bank in particular, is illegal and is not appropriate and they want it to stop as well. We are all on the same page. The question is how we exert pressure and make progress? It is by working together, in unison.

United Nations

71. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade whether she supports the calls from Colombian President Gustavo Petros for states to invoke Resolution 377, the UN's uniting for peace mechanism in relation to Gaza; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [22633/26]

Deputy Duncan Smith: Staying with the issue of Gaza, I accept the Minister's point that we all want to work together and make progress towards peace but what we have now is Trump's odious, so-called Board of Peace, which is anything but that. Would the Minister and the Irish State support the calls from the Colombian President, Gustavo Petro, for states to invoke UN Resolution 377, the UN's uniting for peace mechanism in relation to Gaza? If we are to work together, the UN remains the best place to do that.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I agree with the Deputy that the UN is the best place for all of us to work together and Ireland, as a member and a partner, will always stand up for and advocate for the UN and its structures. We understand how important it has been, not just in this conflict but in many conflicts and, most important, in its resolutions over decades. In relation to the uniting for peace resolution, Ireland will always take part in and be a part of any structure or grouping with member states that can provide a way forward. The resolution itself provides for an emergency session of the General Assembly to be called on matters where a lack of unanimity in the Security Council prevents action in relation to international peace and security.

Since 1997, there has been an emergency special session dedicated specifically to the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory. The fact that it has been resumed over 20 times since it was established, including on multiple occasions since the outbreak of the war in Gaza

on 7 October 2023, is a reflection of the importance that the international community and the UN give to the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory. Ireland will continue to actively participate in this special emergency session.

It is important, however, to acknowledge what the uniting for peace resolution can and cannot do. The resolution itself does not create any obligation on the Security Council or any other body of the United Nations to act, nor is it binding on any UN member state. No effective mandates for action in the areas of peace and security can be created by the General Assembly. It is not possible for the General Assembly to authorise a peacekeeping mission, for example, as it would lack the robust mandate required for such a mission to function effectively. Nevertheless, as we have seen in relation to the situation in Palestine, the consideration of any issue by the General Assembly is an important and impactful opportunity for each member state, including Ireland, to speak in defence of the protection of the fundamental values of the United Nations, as we have done, and to outline the horrors that have been happening and continue to happen in Gaza. In addition to our participation in this, we take every opportunity to reiterate our support for that just and sustainable peace by always intervening.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank the Minister. I am fully aware of the limits and obligations of the uniting for peace resolution. However, we are in a desperate situation. The ceasefire in Gaza is a ceasefire only in name. Bombardments continue. People continue to be killed daily. Aid continues to be blocked. Earlier this week, three planned UN convoys to collect supplies from the crossing had to be cancelled after the Israeli authorities informed the UN that only fuel would be let in that day. Most crossings into Gaza remain closed. Only Karem Abu Salem, Karem Shalom, is opened with some regularity. That presents a major bottleneck. Close to 20,000 patients are in dire need of medical care outside Gaza and cannot get out. Settler violence in the West Bank continues apace.

We are in a desperate situation. The UN is paralysed. The Security Council is paralysed. I know the General Assembly has been in emergency session but it is not pushing hard enough to provide some kind of alternative to Trump's Board of Peace.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I agree with the Deputy. My biggest concern is that the ongoing conflict in the wider region of the Middle East will take away our focus on our priority, which should be trying to find a way forward for the civilians in Gaza. We are, and I am, absolutely determined to ensure that will not be the case. At every meeting we have had, even where it related specifically to the ongoing conflict in Iran, I have raised the situation in Gaza and the need for us to make progress. I have raised what is happening in the West Bank. I have raised what is now, unfortunately, happening in Lebanon, where there is clearly an annexation happening in the south. I have said consistently that we need to do more.

While I believe that some progress has been made through the Board of Peace and the new board that has been established to try to bring about a structure in Palestine, it is not happening quickly enough. People are not able to get in. Many of them are still situated in Cairo. On top of that, as the Deputy has mentioned, in regard to the number of aid trucks and the amount of aid that is getting in, while my understanding from talking to ambassadors on the ground is that the situation has slightly improved, it is nowhere near where it needs to be. If we can, through the General Assembly and the UN structures, continue to raise these issues, we will. We need

to do everything we can to bring about action. That is what we need. We need more trucks and openings and more progress on the Board of Peace.

Deputy Duncan Smith: That is what I want. What is the Irish Government's position on the Board of Peace? Are we in favour of it? Are we backing this board or are we remaining silent and seeing what, if anything, it manages to achieve? It seems we are paralysed in terms of calling it out.

The Government needs to support Resolution 377 A at the UN. We need to pass the occupied territories Bill in full. Deputy Ó Laoghaire articulated that clearly and eloquently a few moments ago. We must pressure the Israeli authorities to enable full, safe, sustainable humanitarian access and movement into Gaza and the West Bank with the complete opening of all border crossings. We must pressure the Israeli authorities to reverse the annexation and end the unlawful occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, with the dismantlement of settlements.

The UN Security Council is paralysed. Our voice has always been powerful in the UN. We need to bring it, as loudly as we can, to the UN General Assembly. I believe that although it is in a weakened position, it is the best avenue towards some kind of resolution.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We have not joined the Board of Peace and have been clear in our reason for not doing so. We do not believe that any other structure should be mirroring the work of the UN at all. It is doing work with a particular focus on Gaza. That is why it was established. That was the UN resolution for which we and everybody else voted so that a structure would be put in place to support the redevelopment of Gaza and so that we could provide a clear pathway and future with a ceasefire for people on the ground. We support the structure that has emerged from the Board of Peace. What we really need is to ensure that the Palestinian Authority and Palestinian people are included in the work that is progressing. While they are not on the board in the way we want them to be, a number of structures have been put in place to try to ensure that they are consulted and engaged with, and that they are very much a part of any future that is decided. The problem is that it is not happening quickly enough. We have met the chair and those who are leading this. It is not happening quickly enough. As this conflict in the Middle East continues, we need to ensure that a focus is retained. At every opportunity that I have with my colleagues at the Foreign Affairs Council, that the Taoiseach has at the European Council and that my other colleagues have, we are trying to keep that pressure on to ensure that while work is progressing, albeit wholly imperfectly, we do more in terms of aid and access. We will continue to provide that.

Ukraine War

72. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if the Government will make efforts to ensure that European sanctions are made against Rosatom, the Russian atomic agency; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [23432/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: In the four years since the start of Russia's appalling war of aggression against Ukraine, there has been a wide range of sanctions against Russian individuals and companies, and against the Russian Government. In recent days, we have,

unfortunately, seen an easing of sanctions on oil and gas by the United States. I am sure that is something the Minister regrets. That move makes it all the more important that Europe maintains a robust approach to sanctions. It is remarkable that four years in, given the centrality of atomic energy to the Russian economy and the Russian war effort, the Russian atomic agency, Rosatom, has not been sanctioned. I want the Minister to raise the issue at the European level and encourage action.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Ireland has consistently supported strong sanctions in response to Russia's illegal war of aggression in Ukraine, which, as the Deputy said, has been ongoing for more than four years. The sanctions adopted in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine are the most expansive and hard-hitting sanctions in EU history. Over 2,700 individuals and entities are now subject to EU restrictive measures. An unprecedented range of sectoral measures against Russia have been adopted, including measures targeting the trade, finance, energy, technology, defence, media and maritime sectors. These measures are agreed on the basis of unanimous decisions of the Council of the European Union. They are carefully targeted to ensure maximum impact on Russia while avoiding unintended consequences, including for civil nuclear safety. To date, the EU has negotiated and adopted 19 packages of sanctions, all of which we have supported and have been keen to see progress as quickly as possible. Work is advancing on the 20th package of sanctions, which we hope can be agreed soon. We have had challenges in that regard, but hope we can make progress soon.

Since the extension of sanction measures introduced in 2022, the question of restrictions relating to Rosatom has not received unanimous support from EU member states. This is a complex issue, and the reason it has not received that support is that it touches on the energy supply chain for a number of countries. That is a matter that has been taken into consideration for any of the packages that have been agreed in recent years. We have supported successive rounds of sanctions against Russia and will continue to do so under our Presidency because we know they are having an impact. The clear feedback from our Ukrainian colleagues, and from what we can see in terms of the economy in Russia, and other actions we have taken, is that the sanctions are having an impact. We will continue, however we can, to press for and ensure that no sanctions are eased off if there is no peace agreement or peace deal moving forward.

The other way we can provide support is by making sure we agree a support package and continue to support Ukraine. I again highlight the fact that colleagues in this House, including the Deputy, did not vote for a €90 billion package that was intended to support people in Ukraine at a time when they desperately needed it. Sanctions are one thing, but we need to ensure we are providing financial and defence support, and any other kind of support, to Ukraine. If any future vote comes up, I urge the Deputy to do the same.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Minister will be well familiar with our support for civilian, humanitarian and infrastructural aid. That has been the case for several years, continues to be the case and will be the case in the future.

I welcome what the Minister has said about the sanctions. The package continues to be worked upon. The issue of sanctions against Rosatom is a very clear priority for the Ukrainian Government, as was articulated by President Zelenskyy in mid-February.

He has called for sanctions, given the centrality of the atomic agency to the Russian economy and the war of aggression. The Minister talked about the issue of nuclear safety. There is also the issue that nuclear infrastructure has been targeted in a way that is very dangerous to the civilian population in Zaporizhzhia. There have also been attacks on the protective shell at Chernobyl. Obviously, that will cause a huge amount of concern for people, when they cast their minds to the potential ramifications of that, so that is all the more reason.

I appreciate this is agreed at European level. The Minister talked about countries being vulnerable in terms of the supply chain. Ireland is not one of those countries. There is no reason Ireland should not push it. Will the Minister commit to using her voice to specifically call at a European level for such sanctions?

Deputy Helen McEntee: We have supported and will always support further sanctions. The Deputy can be assured we will continue to support any sanctions package that is brought forward. There are considerations that have to be taken into account. In this particular instance, there are very clearly concerns that have been raised by a number of member states in terms of their own energy security. Nonetheless, even with those issues, 2,700 different individuals and/or companies have been sanctioned. It has had a huge impact. We want to see that continue.

On the €90 billion package, we are providing humanitarian assistance. To date, Ireland has provided €492 million in support of Ukraine, including €198 million in humanitarian assistance and stabilisation. Ukraine is saying to us that is not just what it needs. Of course, it needs humanitarian support, but it needs defence systems. The only way Ukraine has been able to withstand this brutal invasion for four years is it has been able to stop drone attacks because of air defence systems. Europe and Ireland need to continue to invest in it. That is what the €90 billion was about. It was not just humanitarian aid or aid for Ukraine's critical infrastructure at a time when subzero temperatures were impacting people's day-to-day lives. The fact drones have stopped this war from ending on Russia's terms is because we are providing that assistance. I again urge the Deputy, if the opportunity arises, to support this type of funding.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I say again to the Minister that civil, humanitarian and infrastructural aid is important. It should continue and Ireland should continue to support that.

I will raise the issue of Aughinish Alumina in County Limerick, which provides alumina. In recent days, a report in *The Irish Times* highlighted the fact that smelters supply aluminium to a Moscow-based trading company, which in turn supplies Russia's military industry. That is obviously a concern. The Russian smelters and Aughinish are owned by Rusal, a company with deep connections to the Kremlin and Moscow's arms industry. It is important, when we are considering how to ensure sanctions are effective, that issues like this are taken into account.

I will again ask the Minister specifically. She talked in generalities about the need to support sanctions. I agree with her but I ask her specifically, and I want a clear response in relation to this, whether it is her intention to raise the specific item of Rosatom, which is a priority for the Ukrainian Government. Will she specifically ask that this be included in the next package? That is not a difficult question to answer. I want a clear answer to that and not on the Government's support for sanctions generally. I am aware of that. I appreciate and welcome it but will she call for that specifically?

Deputy Helen McEntee: Apologies; I thought I was clear. We have already supported that. However, there was not unanimity. My understanding is that will not change. We have already supported the progress of sanctions in all instances but there is not unanimity. It is not Ireland's choice at the end of the day. We are one of many member states. We have supported all the packages that have been agreed unanimously over the past number of years. We will continue to support and push for the twentieth sanctions package that is currently on the table. We know it is making a difference and having an impact. There may be more we can do. In the same way, as the Deputy mentioned, Aughinish Alumina has a significant role in supply chains across Europe, there are many similar pieces of infrastructure that have implications beyond the sanctions themselves for European member states. All of these have to be taken into consideration when any sanctions are being put forward. There was not unanimity when it came to this particular plant. I am clear on that-----

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I ask the Minister to please clarify-----

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----but we are focused on the twentieth package. We have a package that we have been working on. We are focused on that and have been pushing for it. While we have not had success at the most recent Council, I hope we will be able to make progress. The sanctions are having an impact and are impacting on Russia's ability to continue this war.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Nolan apologises that she cannot be here for Question No. 73.

Question No. 73 taken with Written Answers.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Dublin-Monaghan Bombings

74. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the position regarding the British Government's response to the State's ongoing request for full disclosure and access to all relevant documents concerning the Dublin and Monaghan bombings of 17 May 1974; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [22428/26]

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I have raised this question before in the House. It relates to the British Government's response to the State's ongoing request for full disclosure and access to all relevant documentation concerning the Dublin and Monaghan bombings of 17 May 1974. We had the summary report of Operation Denton in the past few months but there is still a general frustration, despite the multiple calls by this House for disclosure of all documents relating to those terrible events of 1974. Will the Minister make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this. I know he has raised it on a number of occasions. We all agree there is no doubt that the families and survivors of the

Dublin and Monaghan bombings have waited far too long for answers. We all want to get to that point for them.

The Government has long-standing requests in place to allow access by an independent, international judicial figure to all original documents held by the British Government relating to the Dublin and Monaghan bombings. These requests arise from successive all-party motions adopted by this House, which is testament to the continued importance placed on the maximum possible disclosure in the interests of providing truth to victims of these atrocities and their families. In that context, the delay in the publication of the full report of Operation Denton, a review of the Glenanne gang cases, including the Dublin and Monaghan bombings, which was expected last year, is extremely disappointing. I understand, however, that legal issues, in particular in relation to legal proceedings currently under way in Northern Ireland, have prevented that report from being published.

Officials from my Department remain in regular contact with the head of Operation Denton, Sir Iain Livingstone. They will continue to follow up on the publication of the full report. We hope the report can be published within a reasonable timeframe and that its findings may shed light on what happened on that absolutely awful day for those involved and their families. The publication of the report would also help to maintain momentum on our broader work on legacy, particularly in the context of the implementation of the joint framework, which was agreed last year by the two Governments, and where legislation is currently going through the Houses in the UK and the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, is progressing legislation on our side.

What is essential and at the heart of getting truth for families is having that reciprocal co-operation. That is very much at the heart of the joint framework, which commits the British Government to provide "cooperation to Ireland for investigations, inquiries and inquests" in this jurisdiction. It is *vice versa* in that we co-operate in the same way. During any of my discussions with the Secretary of State, Hilary Benn - we have met on a number of occasions and he is absolutely committed to finding peace and truth for so many families - it is that culture where we have the most possible disclosure. This is essential for public confidence in finding truth.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an bhfreagra sin. As she said, the Dublin and Monaghan bombings remain one of the single darkest days of the Troubles. Constituents of mine are members of the families of victims who lost their lives in those bombings. More than 50 years on, those families are still waiting for the truth. As the Minister said, this House has been unanimous in its multiple calls for full disclosure from the British Government. Yet, it is ironic that in the same week we had the discussion and debate on the Omagh bombing inquiry Bill, where we are making our contribution to full co-operation with regard to the discussion and discovery of legacy, the same level of co-operation is not as forthcoming with regard to the findings of Denton.

While the summary report was there, what we have seen from the likes of the publication of Kenova is the importance of disclosure and openness, and the allowance of closure for families where they can see what happened in the case of their loved ones. We will then look forward to understanding our shared history and, more importantly, building that shared future.

Will the Minister raise this in her next engagement with the UK Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and push for full disclosure?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I will absolutely speak with the Secretary of State on this. The British Government is in no doubt of the desire, not just of this Government but successive Irish governments, to see the release of relevant documents to help the families of the Dublin and Monaghan bombing victims to get the truth of what happened to their loved ones. I and other Ministers have raised this regularly in our engagement with the British Government and our counterparts. At least nine letters have been sent over the past number of years specifically seeking this information. Again, the joint framework we are both working on agrees and commits to reciprocal co-operation. Once these mechanisms are in place, we will again pursue the information we have requested from the British Government.

The hope and anticipation was that we would get some of those answers through Operation Denton. We regret the fact that report has not been published. We are told the ongoing legal situation in the North is the reason it has not been published. If that can be resolved, the sooner that report can be published the sooner we can identify and get some form of clarity. If that is not provided, we will continue to engage with the UK Government.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: As the Minister said, the findings of Denton and Kenova demonstrated the real and acute need for full transparency from the British Government, the importance of access to these records and the ongoing impact for victims' families, in particular, of withheld material on truth and recovery.

11 o'clock

I also draw attention to the fact that in the resolutions from this House, we asked for an independent judicial figure of high repute to address and investigate the documents in question. I urge the Minister to ensure that aspect of the call from this House is also heard to build trust in this overall process and ensure we have confidence in the findings thereof.

I thank the Minister for her engagement with the Secretary of State on this matter so far. I urge her to continue to put that pressure on them and ensure they understand the importance of transparency, truth and of closure, especially. For many of these victims' families who are entering their senior years, they would like some closure and understanding of what has happened to allow them to look with hope to the end of their lives.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy and he can be assured that I will engage with the Secretary of State on this. We have been very clear in setting out and making sure there was trust in our request and we asked that it would be an independent, international judicial figure who would look over this information and would receive the original documents. To date, we have not received them. The focus had been on Operation Denton to see what information would be provided in it. The information that emerged from the Kenova Report was quite shocking; in fact, it was appalling in many instances. It is important that the information that was provided there that has provided some clarity for people that Operation Denton will be able to do the same.

Everybody in this House is not just of the same view but we have the same objective here: how do we bring some form of clarity? I am not sure there will be ever closure for families given it was such an appalling tragedy that happened to them. However, there might be some form of clarity that can be provided so they understand and know what happened to their loved ones. That is our objective and it is my priority. I will continue to work with the Deputy and colleagues on that.

Trade Promotion

75. Deputy James O'Connor asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the role her Department plays in the action plan on market diversification; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [23046/26]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Question No. 75 is in the name of Deputy James O'Connor and is being taken by Deputy McCormack.

Deputy Tony McCormack: As the atmosphere grows here in Ireland but also out in Prague, I wish the Irish team and the management all the best as they try to qualify for the world cup. We all remember the previous competitions we qualified for and the pride it brought to our great country. I am back to the day job now so I would like to ask the Minister what progress has been made in implementing the market diversification action plan and the measures being taken to support Irish exporters in accessing new international markets?

Deputy Helen McEntee: From what I have seen, it looks like half of the island has left without a ticket but I am sure they will enjoy the match either way. I wish best of luck to our team, of course.

The Government Action Plan on Market Diversification was developed jointly by my Department and the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, with input from other Departments and agencies. It was developed with input from the business sector, most importantly, through the Government trade forum as a direct response to helping Irish business diversify their markets globally. In particular, given the challenging and uncertain environment we are all working in, it is very much about deepening and strengthening our economic relationship with our core partners such as the US, UK and EU but also about exploring new and emerging markets, of which there are many.

It was published last August and we have already published the first implementation update, together with the two lead Departments. There is an implementation plan, which is led by a headquarters market team. My colleague the Minister, Deputy Burke, and I update the Cabinet committee on economy, trade and competitiveness and the implementation of the plan every six months. The first report was a very positive report in terms of work that has been carried out. To give an example, we have held a successful first joint economic mission with the United Arab Emirates. This was held in the UAE in December with three Ministers from here in attendance undertaking detailed trade promotion activities. We have had our largest ever St. Patrick's Day programme, which many colleagues were on, and it saw 36 representatives visit 47 different countries. While the focus was on our diaspora and our cultural connections, there was a huge enterprise and trade focus looking at how we can explore and expand our markets.

I was in Boston and had an opportunity to meet with the representatives of some fantastic Irish companies who are expanding in the US but also to look at some of the large US companies we have here as well and how we can convince them to expand and do more here. There were significant early results on expanding our State agency footprint as well. There are new representatives for IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and Tourism Ireland in Seoul, Zurich, Dubai and Deli. There are new innovation attachés as well who are in Boston. I met my own just in the past week in San Francisco. Other trade missions are also being expanded and developed for the year ahead. I will come back but there is a lot already happening and a very positive plan.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I thank the Minister. I welcome the continued focus on market diversification, particularly given the increasingly uncertain global trading environment in which Irish businesses are operating. Recent progress on the EU-Australia trade agreement demonstrates the opportunities that exist for Ireland to broaden its international trading relationships. However, this must also be viewed in the context of ongoing uncertainty around tariffs internationally and continued volatility in oil and gas markets, all of which create real risks for a small, open and highly export-dependent economy like ours.

Ireland's growth model has been strongly export-led for decades. While this has delivered enormous benefits, it also leaves us particularly exposed to geopolitical and economic shocks. In that context, the diversification is not simply desirable; it is essential for safeguarding long-term economic stability, employment and investment.

Can the Minister outline how the Department is actively positioning Ireland to benefit from new EU trade agreements and emerging global markets, while also mitigating the risk arising from tariff instability and energy market volatility?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I too will take this opportunity on the floor to welcome the agreement of the EU-Australia trade deal this week. This is something that will open up Irish markets to a substantial economy and one where we are very much aligned. We see Australia as trusted trading partners. There is further exploration happening and we are looking at other trade deals across the globe. Of course, we hope to ratify CETA as well this year in its tenth year. The Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, is bringing forward that legislation and we will visit Canada in the next few weeks to highlight just how much progress has been made and how valuable it is. It has been worth about €10 billion to our economy over the ten years.

There is more we can do outside of trade deals and I am very conscious of the fluctuation and changes that have happened in the tariff environment, particularly with the US. That is why during our Presidency, we will particular focus on what we can do within the European Union. The Deputy will know three of our priorities are competitiveness, security and our values from a competitiveness perspective. This will be about completing the Single Market. There are barriers within the Single Market that are preventing us from doing better and more business. It will be about making sure we focus on the capital markets union and banking union so we open up more finance. I will come back to the Deputy on the rest.

Deputy Tony McCormack: While strategy for diversification is welcome, the reality is that Ireland remains highly concentrated in terms of trade exposure. Around one third of exports

go to the United States and Ireland holds over €1 trillion in foreign investment stock, the majority of which originates from US-based multinational firms. At the same time, the UK and the European Union collectively remain by far our largest overall trading partners. This level of concentration creates a significant vulnerability in periods of global economic or political disruption.

Can the Minister outline what measurable progress is being made in reducing Ireland's exposure to a narrow set of markets and sectors? How will the Department ensure that diversification efforts translate into real and sustained growth in trade with new partners rather than remaining at the level of policy ambition?

Deputy Helen McEntee: It is connected to what I was saying about the work we are doing in the EU, such as focusing on competitiveness and simplification so we can reduce some of the barriers, being honest, that we have imposed on ourselves that are adding cost to business. We are still focusing on the main trading partners we have. The EU is one of them and the US is a critical one. A huge amount of our focus and my time is making sure we can get absolute clarity on what the tariffs are and the implications for the various different sectors that are important to us.

We know there are certain industries, particularly agrifood and medical technology, where we need to make greater progress because of the current tariffs. That work is under way because no matter what we do and how much we diversify, the EU, US and UK will be our most important trading partners. With all of these other opportunities, be it through China, Australia or India, where we have a market that is hugely untapped, or in Canada, where we believe we can make much more progress, we still need to make sure that we are getting the most out of the relationships that are closest and most important to us.

While there are challenges there at the moment, I believe, particularly through our Presidency, there is an opportunity for us in our relationship with the UK in trying to bring that closer again with the EU and breaking down those barriers in the EU along with creating stability with the US that will benefit our businesses in so many different ways.

Diaspora Issues

76. **Deputy Noel McCarthy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the progress made to date by her Department in the development of an updated diaspora strategy; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [23044/26]

160. **Deputy Joe Neville** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the status of the diaspora strategy; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20218/26]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Question No. 76 is in the name of Deputy Noel McCarthy and is grouped with question No. 160.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: Like the previous speaker, I also wish Ireland well tonight and hope we will be in the Aviva Stadium on Tuesday night for the next stage of it. With the Leas-Cheann Comhairle's indulgence, I will also welcome a school to the Visitor's Gallery today.

The school is in my own constituency of Cork East, the national school in Coolagown, and I welcome the pupils and teachers who are there today. I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

I ask the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the progress made to date by her Department on the development of an updated diaspora strategy.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I propose to take Questions Nos. 76 and 160 together.

I thank the Deputies for raising this question. As they know, the Government is committed to deepening our ties with the Irish communities overseas and to ensuring that the welfare of the Irish abroad remains at the heart of our diaspora engagement. In line with the commitment in the programme for Government, the next diaspora strategy is at an advanced stage of drafting and will be published in late April, to coincide with the next global Irish civic forum that will take place on 30 April and 1 May in Croke Park. This strategy will be the third of its kind and was drafted following a wide-ranging consultation process that engaged Irish community, welfare and cultural organisations, as well as business social networks across 28 cities in 19 countries, including formal diaspora consultations in Britain, the United States, Canada and Europe, as well as in the UAE, Australia, Argentina, Singapore and Kenya. I also met with Irish stakeholders in Dublin and Galway as well as a very productive meeting with Oireachtas Members in Iveagh House last June. Further meetings were also held with relevant Departments and State agencies. These engagements were supplemented by the global Irish survey, the first ever online survey of the Irish abroad, which I launched last July and was available for several weeks throughout the summer of 2025. This survey was open to individuals and organisations and received over 10,000 responses. Respondents also had the option to submit position papers, of which over 40 were received.

While work on finalising the strategy is ongoing, the well-being of the most vulnerable of our diaspora remains a key focus for us. I am also committed to enhancing our outreach to the next generations of the diaspora, strengthening our networks across the globe in order to embrace the experiences and perspectives of the Irish abroad, and supporting those who wish to return to Ireland. I can confirm that the emigrant support programme, ESP, will remain the primary vehicle to manage the Government's commitments to our diaspora in the next strategy. As this House will be aware, since its establishment in 2004, the ESP has assisted more than 900 charitable and Irish community organisations in 53 countries with over €265 million in grants. The majority of this funding, some 60%, is granted to front-line welfare service providers working with elderly Irish emigrants and other vulnerable members of our communities. These organisations working closely with our embassies and consulates, particularly in Great Britain, the US, Canada and Australia, provide crucial support, often at times of crisis, in areas such as elders lunch clubs, advisory, counselling, mental health support, advocacy, information and outreach services for our citizens abroad, including on immigration matters and status. This work is vital, particularly for those from marginalised backgrounds and those with complex needs. The 2026 budget for the programme is €17.5 million, which is the highest amount committed to date. I look forward to publishing the strategy in the coming weeks and ensuring Ireland continues its broad and inclusive engagement with our diaspora over the next five years.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I thank the Ministers for their hard work and dedication in the area that is of major importance to Ireland. The diaspora across the globe represents the very best of our country on a community, cultural, business and sporting basis. I acknowledge that the ESP is a very important support for Irish diaspora groups and has proven to be enormously popular. Almost 600 applications were received before the ESP deadline in early February. With that in mind, I ask the Minister of State when successful applications are expected to be announced and funding allocated? In addition, the recent EU trade deal with Australia and the Government action plan on market diversification with no doubt only further expand Irish communities and businesses abroad. Taking this into account, will the Minister confirm whether the Department plans to extend our diplomatic reach to new areas by opening new embassies or consulates in countries or areas in which Ireland has not previously been represented?

Deputy Joe Neville: My question was grouped with Deputy McCarthy's. The Minister of State has partially answered it. I asked what the status of the diaspora strategy is and if the Minister or the Minister of State would make a statement on the matter, considering both of them are there. I know the Minister of State has specific responsibility for the diaspora. Coming on the heels of St. Patrick's Day, we know how important the footprint that Ireland has and that the people have had through multiple generations. As was said, it is not just about the first generation; it is about several generations and how we continue that work on through these. If we look at the US, I had a national chamber of commerce group in yesterday. We have direct flights into Nashville, not necessarily a place known for its Irish emigrants but, at the same time, a huge proportion of people have Irish or Scots-Irish ancestry. We need to ensure we get them here from a tourism perspective but also from a business perspective, which is really important.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: I am proud of what the Minister and the Government is doing in continuing the work in the past of engaging with the diaspora. When we have thought in the past about the diaspora, we have tended to talk about the kings of industry around the world and then the disadvantaged and how we might support them but in recent times, we have large concentrations of highly skilled young people who have emigrated and concentrated in places like Australia and Canada. As part of any diaspora policy, does the Minister of State envisage some systems being put in place or some strategies being adopted whereby we can actively engage with those young people and encourage them to consider a return home where they are badly needed to fill many of the vacant positions that exist?

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank the three Deputies for their supplementaries and I will try to rattle through them as quickly as possible. Regarding the emigrant support programme, as I laid out, this year the budget will be €17.5 million. That is the biggest it has ever been. Part of that is to reflect inflationary costs on certain areas but there is always increased demand and need for the services provided. Deputy McCarthy rightly cited the economic opportunities of EU-Australia trade deal, as was laid out by Deputy McCormack as well. Just this year, the Government has opened a consulate in Melbourne to complement the consulate in Sydney and the embassy in Canberra, while Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland have also expanded their teams. That is just in Australia, but around the world we see increasing economic opportunities through our diaspora. It is something I hope the new strategy will have a very distinct emphasis

on, particularly in the United States where about 36 million people claim Irish ancestry, be Irish, Ulster-Scots, or Scots-Irish. That is why the Government launched a strong programme marking the 250th anniversary of the US Declaration of Independence, which was signed by many Irish people and has a strong connection to Ireland, both for the cultural and political ties but also the tourism and business ties.

Deputy Neville and I are two of the biggest fans of American football in the House. We see the power of the college football classic every August in Dublin as it brings €130 million into the economy. Equally, with the NFL, we see the opportunities there in terms of sports diplomacy.

In response to Deputy Ó Fearghaíl's question, the Government has laid out a number of programmes, not necessarily through the Department, looking to attract some of our highly skilled emigrants back home from places like Australia, Canada but also the Middle East. There are a number of obstacles that we will cite in the strategy or that we will look to overcome. We hope to conclude a reciprocal driving rights arrangement with the state of New York in the coming months, which will complement arrangements with Canada and Australia. We will also be looking at areas in terms of recognising qualifications and experience gained. Insurance companies are now quoting Irish people who have been driving abroad. We also have banks giving specific packages and programmes. I will elaborate in due course.

Deputy Joe Neville: I am delighted that the Minister of State referenced college football because we have seen the tremendous impact that has had. Not only are we bringing the games but we are bringing people over. A lot of those people spend a lot of time in Ireland. The game offers a window to Ireland in America with huge numbers watching the games. They see the best of what Ireland has to offer from a sporting facility perspective but it also gives us the opportunity to promote ourselves the week before the season starts. The college football has been a tremendous boon to the economy and to how we promote ourselves. The Minister of State has referenced the sports but another way he has really reached out is through the promotion of the Gaelic games abroad and how we tie that in. The GAA really is a foundation stone for so many people who go abroad. The first thing they often do is look for the GAA clubs. However, we can bring the GAA under that umbrella and however that works best, it is important to keep those live connections between the people who might have just recently gone and the multiple generations in America.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I thank the Minister of State for his reply. He is a rugby man himself but as my colleague Deputy Neville said, the GAA is very important. What is the Department doing to promote the GAA overseas? How much money has been allocated to this in recent years?

Finally, we have a very important statue in Midleton in my constituency of Cork East, which is the Kindred Spirits monument.

This represents a donation by the Choctaw Nation to the people of Ireland during the Great Famine. It is a fantastic monument that showcases the very best of overseas aid and how historical partnership endures. Should the Minister of State have any availability soon, my colleague, Councillor Rory Cocking, and I would love to show him the statue in person.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Regarding the references to sport more generally, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, launched the latest iteration of the sport diplomacy strategy in Boston at the famous Fenway Park. This is a key policy provision not just for the Department of sport, but also for the Department of foreign affairs, because sport brings people together here and abroad. We often see the real economic opportunities associated with the College Football Classic and the NFL coming to Ireland, but we also see where that ties in with tourism and higher education opportunities. There are great opportunities for Irish third level institutions to partner with American institutions for investment and research.

At the heart of our sports diplomacy policy is, of course, the global games development programme, which we support with a direct grant, parallel to the emigrant support programme, of about €7 million per annum to the GAA. That money supports staff, training and governance in GAA clubs around the world. In February, I met the Simba Wolfhounds GAA Club in Uganda, which was set up by a Galway man who works with young children in very deprived areas. I have met GAA clubs in Coventry, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, New York and Pittsburgh, but there are also other sports as well. I would have played for the Toronto Irish rugby club and the Brussels Celtic rugby club. These are all a part of this as well.

GAA is very much at the heart and soul of this. When we look at both participatory and elite level sports, we see Irish people who have had to go abroad, perhaps to play Premier League football, like those currently in Prague, while others are at the highest level of collegiate athletics in the United States. Eamonn Coghlan, a former colleague of ours in these Houses, made his name in the United States and was able to represent the Irish abroad multi-generationally at the Olympic Games and the World Athletics Championships.

To conclude, any visit to Midleton is a good visit. I would be more than happy to join Deputy McCarthy and Councillor Cocking. The tie between the people of Ireland and the Choctaw Nation is something we cannot stop reminding people about. It is very important and historic.

EU Agreements

77. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the engagements she has had in relation to the EU-Mercosur Trade Agreement; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [21739/26]

90. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for an update on recent developments regarding Mercosur; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [22524/26]

119. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for a report on any engagements or meetings she has had in respect of the EU-Mercosur Trade Agreement since January 2026. [22879/26]

132. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the measures she is taking to ensure the Mercosur trade deal is not provisionally implemented

before a case is heard in the Court of Justice of the European Union; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11691/26]

144. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if she has raised any objection with the European Commission in respect of the decision to provisionally apply the EU-Mercosur Trade Agreement. [22877/26]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Newsome Drennan will introduce Question No. 77 on behalf of Deputy O'Hara.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: On Monday, the EU told Mercosur countries that the trade deal would be provisionally applied from 1 May. What engagements has the Minister had regarding the EU-Mercosur trade agreement? Has she told the Commissioner that forcing through this trade deal is not acceptable?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I propose to take Questions Nos. 77, 90, 119, 132 and 144 together.

In the 2025 programme for Government, the Government very clearly committed to working with like-minded EU countries to respond to the very real concerns of Irish farmers and to defend our interests as regards the Mercosur trade deal. On 9 January 2026, EU member states voted on the EU-Mercosur agreement. This vote was carried by a qualified majority. Ireland voted clearly and unambiguously against the approval of the agreement. I and other Government Ministers, along with officials, have engaged extensively at EU level to voice our concerns about the agreement. This engagement was sustained over time and took place across multiple forums and in both formal and informal settings, with fellow EU member states and the European Commission. These included European Council meetings; sectoral Council meetings, including the Foreign Affairs Council for trade ministers; bilateral engagements in EU member state capitals; numerous phone calls at ministerial level; working party meetings; and ongoing direct dialogue with the European Commission.

Along with my Government colleagues, I have consistently emphasised Ireland's requirements for credible, legally binding commitments on matters relating to trade and sustainable development, including climate, biodiversity and deforestation protections, as well as clear protections and assurances with regard to incomes of farmers in Ireland. As a result of this engagement and efforts made by Ireland and like-minded member states in the Council of the EU, it is important to state that hard-won improvements have been made to the overall agreement package, including a new legal Act to operationalise bilateral safeguards to protect sensitive products; a financial safety net for farmers; strengthened sanitary and phytosanitary, SPS, controls, along with a 50% increase in audits and checks; and commitments on the alignment of production and SPS standards, notably on pesticides and animal welfare. The Commission also committed on 7 January to enhance the availability of CAP funding to farmers and rural communities under the proposed new multi-annual financial framework, MFF.

The Government takes note of the decision of the European Parliament to refer the deal to the European Court. The Government also takes note of the statement of the European Commission President, as the Deputy has said, that the Commission will apply the EU-

Mercosur trade agreement on a provisional basis. Speaking after the European Council meeting in January, President von der Leyen indicated that a decision on provisional application of the agreement would not be needed until at least one Mercosur country had completed its ratification procedures. In late February, Argentina and Uruguay both secured parliamentary approval in their respective parliaments. Brazil and Paraguay have now followed suit with their own internal ratification procedures. While the Council of the EU voted in January to grant authority to the Commission to apply the agreement on a provisional basis, which it is entitled to do and is legally allowed to do under the treaties, Ireland made it very clear that it did not support that vote. It is important to note that President von der Leyen emphasised the "provisional" aspect of this announcement on application. In line with the EU treaties, the agreement can only be fully concluded once the European Parliament has given its consent. Obviously, it cannot consent, and it has said it will not consent until that legal process is concluded.

Along with my Government colleagues, I will continue to engage with the European Commission and other EU member states in the time ahead to ensure the full implementation of the commitments obtained from the Commission to address our concerns with the agreement, including the safeguard provisions we fought for and which many MEPs made clear were necessary to support and protect the interests of our own farmers. It is important to stress that we have just had conversations about the need to diversify and to focus on other markets. We are an open trading economy and we have always supported trade agreements. However, we have to make sure when it comes to our sensitive industries and our most important sectors, like the agrifood sector, that our farmers are not penalised because of the standards we have set ourselves at a European level. These are the very clear reasons we voted against the Mercosur trade deal and had significant concerns with the deal. We wanted to find a way forward, but it was not possible at that time. We have been very clear in our objection to the Mercosur deal in its current format. That has not changed, even with its implementation on a provisional basis.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: There are very real concerns for consumers and farmers regarding the risk this trade deal poses. We have seen the recall of Brazilian beef over the presence of banned cancer-linked drugs. God only knows how much more drug-riddled beef has been sold in Ireland and across the EU, because the levels of laboratory testing are an utter embarrassment. Does the Minister know the percentage of laboratory checks that are carried out? Would she like to hazard a guess? It is 1.7%. Is it the Minister's position that this is an acceptable amount of testing, especially considering all the recalls last year? To me, there is an air of secrecy about it all. Last year, 172 tonnes of beef came in from Brazil. When I asked where it went, the trade data did not even summarise the destination or the end user, so there is no record.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We have been clear in our objection to this for the reasons the Deputy has outlined, and for many other reasons also. It is very clear that this Government, our farmers and consumers have real concerns about the type of product that may be entering into the EU. It is for that reason that we opposed this. As I have said, as a country we are in the economic position we are in because we are an open trading economy. This is not the position we would normally take. However, we had real and genuine concerns, as did our farmers, and that is why we voted against it. The position of the EU - this is the way it works

- is that we cannot stop this from moving ahead if there is a qualified majority. The Taoiseach voted against this at the European Council meeting where President von der Leyen made it clear that she wanted to move ahead with the temporary or provisional implementation. We made our position clear at that time, as we have done throughout all of this engagement and process. However, we were not successful and the vote itself passed for the reasons I have outlined.

At European level, we have pushed- as have our MEPs, particularly Fine Gael MEPs and Government MEPs - to make sure there are more safeguards in place to try to respond to some of the concerns the Deputy has raised and farmers have rightly raised.

I will go into more detail about those mentioned. We have key commitments, including enhanced monitoring. The Commission will follow market trends closely. It will be able to identify any risks ahead of time, allowing more space to react. There will be full transparency. The Commission sends a monitoring report to the Council and the European Parliament every six months to assess the impacts of imports. Swift action to launch an investigation is progressing. In most cases, the Commission will launch an investigation within five days if there is more than a 5% increase in annual imports of a product or if import prices are at least 5% lower than prices of the same or competing EU products. Clarity on possible measures can consist of a temporary suspension of the schedule of tariff reductions of the product concerned, whether it is beef or any other product, or a reduction of the tariff preference back to the MFN or base rate, whichever is the lowest level.

On top of that, we have a new unity safety net for crisis measures. Essentially, this is a fund with a total capacity of €6.3 billion. This effectively doubles the current agricultural reserve. This reinforced support will help to safeguard our farmers, particularly at times of market diversification, market disturbances and growing geopolitical uncertainties, of which we know there are many. In practice, the European Commission will monitor market developments closely once the agreement is being gradually implemented, particularly with regard to the agricultural sector. We are very specific and focused with regard to the agricultural sector. On 7 January, the Commission also committed to enhancing the availability of the CAP as well, which I think is absolutely essential to fund our farmers and our rural communities under the proposed new multi-annual financial framework, MFF. As the Deputy will know, with the upcoming Presidency, Ireland will be playing a significant role in progressing the multi-annual financial framework, or budget, for the EU, and the CAP and support for our farmers and our rural communities will be an absolute priority for us.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: The Commission clearly holds the Dáil in low esteem. It has consistently failed to reply to concerns raised by me through the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Agriculture and Food. We have written to the Commission on a number of occasions since November, which was the first time, then in January and then again as recently as yesterday. We have been seeking answers and clarity, and silence is all we have been met with. The European Parliament voted to refer this deal to the European Court of Justice because of concerns around its legality. This was a democratic vote from representatives of the people of the EU. The Commission has opted to ignore elected representatives here in Ireland and across the EU and pushed on with the deal regardless. Is the Minister not concerned at the blatant disregard for the democratic process?

I am a suckler farmer. These are the farmers who are going to be selling weanlings. Their product will not get to the shelves for another year, so they are the ones who are going to be caught. I have asked for the Commission to write back to us but it is just ignoring us. To me, this smells something rotten. Nobody seems to be answering the questions.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I cannot respond in respect of who the Deputy might have engaged with. I do not know who the Deputy has engaged with. There are certainly many different channels available, even through Sinn Féin's own MEPs, at European level where questions can be asked and responded to.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: It was trade and agriculture.

Deputy Helen McEntee: While there has been a practice in terms of the Parliament voting for and consenting to a treaty, the EU treaties do not require European Parliament consent before the application of a trade agreement. Whether that has been the case in the past, the decision was taken in this instance, given the size of the deal itself, to move forward with a provisional application of the trade agreement. Again, under the EU treaties, the Council of the EU can decide to apply an international agreement provisionally before it is concluded and enters into force. The decision taken by the Parliament to send it to the court or to put it through a legal process has, in effect, delayed the Parliament's ability to be able to vote on it. The decision was taken by the Commission to implement this provisionally because we do not know the length of time it will take before it comes back to the Parliament.

When this was put to the European Council, our Taoiseach and this Government voted against it. I cannot be any clearer in saying that. We have been clear from the outset that we were not happy with the measure put in place, albeit I believe it is much better and stronger because of the influence of Government MEPs at a European level. We have, however, been consistent in saying it has not gone far enough. Notwithstanding that, because the Mercosur countries have implemented this in their own countries and their own parliaments, the EU treaties do allow for the Commission to move forward with the provisional application, and that is what it is doing now.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I have huge issues with the fact that it does not come back to us.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I can check that.

Passport Services

78. **Deputy Ryan O'Meara** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the current turnaround time for new passport applications and for renewals; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [22522/26]

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: After a miserable winter here, many of our constituents are looking forward to their summer holidays and perhaps a bit of sun if they are lucky enough to get abroad. With that, comes a need for many people to renew passports or to apply for new

passports. What are we looking at in terms of turnaround times for new passport applications and for renewals?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I hope it will not be just our constituents who will be able to get away. Maybe we might all get a break during the summer as well. The Deputy is right that this is the time of year when we need to highlight the need for, and encourage, people to get their applications in if their passports are out of date or if they need time on their passports for wherever they are travelling. This is particularly the case in situations where people have new small children who do not have a passport. They should get those applications in as soon as possible.

Notwithstanding that, I have to say the passport service is successfully responding to quite a high level of demand. It has already issued 224,000 passports this year. The service does phenomenal work, and I have no doubt that it will issue many more passports in the months to come.

The advertised turnaround times for passport applications are ten working days for simple online adult renewals. I would hazard a guess that anybody who has done their application online for a renewal will have received their passport within a matter of days.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: Yes.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Ten working days is not the experience I and many others have had. It is 15 working days for complex or child online renewals. Again, the time taken tends to be somewhat shorter but these are the average lengths of time. It is 20 working days for first-time online applications and eight weeks for passport assist applications.

We have seen many of the challenges where first-time applications for children are being put in on paper. Those are certainly the queries I get and that I am sure the Deputy gets as well. This is particularly the case where there are challenges, where pictures are not correct, something has not been signed or there is an issue with the paperwork itself. It is much more difficult to deal with these applications in a quicker way. I use this opportunity to encourage anybody looking to apply for a passport to do it online because it can be done 24-7. It does not have to be done within office hours. The turnaround times I mentioned apply to applications that are fully complete and correct, and begin from the time the supporting documents are received by the passport service. It does not begin from the date the online application is made. Where applications are incorrect or incomplete, it is naturally just going to take a little bit longer.

Since 2022, the passport service has operated a document management system whereby incomplete applications that require further supporting documents are prioritised once the additional documents are received. These are processed within 15 working days. Huge progress has been made in recent years and hopefully people will be able to apply.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I acknowledge the work of the team in the Passport Office. The numbers the Minister gave are incredible. All of us as public representatives see how hard they work and how responsive they are to helping people under pressure to get a passport. There is

also the rapid turnaround time if people are going for a simple adult renewal. The passport could be arriving in the letterbox a day or two after people apply.

I also acknowledge the Minister and the two Ministers of State here in the Chamber, and their staff. I particularly acknowledge the Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, and his staff for the assistance they regularly give to me in securing passports when there are these more difficult cases.

I echo some of what the Minister said. I encourage people to check their passports right now if they are travelling this summer> People should apply online, where possible, to avoid paper applications. We see so many issues arising from paper applications. I also believe this message should be communicated to our Garda stations to ensure that if somebody comes in with a paper passport application, gardaí will know they can guide them towards using an online application to avoid these issues happening.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy. I fully agree. Some of the challenges have been around the paperwork, where certain things have not been signed or where there have been follow-ups and it has not been possible to engage with certain people. If people are going to a Garda station or to get a signature from anybody, it is important they know they will be in a position to be able to follow up with the Passport Office when it re-engages.

The reason we have been able to increase the number of passports being provided while reducing the timelines involved is because of the significant investment that has gone into the Passport Office in recent years. Over the past five years, the passport service has increased its staffing resources by 75%. The Passport Office has gone from having 468 people working there to 822 people working there now, which is a significant response and increase. Year on year, we are seeing a workforce that is expanding and growing, and that is also looking to the future too. In my next contribution, I will point out the changes that are going to take place this year. While we do have an award-winning passport service, we are looking to do even more for people.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: To conclude, I believe communication with the public would help us in those final tricky cases we are seeing.

To be fair, as public representatives there are fewer and fewer passport issues coming to us because most of them are being sorted, as the Minister said, because of the investment the Government has put into the Passport Office and the increase in staffing numbers.

In relation to the witness for the photographs or the parents' consent to a passport, people need to know they should go to a 24-hour Garda station. Someone will always be there to answer the call to verify and make sure the pictures are taken correctly. Parents should ensure they do not miss an email if they are queried on something. So they know, again I stress they should always apply online where possible. That should be communicated in a campaign and people should be directed towards those Garda stations which, to be fair, have a lot more to do in their job than just passports but are going to get that job when they are 24-hour stations. Members of An Garda Síochána need to know those key facts to be able to advise people to avoid the issue before it even has to come to us and then we have to go and hound the three Ministers for passports.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We do not mind at all. That is what we are here for. I agree and urge all Deputies to advise on their social media channels or in whatever way they can to encourage people to check their passports to make sure they are in date and to give enough time for a new infant or child getting a passport for the first time. I mentioned some of the changes which are going to take place this year. We are looking at some complex transformational projects which are trying to future-proof the service overall to provide a better customer experience, business continuity and safeguarding of the integrity of the Irish passport, which is probably one of the most secure passports in the world. Particularly post-Brexit, we are seeing an increase in the number of people seeking to have the Irish passport, which has resulted in some of the increase in numbers as well. We are looking to deliver customer relations solutions projects and facial recognition technology as part as our overall service. We have a passport redesign project and a passport online project as well. These will be integrated with the new passport processing systems. There is a lot of work being done to improve what I believe is already a very good system.

Middle East

79. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to provide an update on her interactions with the European Union following the United States' illegal attack on Iran; and if she will make a statement on the matter [22941/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: There have been some very interesting newspaper headlines today particularly, such as "Czechia ár lá." I think we can all say we trust in Troy, Caoimhín, their teammates and manager, Heimir Hallgrímsson, who I was lucky to meet at Oriel Park at a Dundalk game recently. Ádh mór and good luck to the Irish team.

I ask the Minister to give an update on her interaction with the European Union following the United States illegal attack on Iran alongside genocidal Israel and the chaos that has created.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. For many people it has been a huge concern over the past number of weeks and has added to the significant instability in the region, not just in Gaza and Palestine and the conflict with Israel and Lebanon, but also the wider region itself. Responding to the crisis caused by this ongoing conflict following the military action by Israel and the United States against Iran, and Iran's military action in response, is a priority for this Government. We remain in close contact with our EU partners. I attended an emergency video meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council on 28 February and again on 5 March, the latter including foreign Ministers from the Gulf countries themselves. The situation was further discussed at the regular Foreign Affairs Council on 16 March and the European Council on 19 March.

EU member states including Ireland have been very clear that we are deeply concerned by the developing conflict in the region and have highlighted the need for urgent de-escalation. Ireland, with other member states, has expressed extreme concern about breaches of international law, the need for solidarity with Gulf states which are the subject of direct attacks, and the risk of further widening and escalation of the conflict which we are starting to see in other parts of the region. EU member states have also expressed concern at the situation in

Lebanon following Israeli military action and the impacts for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.

As I mentioned earlier, every discussion we have had focused on Iran. I raised the dire and deteriorating situation in the West Bank, Gaza and Lebanon. At the Foreign Affairs Council, FAC, and the European Council, member states condemned the targeting of civilian infrastructure and the bypassing of international law and the UN charter. It is regrettable, or more than regrettable, that time was not allowed for dialogue and diplomacy. It has been made clear to us that the Friday before this attack happened, progress had been made. It is regrettable that further talks did not continue. The EU must now use all of our channels to encourage de-escalation and a return to diplomatic processes.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all want to see de-escalation and an end to this illegal attack. We must all be incredibly worried about the wider chaos it is creating. Obviously, the chaos is impacting us in relation to fuel prices, but there are incredibly serious circumstances. Israel has used this from a point of view of continuing its attacks on Gaza and the West Bank, and it looks like it is looking to build a *cordon sanitaire* beyond the Litani River in Lebanon. I wrote to the Minister and I appreciate the reply, regarding the issue brought to me by family members of those serving with the 27th infantry battalion which is on peacekeeping duties in south Lebanon. I accept the Minister cannot comment on issues of security, but can she ensure that alongside the UN there is a monitoring of the circumstances and absolute support is provided to our peacekeepers, who are out there doing absolutely necessary work, as these families are incredibly worried?

Deputy Helen McEntee: In relation to the situation in Lebanon, it is not acceptable what is happening. It is essentially a ground invasion. The Israeli defence forces and army are trying to annex the south part of the region. Unfortunately, that is where many of our troops are, though not all. What I can assure the Deputy is that I am in regular daily contact with the Chief of the Defence Forces who provides me with updates of our troops and how they are. I am pleased to inform the House that all of our troops are safe and accounted for, and these are situations which are kept under continuous monitoring. There are times they have to go into groundhog, which is when they are underground in very confined small spaces for a long period of time. There are other days when that is not happening and they are out patrolling. They are obviously working very closely with their international partners and battalions. I can assure the Deputy, families and those at home who of course are concerned about their loved ones that these operations through the UNIFIL HQ are kept under continual monitoring. The role of the peacekeepers however is to be there on the ground in these types of situations. The desire for peacekeepers to be there on the ground monitoring what is happening has been made very clear to me. Of course, we need to make sure that if situations change or escalate, that is taken into consideration. I have full belief in UNIFIL HQ and the decisions it takes.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It highlights the situational circumstances and danger that peacekeepers have in their particular work and job. I commend them. It is absolutely necessary that we maintain a monitoring eye on what is a constantly escalating situation. We are not entirely sure whether the US President is negotiating with himself, getting presents from Iran or going to unleash hell. All we know is that any further escalation will lead to far more difficult

circumstances. It shows the chaos in the American lack of strategy. No matter what we might think of it, the Iranians had a strategy, and it was about impacting oil supply and hurting US assets throughout the region. We need a de-escalation; none of this is good enough. I do not believe the Government or the European Union has been sufficiently strong. I accept we are dealing with a president who does everything without listening to anybody and we can see the abject chaos. It looks like he has bitten off more than he can chew. Not only do we have to protect people as regards home heating oil, petrol and diesel, we need to make sure we play our part in standing up for international law.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We have been absolutely clear as a Government that de-escalation is the only way forward. The longer this conflict goes on the more lives are lost, the more innocent civilians are caught up in this, the more impact it has on the region itself and destabilising the region and the wider the impact for all of us. We know the impact we are seeing already, whether at the petrol pumps, in heating our homes or in other areas. That is why we brought in a €250 million package this week in a way that other countries have perhaps not been able to do to respond to the needs of those who are filling their car and heating their homes, and to the needs of those who are most vulnerable. However, the longer this goes on the more challenging that becomes. My priority and that of all of our colleagues in government has been, through whatever avenue possible, be it through European Council meetings or trips in the past week for St Patrick's Day, to raise the need for de-escalation. That can only happen when all parties come to the table. It is very clear there was not a UN mandate or sanction for this.

All parties, the US, Israel and Iran, need to come to the table to negotiate. That is what we will continue to advocate for.

EU Meetings

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Question No. 80 will be asked by Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail.

80. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for a report on the recent meeting with the Polish Secretary of State for European Affairs. [22515/26]

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: I congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, on having been the person dispatched by the Government for the St. Patrick's Day celebrations in Poland. I wish to ask him if while there his meeting with Secretary of State, Mr. Niemczycki, was successful and enabled him to build on the wonderful person-to-person relationships that exist now, and existed for many years, between Ireland and Poland?

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Thomas Byrne): I met my Polish counterpart, the Secretary of State for European Affairs, Mr. Ignacy Niemczycki, in Warsaw on 13 March. This was the first of many engagements I had during my three-day St. Patrick's Day programme in Poland, which was followed with a visit to Ukraine and then to Moldova. The Secretary of State, Mr. Niemczycki, and I discussed the excellent bilateral relations between our two countries, including growing economic ties and the outstanding and wide contribution the large Polish community is making in Ireland. The

Secretary of State and I had a very useful and constructive meeting where we addressed major files on the European Union agenda. We looked ahead to Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second-half of this year and we discussed our main priorities, including competitiveness, security, and European values. We also discussed the enlargement of the European Union, on which there seems to be strong momentum at the moment.

The Secretary of State and I had good exchanges on competitiveness and simplification, including better regulation. There was a very welcome discussion on the importance of the rule of law. Obviously there has been a change in perception and a change in view in Poland with the change of Government there. We both welcomed the work on the European Democracy Shield, which has been brought forward by Commissioner Michael McGrath. I highlighted the Blue Star programme to the Secretary of State, which is a programme we have here in Ireland to help increase awareness of the European Union among young people in Ireland.

Over the past several months, I have endeavoured to travel to each European Union capital in advance of our Presidency as part of our Presidency preparations, setting out our priorities and listening to my counterparts' concerns and perspectives. Such visits have been very valuable and are making a significant contribution to our preparations. I thank the Irish ambassador, Mr. Patrick Haughey, and his team in Poland for the excellent organisation of the visit and for the excellent regard in which they are held by the Polish system. Ambassador Haughey is very well known in Poland and he and his staff are doing an excellent job representing us in that country.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: It is quite extraordinary the manner in which the relationships have developed between Irish people and Polish people. Polish people were among the first major wave of immigrants that came to work in this country during the Celtic tiger. They demonstrated a fantastic work ethic and they built a relationship with Irish people. There has been a lot of intermarriage. I think Polish is now the third most frequently spoken language in this State. I heard only yesterday from the Minister of State that the Poles are the second highest consumers of Irish whiskey after the Americans, so that is all very good in terms of what we may do as far as trade is concerned.

We share this passion for supporting Ukraine. Was it the Minister of State's experience that the Poles are equally enthusiastic about supporting the early advancement of Ukraine's application for EU membership?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: What the Polish people have done in supporting refugees from Ukraine, as well as giving military support, has been extraordinary. At the start of the war people arrived off trains or off transport and were met on the platforms by Polish residents and brought to their homes. We can account for millions of people who have benefited from that. There is a strong desire in Poland to see Ukraine accede to the European Union. I have had much conversation on this topic with counterparts, with the chargé d'affaires here, and with our ambassador.

The Deputy is right to emphasise the strong links between Ireland and Poland. We have about 96,000 Polish people living in Ireland but I think there are about 100,000 people living in Poland who used to live in Ireland. There are at least 10,000 children in Poland who have

Irish citizenship. It is quite extraordinary that there is a St. Patrick's Day parade in a place like Łódź, which is one of the biggest cities in Poland. To see the celebration of St. Patrick's Day in Łódź and in Warsaw really brings a new meaning to the word "diaspora". The Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, has been doing work on this too. It is a reverse diaspora of people who were here, who have exceptionally fond memories of this country, and who want to continue to build the links.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: Could I take it that the Minister of State is very satisfied that Donald Tusk is someone who will be able to ensure Poland remains very much at the centre and at the heart of the European movement? I wish to ask also about their other neighbours. How do Polish people feel about, and are they supportive of, Moldova joining the EU? What, if anything, was said to the Minister of State about the situation in Belarus where the Lukashenko regime continues to harangue its own people, continues to support Putin, and continues to imprison over 1,000 political activists in a shameful disregard for democracy? Was there an opportunity to discuss that particular matter?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Belarus is an issue of considerable concern to the Polish Government. The Deputy is right. It is a major security concern for them. I think pretty much all of the major figures in the Belarusian opposition are based in Warsaw at the invitation of the Polish Government, so there is a strong link between them. At all levels of government, be it with Prime Minister Tusk, the Taoiseach, Deputy Prime Minister Sikorski, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, the Secretary of State Mr. Niemczycki, and myself, we have a very good relationship with Poland. That relationship has been brought to a new level by Ireland taking part in the Nordic-Baltic meetings before the European Council. Poland is now a part of this and it is now called the Northern Nine. Ireland chaired those meetings in the latter half of last year and Prime Minister Tusk was in the Irish delegation room meeting the Taoiseach as part of that. There is a really good relationship. There is a lot to build on and a lot to work on.

There is one thing we want to see that is lacking. There are not enough flights to Warsaw from Ireland. I know both ambassadors are working very hard on this. There are flights to lots of other places in Poland but at times it is quite difficult to get a flight to Warsaw. This is a concern to us all and we are working on it.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: They are too expensive.

Trade Relations

81. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the way in which Ireland is working with EU partners and international organisations to ensure that trade flows, market access and regulatory stability are maintained during global economic uncertainty; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [22537/26]

139. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the way in which Ireland is responding to evolving international trade policy developments that may impact Irish economic interests; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [22513/26]

Deputy Erin McGreehan: In what ways is Ireland working with EU partners and international organisations to ensure trade flows, market access, and regulatory stability are maintained during the global economic uncertainty? Will the Minister make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Helen McEntee: We can agree that in an increasingly volatile environment it is really important that we focus on what we can predict and what we can work on, not just within the EU market but with our international partners such as the US, the UK and beyond. There are a number of things I am doing, working closely with colleagues in government. At home we are meeting with companies to understand what the impacts are of a lot of the changes, be they tariffs or the regulatory environment more broadly. We are meeting with our companies. I also host the trade forum where we bring together representative organisations on a regular basis to understand the impacts of what is happening and to get feedback from them as to what more we can do. At an EU level we are diversifying and strengthening our economic resilience by reducing our overdependence on some of these particular markets.

We have a number of new free trade agreements. Just this week we agreed the Australia agreement, which I very much welcome. It is an open and very much welcome agreement. We are also looking at negotiations with the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand and the United Arab Emirates. There are lots of new markets we want to work on.

In relation to EU-US trade relations, the most important thing is that we have clarity and the stability we thought we had last year with the Turnberry agreement and the US-EU joint statement. We are advocating to get back to that point. We also want to make progress on some of the further exemptions we need specifically for some of the key Irish sectors.

The simplification agenda will be a priority for me and the Government during the Presidency. This is about some of the barriers we have perhaps imposed on ourselves and making sure that we make it easier for businesses to do business within the EU. I am really pleased to see the EU's 28th regime, which is going to be led by our own European Commissioner Michael McGrath, and which was brought to the Commission and to some of our Council meetings today. Hopefully, we will make progress on this. It is about making sure that if a company does business in Ireland, it is easy then for it to do business in France, Germany, Poland and in every other member state. At the moment such companies have to go through individual processes for each country. It is about looking out beyond the EU and what more we can do within the EU to support and enhance business at a time of huge uncertainty.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I thank the Minister. It is really good to hear about all the work that is going on in Ireland and the EU. We know the Minister is in agreement that our economic future and our social cohesion really depends on how we maintain those strong trade relationships and how we respond to real pressures that people are facing on the ground with energy costs and food security. I am very glad to hear that the EU Presidency has a clear focus on this. We need a strong focus on diversification to cushion our economy from shocks.

12 o'clock

The latest energy crisis is only the latest, and there will inevitably be another one ahead. Before the next crisis, Ireland and Europe really need to stand up to make sure we protect our economy and citizens from the whims of global leaders.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Everything we do is interconnected. Any of us who travelled in the past week or so, or indeed anyone who has been on any of the visits we make as parliamentarians, will have seen that our economic interests are supported by our cultural ties and what is happening in other regions and other parts of the world. All of this can have a significant impact on the quality of life citizens have here. While there is huge instability in the world, knowing the impacts it can have on our economy and people's quality of life, we need to make sure we can control the controllables and take away some of that uncertainty businesses and communities are feeling. That is what the trade forum is about and it is why I chair it every six or eight weeks. It is why our focus and one of key priorities during the EU Presidency will be competitiveness. It is about that simplification agenda and looking to see how we can further strengthen the Single Market and break down barriers within the EU and seek more trade deals. I have mentioned that at least four are in the pipeline and that will hugely benefit our economies. Beyond that, whether it is China, India or other sectors we have not explored in the way we should, there are huge opportunities for business and citizens and communities because of that.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: It is important that we do. With the EU Presidency, Ireland has a real opportunity to be a leader. Ireland is an economic success story, but with Ireland's Presidency of the EU let us make sure that we are cushioning ourselves and that we have a strong Europe, a strong Ireland and a strong economy.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I believe the EU Presidency is an opportunity to make sure we can make further progress on our relationship with the UK. It is still one of our most important trading partners and closest neighbours. The relationship with the UK now, with Keir Starmer as Prime Minister, has changed and transformed. We can see that happening with the EU as well and we all benefit when that relationship gets stronger. There are a lot of opportunities, and we obviously want the Presidency to be a successful one. That is exactly what we will be working towards.

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Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Tonight at 7.45 p.m. the country will come to a standstill to cheer on the boys in green in Prague. It is wrong that so many people in the North who share the same passion and identity may be unable to watch their national team free to air because it is geoblocked. This is something the Government urgently needs to address. I was a young lad when Donegal's famous son Packie Bonner made that save to set Ireland up for victory in Italia '90, and that memory stays with me. Let us hope the lads can do the business tonight and take

us a step closer to our first World Cup in 24 years. The nation believes and the nation is right behind them.

I lár ghéarchéim breosla as cuimse, tá an Rialtas i ndiaidh teaghlaigh atá ag brath ar ola teasa tí a fhágáil ar lár. Ní fhaigheann formhór acu an liúntas fuinnimh go fóill. Caithfidh siad dul i ngleic le costais ag dul in airde agus in airde agus roghanna dodhéanta á ndéanamh acu. Níl faoiseamh ar bith ón dá cent atá ceadaithe. Teastaíonn fíorthacaíocht ó na teaghlaigh seo agus teastaíonn sé anois. Rud a dhéanfadh difríocht láithreach ná chun a fháil réidh leis an gcáin charbóin ar ola teasa tí.

Let us talk about fairness because the Tánaiste spoke about fairness yesterday. Where is the fairness for the 750,000 households relying on home heating oil? The vast majority of them do not get any fuel allowance. They have seen their costs to fill soar to eye-watering levels and the Government's response is a reduction of 2 cent per litre and €20 in the cost of a fill. Incredibly, the Government is going to take back this measly €20 in a couple of weeks when it jacks up the prices by increasing carbon tax. That is not fairness. It is insulting and people know it.

Let me tell the Tánaiste what this actually looks like. A support worker who contacted me is working constant overtime trying to keep two children in college and one in school. She told me she is exhausted and burned out and still cannot get ahead. Electricity is up, food is up and fuel is up. She is now sitting with no heat on, asking what the point is. Another women who contacted me in the past day is 67 years of age. She is still working. She told me she only turns on the heat when her grandchildren visit. She is saving the last little oil she has for them. Think about that for a second. People are denying themselves basic heat in their own homes. That is the reality of the Tánaiste's decisions, whether he likes it or not.

Sinn Féin put a clear proposal to the Tánaiste this week to remove excise duty and strip out carbon tax from home heating oil - real, immediate relief - but he refused and dug in. I again ask why. Why, when he knew that these measures are not enough, did he choose to leave people short? The Tánaiste should be bringing a financial resolution before the House today. We should be reducing excise duty on home heating oil tonight and giving the maximum reduction possible on diesel and petrol. He needs to recognise he has made a serious mistake, because from today this place will not sit for 20 days and families will be left high and dry to fend for themselves, trying to stretch whatever is left in the tank and making impossible choices.

Again, my question is simple. Will the Tánaiste act now to do the right thing? Will he recognise the mistakes he has made and stop abandoning the 750,000 households that rely on home heating oil to heat their homes? Will he bring the resolution and cut excise duty on that fuel, or is he going to continue to abandon those households and leave people to struggle knowing full well that his measures do not come close to cutting it?

The Tánaiste: Let us start where we can agree in a rare moment of unity in this House.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It seems to be working well.

The Tánaiste: Which is working well?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The football team.

Deputy Noel Grealish: We hope they work well tonight.

The Tánaiste: It is kind of bringing us together.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It has started off that way anyway.

The Tánaiste: I might lean into that, to start in a moment of harmony. I genuinely join all Members in this House and people right across the country in supporting the Irish national soccer team tonight as they take on Czechia. At a time of real challenge in our country and our world, of turmoil and uncertainty, the Irish team have really lifted our spirits. There is a real sense of belief, from the youngest to the oldest person in this country, that Ireland can do this. I wish the best to our manager, Heimir, the entire team, the many thousands of fans who have travelled to Czechia to be there and the many millions who will tune in tonight. We are all behind our team and in the truest possible sense of the phrase, come on you boys in green.

This week we brought in one of the largest interventions of any EU member state, based on population, to help people in the here and now, at the petrol pump, with the price of diesel, to help our hauliers, our coach operators and to help those at most risk of fuel poverty, including those most at risk when it comes to the cost of things like their home heating oil. Deputy Doherty knows that as well. He knows that from as soon as next week, nearly 500,000 households in this country will benefit from the decision we took to increase the fuel allowance. I want to provide clarity in this House. I do not know about the Deputy's office, but I certainly got queries from people wondering whether, if they had opted in to the lump sum payment for the fuel allowance, they have that opportunity to receive the four-week extension in the same format and the same lump sum. They do, and that can be paid from next week too.

We have taken real, practical measures. There is €70 million worth of additional fuel allowance, which I think everybody in this House supports. It is a measure that is targeted and helps those most in need. It helps many working families, by the way, because we have extended it to the working family payment. It helps many pensioners and older people, many people with a disability and many carers. It factually helps those most in need of assistance with the cost of fuel. Extending that into the summer period, considering the level of volatility around fuel, is the right thing to do.

We also took practical and more universal measures to help everybody in the area of excise. There was general and widespread support for that too in this House. Sinn Féin did not vote for it in the end. It had a different set of proposals. When push came to shove pretty much, every other political party in the Opposition, while they might have different ideas and might have wanted a different package, still pressed the "Tá" button in favour of cutting excise on petrol and diesel. Sinn Féin were too partisan and too involved in performative politics. So much for the united Opposition. They were left on their own when the rest of the Opposition decided that, maybe on this one occasion, they would take off their party jersey and vote with the Government because this package of measures will help people in some way. I thank people who constructively engaged on that.

There clearly is a constructive Opposition in this House, and then there is Sinn Féin.

On carbon tax, there was a document published on budget day on the use of carbon tax funds. Deputy Doherty is at this a long time - 16 years, in fact. He is the longest serving Opposition spokesperson on finance in the history of our State. The carbon tax allocation clearly goes to those most in need and it clearly shows it is helping people most at risk. It is helping people when it comes to the fuel allowance, it is helping people with the living alone allowance, it is helping people in our farming communities, it is helping with the transition in the form of EV grants and infrastructure, it is helping with the peatland rehabilitation and it is progressive and helps those most in need as well. Sinn Féin opposes it. I think it is nearly on its own. It might have a few others but of the main Opposition parties I think it is on its own in opposing carbon tax. It is no longer Opposition versus Government but most parties in this House versus Sinn Féin when it comes to the policy rationale here. It party cannot resist this populist tendency to just oppose everything for the sake of opposing everything.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thanks, Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: There are real challenges and we may well need to intervene again, but the package we put in place was the right package for the right moment and we will remain nimble and agile on any further interventions that are needed.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: More spin and more deflection from the Minister. What he says is nonsense. Everybody knows what happened. We have led on this issue. We put forward an amendment that would have seen the maximum reduction in the price of diesel for people and the same reduction for petrol and would have seen excise duty completely removed from home heating oil, the cost of which has nearly doubled in four weeks. What did the Tánaiste do? What did his colleagues in Fine Gael do? What did Fianna Fáil and the Independent lackeys who support the Government do? They voted it down. They left 750,000 families in the lurch. That is what they did. They abandoned them. I put it to the Tánaiste directly, what does he say to people, the majority of whom do not get fuel allowance? What does he say to that woman who was talking to me, who is sitting in her home and cannot put on the heating? What does he say to her? What does he say to the woman I spoke about last night in the Dáil, who was wrapped in a blanket with a disabled son and is afraid to turn on the heating? The Tánaiste abandoned those people and I am telling him we can do the right thing now. He can recognise he has made a mistake and bring a financial resolution forward, as Sinn Féin have proposed, to cut excise duty to the maximum amount on home heating oil and give people real support at this time of crisis. That is what the Tánaiste should be doing.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Tánaiste.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is leadership and that is what we will continue to fight for on behalf of hundreds of thousands of people right across this State.

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

The Tánaiste: I hope that when the Deputy meets somebody at risk of fuel poverty and brings their case into the Dáil, as well as just reading them out in here, he helps them get the financial

assistance our system provides in terms of the fuel allowance. I would like to see the data, and please send it to me, showing that the majority of people in the country at risk of fuel poverty do not receive any assistance from the State with fuel costs. The fuel allowance-----

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: He did not say that.

The Tánaiste: He does not need your help.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I did not say that.

The Tánaiste: The fuel allowance is paid to almost 500,000 households. There are people-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What do you say to that woman who does not get it?

The Tánaiste: -----who do not qualify for the fuel allowance-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What do you say to that woman who does not get it?

The Tánaiste: -----and I say to people who do not qualify for fuel allowance that this Government is making a number of interventions to help, not just with the NORA levy but also through petrol and diesel measures. I also say to those people that we stand ready to intervene further but we must remain nimble and agile. Did the Deputy hear the Central Bank this morning? Has he read the Central Bank's report? If this conflict goes on for a prolonged period, we may need to intervene further.

The Deputy talked about mistakes. He has made three this week. First, he said the State was taking in €38 million a week extra in taxes-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: *Business Post* authors said that.

The Tánaiste: -----but we are not.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The *Business Post* -----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty.

The Tánaiste: After 16 years of being Opposition spokesperson on finance-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Are you calling out the three journalists in the *Business Post*?

The Tánaiste: -----presumably you do not just take-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Is that what you are doing?

The Tánaiste: Presumably-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Is that what you are doing?

The Tánaiste: -----you actually know the facts. We have not taken in €38 million. That is your first mistake.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is not.

The Tánaiste: Second, you have called on us to remove excise on home heating oil but there is no excise on home heating oil.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: There is. Do not be stupid.

The Tánaiste: There is not. Third, you said your proposals-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will I show you the manual?

The Tánaiste: -----would cost €100 million a month but they would not. One week, three mistakes. We need to actually engage constructively.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Do you not know that mineral oil tax is excise?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: Many people across here are trying to operate constructively-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Are you serious?

The Tánaiste: -----but what has happened this week is Sinn Féin has been left isolated not just by the Government parties-----

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

The Tánaiste: -----but also by the Opposition parties because it is engaging in populist, performative politics-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Sheehan.

The Tánaiste: -----at a time of serious national challenge. Please grow up.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I might try to go back to football-----

The Tánaiste: We started well.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: -----to wish Troy Parrott and our boys in green all the best of luck tonight in Prague. We are all hoping for a hat-trick.

Tá cruachás na gcostas maireachtála ag éirí níos measa, go háirithe ó thaobh tionóntaí de. The cost-of-living emergency is getting worse. The measures the Government announced mean the cost of living will remain stubbornly high for workers and families who cannot make ends meet. Renters are not immune from this crisis and are in fact the worst hit as they face double-digit rent increases under the Government's rent hike Bill and sky-high energy and grocery bills. We are also seeing a growing wave of evictions - in fact, the highest rate of evictions since the Famine. There was a 41% increase in evictions in the last quarter of 2025. Today we learn house prices are up again, this time by nearly 4% in the year to March, which pushes home ownership further out of reach. This rolling series of mass evictions is the result of the housing policies of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. We have had 20 families in Limerick, 14 families in an apartment complex in Ballybane in Galway and six incredibly vulnerable households in a retirement village in Sligo, including Frank, an 88-year-old wheelchair user with dementia, and his wife Elizabeth, aged 84, who has been his carer. Is the eviction of an elderly couple with dementia from a retirement home the housing policy the Tánaiste stands over?

While the Minister and his Department roll out the red carpet for institutional investors in Cannes with the promise of higher rents and higher returns, 41% of renters are at risk of poverty and a growing number spend 50% of their income on rent. Tomorrow the homeless figures will set another shameful record and there has been nearly a decade of foot-dragging on the regulation of short-term lets. The housing crisis is being paid for by renters, who have nowhere to go when evicted, and Fianna Fáil told us six years ago it would solve the housing crisis and Fine Gael said the same thing a decade ago. We are still waiting and the problem is getting worse. In Spain, as part of its response to the crisis, the Sánchez Government has extended rental agreements by two years, which will stop evictions and freeze rents, while here in Ireland, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are facilitating a wave of mass evictions and allowing landlords to hike the rent to the market rate in between tenancies.

As rents surge and a tsunami of evictions gets under way, will the Government intervene to protect renters? Will it freeze rent increases like Spain has and will it put a moratorium on evictions? What new cost-of-living measures will this Government bring forward for renters? Will it at the very least double the renter's tax credit, as Labour has called for?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Sheehan for raising the matter and the impact of the real cost-of-living pressures, the current conflict and how, for the purposes of his question, they are having a particular impact on those renting as well. I will make a couple of points. One of the reasons the Government this week provided a package of €250 million for a time-bound period was a recognition that the economic medicine we are endeavouring to administer now may need a different type of prescription in the time ahead. I say that genuinely with humility because I cannot predict - respectfully, no one in this House can, and I am not sure there are many people in the world who can - where the scale of economic challenge will go and where the key areas of pressure may be in the time ahead. The Deputy has not done this, but I certainly would not want the Government's position to be misrepresented to suggest we are talking about

the end of May and then we will see an end to this moment of economic challenge. That is not looking likely, based on what we see now. We may well have to come back to the House at future moments and indeed in budgets in the time ahead and have conversations about further assistance and interventions to support our economy and our people, should this conflict go on for a prolonged period. I know we all hope it de-escalates and ends because the quickest way to provide economic stability and move through this period of economic challenge is, of course, for this awful conflict to stop. That is before we even get to the humanitarian impact of war, which we should never be numb to in this House.

I disagree with the Deputy on how investors are presented. Even the Housing Commission report recognised that while the Government has to continue to invest more in housing, private investment will also be required. We need people to come to this country and invest privately in building and providing homes too. That is good and I think all parts of this island, and the Administrations in both parts of this island, were represented in trying to attract investment at the event in Cannes.

On short-term lets, the Deputy makes a fair point that this has been going on for quite a while. It is important we get it right and we are moving towards legislating on this. I have had very good meetings with the Ministers, Deputies Burke and Browne, in recent days on it.

We want to make sure we can provide additional housing stock but also protect housing stock for the tourism industry, particularly in rural Ireland. We almost have a way forward on that.

We have a different view when it comes to protections for renters. I genuinely believe the Bill we brought forward does bring in a suite of measures to protect tenants, the likes of which we have not seen in this country before. There will be six-year tenancies for the first time ever. The RPZs will be done on a nationwide basis for the first time ever. I recall when this Dáil was first convened many in the Opposition thought the Government was going to get rid of the RPZs. Not only did we not get rid of the RPZs, we made them nationwide. As well as that we brought in what are effectively bans on no fault evictions for future tenancies.

I am concerned about what the Deputy said about the case in County Sligo. There are clear rules but there is also basic compassion and decency. If the Deputy sends me further details, I would be very happy to look into it.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: The Tánaiste selectively quoted from a number of sources, including the Housing Commission. The fact of the matter in regard to short-term lets is the Government is already talking about weakening the legislation by increasing the population cap and putting in exemptions that were not there when the original legislation was mooted.

The housing crisis has become so severe that an 88-year-old with dementia is being evicted in County Sligo as we speak. That is how bad it has become under the watch of this Government. In his response, the Tánaiste did not actually address the question I asked, which was: what new cost-of-living measures will the Government bring forward to protect renters? Will the Government look at increasing the renter's tax credit? At the very least it is something the Government could, and should, do because this cost-of-living crisis is impacting renters the most. They are the most vulnerable people in the housing system at the moment.

The Tánaiste: We brought in measures this week that benefit everybody in terms of the cost of fuel at the pump. That was the important and right thing to do. What the Deputy is highlighting in this House today concerns renters. I say this respectfully; I hear other people highlighting different aspects in media and newspaper commentary. We have to be very careful with the economic interventions we make. There is an annual budgetary process. We will have an annual budget. We have a rent tax credit in place and have funded that tax credit for the years ahead. We will no doubt have a debate and discussion, and there are commitments in the programme for Government on the scale of the renter's tax credit as well. I have to be very honest with the Deputy. We need to have a comprehensive understanding of the depth and duration of this economic challenge. Tomorrow, I will attend a special Eurogroup meeting on this specifically, because we also need to continue to engage and see what other countries are doing too.

On the issue of the short-term lets, I do not accept there is a watering down. There is a change but it is not a watering down. We have to get the balance right here. I do not think anybody intended, or certainly I did not - I not sure the Deputy did - that there would be a situation where crucial rental properties in small rural communities would be taken out of the tourism sector so we have to get that proposal right and arrive at a balanced way forward, and we will. Renters, people who own homes and all people in the country will benefit from the €250 million intervention and the Government will remain nimble, agile and willing to act further should this economic crisis globally deepen in the time ahead.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I will start on football by wishing our lads the very best of luck tonight. I will also stay on the issue of sport more generally because in that welcome, we see a disparity between those who have and those who have not in this country. One of the players carrying the hopes of the nation on his back tonight is Troy Parrott. Troy comes from Portland Place in the heart of Dublin's north inner city, a community that has produced extraordinary supporting talent, not because of what the State has provided but in spite of what it has not. We are very good in this country at celebrating our sporting heroes with the jerseys, the flags and even, I hope, the open top buses soon. What we are less good at is being honest about the gap between how loudly we celebrate these athletes and how little we invested in the communities that produced them.

There is not a single full-sized football pitch available to children in Dublin's inner city, north or south. That is something I have raised on numerous occasions in the House. The only full-sized pitch in the locality at all is Croke Park and that very much remains behind closed doors for most people in this Chamber. That is a predictable result of a funding model that was never designed to reach communities like Dublin's north inner city. The ESRI identified nearly 20 years ago that sport funding in Ireland is structurally regressive, flowing to clubs that already have facilities in communities that already participate at scale.

Today, the Irish Sports Monitor shows a 19-point gap in participation between higher and lower socioeconomic groups. The main Government parties have invested over €1 billion in sport since 2018 and that gap has not changed in two years. Where is the money going? The Parliamentary Budget Office has answered that question clearly. Dublin received €26.50 per person under the sports capital programme. The national average is €54. County Leitrim received over €100 per head. This is not about urban versus rural; it is about fairness. The

most densely populated county in the State with the highest concentration of disadvantaged communities gets less than half the national average per head and we know exactly why.

To access the sports capital programme for capital work, communities need to own their land outright or hold a lease of at least 21 years' duration. The communities that already have facilities get more and the communities that have nothing remain locked out. That is exactly why golf clubs in this State apply at for this funding exactly three times the rate of boxing clubs, not because golf matters more but because golf clubs and the like have the cultural capital to access the system.

The Pobal deprivation index was designed to weight applications towards disadvantaged areas but an application that has not been submitted cannot be weighted. A community with no land, no lease and no 21-year title cannot be prioritised. Tonight we will cheer on Troy Parrott and the rest of the team and tomorrow morning the Government will return to a funding model that makes the next Troy Parrot less likely, not more likely. When will the Government will commit to direct State investment in public sporting infrastructure in disadvantaged urban communities? A situation where Dublin's inner city, north and south, does not have an 11-a-side pitch is not sustainable.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I acknowledge his community and constituency have done more than its fair share for moments of incredible national sporting pride, no more so than Troy currently. I acknowledge that it is some community he represents in terms of the scale of national heroes it is producing. If I can be slightly parochial, in terms of a Bray woman, I hope that Katie Taylor might get that retirement fight in the large Croke Park facility in the Deputy's constituency as well, but maybe that is for another day.

The Deputy made a serious point. I will not say I agree or disagree with it but I do take the point about needing to ensure the funding is getting to those most in need. The Deputy was not intending to do this but disadvantage can be both rural and urban and in fairness, the Deputy acknowledged that. Indeed the cost sometimes of providing facilities in more sparsely populated communities can also be greater. While the figures produced by the Deputy are validated and I do not disagree with them, it is not always comparing apples for apples and oranges for oranges. However, the broader point the Deputy makes about the lack of a full-sized pitch for the use of children in the inner city, north or south, is a very valid and real one and one I will commit the Government to working constructively with the Deputy's community, constituency and Dublin City Council on.

We are planning on opening a new sports capital round of funding shortly. I do not have the exact date but I expect it to open in the coming weeks. I will speak with the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, and the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, about the points the Deputy made on that. We are increasing the level of funding for sport in a very real way. Part of the Deputy's question to us is whether we can make progress in bridging some of that funding gap. I am certainly up for that challenge and I know Government colleagues are as well.

The Deputy mentioned golf. I am not suggesting the Deputy is, but sometimes these debates can become zero-sum games. There is an opportunity to get the model right for everybody. Golf has brought great success to this country also. We will host the Ryder Cup. There are communities and young people I hope that will inspire. There are young people I hope soccer will inspire. We had the Olympics recently and the inspiration Kellie Harrington in the

Deputy's community provided. If the question is whether we can do more through our sports funding to target disadvantage, urban and rural, and specifically the issues in relation to a full-sized pitch in the Deputy's own community, the answer is, "Yes". I will genuinely work in good faith with the Deputy and with colleagues to make progress on the matter.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The heart of this issue for me is not about the success. Very few children will ever reach the scale of Troy Parrott or Kellie Harrington. All too often I have to take a phone call from a coach who is dealing with kids who are oftentimes coming from overcrowded and disadvantaged backgrounds, to tell me that their pitch booking has been cancelled or they do not have playing facilities.

The inability to play on a pitch has an impact on their ability to be inspired tonight by somebody like Troy Parrott and take up a ball and head out on a Saturday morning. There is a disparity in simply being able to access sport. That impacts in a way that will not only be felt in medals, trophies, buses or jerseys but in the way that kids will not have access to a role model, to be just able to go out and release the energy kids get to do in sport. This is not just about medals or world cups. It is actually about giving the capacity to young people in disadvantaged communities to play at a scale experienced by other kids in more affluent areas. That is why the sports capital programme needs to involve direct State investment into infrastructure. Anything else is a failure of the same people we will be celebrating tonight and those who will come after them.

The Tánaiste: I agree fully with what the Deputy said. I used to play underage soccer for Greystones United; I think I let seven goals in in one game. I was never allowed in goals again. I knew soccer was not going to work out for me. The Deputy's broader point is right because it is about the sense of community, providing our children and young people with focus, purpose, a sense of belonging and place and health and well-being. The return on investment is manifold. I say this in good faith; I would like to understand more why there is that situation with the lack of a full-size pitch. I am not making excuses but there may be lack of green space. I do not know. I am happy to engage with the Deputy, the city council and the relevant Ministers. Let us see if some good can come from this discussion. Some things are political and some things just make sense to work on together and I am happy to do that.

Deputy Charles Ward: This issue I raise remains unresolved and it is distressing people across Donegal. We have acknowledged the defective concrete crisis is in private homes but even that scheme is deeply flawed and continues to leave many families struggling to get onto it. At the same time there is still no dedicated scheme for social housing, which we are waiting on. Critically, there is no scheme at all for public buildings such as schools and crèches affected. In Donegal alone, we know of 25 crèches and a number of schools impacted. In communities like Raphoe, Ardara, Letterkenny and across Inishowen, this is the daily lived reality for these families. They are living in houses with cracks and damp and mould. Their children are going into creches and classrooms facing the very same structural issues. It is an unsafe teaching environment. Where their schools were once safe, steady buildings, they are crumbling down around them. There is no scheme in place and no clarity on when there will be a timeline for a scheme for public buildings, schools and crèches. This has created a two-tier response to the crisis relating to defective concrete blocks. Where it is unacceptable in a

home, it should certainly be unacceptable in a building where children go to learn. That is the reality they face. The State has a duty of care. It cannot stop at the front door. I have raised this countless times and I raise it again because the situation is getting worse, not better. The reality for children in Donegal is they are being asked to learn in buildings that are not fit for purpose. Eventually, they will be dangerous. At what point does this move from failure to act to failure in the State's duty of care to these children? Will the Government act to put in place a dedicated scheme for public buildings affected by defective concrete and address the gaps that continue to exist for social housing in the affected communities?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue; in fairness to him, he raises it on an ongoing and, quite rightly, intense basis. The pace at which the defective concrete blocks scheme is operating has clearly accelerated over the past two years. More than €155 million was spent in 2025. This compares to just under €60 million in 2024. As the scheme ramps up, additional funding will be provided as required. The overall cost of the scheme is expected to be in excess of €2.2 billion. That excludes inflation, which has become a very topical issue. We are working to make sure the scheme is designed and delivered in a manner that meets the real needs of homeowners in an efficient and effective way. That work is ongoing.

The Deputy raised quite a few issues so I will go through them. I am being honest - the Deputy represents Donegal but from any of my visits to Donegal I always leave with the clear impression that there are going to be issues outside of the scheme that need to be addressed. That is just a statement of fact. Specifically in relation to schools, the Department of Education and Youth has said it will work with schools impacted by mica. My understanding is it is aware of 16 schools all based in County Donegal, which have submitted emergency works applications for funding related to testing for the presence of mica. The Deputy might have better information than me but that is what I have been told. The Department is working through a mica strategy for schools, which it will develop this year. This will involve adopting a programme approach to the issue but will provide a pathway for schools currently waiting on remediation of mica issues and any schools affected into the future. I am told it is doing this in partnership with Donegal Education and Training Board. As part of this programme approach, an assessment will be done on overall accommodation requirements in each of the relevant areas to determine what scale of accommodation is required over the medium to long term to cater for local demographics. The Department will undertake site visits during the current school year to further inform that remediation approach. More broadly the Department has provided €225.65 million in capital funding for Donegal schools since 2020.

On childcare which the Deputy has raised with me in the House before, as it relates to mica, Letterkenny Community Childcare was approved for a building blocks grant of €750,000 in May last year. I am familiar with Raphoe Community Playgroup. I accept collective responsibility for this but I am irked we have not found a way forward yet. It received funding in 2025 to procure an external expert to assess relocation options. It was approved for further sustainability funding to cover rental costs for a temporary premises for 2025 and 2026. I know it applied for the building blocks grant scheme. I think those criteria need to be looked at. It engaged in good faith and the criteria did not allow that application to progress. I was told very recently that it is now through the County Donegal childcare committee in contact about the State-led childcare programme. Perhaps that could be a way of making an intervention. TDs and Senators in Donegal work on this together. The State-led programme might be an area

worth having an engagement with the Department of children and the Minister on. It might be an opportunity to try to rectify some of these issues.

Deputy Charles Ward: A defining feature of the defective concrete crisis has been the delay process. It is delay, delay, delay. We are currently waiting on the revision of IS 465 due this quarter, which is up on either Friday or Tuesday. This is the biggest scheme in the State so one would think the NSAI would make the Tánaiste aware if it is going to be published this quarter. Will it be published this quarter?

The Tánaiste: I will get the very best information I can and write to the Deputy. The information I have here tells me the NSAI, as the Deputy correctly said, is carrying out the review of IS 465. It carried out a consultation last year, which closed on 11 July. There were over 640 submissions and the technical committee is reviewing them. That is at an advanced stage. I am advised the review will be completed in the month of April. The NSAI will then publish an update on its website when the review has been completed. The month of April is what I have been told.

Deputy Charles Ward: It will be quarter 2.

The Tánaiste: Based on this, it will just nudge into quarter 2 in that it will be in April instead of March. The Deputy raised a very specific number of days; I will see if his information is even more detailed than mine but the most important point is the review is almost complete. It will be completed by the month of April and published swiftly thereafter.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I would like to use my time to suggest a way to improve cancer care outcomes in counties Carlow and Kilkenny. In figures given to me by the Irish cancer Society, excluding non-melanoma skin cancer, in 2024, 47% of Carlow people diagnosed with cancer died from the disease. In the same year, 47% of Kilkenny people diagnosed with cancer died from the disease. We have made significant progress in improving survival rates and expanding access to cancer care. I pay tribute to the men and women who support oncology patients as well as volunteers in the likes of Éist in Carlow and Cois Nore in Kilkenny among other services available in my constituency. However, 365 men, women and children from Carlow and Kilkenny died from cancer in 2024.

That is almost one person per day. As somebody elected to represent these people and their families, I find this quite upsetting. This is why today I want to make the case for a decisive and necessary step in Ireland's fight against cancer. This is the introduction of next generation sequencing, NGS, testing as a core part of cancer diagnostic and treatment services.

While traditional NGS relies on tissue biopsies, blood-based NGS is a critical tool in modern oncology. In other words, it is a simple blood test that is capable of detecting more than 50 types of cancers simultaneously. To quote a medical consultant I spoke with recently, a publicly available blood tests to detect multiple cancers simultaneously and to detect inherited cancer risks will be a game changer for cancer care in Ireland. This game changer will only happen if

we choose to integrate NGS fully in our public health service. This blood test would allow us to reduce delays, improve accuracy, provide equitable access to patients regardless of geography and guide targeted therapies that depend on understanding the genetic profile of tumours. This is precisely the sort of early detection and precision medicine our national cancer strategy envisaged when it set out its outcome goals of detecting cancer earlier, reducing inequalities and improving patient outcomes.

In 2022 the HSE launched Ireland's national strategy for accelerating genetic and genomic medicine, which sets out a clear vision for bringing genomics into routine care. This strategy emphasises improved disease prevention, better diagnostics and more targeted treatments for patients and families across the country. To deliver this vision the HSE then established the national genetics and genomics office in 2023 to build national capacity for genomic testing and to ensure Ireland can retain and expand accredited testing. We can see that a lot of the ground work has been done but to deliver fully on the promise of genomic medicine we must now make NGS the standard platform for cancer testing.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Callaghan for raising this issue. She is right to say there is not a family or community not impacted by cancer. We all have to do more and challenge ourselves and our system, and support our health service, researchers and scientists in terms of what more we can do to prevent cancer and to earlier identify cancer. I think of our colleague, Deputy Peter Roche, who lost his brother Vincent in the early hours of this morning, and I extend my sympathies to him.

I met the Irish Cancer Society last week and we discussed a range of issues, including this in the context of developing the next national cancer strategy. I thank Deputy Callaghan because raising this is timely as we prepare to develop the next national cancer strategy. Deputy Callaghan has been a vocal advocate for cancer care, cancer prevention and cancer treatment. We are absolutely committed to improving cancer care. As I have said, we must also continue to see what more we can do in terms of being innovative in better early identification and better prevention.

The current national cancer strategy identifies the need for genomic testing and hereditary cancer care management. The national cancer control programme hereditary cancer model of care highlights the need to further improve access to genetic testing for patients with cancer and their relatives. We are committed to ensuring this happens. Where a cancer patient is suspected of having an underlying cancer predisposition syndrome, they are typically offered multigene panels to look for changes in relevant genes, if identified, and there is testing for close family members also. It is important to note the HSE does this in line with best international practice rather than through broader population screening programmes. A genomic test directory for cancer is constantly being developed in the health service as well, and the national cancer control programme is now funding a number of tests in adult cancer, including colorectal, melanoma, lung, ovarian and other cancers. Tests have been developed, I am pleased to say, at CHI Crumlin for all known significant mutations in paediatric and young adult solid cancers. On foot of Deputy Callaghan raising this today, I will specifically speak with the Minister for Health and ask that she further engages with Deputy Callaghan and anyone she has been working with in Carlow and Kilkenny on this. There is an opportunity to try to progress this in the next national cancer strategy.

The hereditary cancer steering group oversees the implementation of the hereditary cancer model of care. They are now working to mainstream genetic testing as part of the hereditary cancer model of care. They hope to have this in place in a number of cancer centres in our health service by the third quarter of this year. This will make pre-test counselling and genetic testing available through the treating oncology team for certain patients with a diagnosis of cancer, including breast cancer, which will be a significant step forward. We have also provided funding for posts to include two genetic counsellors, three service support staff, four advanced nurse practitioner posts and two consultant medical oncologists with a special interest in genetics. This is the immediate move that will take place this year as we begin to develop the next national cancer strategy and the next steps forward. I will speak to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and asked that she engage further with Deputy Callaghan.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I want to be associated with the expression of sympathy to Deputy Roche and his family.

My proposal to introduce a publicly available blood test for detecting multiple cancers at once is scientifically sound, economically sensible and morally necessary. Every delay in adopting this technology represents a missed opportunity to detect cancers early, to treat them more effectively and to save lives. As the Tánaiste has outlined, we have the strategy, the structures and the investment almost ready. I am looking forward to working alongside the Tánaiste and the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, to see this genetic testing progressed in the next strategy.

I urge the Government to commit to the nationwide roll-out of NGS in the HSE to ensure every patient, no matter where they live, benefits from the most advanced cancer diagnostics available. Patients in Carlow and Kilkenny deserve nothing less than the best that modern medicine can offer. The blood test will help us deliver exactly this. Today my thoughts are with a friend of mine in Thomastown, without whom I know for certain I would not be standing in this Chamber. As long as I am in this Chamber representing the great people of Carlow and Kilkenny, I will fight for better cancer care outcomes for those people. I look forward to working with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Callaghan and I send my thoughts and best wishes to her close friend in Thomastown. Deputy Callaghan's experience and story is one we in the House all share. It is something that touches and impacts all of us in our lives, our work, our communities and everybody in this country. We have made good progress as a country. Our doctors, medics, scientists, nurses and healthcare system have made good progress in our cancer survival rates but, as I say this, there can be no room for any sense of complacency. We have to continue to see how we can do more and do better in terms of prevention and early detection. Deputy Callaghan is quite right to be bringing forward ideas as to how we use the best innovations and best science, and what is recommended by international evidence, to do better in our health service. I know the Government, Deputy Callaghan, and the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, are fully committed to this. I take heart from the fact the hereditary cancer model of care will be rolled out by quarter 3 of this year in a number of cancer centres. This is a big step forward in terms of offering genetic testing and pre-counselling to those at most familial risk. I will talk to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and ask that she engages with Deputy Callaghan and we will keep in touch on this.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister for Finance bizarrely claimed, in an attempt to defend abandoning 750,000 households who rely on home heating oil, that there is no excise duty on home heating oil. The Leas-Cheann Comhairle may remind the same Minister for Finance what he told the Dáil just a few weeks ago, which was that liquid fuel for motor or heating purposes is subject to excise duty in the form of mineral oil tax. If the Minister for Finance is not aware of these basic facts, I will send him the Revenue manual later.

On the issue I want to raise today, the people of Donegal are being abandoned once again. On Sunday we will lose our midday flights, which are crucial for connectivity between Donegal and Dublin. Cancer campaigners have fought bravely to get the Government to see sense after it entered into a contract with an airline that will see the ending of these flights on Sunday. The campaigners were given to believe in commitments from the Government that decisions would be made last week but this can has been very firmly kicked down the road for a number of more weeks. On behalf of all of those, in particular cancer patients, who rely on these midday flights that will not now operate, when will the Government make a decision? Will the Government commit that the midday flights will return to Donegal and that the aircraft will be grounded overnight in the county?

The Tánaiste: On a point of clarification, I have a table I can show Deputy Doherty which states mineral oil tax non-carbon, in other words what we refer to as-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You are caught out.

The Tánaiste: It is zero euro and zero cent.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You are caught out.

The Tánaiste: Carbon tax, which Sinn Féin wants to abolish-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You are caught out.

The Tánaiste: -----but the rest of the Opposition does not and the NORA levy, which we have got rid of-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You are caught out.

The Tánaiste: I will send Deputy Doherty a copy after Leaders' Questions because this is one of three errors he has made this week.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Admit when you are wrong.

The Tánaiste: Quite frankly, a little bit of competency after 16 years as our country's Opposition spokesperson on finance would be helpful.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You are the Minister for Finance and you do not even know what the Revenue-----

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Doherty for that.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Admit when you are wrong.

The Tánaiste: It is there for anybody to read that it is zero euro and zero cent.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Blame all you want.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy is protesting too much now.

Simon Harris: I will make it available to the Deputy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am blushing for the Tánaiste.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Bring back in the football; that is all I can say. Deputy Lawlor, please.

Simon Harris: Sorry, on the very important issue of Donegal-----

Deputy George Lawlor: Thank you, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

Simon Harris: Sorry. My apologies to Deputy Lawlor but there was also a very important issue in relation to Donegal. I just needed to correct that issue. In relation to the Donegal-Dublin -----

Deputy Paul Donnelly: What about the time?

Simon Harris: Please, this quite an important-----

Deputy Paul Donnelly: The Tánaiste is eating into every one else's time-----

Simon Harris: I think Deputy Donnelly's colleague would like me to answer the question that has been raised about Donegal. It is a very important issue and one I want to acknowledge. I thought people in Donegal, in terms of the politicians in this House, were working together on it. I know that my party colleague, Senator Manus Boyle, along with Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher, the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, Deputy Doherty and his colleague Deputy Mac Lochlainn, and Deputy Charles Ward, have all engaged on this issue with the Minister and the community. I met with the Irish Cancer Society on this issue and we discussed

it last week. This is a very serious issue for people in Donegal, particularly but not exclusively for cancer patients.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Tánaiste.

Simon Harris: Just bear with me for one second. I spoke to the Minister in relation to it. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has confirmed that he anticipates that next week he will be in a position to announce the reinstatement of the midday service and the overnighting of the aircraft in Donegal.

Deputy George Lawlor: I want to raise with the Tánaiste the urgent and rapidly evolving situation with coastal erosion in Rosslare Strand. County Wexford is suffering more than many counties with coastal erosion as we move along. I am glad to see that the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, is also in the Chamber. Perhaps he could also give a response to this. We have a crisis in Rosslare Strand at the moment, particularly in the area adjoining the famous and iconic Kelly's Hotel.

Simon Harris: I know it well.

Deputy George Lawlor: This family-run hotel has been in existence for 131 years. Mr. Bill Kelly has said that the hotel will come under serious pressure if we endure another bad winter. It has to be said that €7.5 million was made available in 2018 for coastal protection works on the strand, but that is still at the planning stage. The strand and this particular area of the strand will not sustain another winter of storms, and we will be in a situation of economic catastrophe for the area of Rosslare Strand because of the impact on Kelly's Hotel. I ask the Tánaiste and the Minister of State to give a commitment that emergency works will take place before the summer.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): Before I take that question, I want to raise an issue with Deputies continuously referring to us in this Chamber as "lackeys". If I stood up in this House and called anyone a lackey, he or she would feel it and I would have to apologise. We represent a group that went into government. I represent the people of Longford-Westmeath who elected me as a TD, not as a lackey. I ask the Leas-Cheann Comhairle to correct Deputies when they refer to us like that in the House. The name calling has to be called out.

Simon Harris: Hear, hear.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I will bring it to the attention of the Ceann Comhairle.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: In relation to the issue Deputy Lawlor has raised, I have met with Wexford County Council in recent weeks. My team met with the council again in the last few days to discuss the emergency on the coast at Kelly's Hotel. We have asked the council to fast-forward a minor works scheme that we will fund in the near future. This will happen

imminently. The application will be back into my Department and we will rescue the area of the beach in question. I know the level of vulnerability, I know what is at stake in terms of the hotel and I know the suffering that people are enduring but I can assure the Deputy that in the next few weeks he will see action on the ground.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: After more than €2 billion of public funds and a decade of construction, we still have no idea when the national children's hospital will open. When we were told yesterday at the Oireachtas health committee that the 18th completion deadline will be missed, it was not a surprise. I am beginning to wonder why we get project deadlines from BAM at all. We would be better off asking Mystic Meg at this point. BAM is giving the run-around to the Government, the hospital development board and ultimately, the Irish people. The Minister for Health was told at a meeting earlier this month that more construction workers would be put on site to get this essential project finished, but this has not happened. The Minister now tells us that she is going to write to BAM again. I am sure it is shaking in its boots. This farce has gone on long enough. The only way this project will be completed on time is if BAM provides enough workers on site to do the work but it has repeatedly reneged on its commitment to do this. Why is the Government not in the High Court today to seek an urgent undertaking from BAM that it will deliver on its own promise? This would not be a lengthy court action. It would be quick and on that net issue to ensure that the hospital can open as soon as possible in order that children across the country who desperately need it can be treated there.

Simon Harris: The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is doing a lot more than just writing letters. She is taking a very hands-on approach in relation to this issue. She has the full support of the entire Government in getting this project over the line. It is a project that will transform children's health in this country. The Minister is continuing to work hard on this. She met with the international company, Royal BAM, recently so it is unfair to suggest that she is just writing letters. She is doing a hell of a lot more than that. The other thing that the Minister has worked on with the Department, the HSE and CHI is early access. I am sure Deputy Rice heard about that at the committee yesterday. This has enabled CHI to have access to the hospital which has meant that 3,245 pieces of equipment have been deployed to the new hospital, 930 pieces of ICT equipment and 1,100 pieces of electronic health records. While we are continuing to do everything we can to protect the taxpayer and to keep the pressure on in relation to BAM, I am pleased that in parallel to that, the early access is allowing the hospital to begin to be actually equipped so it can be ready to treat the children of this country.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I want to raise the pain and suffering being caused to people doing essential work in this country due to the massive backlog and delays in issuing Irish residence permit, IRP, cards. Some people who had to leave for funerals or because of family illness in India and elsewhere have not been able to get back into the country. I also want to raise the family reunification rules and to mention a woman called Iby, who is working as a healthcare assistant in our country. She applied for visas for her two children some time ago. Iby has been diagnosed with breast cancer and is undergoing oncology treatment. Due to this, she has been medically unable to travel to India and has not seen her children for three years. Her husband had to come over here to support her recovery so both parents are away, causing terrible trauma and depression for the two children in India. She is continuing to work in our

system. In a further twist, because of the fall in her income due to having no sick pay, she is under the financial threshold now for her children to come here. I am asking the Tánaiste to look at her case on compassionate grounds. We cannot inflict such suffering on workers who are here caring for our older people and expect them to be able to survive here. Do we just want guest workers in this country or do we want human beings who have rights, who have community and who are not forcibly separated from their children? I ask the Tánaiste to look into this and to clear the IRP backlog as well.

Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Coppinger. I will certainly raise the IRP backlog with the Minister for justice, Deputy O'Callaghan.

I will also ask the Minister to look at Iby's case on compassionate grounds, as she has asked. Without knowing the details of the case, obviously my heart and feelings go out, as do those of Deputy Coppinger, to Iby and her family at this time, in terms of her own cancer journey. I will ask the Minister to look at that.

More broadly when it comes to the rules, it is perfectly within the right of a Government, if not the responsibility, to make sure there are clear rules in place in terms of who can come into this country. We want people to come to Ireland, to work here and to make a positive contribution and many do. I fully acknowledge that our health service would fall over if it was not for people coming here. We need to have absolute clarity in relation to issues like family reunification. The reforms the Minister is bringing in are sensible in terms of asking people to show an ability to be able to support their family before they come to the country. That is common sense and is in line with what happens in many other countries.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is a disgrace.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Yesterday the health committee heard that the national children's hospital will not be open, possibly, until autumn 2027. The opening of the hospital has now been delayed 18 times. The hospital that the Tánaiste signed off on is record-breaking for all of the wrong reasons. When the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, was asked recently when the hospital will open, she said that the opening date was in the hands of BAM. This is a startling admission. The Minister admitted that she has no control over the delivery of the biggest infrastructure project in the country. Yesterday, at a meeting of the Oireachtas infrastructure committee, Government TDs voted against pre-legislative scrutiny of the new critical infrastructure Bill. On the day that the national children's hospital was postponed for the 18th time, the Government voted against pre-legislative scrutiny of the new critical infrastructure Bill. Does the Tánaiste not recognise the jaw-dropping irony here?

Simon Harris: No, I do not.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Given the billions of euro in waste and the wholesale incineration of taxpayers' money by the Government on the national children's hospital, does the Tánaiste not think that pre-legislative scrutiny would be a good idea for critical infrastructure in this country?

Simon Harris: I do not. It might sound reasonable to people listening at home, based on how the Deputy has framed it, but the critical infrastructure Bill is very straightforward legislation that is urgently required to give the Minister and the Government of the day the ability to prioritise certain projects. It is enabling legislation and it is extraordinarily straightforward.

1 o'clock

There is urgency around building homes and water and wastewater facilities. Energy is an issue we are talking about right now. If the Deputy wants to sit around and talk about it for months, that is fine, but we do not. We want to get on with it. To draw comparisons is just misleading. It sounds good in a clip, but there is no link whatsoever with a Bill that will enable the Minister to say that a flood relief project or a wastewater treatment plant in a particular town is urgent and to ask people to get on with assessing it. There is no link at all.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There is no link between critical infrastructure and the national children's hospital problem.

The Tánaiste: There really is not.

Deputy Brendan Smith: The Tánaiste and other members of the Government indicated clearly on Tuesday that the introduction of other relief measures would be kept under constant consideration in light of the serious difficulties facing households and businesses due to the increase in energy costs. I suggest that the omission of the farming community and agri contractors from meaningful support in that announcement should be addressed as a matter of urgency.

I understand that three weeks ago, green diesel cost 96 cent per litre. Today, it costs at least 163 cent per litre, which is an increase of upwards of 70%. The excise rate of green diesel needs to be revisited quickly. The silage season is less than two months away. We know that with present prices, the cost of making silage would increase substantially, impacting farmers and agri contractors who would be spreading much dearer fertiliser. Making silage and spreading slurry will be key and essential farm activities over the next number of weeks and the increases will put huge pressure on farm costs and incomes. This is at a time when the prices paid to farmers are stagnant, if not falling, for some sectors. The significant increase in fuel costs is a cause of great anxiety and concern for farmers and agri contractors. We all know that increased energy costs adversely impact other essential farm inputs. For the consumer, food prices will also go up. In his role as Minister for Finance, I ask the Tánaiste to revisit this as a matter of urgency.

The Tánaiste: I would make the point that there are limitations on what it is legally possible to do to excise duty. This week, the Government took measures on excise duty, fuel allowance and the diesel rebate. Some members of the Opposition are asking me to reduce the non-carbon excise element of home heating oil, which does not exist. I cannot do that. There are also rules around the energy tax directive. There is a limit - I am just being honest - to how much we can do in relation to the excise duty on green diesel. However, farmers will benefit from the

reduction we made and the pause of the National Oil Reserves Agency, NORA, levy. The total benefit will be around 5 cent.

I recognise that farmers and the agrifood sector may, like other sectors in the economy, require assistance in the time ahead. The Government will remain nimble and agile in respect of those issues. This week was about excise duty and doing what we could to alleviate the cost increases in petrol and diesel, to help those most at risk of fuel poverty and to provide crucial assistance for the supply chains in our economy around the haulage sector. I am aware of the pressures that other sectors of the economy are under or may come under in the time ahead. That is one of the reasons that the Government has brought in these measures for a time-bound period. It will give an opportunity to come back. I will keep in touch with the Deputy because I know it is an important issue that impacts his community and many people across the country.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: The proposed new Garda headquarters for DMR north at Northern Cross is a project has been in the works for several years now. In my first speech in this Chamber, I raised this issue as a priority for the growing communities on the north side, in Belmayne, Balgriffin and Clongriffin. Despite the money being allocated in the sectoral investment plan in December, which I welcomed, it seems we are no closer to getting all our ducks lined up. We have been told again and again this year that the Office of Public Works, OPW, is in the process of identifying a site for this new station. The Tánaiste knows the area. It is growing rapidly and the need for a strong and visible Garda presence is clear. Can we get negotiations between the OPW and Dublin City Council on site acquisition over the line? It is important for our community.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for again raising this issue. I am conscious that, as he rightly said, he has been raising this issue since his first day in this House, and indeed even before that. I know it is an important issue to his constituents and communities across Dublin north. I assure him that real progress is now finally being made. Following the review of the national development plan, the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, secured over €2 billion for a justice sectoral investment plan out to 2030. Some €911 million of that money is allocated to Garda projects. That is a significant level of investment. It includes the completion of new Garda stations and a new headquarters for the Dublin north region. I am pleased that there is now a timeline against this commitment, and the project will go to construction by 2028. The OPW is now actively working with the Garda and the Department to identify and appraise the most suitable site. The funding is now there. It is ring-fenced and clear. We now need to see the momentum so the project can go to construction by that time at the latest. I will ask the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, keep the Deputy closely apprised.

Deputy Mark Ward: Gaelscoil na Camóige has been operating out of prefabs for over 30 years. It is a school I know very well as my three children attended it. The building of the school building, alongside the new school for Gaelscoil Chluain Dolcáin, is progressing, and that is welcome. However, the schools were notified that the autism spectrum disorder, ASD, classes will not now be built. The ASD expansion was agreed and given the go-ahead in 2024. Planning permission was in place. In January, the schools were informed by the Department that they had broken their agreement on the ASD classes. The school is due to open in

September. This is unacceptable. Gaelscoil na Camóige is moving to a two-stream intake this year. It projects that it will be up to full capacity in three years' time. The Department might save €2 million today, but it is going to cost a hell of a lot more in years to come. No doubt, I will be back here and arguing the same case. I ask that a common-sense solution is found so that our most vulnerable children can have their educational needs met.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I will talk directly to the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, about the issue. At a time when we are seeking to open more classes and there is a school, and indeed a new school building, willing to accommodate those classes, I would be supportive of that proceeding. I will talk to the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, and ask them to come back to the Deputy to see if we can make progress on the matter.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I associate myself with the comments of Deputy Ward. I raised the same matter on the floor last week. I hope we can get a common-sense solution.

I pay tribute to uniformed organisations that work with young people in Ireland, including Scouting Ireland and the girl guides across the country. I congratulate the conNECKt team from Lucan Girl Guides on their victory at the first Lego league national final this week. They won the best team placard award. This victory and the work of these organisations, as I know from my experience in my constituency in Lucan, Clondalkin, Neilstown and Rathcoole, showcase the best in youth innovation and show the value of the non-formal education, leadership skills and resilience which they provide. I know that Scouting Ireland has been on a journey to ensure it is a safe organisation for young people. It became one of the first scouting organisations in the world to be awarded the global Safe from Harm standard. This afternoon, will the Tánaiste join me in ensuring that organisations such as Scouting Ireland and the girl guides are supported and engaged with appropriately by the State to ensure they can avail of funds, such as the community centre investment fund that was announced this morning, in recognition of the value of the non-formal education and resilience they provide for young people? We want that to be recognised by the State in its engagement with them.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I will ask the Minister to further engage with him and Deputy Ward. I know the Deputy previously raised the issues of the Gaelscoileanna and those autism classes in his community. We will try to make progress on that together.

Déanaim comhghairdeas le Lucan girl guides on their success and the pride they brought to their community. The Deputy is right to highlight the hugely positive work that is carried out in communities across Ireland, including his own constituency of Dublin Mid-West, by girl guides organisations and scouting groups. We all had an opportunity to see that in a very visible way during the St. Patrick's Day parades that took place in all of our communities. We need to support them. I am pleased to say that the community centre investment fund, which has already had a transformative impact in communities across Ireland, was opened this morning by the Minister, Deputy Calleary, for the fourth round of applications. The 2026 fund is going to focus on the refurbishment of existing facilities in communities across the country. Scouting and girl guides groups that can satisfy the conditions can, of course, apply. The conditions require that they are not-for-profit organisations, under which requirement the two

organisations qualify, must be in existence for at least years, which I imagine many of them have been, and must currently manage an existing centre and be open to the wider communities. Those are the criteria, and scouting groups and girl guides can certainly apply on that basis.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: I wish to refer to the capital investment programme for fire stations throughout the country. I highlight the work of over 60 firefighters, both full-time and part-time, throughout all the stations in County Longford. I thank them for all their good work. They are highly trained and committed to keeping us safe in our communities.

I am seeking investment for a new fire station in Ballymahon. There is a population of over 3,000 in the town and the station serves over 10,000 people in the wider community. It is home, as the Tánaiste will know, to Center Parcs, a €230 million tourism investment. I spoke with the general manager in the past couple of days. By the end of this year, another €100 million will be invested. Hundreds of thousands of people will come to stay in the over 500 lodges in that area.

However, we need investment into a new station. I am looking for a commitment in the capital budget for 2026 that we will secure funding to deliver that new station to the people of south Longford.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I join with him in praising our firemen and firewomen, firefighters across the country and all those involved in our fire services for the vital work they do. It is important we show our gratitude, not just in words but in investment in them and their facilities. I thank the Deputy for raising this. He has been a consistent advocate for Ballymahon fire station. I know how important this is to the community in south Longford for all the reasons he mentioned, including the many people who now visit Longford as part of the incredible success that Center Parcs has been. Providing fire services is a statutory responsibility of individual fire authorities, or local authorities, under the fire Acts. The good news is that in planning for the next capital programme, Longford has reiterated that Ballymahon is a priority project for the county in terms of fire services. I understand the fire service is now actively working on identifying a preferred site. I have clear indications from conversations I have had very recently that this project is moving in the right direction. There could be positive developments on it very shortly. It would be premature for me to get ahead of the finalisation of the new programme, but I assure the Deputy that the Minister, Deputy Browne, will keep in close contact with him on this. I will keep a close eye on this as well because the case the council has made is compelling. It has been clear in relation to Ballymahon being priority project number one. We have given a significant allocation to the fire service capital programme. I expect progress on this very shortly.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: Next weekend, many of us will be at the 1916 Easter commemorations honouring those who fought and died for Irish freedom. The Proclamation references "cherishing all the children of the nation equally". Just last week, I met the local management committee for school completion at Blakestown Community School. Like all school completion committees, it works with the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children in our communities. It has not had an increase in funding in years, with larger numbers of students leading to effective cuts every year. Yesterday, the Government announced the DEIS plus scheme, a new set of additional plans and funding for schools in very disadvantaged

communities. The feedback I have got from schools is one of utter shock and dismay. One school has been selected for DEIS plus for the entire Dublin 15 area. Rath Dara Community College is a post-primary school that is a stone's throw away from the only primary school that was selected, Ladyswell National School, but it is not on the list. Blakestown Community School and Scoil Mhuire, which are both DEIS schools, did not make it. Is this just a box-ticking exercise to claim the Government is doing something for disadvantaged students? If not, will the Minister commit to revisiting the allocation? At the end of the day, it is not just Dublin 15. There are communities all over that are absolutely baffled as to how their local schools were not selected for DEIS plus.

The Tánaiste: Any local TD will always have a view that their constituency should or should not receive additional things.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: It is one school. One.

The Tánaiste: Hang on a second. The Deputy used very emotive language when he asked whether this is "a box-ticking exercise". Let me be very clear that as of yesterday, for the very first time in the history of this State we now have a DEIS plus programme. I do not usually do this, but I remember Aodhán Ó Ríordáin looking for this when he was in this House. He is now Labour Party MEP for Dublin. This is something that has been called for across this House for a long time.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: Absolutely.

The Tánaiste: The former education Minister, Deputy McEntee, worked on it, as did the current Minister, Deputy Naughton. This Government delivered it yesterday. There are 121 schools - 96 primary schools and 25 post-primary schools - that will get enhanced support. They are the most disadvantaged of the disadvantaged, factually. This is a start. It is an important start that will make a real difference in tackling educational disadvantage. There will be more than 400 additional roles, 350 extra teaching posts benefiting 700 schools nationwide and the expansion of the home school liaison programme to 130 additional schools. The Deputy should please continue to advocate for more schools in his community-----

Deputy Paul Donnelly: What were the criteria?

The Tánaiste: -----but he should not be so populist.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: What were the criteria?

The Tánaiste: Sinn Féin should not be opposing for the sake of opposing. This is a really positive development.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: It is not about opposing.

The Tánaiste: It is a really positive development.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I ask the Tánaiste to withdraw that. This is not about opposing.

The Tánaiste: Some 700 schools will benefit overall and 121 will get enhanced supports. It is not box-ticking; it is transformational.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: Will you publish the criteria as to how these schools were selected?

The Tánaiste: The criteria are very clear.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: They are not.

The Tánaiste: Do not try to taint a programme that has so much scientific support behind it in terms of educational advantage.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: My question relates to auto-enrolment. From January this year, all employers in the State have to make the payment on behalf of their employees. Yet, employers providing services on behalf of the State are not consistently funded to pay this vital payment. I say "consistently" because some Departments are making provision and some are not. The Department of justice has made specific provision, particularly through Cuan and the Probation Service, for auto-enrolment. When I asked every other Department and Government agency, they completely washed their hands of making provision for that auto-enrolment payment. The Department of Social Protection and Tusla said "No". The Department of Health said "No" but also said it would be gathering data this year. I raise this because it is an enormous issue for home care providers, family support organisations, child support organisations and many section 39 organisations across this country. There was a pay deal last year but it was a pay deal - it had nothing to do with making provision for pensions. Will this Government ensure that services funded by the State are given proper provision for that auto-enrolment payment year on year?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for flagging this important issue. I will make some further inquiries on foot of her raising it with me. My initial sense and awareness of this issue is that the Department of Social Protection was extraordinarily proactive in promoting auto-enrolment, not just with private sector employers but also with the public service. There was a very long lead-in time for individual Departments and agencies to make their preparations and necessary resource allocations for this through the normal budgetary process that every Department has. The Deputy has got data that suggests some Departments have given different answers than others. I will certainly make my own inquiries and come back to the Deputy directly. I would also appreciate any information she has. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Calleary, to look at that. I will come back to the Deputy with a more considered response.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I will raise the issue of evictions, which I raised last week. The Tánaiste has probably heard that a number of people are facing eviction from a retirement village in Sligo. I am completely shocked by this. It is described as involving people in their 80s and couples. One couple in their 80s have a child with disabilities in his 50s who is facing eviction from this place, which is a retirement home. There is another example in Galway,

with a mass eviction at Cúirt Éigis in Ballybane, where 14 households have received a termination to quit their home. We are seeing thousands of these cases across the country. I am really concerned that the lack of action from this Government to prevent these evictions is leading to huge misery and trauma. People cannot find properties within the housing assistance payment, HAP. The tenant in situ scheme has been cut. The new measures do not apply to hundreds of thousands of existing rental households. What is the Government doing to prevent more evictions, to prevent these people from being evicted and to ensure these people have somewhere to go to? Where are these elderly people going to go?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. It has also been raised by my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, who represents Sligo. There are a specific set of circumstances in that a private owner of a facility has decided to sell. I do not mean to call it a facility; it is people's home. It would be worth inquiring whether there are any solutions that can be explored through local authorities or State agencies to assist there. I am not yet apprised of the full facts but it seems to be a particular set of circumstances. More broadly, and we have different views on this, I will make the point that the rental reforms we brought in aimed to create a balance in increasing the supply of tenancies and rental markets, and providing a suite of new protection measures for tenants, including the six-year tenancy and the extension of rent pressure zones nationwide.

Deputy Rory Hearne: What about all these people now?

The Tánaiste: There are clear rules and laws that need to be followed. There is also the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB. We have seen some examples of where people tried to deviate from the law. That cannot be allowed either and was not allowed in the case that was highlighted in this House recently. The RTB has a very important role to play in this too.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I would like to raise the continued delay in reinstating full An Post services at Doolan's in Blue Ball, County Offaly. This matter has been ongoing since Christmas. It is causing real hardship, particularly for elderly and vulnerable residents who rely on having essential services available within their community. While An Post has indicated that the outlet will be reinstated, the length of time this process is taking is increasingly difficult to understand. This is especially the case given that An Post has acknowledged that the level of business previously conducted there exceeded that of many of its own full post offices nationwide. My concern is that this prolonged delay may be a tactic to have people become accustomed to travelling elsewhere only for a decision to be taken not to reinstate the service. Will the Government now facilitate urgent engagement with the relevant Minister to ensure this outlet is restored without further delay?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy McCormack for raising this issue about his constituents and Blue Ball, the impact that is having on them and his concerns regarding the delay in terms of the restoration of the service and the understandable anxiety that is creating in the community as to whether the service will be reinstated. On foot of the Deputy raising it here today, I will ask the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, who has ministerial responsibility for our postal services, to engage with An Post and come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Joe Neville: The issue I wish to bring up today is something I have raised a number of times since I was elected. Like the Tánaiste, I believe that an Irish savings and investment account model, especially for young people, can make a huge difference. However, I also continue to believe that tax reform for ETFs would offer an effective and impactful means too for those people who already might be in a position to invest.

The goal we have as a Government and one I know the Tánaiste has been really pushing is to transform investment behaviour in Ireland and assist personal wealth growth. This would complement the auto-enrolment scheme that we have already put in place but this would have minimal cost to business and the Exchequer, too. It would also help counter the growth in Irish deposits and provide an opportunity for personal wealth creation.

One thing I want to highlight with ETFs is the deemed disposal rule that it only really exist in Ireland. It further acts to discourage international funds from being offered to Irish retail investors. Can we work towards ensuring the abolition of the deemed disposal rule forms part of the Government's retail and investment plans in the coming term?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue again. I know it is one he is very keen to see progress on - as am I - and I assure him that work is under way to ensure this. We cannot be in favour of a savings and investment union at an EU level, which we passionately are, and not make sure our citizens are able to benefit from that here. There are so many people in this country who are trying to do the right thing and put away small amounts of money for themselves, their kids and a rainy day. I am talking about small amounts of money here and middle Ireland. People are playing the rules and are not getting any return on it. In fact, it often loses value in real terms too. I am very keen to establish those investment accounts in Ireland. Work is ongoing on this. The first annual savings and investment forum will take place next Tuesday, where we will begin to parse through with stakeholders how that might be developed. I am looking at what other countries have done and I think Sweden has done well with this. The Deputy is also right that we need to look at what we can do around existing taxation structures on retail investment. He will know we took a first step last year in reducing the rate of tax applying to investments in Irish and offshore funds to 38%. The overall policy rationale for deemed disposal is the issue here that we need to explore and try to make progress on. I am very confident we can make progress together in the time ahead.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I raise with the Tánaiste the decision of Government to reintroduce the leaving certificate and junior certificate fees at a time when families are under such immense financial pressure, between energy arrears and struggling with the rising cost of food and fuel. This is also the week when the annual direct debit for the local property tax came out of many people's bank accounts. One parent put it to me that the last thing her family needs is another bill coming through the door and that they simply cannot get blood from a stone. These fees are a tax on learning and they are hitting most working, struggling families and hitting them the hardest. At a time when households are at breaking point, this is tone deaf, quite frankly. Will the Tánaiste please review this decision? Families simply do not have this money.

The Tánaiste: For families who are most in need, the protections remain in place and I want to say that. The protections are in place for any student with a full medical card, anybody covered under their parent's or guardian's card will continue to be fully exempt-----

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Not all will. What about the others?

The Tánaiste: I get confused sometimes as to the Sinn Féin economic position. Is it everything must be free or is it that we should we target supports at those most in need? If it is that we should target supports at those most in need-----

(Interruptions)

The Tánaiste: Do not tut-tut at me, please. If it is that we should target supports at those most in need and if it is Sinn Féin's position that every cost-of-living measure that was in place pre-Covid should remain in place post-Covid, that is a very different sort of Ireland. We made it very clear we were moving to sustainable, permanent reductions in core areas; the permanent reduction in college fees, the permanent progress we want to make on childcare and making targeted interventions here as well.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: There is no childcare.

The Tánaiste: These fees were last charged in 2019. They will be at the same level they were since 2012 which means in real terms, they will be a lot less. Crucially, protections for students in need financially, through that medical card system which means they are fully exempt, remain in place.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: The Tánaiste knows that is not true.

Deputy Paul Lawless: It is 40 years this year since Knock Airport opened in County Mayo. At the time, it was thought impossible to build an airport on a foggy, boggy hill but such was the determination and vision of Monsignor James Horan. Since then, it has been incredibly successful and a really key piece of infrastructure for Mayo and the west of Ireland.

It is at somewhat of a crossroads at the minute. It is due to exceed 1 million passengers this year, having already handled 950,000 passengers last year. Under the regional airport support scheme, once an airport exceeds 1 million passengers, it triggers a tapering off of funding. However, this funding scheme is vitally important and has been critically important for the airport in previous years. The management team is incredibly successful and it has many more ambitions for capital infrastructure and to expand passenger numbers.

My question to the Tánaiste is: what steps will he take to ensure Knock Airport is not penalised for growth? What steps will the Tánaiste take to ensure we continue to the investment in the west of Ireland? This airport is really important and I want to see it continue to be supported.

The Tánaiste: So do I and so does my colleague the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, sitting here beside me. I know Deputy Lawless does too. When I think of Knock Airport, I always think of two things. One is the visit I had there during the election campaign. It was a very good visit with Deputy Dillon, former Taoiseach Enda Kenny and others. I think it was also

the place where the late Pope visited when he came to Ireland and I think he said "Mayo for Sam". Sure look, the dream lives on.

These are the things in my mind but I know it is an incredibly important part of the airport infrastructure in this country. We are an island nation. Our airports play a massive role, as too does Knock Airport. We should never, ever have a situation in this country where we think it was a choice between growing what happens at Dublin Airport or the regional airports. We will need that capacity right across the network. That is why we have invested over €20 million in capital funding in Knock Airport over the past few years.

Under the regional airport programme, I really believe we will be able to make progress and along the lines that the Deputy, the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, and others are discussing. We are fully supportive of the growth and development of Knock Airport.

Deputy Michael Collins: The CAMHS service in west Cork is now in a state of crisis. The entire service is operation with just one psychiatrist and there is no psychologist. There is no mental health nurse, no social worker and no therapist on the team. These roles are essential to any functioning CAMHS service. For years, the HSE has claimed to be recruiting. Yet, no staff have ever been appointed. The situation now is so serious that the sole psychiatrist, who is due to retire in the coming years, may retire early due to the overwhelming pressure. That would leave no CAMHS service at all in west Cork.

Recently, a GP urgently referred a 14-year-old experiencing suicidal thoughts, only to be told that the psychiatrist already had 17 emergency cases ahead of them with no timeframe for assessment. What immediate actions will the Government take to stabilise CAMHS in west Cork, ensure urgent recruitment across all professional roles and guarantee that vulnerable children are not left without any mental health services?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Michael Collins for raising this important issue, which I know he regularly raises. I will specifically speak to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, about the issues in west Cork and what further actions can be taken there on the issues the Deputy raised. Evidence shows that around 2% of children and young people should require the support of CAMHS but referrals are continuing to increase every year for the service. Referrals to CAMHS increased from 17,436 children in 2020 to over 29,000 in 2025. It is an increase of almost 70% in referrals in six years. That is an insight into the level of pressure and challenge that exists as well.

We have seen CAMHS very significantly increase its acceptance of referrals. It accepted about 16,600 referrals last year, which was 14% more than the previous year. There are now 81 community teams which delivered over 231,000 appointments last year. There has been an increase in funding as well. There was €181 million allocated last year and a further €10 million has been allocated this year, leading to a ring-fenced budget of €190 million.

I know there are real challenges. Sometimes, those challenges are on recruitment. On foot of the Deputy raising it here today, I will specifically ask the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, who I know is very passionate about this area, to engage directly with the Deputy too.

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

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

Development at Bessborough: Statements

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): I now call on the Minister, Deputy Foley, to make her opening statement.

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle as ucht an deis a thabhairt dom labhairt anseo inniu. I appreciate the opportunity to speak today on developments at the site of the former mother and baby institution at Bessborough. The legacy of the mother and baby institutions is a deeply sad one that continues to be a source of profound hurt and pain for many people across this country. I am very conscious of the sensitivity of this issue, particularly for survivors and former residents of the Bessborough institution, as well as for their families. Indeed, there may well be members of the public in the Gallery today who were born in Bessborough or who had family members there.

The Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes was established in 2015 to investigate and report on a range of issues associated with mother and baby institutions. One of those was Bessborough mother and baby home. As the commission's report documented, the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary had been invited to set up a mother and baby home in Cork by the head of the Cork Board of Guardians. The congregation decided to purchase Bessborough House, a large Georgian house on 210 acres, and opened Bessborough mother and baby home in 1922. While it was owned and run by the congregation, it was largely paid for by public funding.

Inspections of Bessborough mother and baby home were carried out by the Department of Local Government and Public Health. One diligent and determined inspector, Alice Litster, raised the alarm about the fact that 70 of the 114 children admitted to Bessborough in the year ending 31 March 1943 had died. All but one of the infants were under one year old. As the commission's report documented, Ms Litster identified the unsatisfactory milk supply to the home and the failure to breastfeed as the main causes of the high death rate and the unhealthy condition of the children. She later recommended that Bessborough be closed to new admissions for at least three months.

Up to the start of 1945, no serious steps were taken by the congregation, the South Cork Board of Public Assistance or the Department of Local Government and Public Health to address the problem, but finally, in January 1945, the Department of Local Government and Public Health decided to implement Ms Litster's recommendation to close Bessborough to new patients for a period. The mother superior in charge of Bessborough was subsequently replaced. In December of 1945, the Department of Local Government and Public Health wrote to county councils and boards of public assistance to inform them they could resume sending pregnant mothers to Bessborough. This is just one aspect of the decades-long history of Bessborough examined in the final report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes. In total, 9,768 mothers and 8,938 children were admitted to Bessborough until it closed in 1998, which is not that long ago.

The Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes had wide-ranging powers and conducted extensive inquiries, searches and test excavations at institutional sites in an effort to locate the burial places of children. It made extensive efforts to establish where the children who had died at Bessborough were buried. The commission examined the records of the deaths in the institution and cross-referenced these with information provided by the General Register Office. It also reviewed the records compiled in the institution and confirmed that there was no information about burial arrangements there.

The commission was particularly concerned that none of those who had been involved in the running of the institution were able to identify the burial place of the children who had died there. Given the lack of documentary evidence, the commission engaged forensic archaeologists to carry out cartographic assessment of possible unrecorded burial arrangements in the grounds. The forensic archaeologists and the commission's researchers reviewed all available cartographic sources and aerial images. A site survey was also conducted. While there are a number of locations within the grounds where burials could have taken place, no evidence was found of burials anywhere except the congregation burial ground, which is not nearly large enough for the number of children involved.

The commission also examined aerial photography taken by the Irish Air Corps in 1951. This is interesting because the large majority of child deaths at Bessborough occurred before this date and the commission's view was that if there had been burials in the grounds, high-resolution aerial photographs would show some ground disturbance or anomaly on the landscape to give some indication of where remains might be located. However, no visible features on the Bessborough landscape indicated any obvious site of the remains of such a large number of children.

In addition, the commission issued a national public appeal seeking information from individuals who might have had information about the burial places of children who died in Bessborough. All information was followed up. The locations identified as possible burial sites, some of which have now been built on, were assessed by forensic archaeologists but no evidence was produced to suggest any of the identified sites contain human remains. The commission also actively investigated the possibility that former residents of Bessborough might have been buried in other locations. It examined the burial records of burial grounds that had been in operation in the area. While it identified some burials, it was unable to establish the burial location of the majority of children who had died while resident at the institution. The commission considered that it is likely that burials did take place in the grounds of Bessborough but, despite its extensive investigations, was unable to find any evidence of a location. It considered that the only way that it can be established whether burials had taken place in the grounds is by an excavation of the entire property, including the parts of the former 200 acre estate that have now been built on, which it did not consider feasible. While I understand there have been calls for further investigations, it is really important to note that there are very differing views among survivor groups about how the site should now be treated.

I am aware planning permission has recently been granted for the building of apartments on a portion of the privately owned land at the Bessborough site. For the record, I must be clear the State does not own the land in question. The Government's response to the legacy of mother and baby institutions is set out in the Action Plan for Survivors and Former Residents of Mother and Baby and County Home Institutions. On foot of the action plan, in November 2022, the

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage wrote to local authorities, including Cork City Council, requesting that development plan processes give adequate consideration to incorporating appropriate measures to ensure the protection of unrecorded burial sites associated with an institution. While planning decisions are a matter for the relevant planning authorities, the circular issued by the Minister noted that, in assessing planning applications at such locations, evidence of unrecorded burial sites should be treated as a material consideration and that appropriate conditions may be attached to potential developments.

My predecessor, Deputy Roderic O’Gorman, also brought the findings of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation to the attention of Cork City Council and An Bord Pleanála, highlighting the unresolved questions with regard to the location of burials on the site and, where any development takes place at the site, the need for that to involve archaeological investigation and ongoing monitoring. I note that in the permission that was recently granted, Cork City Council has attached a number of conditions, including requirements to have a forensic archaeological monitoring strategy and a forensic archaeologist in place to monitor excavation at the site every single day. It is also specified that if human remains are located, all work on site should cease and relevant authorities should be informed. Forensic archaeologists are professionals who work on the recovery of human remains, including in the context of modern crime scene investigations. It is important to state here that if the development commences and remains are uncovered during excavation for building purposes at the Bessborough site, it may then be appropriate for those remains to be excavated under the provisions of the Institutional Burials Act 2022.

The profound importance of both local and national memorialisation is clear from engagements with survivors and former residents.

The Government's action plan contains commitments relating to dignified local memorialisation of known or agreed burial sites. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage established a working group of departmental and local authority officials to advance the commitment to local memorialisation. Officials in the relevant Departments will work together with a view to bringing forward proposals to support inclusive, survivor-led local memorialisation.

Another key commitment in the Government’s action plan is the development of a national memorial and records centre. In March 2022, the Government approved high-level proposals for a national centre for research and remembrance to be located on Sean MacDermott Street in Dublin. It will stand as a site of conscience to honour equally all those who spent time in industrial schools, Magdalen laundries, mother and baby and county home institutions, reformatories and related institutions, and all those who have lived experience of Ireland’s historical adoption and boarded-out systems. The national centre will stand as part of our national institutions and will comprise a museum and exhibition space, the development of which will be led by the National Museum of Ireland, a research centre and repository of records related to institutional trauma in the 20th century, which will form part of the National Archives, and a garden space for reflection and remembrance.

There has been significant progress on the development of the centre. In July 2023, the Government approved the master plan for the national centre campus and the preliminary business case for the main national centre buildings. In March 2024, the Government approved further key project documents, including the preliminary business case for the full national

centre campus. An application for planning permission was submitted in November 2024, and planning permission was granted by Dublin City Council in February 2025. Enabling works are under way at the site and main works are expected to commence later this year.

Survivor members were recently appointed to the steering group that is driving the overall co-ordinated development of the national centre campus. In addition to survivors, the steering group membership includes the special advocate for survivors and representatives of the relevant State bodies. While physically situated in Dublin, the national centre will be accessible for all survivors and affected persons in other parts of Ireland and abroad. This will be made possible through the provision of digital access to some records and exhibits. In addition, it is envisaged physical presences will be developed elsewhere, including in conjunction with some local museums, to enable survivors to visit more easily.

I fully acknowledge the trauma that must come with not knowing the burial location of one's family members. I acknowledge that the application to build on lands at Bessborough, and the granting of planning permission for that application, has reawakened much of that trauma. I would like to express my sincere understanding of how difficult this has been for mothers who stayed in Bessborough and for the children who were born there.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Micheál Carrigy): I thank the Minister for that. I also welcome to the Chamber any persons in the Public Gallery who are associated with the Bessborough development.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I am going to talk about Bessborough, but I will also talk about the entire system of mother and baby homes, industrial schools and county homes. We have had many apologies in this House, and rightly so; they are welcome. Too often, however, the State has failed to truly get to grips with what was actually in place in this State, that is, an entire system that was integrated between county homes, Magdalen laundries, mother and baby homes and industrial schools. To say it was a dark period of our history is an understatement, and I will return to that because it is not merely history. This was an entire system that had the imprimatur of the State and that the State was entirely complicit in. The State's response has always been to treat it as piecemeal and a bit of wrongdoing by institutions here and there, instead of really confronting the fact the State fully endorsed and was part of this system, and to a large extent relied on the system.

There has not been a frank and honest recognition of the pain that was caused. The most obvious example of that was the heartlessness of the six-month limit for compensation under the mother and baby home scheme, as if the trauma of separation was any less for those who fell under that bracket. We know now very clearly that trauma exists right from birth and that separation would have been created. That was one of the most callous proposals and decisions adopted by any Government in recent years.

Bessborough puts it into stark relief. We can all acknowledge maternal health in the forties and fifties in Ireland was not what it should have been, but to say the standards in Bessborough fell below that does not even begin to cover it. Public health reports looking at this saw an infant mortality rate of 82% in some years in the forties. The cause of death of some 20% of the deaths in Bessborough in the forties and fifties was marasmus, a form of severe

malnutrition. People were dying in Bessborough in Cork in the forties and fifties for want of food and nutrition.

It is also important to say this is not only history, and we would make a profound mistake in treating this as only a period that can be looked back on and examined in a historical context. There are people in the Public Gallery and watching on whose brothers, sisters and mothers were in Bessborough. For those people, this is profoundly real. This is about being able to identify where their loved ones were buried; that is what we are talking about. I was at an oral hearing for one of the previous applications, which was thankfully refused, and I remember a debate between esteemed, capable people who had different opinions on how to interpret old ordnance survey maps. One set of experts was trying to say, "Well, the marking there for a burial ground represents the order's burial ground over here", while another expert was saying, "No, very clearly, this burial ground could potentially have been there." Which of them was right?

The point of this, and what has stayed with me since then, is that this was no ordinary housing application. This was a housing application talking about whether or not children had been buried there. That was the fundamental point. It is no ordinary planning application that we are discussing now. It is profoundly wrong and hurtful to build there. The Government will say it cannot interfere in planning locations, but there could have been a Government intervention in the Institutional Burials Bill. It is not only in Bessborough but also in Sean Ross Abbey and other locations across the State, and the Government should have recognised that. We have been talking for some time in this House about this issue as regards the institutions and where children were buried. Some 700 children who died at Bessborough are unaccounted for. We do not know where they are buried. It is absolutely appalling.

I have talked about the State's complicity in this. A story just reported today that the State's Chief Medical Adviser, James Deeny, communicated to Bessborough that they would put aside their investigation if the death rate continued to decline. That is what we are talking about here, the potential burial place of children. The Government needs to find some legislative mechanism to ensure sites such as this and across the State are protected, because this is not the only location.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: The decision to grant planning permission for a residential development on the site of the former Bessborough mother and baby home in Cork is deeply wrong. It is deeply troubling and profoundly disrespectful to the women and children who lived there, who suffered there and who died there. Bessborough is not just another development site; it is a place of trauma, loss and gross injustice. It is a place where women were confined, where children died and where families are still searching for the truth. We cannot discuss planning at Bessborough as if it is comparable to any other planning application in the State, as if it is simply another zoned map. This is about history, accountability, human dignity and the real impact that Bessborough still has on those who were there. This decision risks erasing history and erasing the often horrific lived experiences of women and their children. These are not distant, abstract stories.

The Minister mentioned 1998. I was a mother in 1998. These are real people who suffered real injustices at the hands of both the State and the church.

They are sisters, aunts, daughters, mothers and children. They are families who were failed and who continue to be failed. We know that hundreds of mothers and children died in Bessborough during its years of operation. We know there are no records for some of those who died there. We know that the commission itself said it is highly likely that burials took place on the grounds. In that context, how can any development proceed in good conscience without first establishing the full truth? I acknowledge the Minister's opening statement and the recognition of a forensic archaeologist but that is simply not good enough.

This week, academics and human rights experts warned that allowing large-scale development on this site risks undermining Ireland's obligations to properly investigate locations connected to mother and baby homes. They raised serious concerns that the full extent of burials may not yet be known and that construction could proceed without questions being answered. These warnings cannot be ignored. They must be taken seriously by the Government and the planning authorities.

Sinn Féin has been clear and consistent on the legacy of mother and baby homes: survivors and families must come first. The record of successive Governments on this issue has been one of delay, exclusion and avoidance. From the commission of investigation established ten years ago and the sealing of the records to the redress scheme that excluded survivors, there have been repeated failures to confront the truth. Once again, we are faced with a decision that appears to prioritise moving on over finding out what really happened and attempting to bring some level of closure to those women who suffered so horrifically within those walls.

There is no doubt that we need housing, and Sinn Féin supports developments, but we support the development of homes in the right place at the right time and not at the cost of covering up the truth or stripping dignity away further. We cannot build over sites where there are still unanswered questions about unmarked graves, missing records and the fate of children who died in State-supported institutions. If this development proceeds without a full investigation, without proper consultation with survivors and without ensuring that all burial grounds are identified and treated with respect, the State will be failing these women and children all over again.

There must be immediate action to safeguard this site and a full and thorough examination of the grounds is required. Survivors and families must be consulted and listened to. Local memorialisation must be provided and no development should proceed until the truth is fully established. The Taoiseach himself has said the State failed mothers and children in these institutions, but words must mean something. If we allow this site to be built over without first establishing what lies beneath, not only will history just be neglected, it will be actively erased.

Survivors have endured unimaginable trauma. I cannot imagine the trauma of not knowing where a loved one is buried. They should not be retraumatised by decisions taken without them about their history and against their wishes. A grave injustice was done. It cannot and must not be covered over. Sinn Féin is determined to secure truth and justice for survivors of mother and baby homes and for those who did not survive. They have strength and resilience, but what must seem like an ever-ongoing reopening of scars and traumatic events cannot continue to be inflicted upon them by the State or any arms of its apparatus.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Some 18,000 women and children went through or spent time in Bessborough. It closed in 1998. This is not just a historical wrongdoing; it is a modern one

right up to today. There are people who still bear the scars and the trauma. To give a feel of it, John O'Brien died on 3 November 1922. He was ten months old. He was a young little baby, who was probably laughing and able to clap and what have you. He was the first child to die in Bessborough. Zoei Bonny died on 10 August 1994. She would have been 32 this year. She was only two days old and she was the last baby to die in Bessborough. From John to Zoei, 921 other children died on that site. I do not have the time here, unfortunately, to name each and every one of those children, but the stories of Zoei, John and all those whose lives were lost too soon cannot be erased from history. The State owes it to them to make sure that does not happen. They were not given dignity in life, but they should at least be given dignity in death.

Over 923 children died. There are 64 graves. Only 64 have been found. It is hard to wrap your head around the number of children, babies and mothers who died in Bessborough. It is unbelievable. Three children died on this date, 26 March, over the years. There was John Coughlan, one month old, who died in 1923; Kieran Lennon, who was six months old and who died in 1945; and Vincent Joseph Finn, who was two days old when he died in 1959. There are no graves to visit them today to remember them and no headstones to mourn them. There is no dignity in their death. The atrocities inflicted on them in life, continue in their death.

People use the phrase, "to sweep it under the carpet", about Ireland's approach to mother and baby homes throughout the 20th century. Now, instead of sweeping it under the carpet, it is going to be swept underneath apartment blocks and concrete. How can that be right? What is planned is wrong and must not go ahead. This Government must step in. The solution is to properly investigate where these babies are buried, to find their graves and to give them peace in death. We will make a submission to appeal the planning permission granted. I want to say strongly here on the Dáil record that I object to it. I object to any development on this site until all investigative means have been used to identify where every child and mother is buried. I object on behalf of Zoei and John and all of the hundreds of babies who have had their chance of dignity in life and in death robbed from them. I object on behalf of Nellie Sweetman, who was 86, when she died after decades in Bessborough, and Josephine Larkin, who was only 20 when she died of shock after extensive burns on her body.

The mother and baby homes commission of investigation did not use all means necessary, and neither Cork City Council nor An Coimisiún Pleanála can see the results of the investigation. That is wrong. How can a decision be made without seeing the investigation? Planning should never have been approved, and it must now be refused. The Government should CPO this site and carry out the investigations. I attended a vigil recently and the level of upset was just indescribable. It is hard to imagine the heartbreak people had when they heard apartments were going to be built on this site.

I take my final moment to thank those who have made sure that Zoei, John and every other baby in Bessborough will never be forgotten. In particular, I mention Carmel Cantwell, whose fight for William has shown what an excellent sister she is. There is a vigil there every summer. I encourage anyone to go to it to listen to the stories of the people, the mothers and the children, of Bessborough.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: When we speak about Bessborough, we are not speaking about an abstract planning file or a routine decision before a local authority. We are speaking about a

place that goes to the very core of who we are, or who we claim to be, as a republic. There are moments when politics must step back from process and confront conscience. This is one of those moments. The history of mother and baby homes is not distanced or detached. It is raw and painful, and remains unresolved for far too many families.

Bessborough, in particular, stands as one of the starkest symbols of that legacy. Nearly 19,000 women and children passed through its doors. That is not just a figure. It is a measure of suffering on a scale that is difficult to comprehend fully. We must be honest about what this means. These were women and children who endured conditions that no person should ever have to face. Their experiences were marked by stigma, silence and a profound absence of compassion from the State and society alike.

When proposals come forward to develop this land, we cannot treat it as just another site. This is not simply about housing supply or zoning decisions. It is about moral responsibility and memory and whether we have truly learned anything from our past. More than 900 babies are believed to have died at Bessborough. As my colleague, Senator Harmon, pointed out, the majority of these children remain unaccounted for, and the site itself may in fact contain a mass grave. That is the crux of it. Truth matters to survivors and relatives, and it must matter to us as legislators.

To proceed with development in the absence of a full and thorough investigation would not just be premature; it would be wrong. It would risk closing off avenues to truth which have already been denied for decades, and send a message that expediency can have precedent over dignity.

My colleague on Cork City Council, Councillor Peter Horgan, has been extremely clear on this. This is a deeply painful and shameful chapter in Ireland's history and any future of the site must be guided by sensitivity, transparency and respect. It should, most importantly, be conscious of the pain and suffering of survivors. We in the Labour Party have urged the Minister for housing to use powers under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act to protect places like Bessborough from development, yet he has failed to do so. That is why Councillor Horgan has lodged a planning objection against the site.

We have to ask ourselves difficult questions. What does it say about us if we build over ground that may contain unmarked graves? What does it say to those who lived through these institutions or who lost loved ones there? For many, Bessborough is not history; it is a lived experience, a grief that has not yet found closure, and questions which remain unanswered.

Let me be clear; this is not an argument against housing. We all recognise the urgency of the housing crisis, particularly in a growing city like Cork. However, the issue is not whether we build, it is where and how we build. There are alternatives. There are vacant and derelict sites which can and should be prioritised. What is being asked here is not unreasonable; it is simply that we approach this particular site with the care, sensitivity and respect it demands. Ultimately, this comes down to respect for the women who were sent there, the children who never left, and the families who are still seeking truth.

We have a choice. We can face our history in full, however uncomfortable that may be, or we can turn away from it. If we choose to turn away, we diminish not just our past but our integrity as a society. Bessborough is not just land; it is a memory and deserves to be treated as such.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I express my solidarity with the survivors of the Bessborough mother and baby home and of all mother and baby homes as we broach this issue. We are talking about a matter of great sensitivity relating to the disappearance of hundreds of women and babies. This is a matter of basic human dignity for survivors and for the babies and mothers who did not survive. We are also talking about what exactly it means when the State makes an apology for something. The State is making plenty of apologies these days but what do they mean? We all know what a hollow apology sounds and feels like. How do we know, and how does the State express it is actually sorry when it comes to survivors of mother and baby homes? There always tends to be a focus on the financial redress side of a State apology but true justice requires a much broader and more holistic approach than simple financial restitution. That is the easy part, and we are not even getting that right by putting up arbitrary barriers based on time spent on institutions if one wants to apply to these things.

A genuine apology requires self-reflection and changed attitudes and behaviours towards people who may previously have been excluded and looked down upon and changed approaches to how the State conducts its business so that the failures and sins of the past are not repeated. It requires truth-seeking and truth-telling, reflection and memorialisation.

We know that of the 923 babies who died at Bessborough, 859 are entirely unaccounted for. The location of the remains of 19 mothers is also unknown. The commission of investigation reports it is highly likely burials took place on the grounds of Bessborough. The absence of certainty around the location of the remains of those who died at Bessborough is precisely why planning permission was refused for a redevelopment there by An Bord Pleanála in 2021. Nothing has changed in the interim.

We cannot atone for best Bessborough, this national shame, by bulldozing it and paving over the memories of those who lost their lives there. Special advocate for survivors, Patricia Carey, has spoken about how this proposal has been retraumatising for survivors. I am sure the Minister has seen the letter written by a number of human rights lawyers and academics from the University of Galway to An Coimisiún Pleanála today regarding this site, and is aware that the State has failed to comply with its obligations under European human rights law with regard to deaths and disappearances. We need to heed the calls from the survivors.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I thank the Government Chief Whip for facilitating time for this debate at my request. I was struck by something my colleague, Deputy Ó Laoghaire, said earlier in relation to the tendency of the State to treat issues of institutional abuse as piecemeal and individual. If we look at industrial schools, Magdalen laundries and mother and baby homes, the fact of the matter is this was incarceration funded by the State and facilitated by a corrupt institution, the Roman Catholic Church.

I was struck by some aspects of the Minister's speech in relation to there being no information about burial arrangements. While the Minister stated that there are a number of locations in the grounds where burial could have taken place, no evidence of burial was found anywhere except the congregation burial ground. That brings me back to an experience in my own family. My grand aunt was in a mother and baby home in the 1950s. Her child was taken from her and sent to Australia. We only found this out approximately ten or 12 years ago. She could not make contact with her biological daughter for decades afterwards. There was no

paperwork surrounding her daughter's birth or registration of birth; it was extremely difficult to obtain.

I note the previous application was for a SHD but this was ruled by An Bord Pleanála as being unsuitable. The fact of the matter is that the Bessborough site requires a national intervention to prevent development. The State has obligations under the ECHR to investigate this and it should be responsible for surveying and protecting the site itself. It should not be something that is left to any private entity. Some of the rhetoric coming from Government in relation to this is markedly different and departs from what the official policy position is. The Taoiseach said Cork City Council should have purchased it, the Tánaiste said he was deeply uncomfortable with the situation, and the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, said the solution was not to CPO the site.

The State needs to step in here. This should be a site of conscience and national commemoration. The way survivors have been treated here, as survivors are consistently treated by the official mechanisms of the State, is absolutely appalling. The fact of the matter is that only two people, Carmel Cantwell and my colleague, Councillor Peter Horgan, bothered to lodge a formal objection to this. The Minister for housing has powers under section 28 and can issue ministerial guidelines.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: At the outset, I thank the Minister and Government for facilitating these statements today. They are absolutely necessary. As we all know, Bessborough represents a very long dark chapter in our past. It extended from 1922 to 1998. It was a very recent chapter. It is not that long ago since Bessborough closed its doors. Some of the history of what went on in Bessborough is known and some is unknown but certainly there were horrors in relation to it. Some of that is documented but much of it is not. As we have outlined here today, 9,768 women and girls went through Bessborough, and 8,938 children also experienced it.

That is over 18,000 human beings, as Deputy Gould referred to earlier. A total of 923 children died in Bessborough. We know that only a very tiny number of those are accounted for. These facts are stark and very significant. I acknowledge that the commission of investigation undertook work on the Bessborough site. It also concluded that it is likely there are further burial sites relating to Bessborough. The fact that the commission said it has found no evidence as to where these may be located should not in any way be used as a reason to suggest the Bessborough site can be developed. We absolutely need to err on the side of caution on this. The 923 figure is stark in terms of our past as a country.

With regard to the role of Cork City Council, a unanimous motion, as I understand it, has been passed regarding the compulsory purchase order, CPO, of the site. I do not understand how the council has not been more proactive over the years on the site. As someone who served on the council for many years I know that councillors have a lot of powers in the development plan over the zoning of land and designating and categorising of land. I genuinely do not understand how the Bessborough site was not protected in various city development plans over the years. That was a mistake and that was unfortunate but that is where we are now. As we know, there is planning permission in place.

As housing spokesperson for my party, I speak week in and week out on the need for housing supply and on the housing crisis, and how that is impacting on our citizens in an acute way.

We need housing but there are limits and exceptions to that. This situation is an exception to that. I have no difficulty in saying, as a housing spokesperson, that this site should not be developed. I may come in for some criticism on this given my role but I absolutely stand over it. There are exceptions to everything and this is one of them given the very dark past that occurred in Bessborough. I ask that the Government does everything to find a different way forward here. It is possible to find an alternative way forward. As public representatives, we all know the reality when there is a planning permission and it is appealed to An Coimisiún Pleanála. If that is allowed to follow through on its course, there will be a decision. There is a window there for the Government to consider what it can do on this. I acknowledge that the options are limited but there is scope to examine this. I thank the Minister for being here and for listening to us today. Family members of survivors and survivors are with us here today in the Public Gallery. I acknowledge them making the journey from Cork to listen to the debate, which is so important. It is a large site. As a Deputy said earlier, it should be a site of conscience. It should be a site that is protected and preserved in respect of those who experienced Bessborough and in respect of their family members. We have a duty as public representatives to work together and collectively to try to find a way forward here that meets those needs better. I ask that the Government does this. We need to err on the side of caution and that is what I ask to happen.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Today's statements on Bessborough are welcome and very important but they will be meaningless unless the Government takes action on foot of the debate today. I urge the Minister to listen to the contributions from across the House, including by Members from her own party, who are calling on the Government to intervene. The bottom line is that apartments should not be built on what is very likely a mass grave. It would not be accepted anywhere else and we cannot accept it here. Níl sé ceart.

Last week I spoke at a protest outside the gates of Leinster House. I want to say directly to the Minister what I said to the survivors and their supporters at that gathering. Recently I attended a vigil organised at the Bessborough site in Cork. Afterwards I took time to look at the death records from the institution: 923 children died in the care of the nuns in Bessborough. The scale of the suffering cannot be overstated, yet only 64 burials are accounted for. The commission of investigation into mother and baby homes found that it is very likely the remains of infants are buried on this site.

During the 1940s in Ireland, the infant mortality rate was 6.5%. In Bessborough, it was nearly 61%, which is ten times higher. The State knew this and it turned a blind eye. Officials in the Department of Local Government and Public Health at the time recognised that should Bessborough deaths be leaked to the public it would result in a "public scandal". All these years later all we have is a decision to grant permission to build apartments on the site that saw so much tragedy. Some of those in power think that this is an issue of the past. They could not be more wrong. The survivors of Bessborough have never received justice. Families are still looking for information and answers. This is not just about Bessborough. If the planning permission goes through here, it sets a precedent for the use of other grounds and other institutions such as those in Sean Ross Abbey and Castlepollard where burials also remain unaccounted for.

These children matter, the survivors matter and our history matters. The Government cannot treat this like a normal planning application and sit idly by as concrete is poured over graves.

Despite what the Government might say, our reckoning with this dark period of our history is not over. It is crucially important that future generations understand what happened here and elsewhere. We need a full investigation of the grounds of Bessborough. This should be followed by sensitive excavation of the site, which should then be subject to a CPO to establish a memorial for all those who suffered. The Minister mentioned the museum in Dublin but survivors elsewhere across the country, including in Cork, also need a space, not just an apartment complex. Every attempt to reckon with this period of our history has been deeply flawed. Time and again successive Governments have failed survivors. This cycle must end. That starts with the Minister intervening to stop this planning application at Bessborough. Abuse cannot, and must not, be cemented over.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I welcome to the Public Gallery people who were incarcerated in Bessborough and other institutions. I particularly welcome Councillor Noelle Brown who was born in Bessborough and who has been an activist in this area for decades. Noelle has tirelessly highlighted the wrong done in this country.

We are at a tipping point in how we acknowledge and make amends for our history and the large-scale human rights abuses that took place in mother and baby institutions. The incarceration of women and the forced disappearance of their infants and children, either through death or forced adoption, has left a legacy that affects not only survivors but us as a nation. Thanks to Catherine Corless, we finally have a sensitive excavation taking place in Tuam. It has signalled to survivors that these children mattered not only to their families and mothers but also to this country. The news that planning permission was granted at Bessborough, the site of another mass grave, caused deep pain for survivors of that institution and sent shock waves to survivors of other institutions where thousands of children's burials were also unaccounted for. The recent protest outside the Dáil and the phenomenal public support that followed illustrates clearly that the people of Ireland want the remains of the children in Bessborough dealt with equally sensitively as those at Tuam. The stories told by survivors were absolutely heartbreaking and they have been retraumatised by this planning permission.

A second protest by students and teachers from Larkin Community College was a tender and sincere questioning of why the Bessborough children do not matter. These young people, students from the college, made paper hearts with the names of the 923 children whose remains are disposed of at Bessborough and the cruel way that each one of them died. It would take me 45 minutes to read out the names of every one of those 923 children. The children of Bessborough were not buried; they were disposed of in the hope that they would be forgotten and never recovered. The plan to build on that mass grave is a double cruelty at a time we should know better. This is not who we are as a country. This is not who we are as a nation. It is not what we want as a country to see happen. The children of Larkin Community College have been very clear in what they want. They want to make sure that every one of those children is valued and loved and remembered, not only by their families but by us as a country.

It is well-documented that Bessborough was a cruel and cold place for every mother and every child incarcerated there. To have them subjected to that cruelty at their most vulnerable can never be forgotten.

3 o'clock

To leave a mother grieving the loss of her child for decades with no grave to visit, and then to decide to pour concrete over a sensitive site is a modern cruelty that has no place in Ireland in 2026. It is not who we are as a nation.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I am conscious that this will be my last contribution, and I am sure that of others, before we head off for the Easter holidays. The Easter celebrations have a particular resonance in Ireland because we celebrate the parts of our history where we were valiant. We will probably visit commemoration sites and read testimony on walls about a nation that proudly professed that it would cherish all of its children equally. I hope those of us at those commemorations can reflect on the motion before us and think about the 923 children who were not held to that standard. They are children whose names and the fact they existed is known through birth certs, but we know nothing of how they died and where they were laid to rest. We all know that history is a continuum. When we go to those commemorations and speak of being part of a republican ilk, we know each one of those lines. The failures that befell babies in Bessborough were similar to those of the women and children who were incarcerated, were forced to engage in vaccine trials and forced adoptions, and were cruelly treated. They were failed but we become part of that failure when we become complicit in the cover-up and when we pour cement to ensure we can never establish the facts. We may never be able to find their little bodies. In becoming complicit, we in this Chamber become part of the continuum of failure that has not yet led to a true reckoning of ourselves as a State. As a nation, we are defined not only by what we choose to commemorate but also by how we choose to commemorate it. In the coming two weeks we will talk about the parts of our history where we were valiant but at the same time we will be complicit in a scenario where we pour cement over a place where 923 babies are buried. That is a failure of our own history.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The nub of the issue, in terms of the outrage currently being experienced within the survivor community, is the treatment by this Government and successive Governments of victims of State wrongdoing. The Government needs to display compassion, humility and understanding, but that is not coming through and has not come through in the context of the survivors of industrial schools, Magdalene laundries and symphysiotomy. The list goes on. Instead, what we see is a litigious, legally minded and legally focused response to victims of State wrongdoing and ultimately an attitude of waiting for people to die out and for the problem to simply die. In my role in a previous organisation, I advised the interdepartmental working group on the redress programme for the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes. One of my main messages within that forum was that there was too much dominance of legal thinking and too little humility and compassion. In that exercise I listened to survivors of mother and baby homes. I was struck by how many of them have shaped their lives around their experiences. These people have got qualifications in human rights so they can argue their case. They have fought for decades for justice and to be seen and heard, and many of them will die before they ever see it. This current development is just another demonstration and display of this Government's failure to grasp that concept. When we as a State have so brutally failed a group of people, the Government and all of us must show utter humility and absolute compassion when we engage with people and deal with all of these issues. Building and concreting over the site of a mother and baby home is so far from that that it really is horrific.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: This matter goes to the heart of how we as a State reckon with our past and respond to those who continue to live with its consequences. The focus today is on the history of Bessborough and the wider legacy of mother and baby institutions in this country. Bessborough was one of a network of institutions that operated for decades in Ireland by taking in women and girls, many of them very young, who found themselves pregnant outside marriage. Those women were often sent there in circumstances not of their choosing. Once they were inside, they experienced a system that was harsh, isolating and in many cases deeply traumatic. They were separated from the families and communities and in many cases from their children. Their voices were not heard. Their rights were not respected. For far too long, their experiences were hidden from public view. Children born in Bessborough, like those born in similar institutions across the State, faced their own stark realities. Many were adopted, often without full or informed consent from their mothers. Others remained in the institution for periods of time. Tragically, many in Bessborough did not survive. For decades the story of these women and children was not spoken about openly. There was silence at a societal and institutional level. Silence was imposed on those who lived through those experiences. It is only in more recent years, through the courage and persistence of survivors, that the full extent of what happened in places like Bessborough has come to light.

The establishment of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes was a significant step in that process. Its final report provided an important record and acknowledgement of what occurred. It documented the conditions within those institutions and the experiences of those who were there. As we know, reports alone cannot answer every question or address every concern. The legacy of our mother and baby institutions remains one of the most painful chapters in our State's history. While the Government's action plan for survivors and former residents is a step in the right direction, we must say honestly that it does not go far enough, particularly when it comes to the protection of unrecorded burial sites. The request from the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to local authorities, including Cork City Council, to consider these sites within their development plans is welcome but consideration alone is not enough. These are not ordinary planning matters; they are sacred sites, places of memory and in many cases the only resting place of vulnerable people, children and women whose dignity was denied in life. We need stronger and clearer protections to ensure that no unrecorded burial site is ever disturbed, overlooked or lost to development. The State must lead here with urgency and compassion because how we treat these sites today reflects how seriously we take the injustices of the past. We must remember that this is not simply about land or surveys. It is about people. It is about mothers who were denied agency over their lives. It is about children who were separated from their families. It is about those who died and those whose resting places may not be fully known. It is about trust in the State to do what is right even when it is difficult, trust in our institutions to engage honestly with the past and trust that the voices of survivors will continue to be heard.

The Government's action plan rightly recognises the importance of dignified, local memorialisation of known and agreed burial sites. This is not simply a policy commitment; it is a moral obligation to those who were lost to the families and communities that have carried that pain for generations. While I welcome the establishment of the working group by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, what is now needed is urgency and delivery. Survivors have waited long enough for recognition, respect and tangible action on the ground. We must ensure this process is truly inclusive, is led by survivors, and has

survivors' voices at the centre of the decision-making process. However, consultation alone is not enough. Clear timelines, adequate resources and visible progress are essential. I urge the Government to move swiftly from commitment to implementation, to support local communities in creating appropriate memorials and to ensure these sites are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve. I am aware that planning permission has recently been granted by Cork City Council for a housing development on the Bessborough site. While I acknowledge that a number of conditions have been attached to this permission, including a requirement to have a forensic archaeological monitoring strategy and the presence of a forensic archaeologist during excavation, my clear personal view is that proceeding in this manner is fundamentally wrong. If there is even the slightest possibility that burial remains may be located on the site for which planning permission has been approved, assurances should have been confirmed as part of the planning process that no burials took place on that portion of land.

That did not happen here and that is a serious concern for me. The conditions provide the work must cease if remains are discovered and that the relevant authorities must be notified but we should not be relying on discovery during construction. We should be ensuring beyond doubt, before any permission is granted, that such deeply sensitive issues have been fully examined. It is now a matter for An Coimisiún Pleanála to determine how this application proceeds from here. I urge that body to take the utmost care and to ensure respect, dignity and due process are at the heart of any decision made.

This is not just a planning issue but a matter of historical responsibility and human decency. The history of Bessborough is not just local history but is a part of our national story. It reflects a time when vulnerable women and children were failed by the very systems meant to protect them. Acknowledging that history is essential, as is learning from it, but so too is ensuring we continue to respond to its legacy. We cannot change what happened in the past but we can decide how we deal with it now. We can choose to listen, we can choose to act and we can choose to ensure no legitimate concern is left unanswered. In doing so, we honour those who lived through those experiences and those who did not live to tell their stories.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is an outrage that planning permission would be given on this site where over 900 children, that we know of, died but where only 64 graves have ever been found. It has happened despite all the campaigning of survivors and the groups connected with them.

I will mention something the Minister for justice said here the other day when this was raised with him. He basically acted like the Government was powerless and that it was terrible altogether. He used the words "... the Government cannot interfere in respect of planning applications" but of course it can. The Government could object to the application via a Minister, for example. Has it done that? As well as that, this is just part of a pattern of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the two parties that were in power for the hundred years when all this happened, allowing the church off the hook because they do not want the history of their role in all this examined. That is the conclusion we have to draw. As for the idea the Government is powerless, it was in here passing emergency laws for the hauliers over the past couple of nights and it could have passed emergency laws on this.

That land should never have been allowed to be sold by that congregation. The Government should have made sure of that. Which congregation was it? It was the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. As of last year the congregation is involved in ongoing discussion with the Government regarding financial contributions to a redress scheme for survivors with reports indicating they have resisted demands for payment on the grounds they did not act in an untoward manner. This is despite the fact there was an 80% death rate in some of the years of the home's existence. Obviously it was not like that in all the years. The congregation was asked for €96.5 million. They have assets of €37 million. I am rounding the figures up. They have almost €2 million in cash in the bank. The nuns sold this site in 2021 and they pocketed €6.85 million. That is the Government's fault. That never should have happened. Fianna Fáil let them away with murder on this since the 1990s and it could have intervened to put a law into effect so no congregation could sell any site where there were potentially graves. This is an outrage.

The Clann Project has pointed out the Government is legally bound by the European Court of Human Rights to find any bodies that exist and bring them back in a suitable manner for the families of those affected. Bessborough was a site of systemic oppression, and the Government has made sure that that has not actually happened. In the letter the Clann Project pointed out that planning permission was refused a number of times, so the Government knew this was going to happen eventually. I would say the Government is happy to have this built over, so it is another chapter finished for it. The Clann Project also pointed out that under the European legislation investigating deaths of children, mothers ascertaining the whereabouts of the disappeared and returning the remains to relatives is part of the State's human rights obligations which it has not complied with.

I was not in the Dáil when the report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes came out but I remember reading that and thinking "Here we go again, another whitewash". That report should not be cited. It should have been voted down by the Government because so much of it was so mild in its manner towards the people running the homes. It did not use all reasonable means to search for the disappeared children, so let us put that one away. Some of those means would be geophysical surveys, radar, electrical resistivity and magnetometry. I will finish by saying the Special Advocate for Survivors has called for the Government to stop. That is someone the Government appointed. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are trying to bury the truth here and they are happy a private developer is putting this out of the way for them.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I pay tribute to Carmel Cantwell, Noelle Brown who I see in the Gallery, and other survivors and those affected by the crimes committed at Bessborough Mother and Baby Institution. I called it a "home" at the protest last week and I was rightly rounded upon and told it should be called an institution because these were institutions of brutality and oppression that traumatised, stigmatised and brutalised women, and of course led to the deaths of 923 children. It is a horrific stain.

Over the next few weeks we will be celebrating the Irish revolution - the 1916 Rising. One of the greatest - and in my opinion the greatest - Irish revolutionary, whose bust is behind us, was James Connolly. He was a revolutionary as well as a socialist and warned that if the country was partitioned it would lead to a "carnival or reaction" North and South. Connolly was very consciously an advocate for women's liberation and believed that if the Irish struggle

for freedom did not liberate women it would be a hollow victory. When he was warning about the carnival or reaction that would result from partition, he was very specifically worried about what would happen to women in a partitioned Ireland where reactionary forces gained dominance in the State. It is appropriate then that Bessborough was set up in 1922 - the year of partition - as part of a policy by the new State of outsourcing the care of women and children to the Catholic Church which then ran institutions where, in one year, three out of four children died, many of them of starvation. I was reading an article I was sent by Donal O'Keeffe in *The Echo* about the fact in 1947 the State's Chief Medical Officer's papers have revealed a threatened investigation by the State into 700 deaths at the time in Bessborough was abandoned if there was a commitment to reduce the number of deaths of children to single digits. It is horrendous what was going on. They did not investigate at the time and the deaths continued, though they reduced.

The dark stain we are talking about on the history of this State is due to its treatment of women and children, its stigmatisation of women because they did not comply with a twisted notion of morality and then the actual deaths of children, the burial place of hundreds of whom remain unaccounted for. It is unbelievable. The idea we would go from that to prioritising the interests of property developers says it all about the carnival of reaction Connolly warned of. We go from this killing of children, effectively, this starvation of children who were buried in unmarked graves – the disappearance of children – to property developers profiting.

We cannot do anything about it even though we are trampling on the sensitivities of people who have been brutalised in these horrific institutions.

I was saying at the protest last week that I was born in a mother and baby home. I recently went with my mother to try to find the place. It had been in Highgate in north London and we could not find it. I have been reunited with my mother and the outcome has been a good one. I met somebody at the protest, Sarah - she said it was okay to mention her name - from Cork. She said to me afterwards that she was born in the Highgate mother and baby home, which we did not manage to find. That mattered to me and it matters to her. I got some messages from other people who said they were born in Highgate. We were disappeared to England and then quietly brought back to be adopted. Our outcomes were okay but Sarah was born in Highgate and then was in Bessborough. She is out there protesting; a second generation of people affected by all of this.

The thought that we will build on this site, and that the Government will not intervene to make up and compensate for this State's failure of the hundreds of women and children who lie buried in unmarked graves, and for the trauma that has afflicted on the survivors and those affected, is horrendous. The Government can do it. As has been said, it could lodge an objection. Deputy Coppinger was absolutely right. The Government should intervene and prevent the crime being compounded for those who have suffered in these institutions.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Ceann Comhairle: I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 39 and the name of the Member in each case:

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss funding for improvement and refurbishment works to older school buildings across County Kerry.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss information and communication for families seeking advice related to the fair deal scheme.

Deputy Michael Murphy - To discuss the crisis in public dental and orthodontic services in south Tipperary.

Deputy Sorca Clarke - To discuss Cloontagh national school.

Deputy Brian Stanley - To discuss the number of publicly accessible EV charging points in County Laois.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness - To discuss the rents dispute affecting hill farmers in Shléibhte Chnoc Mhaoldomhnaigh in gContae Phort Láirge.

Deputy Marie Sherlock - To discuss the buy and renew funding for local authorities to bring derelict homes back into use.

Deputies Paul Murphy and Liam Quaide - To discuss the classification of long Covid as an occupational injury for a cohort of healthcare workers.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the need for a new building for a school in Gorey, County Wexford.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss delivery of a new school building at Dunboyne junior and senior national schools.

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss public health nursing in Dublin 8 and Dublin 12.

Deputy Conor Sheehan - To discuss the progress of a new Garda station in Castletroy.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney - To discuss the maintenance of social housing in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown.

Deputy Rory Hearne - To discuss the significant increases in evictions nationally.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the need for a full-time Garda station in Rush.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss the delivery of a permanent school building for Gaelscoil Cholaíste Mhuire, which remains in temporary accommodation.

Deputy Cathy Bennett - To discuss a Government response to rising energy prices.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - To discuss the national development plan for education and provision for Wicklow.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí - To discuss the issue of ghost buses and the roll-out of the new NGAVL system.

The matters raised by Deputies Marie Sherlock, Sinéad Gibney, Michael Murphy, Paul Murphy and Liam Quaide, Brian Stanley, Sorca Clarke, Darren O'Rourke and Cathy Bennett have been selected for discussion.

Development at Bessborough: Statements (Resumed)

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I thank all my colleagues for their contributions today.

As the Minister, Deputy Foley, set out earlier, the investigation of burial arrangements in mother and baby institutions, including Bessborough, was an important part of the work of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, an independent, statutory body that was established in 2015. One of the key reasons for its establishment was to examine the burial practices and arrangements in various institutions. The commission was given the necessary powers to conduct a thorough investigation of the matters covered by its terms of reference, including the power of compellability and the power to inspect private premises. The initial contribution set out the extensive investigations undertaken by the commission in an effort to locate the burials of the children who died while resident in Bessborough. The commission's investigation into burial practices extended to many other institutions beyond Bessborough. This included the former institutions at Castlepollard and Sean Ross. These two institutions were run by the same order that ran the institution at Bessborough. However, unlike Bessborough, there were designated child burial grounds in Castlepollard and Sean Ross. The commission found that there was no legal requirement to keep a register of burials in such private burial grounds and that no such register seems to exist. The commission's investigations at Castlepollard included a review of an archaeological assessment of the Castlepollard burial ground that was carried out in 2017 on behalf of the HSE, which currently owns the site. The assessment concluded that there was sufficient space in the burial ground for the number of children who died there.

The commission also investigated burial arrangements at Sean Ross. It used its investigative powers and issued a warrant so that a forensic investigation of the burial ground could be undertaken. It did this in response to information it had received that the graveyard, when still in use, had drainage works inserted through it and that, based on this assertion, there may be no remains at the site and it may never have been used as a graveyard. Site surveys, reviews of planning files and an independent drain inspection were followed by a forensic-standard test excavation, with multiple trenches opened in areas across the site where anomalies were identified by the surveys. The investigation found that coffined infant burials were located across the designated burial ground and that these had not been impacted by drainage works. The commission concluded that no further investigation was warranted. The report of the investigation was published in full in the commission's final report, with the survey and drain inspection reports included as appendices. Following publication of the commission's report, the former Minister for children engaged with a local group in Sean Ross and provided funding for them to conduct a survey of land beside the institution's burial ground; land that was not investigated by the commission. That survey showed no clear evidence of burials.

We are outlining all of this information today so that Deputies are aware of the extent of the work undertaken by the commission into burial practices at mother and baby institutions across the country. I can understand how traumatic and frustrating the continued uncertainty regarding the burial place of children who died at Bessborough must be for the families of those children. Indeed, it is troubling for the whole of Irish society and highlights, in a particularly emotive way, the disregard with which women and children were treated in this

country throughout most the last century. I believe it is crucial that there is respectful memorialisation at the Bessborough site so that we never forget what happened there. I expect that Cork City Council is giving due consideration to this matter and I would urge that survivors and family members are centrally involved in any process around this. If a location of burials at the Bessborough site is uncovered in the future, the Government already has the necessary legislation in place to deal with such findings through the provisions of the Institutional Burials Act 2022. This provides for forensic standard excavation of those remains or for appropriate memorialisation in line with the wishes of survivors and family members.

Earlier, the Minister, Deputy Foley, mentioned a number of actions in the Government's action plan to respond to the priority needs and concerns of survivors, former residents and their families. These include actions relating to national and local memorialisation, protection of burial grounds, the implementation of the Institutional Burials Act and the appointment of a director to oversee the excavation, recovery, analysis, identification and reburial of the children's remains at the Tuam site. Other actions in the plan where there has been significant progress include the introduction of the Birth Information and Tracing Act, the appointment of a special advocate for survivors and the opening of the mother and baby institutions payments scheme. Access to records, in particular, is consistently highlighted as an important issue in ongoing engagements with survivors and affected people.

A person's right to their identity is an important human right and every person should have full access to all of his or her information, where available. In this regard, the landmark Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022 introduced a full and clear right of access to birth certificates and birth and early life information for all persons who have questions in relation to their origins. More than 17,500 applications for information have completed since services opened in October 2022. The new law also contained provisions in respect of access by a next of kin to records of a child who died in an institution. In addition, it established a statutory tracing service, a contact preference register, new powers to ensure the safeguarding of relevant records and a range of new bespoke measures to address issues arising for people affected by illegal birth registrations. The Department has also published information indicating what personal data it holds and how to request access to it via a subject access request. A dedicated phone line provides information for callers on the subject access request process, and information on this is also regularly communicated to survivors and former residents via quarterly updates on the action plan.

Further legislation to provide for the preservation of privately held records related to Ireland's institutional past came into force in 2024. This was introduced in response to calls from survivors and affected persons, their families and advocates, who want to ensure that records, which support understanding of their identity and the institutional systems which shaped their life experiences in such significant ways, are preserved. While the legislation does not provide for access to privately held records, by mandating preservation, it ensures that future access to the records is not rendered impossible.

I hope this shows the Government's clear commitment to implementing actions that respond to the priority needs of survivors and the legacy of Ireland's institutional past.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Vacant Properties

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I thank the Minister of State for taking this matter. My question is about central government support to local authorities for bringing vacant and derelict properties across our towns, cities and villages back into use, and specifically the buy and renew programme that has been in place for a period. In the constituency I represent, Dublin Central, there is an absolute scourge of dereliction. Across every community there are long-standing examples of derelict properties for which there has been no responsibility, accountability or action. There are a few examples of where the local authorities have acted, such as 19 and 21 Connaught Street in Phibsborough, but that tells the sorry tale of how our State deals with dereliction. It has been almost 20 years since it first went on the derelict site register. It came off the register when a bit of work was done, went back on it and eventually was purchased under a compulsory purchase order in 2019. In all that time since then, those two houses have not been brought back into use. The final nail in the coffin happened last year when there were significant changes to the buy and renew scheme by this Government.

There is no doubt there is an exceptional cost to bringing many of these properties back into use and making them homes. I think we all recognise that and there is huge pressure for volume and to build lots of houses at the moment. I totally understand that but it is not acceptable that there are streets in our communities where the blight of dereliction continues. That is a problem for the whole community, not only because of illegal dumping but also for the adjacent houses and the community overall.

Another example is 8 and 10 Ferguson Road, Drumcondra. Twenty years ago last year, the process of putting it on the derelict site register began. It finally went on the derelict site register in 2011 and was purchased under a compulsory purchase order in 2018. Those houses remain derelict to this day. When I talk to Dublin City Council, it tells me it has a huge problem in renovating these houses because it costs a lot of money. There is also a sense, however, that there is not Government support for local authorities in bringing these houses back into use.

We can talk all we want about the war on dereliction and the move to the derelict levy, which will come in and be collected by the Revenue Commissioners next year and is welcome although much belated, but there needs to be a serious financial commitment and recognition by the Government that bringing these houses back into use costs money and a special scheme needs to be put in place. It is not acceptable for any community in the Minister of State's county, Mayo, or in my constituency of Dublin Central to be looking at these derelict houses any longer. We need a specific Government fix.

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank Deputy Sherlock for raising this matter and for the opportunity to update the Dáil on the modification and expansion of the buy and renew scheme. I am taking this question on behalf of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

The Department has a number of schemes in place targeted at increasing the supply of social housing and working towards ending dereliction. That is a key priority of the Government's housing policy, Delivering Homes, Building Communities. We are all aware of the existing schemes in croí cónaithe around the vacant refurbishment grant. The Department is finalising specific details on the updated buy and renew scheme, and it is expected a circular will be

issued to local authorities in the coming weeks. In the interim, I welcome the opportunity to update the House.

It is timely to bring this to the fore because the buy and renew is an important scheme but in its implementation we want to change it in two key ways. First, the buy and renew scheme, which is currently led by local authorities and approved housing bodies, AHBs, is being expanded to include a contractor-led approach. That will have multiple benefits. The aim is to bring forward an additional option for local authorities and approved housing bodies to tackle long-term vacancy and dereliction. It will also provide a potential workstream for local contractors and a stepping stone for tradespeople to move into contracting, bring extra resources to bear in tackling vacancy and dereliction, and give certainty to contractors prepared to bring vacant and derelict properties back into productive use. It will also ultimately increase the supply of social homes. As a further provision, the modified scheme mandates that properties must be both vacant and derelict to be considered for the scheme. This modification will ensure that local authorities and approved housing bodies tackle the most challenging properties first, which may not be easily addressed by any other means.

The expanded buy and renew scheme has enormous potential to unlock development that might not otherwise progress in the absence of an assured purchase agreement approach by local authorities or approved housing bodies. This will involve the local authority or approved housing body entering into a fixed-price purchase agreement with the contractor, providing certainty of an end purchaser for the contractor and the provision of new social homes for the local authority or approved housing body once works are completed in accordance with the terms of the purchase agreement. Of course, properties developed under the buy and renew scheme must be in compliance with all other statutory requirements and with the housing regulations around standards for rental properties.

This is an important update. It is important that we maximise the benefits of all schemes to bring more properties back on stream. With local authorities identifying these properties and engaging with contractors through the buy and renew scheme, there is huge potential for greater momentum in repurposing and refurbishing existing stock. That has environmental and sustainable advantages compared with building new properties.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: It is very welcome to hear this update. If I interpret correctly what the Minister of State said, we are moving from a buy and renew scheme to a renew and purchase or renew and sale scheme. It is slightly turning it on its head. That is not a bad thing, but the critical point is the amount of money that will be allocated for these projects.

We know that 40,000 units of Dublin housing stock was built before the 1940s. Much of this is redbrick stock and some of it is in areas of architectural conservation. There are real issues with regard to how we bring these houses back into use, short of demolishing them.

My concern ultimately is that while the scheme is potentially very welcome, the question is how much the Department and the Custom House are going to put behind it. There has to be recognition here, and I would be the first to talk about how costly it is for the State to buy turnkey homes and how costly can be in terms of Part 5 purchases, which we support. This will also be costly in terms of bringing stand-alone housing back into use. We need to see greater thinking with regard to how it will be financed and, perhaps, the use of some of these homes. Could we turn a two-bedroom or three-bedroom house into two apartments or some

such innovation? The reality is that we cannot continue to have these houses remaining derelict.

I look forward to the day when the scheme will be announced. My appeal is that we make sure it is properly resourced. We look forward to the detail on the contractor-led approach in terms of who will take it up and how exactly it will be taken up.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank Deputy Sherlock for the constructive points she has raised this afternoon. Certainly I feel there are many good local authorities that engage in these types of schemes very proactively. There are also local authorities that fall behind and do not promote them. The modified and expanded buy and renew scheme is a positive and the new parameters are very welcome. The inclusion of the contractor-led approach will give certainty to many local authorities and approved housing bodies. There is a challenge to get small builders and SMEs involved in this type of refurbishment. Many of them are on greenfield sites or involve other large-scale developments. There is a certain niche market for contractors and tradespeople to do this. It is a challenge to bring them into these types of programmes. Along with the derelict property tax, however, it will certainly create an enhanced pipeline for a lot of these types of projects and will inevitably support this scheme. That is what the Department is hoping will happen when we roll it out over the coming weeks.

I take Deputy Sherlock's point on how much funding will be allocated to this. We await the detail in the circular that will be delivered to the local authorities in the coming weeks. Measures such as the buy and renew scheme, the vacant refurbishment grant and the urban regeneration and development fund are all programmes we speak about, but action and delivery are now paramount for many town centres that need this refurbishment and need to have new life breathed into their areas. I welcome the discussion today and hope the information is presented in a swift manner.

Housing Schemes

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I welcome the opportunity to raise the issue of the maintenance of social housing in Dún Laoghaire and Rathdown. I am a TD for the Rathdown constituency and there is often an assumption it is an affluent area only. I have to say I have made it my business to make sure those living in deprivation in my constituency know I will represent them in Dáil Éireann as the only Opposition TD and a new TD in the constituency, because many people in the community are simply forgotten.

My team and I have got a huge number of queries about this and I have visited some of the homes to see for myself. I have genuinely been appalled at the standard of accommodation that some of our social housing residents live in. The key issue is that they are simply living in substandard conditions and I would like to get into some of the detail around it. There are blocks of flats all with the same issues of damp and mould but tenants are sometimes told it is their fault when clearly these are structural issues. I have spoken to families who have been told that while their living conditions are inadequate, they are not eligible for transfer because they are in arrears. We all know the complexity and difficulty that people go through to get to a point of being in arrears and how difficult it is to get out of arrears. To compound this by stating their accommodation crisis cannot be fixed really is hugely problematic. Their health

and well-being are severely impacted because they cannot pay rent for flats that are covered in mould and damp.

I will bring this to life for the Minister of State, because when I went for these visits, I spoke to some of the families involved. There were lovely moments with the children, speaking to them about their experiences. Despite all the odds, they really are thriving in various ways, but they are facing such awful challenges. Some children cannot bring their friends around to play. Their parents cannot have their friends around for a cup of tea. They have to time activities because the smell can be so unbearable at various times of the day that they cannot use certain rooms. They have to recycle clothes and toys because they get so damp and covered in mould. This is one of the areas where we really see the price of poverty; because they cannot fix these issues, they end up bearing multiple additional costs. We have massive housing lists but it is absolutely crucial that we have the funding available for local authorities to maintain the housing stock they already have. This does not mean we need to jack up the rents, as happened recently with Dublin City Council, but by funding it centrally as a core part of what local authorities do and should do.

I want to say from a human rights perspective how problematic this is. Obviously, we do not constitutionally recognise the right to housing, but if we accept there is a right for people to have a roof over their heads, if we do not provide for this and for adequate accommodation, it is so hard to realise the other rights that are fundamental to us, such as the right to education, the right to employment and the right to health. They are all impacted by the right to housing. Without a roof over our heads, it is impossible to realise them.

I want to name-check specifically St. Nathy's in Churchtown, which I found to be in a particularly dire condition. I also want to call out the work of local groups, including the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, that help families in the area. They see the situations that people live in, which are simply not mirrored in the private tenancies people enjoy in the same neighbourhood. This is simply not good enough for me. The State and the local authority as a landlord have to acknowledge this. It drives people into places of shame and stigma. As I have said, there are so many other ancillary and knock-on issues that people experience because of this.

We need to look at how local authorities can provide for adequate standards of social housing in the portfolio of offerings they have. Instead of saying we will wait for the next tranche of social housing, which again is an answer that some of these tenants get as they are told they will be available in the next tranche, we need to fix the conditions that people are living in right now.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank Deputy Gibney for raising this important matter and giving me the opportunity to update the Dáil on behalf of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Critically, the management and maintenance of local authority social housing stock is, first and foremost, a matter for the respective local authority, in this instance Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, in accordance with section 58 of the Housing Act 1966. This includes activating and funding pre-letting repairs to vacant properties, implementing a planned maintenance programme and carrying out responsive repairs. Local authorities must also ensure their tenanted properties comply with the requirements of the Housing (Standards For Rented Houses) Regulations 2019.

Notwithstanding what Deputy Gibney has outlined on the statutory obligations, the Department also provides annual funding to local authorities, including Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, to complement the local authorities' own management and maintenance programmes. This funding is provided through the recent planned maintenance and voids programme, the energy efficiency retrofit programme and the disabled persons grant programme. These programmes, together with the Department's local authority estate regeneration programme, will provide €260 million to complement local authority social housing management and maintenance activities this year. This is an increase of almost €60 million on the amount provided to these programmes in 2025.

Ultimately, the selection of homes and the nature and prioritisation of works for inclusion in the programme is a matter for the local authority itself. In the past 12 years, the Exchequer has provided more than €31 million to Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council for its own social housing management and maintenance programme.

A further €6.3 million will be provided by the Department in 2026. This includes €1.3 million for the revised planned maintenance and voids programme, which was rolled out to the local authority earlier this month and will support bringing more than 70 vacant social homes back into productive use in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. Critically, the new programme will build on the strong progress made in tackling local authority vacancy levels. As I mentioned in reply to Deputy Sherlock earlier, we have the enhanced buy and renew scheme which will be coming on stream in the coming weeks, the vacant refurbishment grant, and significant funding through the URDF for vacant and derelict properties.

The planned maintenance and voids programme now takes a more evidence-informed planned maintenance approach and the local authority has updated its management systems, with a further €4.2 million being provided through the Department of climate, energy and the environment through the SEAI retrofit programme. That will see an additional €800,000 being fed through the disabled persons' grant programme.

The management and maintenance of housing stock is a statutory requirement and a matter for the local authority itself. My Department will continue to complement the efforts of the local authority through a strategic approach to ensure that the management and maintenance of such stock is kept to a high standard.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank the Minister of State for those details. I appreciate that funding is important but I assure him that the €31 million is not reaching some of the families that I am speaking to. I want to emphasise, as I did in my initial contribution, that this is not just about funding. The way in which some of these families are being treated is also an issue. There are complex ways in which people arrive into situations of deprivation and poverty. They do not want to be in arrears and for them to then be penalised for being in arrears and not be able to access other accommodation that is more suitable, which will then help to lift them out of all of the other elements of poverty, is problematic.

I am careful about what I raise in the Chamber as Topical Issues because I appreciate that a lot of this responsibility falls to the local authorities. However, in my previous role in the rights and equality space, I did some work with a group that was involved in a case that went to Europe. I want to reference that case because the obligation lies on the Government and does not just sit with the local authorities. The European Committee of Social Rights in 2017 found

that Ireland violated Article 16 of the European Social Charter due to substandard social housing. The issues that I am seeing in St. Nathy's and other places in my constituency are exactly the same as the issues faced by the 20 different social housing estates that were involved in that case. They were dealing with damp and mould and with local authorities who simply failed to fix it. The knock-on impacts and the generational poverty that we are baking in those communities and those families is hugely problematic. This is something that the Government must take into account. It is not just about the local authorities. While I appreciate that it is their responsibility, ultimately, to carry these things through, they need to be given the support, with both a carrot and stick element, by the Department to actually deliver for these families.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Again, I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter and for her contribution. We are in agreement that the standard of social properties being rented out by local authorities should be such that tenants have a good quality of life and their well-being and mental health are being protected. It is not acceptable for anyone to live in damp, mouldy or substandard conditions. That is why the Government has stepped up with additional funding for 2026, with the provision of an extra €60 million for the planned maintenance and voids programme. It is really important that we have access to good quality homes that provide the required comfort levels for the occupants. These homes must meet the standards set out within the rented standard regulation. That is critically important and non-negotiable from the Government's perspective.

As I said earlier, as public representatives we all have an obligation to engage with local authorities and their housing sections, especially when these concerns are raised to us. We need to respond and I accept that point. We have taken steps to improve the system but the local authorities themselves have the reserved function to allocate their own resources to these types of programmes and to enhance the housing stock within their areas. I am sure that Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council has a lot more resources than we have in the west, in County Mayo, for example, in regard to property tax and resources generated on the ground. That said, I take the Deputy's point. We will continue to complement the work of the local authorities on stock improvement programmes. As elected representatives, we need to continue to hold the local authorities to account regarding the condition of their existing stock and to make sure it is up to standard.

Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Ceann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the National Oil Reserves Agency (Amendment) Bill 2026, without amendment and has passed the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Bill 2026, without amendment.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla (Atógáil) - Topical Issue Debate (Resumed)

Dental Services

Deputy Michael Murphy: As if the crisis that exists in the provision of ophthalmology services across the south-east was not enough, we have an even greater crisis in the provision

of orthodontic treatment for children across the region. I can only describe the state of orthodontic services in County Tipperary, in particular, as deeply worrying and shocking following new information that I received from the HSE. Figures reveal that 546 children are waiting for critical orthodontic treatment, some of whom have been waiting for up to 82 months, or almost seven years. There are another 312 children waiting for an initial assessment. Children in my constituency of Tipperary South are being left to wait for the best part of their childhood for essential orthodontic care. This is not a delay but a systems failure. The HSE has confirmed to me that there are no waiting list reduction targets for 2026 or 2027. The service is operating with just 0.1 whole-time equivalent consultant orthodontist cover for assessments in Clonmel. A specialist orthodontist post has effectively been reduced from full time to 0.6 whole time equivalent and vacancies remain unfilled dating back as far as 2021.

It is extraordinary that in the face of such extreme waiting lists the HSE has set no targets whatsoever to reduce lists. This points to a lack of urgency and a lack of accountability. Even more concerning is the admission that waiting lists will continue to grow over the next two years. This means children who are now only being referred may not be treated until they are well into their teens. The HSE acknowledged to me that demand is exceeding capacity, with more patients joining the waiting list than can be treated. Urgent action is now required. We need immediate recruitment to fill long-standing vacancies, a clear recovery plan with measurable targets and additional capacity put in place without delay.

I am sure the Minister of State will agree that no child should be left waiting years for care that is critical not just to their health but also their confidence and development. What we are looking at here is not just pressure on a service but the effective absence of a functioning orthodontic service across the south-east and particularly in my constituency. Seven years is not a waiting list but a denial of care. The most shocking element is not just the delays but that there are no targets at all to reduce them. The HSE has openly admitted that waiting lists will continue to grow over the next two years. We are talking about children missing the critical window for treatment that can have life-long impacts on their oral health and confidence.

4 o'clock

Parents are being left with an impossible choice: either pay privately or watch their children wait for years. By the time some of these children are seen, the clinical need may be more complex and, indeed, more costly. This is a classic example of a service where demand is known and predictable but not planned for. There is no credible explanation for having no reduction targets in the face of such a crisis and such extreme delays. If this were happening in any other part of the health service, it would be treated as an emergency.

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank the Deputy for raising the important issue of the HSE's public dental and orthodontic service in south Tipperary. I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister for Health.

The HSE oral healthcare service aims to provide an oral examination and necessary treatment for children at ages approximating to second and sixth class and, in some cases, fourth class. Emergency care is provided for children of all ages up to 16 and for those with complex and additional needs. The HSE provides orthodontic treatment to patients with the most severe and complex treatment needs.

The Minister for Health is aware that there are currently backlogs in the HSE's child oral health examination programme, which have meant that the sixth-class groups are being prioritised. In relation to orthodontic services, targeted investment is delivering meaningful improvement. On top of the €240 million that the Government invests annually in oral healthcare, over €20 million has been allocated to waiting list initiatives for contracted orthodontic care, resulting in more than 5,200 removals from waiting lists since 2020. This includes a dedicated orthodontic surgery programme that has delivered treatment for an additional 266 patients to date. This funding will continue in 2026 with a further €2.8 million being provided.

The HSE has advised that there are staffing challenges in the public dental service in south Tipperary and that the healthcare area manager for south Tipperary is currently reviewing staffing levels and waiting list times to replace one specialist in orthodontics based in south Tipperary. To support capacity nationally, €2 million was awarded in 2025, increasing to €4 million in 2026 for an additional 15 HSE dental staff to deliver oral healthcare in the community. The HSE advises that Carlow, Kilkenny and south Tipperary have been allocated one of these posts, which have been difficult to fill.

With regard to immediate and long-term reforms, the Minister acknowledges that the current system, which was developed in the 1990s in response to the identified oral healthcare needs at that time, must be modernised and aligned with current needs. The Government is committed to addressing the immediate difficulties that patients are experiencing in accessing oral healthcare services. The Department of Health is working with colleagues in the HSE and other relevant stakeholders to address the immediate backlogs in the public dental system while long-term reform is under way.

The national oral healthcare policy sets out the vision for oral healthcare services in Ireland and has two key goals: to provide the supports to enable every individual to achieve their potential best oral health and to reduce oral health inequalities across the population by enabling vulnerable groups to access oral healthcare and improve their oral health. Reform of our services is vital and I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter to ensure that people of all ages can have access to modern, prevention-focused care.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I thank the Minister of State for the reply, but there was nothing in it to give any comfort whatsoever to those children on the waiting list across the south-east, and in particular south Tipperary. I am thinking of those children who have been waiting for up to 82 months for a critical intervention. The solution is not complicated. It is about filling those posts that have been vacant since 2021. We need a targeted recruitment drive for orthodontists in the south-east. We need them now. Relying on staff travelling from Waterford to Clonmel a few days a month is not a sustainable model of care. What is needed now is a clear recovery plan with timelines, targets and accountability. It is important that we look at interim measures, including outsourcing or additional clinics, accessing capacity that is in the private sector in the same way we are doing in the context of ophthalmology to bring waiting lists down quickly. This has to be treated as a priority within the regional health structure. The Department of Health needs to intervene. This is beyond a local staffing issue. I want to see a clear plan published for how we can bring down these waiting lists. We know there are pressures nationally, but the situation in south Tipperary is more than acute and cannot be normalised. Even in a stretched system, a seven-year waiting list for a young child awaiting

critical orthodontic care is indefensible. No child should spend his or her time on a waiting list. That is the bottom line.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I have listened to the Deputy and taken on board the points he has made. I will bring them back to the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. The Deputy has advocated for his constituents to ensure they have better dental and orthodontic treatment services. I assure him that improving access to dental care for children is a priority. We need an accelerated response to the staffing deficit that Tipperary is experiencing. We must also ensure that waiting lists are reduced significantly over the time ahead.

The Government is investing heavily in oral health policy. This is part of the modernisation of our health service. We need transformation in how we deliver the care at a regional level and not just at national level. Sometimes that is forgotten. There should not be inequality across the east, west and south. Everyone should be on this journey at the same time. We are committed to ensuring that patients who are experiencing real difficulties have access to services.

I will take this issue back to the Minister and thank the Deputy for raising it.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Paul Murphy is down to share with Deputy Quaide, who has not arrived. The floor is his.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Deputy Quaide sends apologies. He was able to make it on Tuesday but not when it was rescheduled. He has been raising this issue consistently so I thank him.

We all clapped in this Chamber, or perhaps it was in the convention centre, for our healthcare workers. I recall going outside my house, like people all across the country, to clap for our healthcare workers and thank them for standing on the front line during the Covid-19 pandemic, for putting their own health at risk for the rest of us and telling them we had their backs. However, it turns out we did not have their backs. Those workers are being abandoned by the Government. It is absolutely shameful. Healthcare workers got Covid and then long Covid, likely because of the work they were doing. They have had serious impacts on their health, which I will go into, and have been abandoned by the Government. The special payments they were on were discontinued in December. They are now on standard public service leave, which gives them full pay for three months and in April, their payments will be halved. They will be left unable to pay their mortgages and their basic bills because the Government refuses to recognise long Covid and Covid as occupational illnesses. That is the answer here. If nurses were to get hepatitis or HIV as a result of their work, they would go on the occupational illness scheme. That is what should be happening to those healthcare workers who got long Covid.

I will give some testimony from a woman, Fiona, who was in touch with me. She is a healthcare worker who has long Covid. She said:

I can not put into words how debilitating Long Covid is. I will be sick 5 yrs come January. 3 ... friends will be sick 6 years come March. My life as my knew it has changed dramatically. My career and health is now in ruins. I suffer from severe debilitating fatigue.

Some days it is choosing between going for shower or cooking dinner as well as fatigue I have tachycardia, brain fog, joint pain, muscular pain ,nerve pain, shortness of breath,headaches, nausea [and] vomiting, recurring mouth ulcers and tinnitus. I am doing my best to recover but unfortunately I'm not there yet so I need my pay protected till I am able to return. As well as being physically unable the brain fog a huge barrier. Right now I couldn't provide safe care to patients. As nurses we are accountable for our practice. If I return to work and made a error or omission that caused harm to a patient that would be entirely on me. And I dont think anyone wants a nurse with brain fog looking after them!

I have dealt with a number of people and campaigned on the issue of long Covid in general as well as on the issue of occupational illness. It obviously has a hugely debilitating impact on people. The costs are immense. Again, to quote Fiona, she said: "I travel to Dublin from Cork every 6 months to see Prof Lambert. All these appointments are between €200 - €250. I am grateful I have health insurance but all these consultant fees add up. My monthly meds are €80 every month. I'm very grateful though the DPS cover all my meds so there capped at €80. Gp visits are up to €75 a visit."

What are these people supposed to do? What is the idea here? Is the Government trying to force people who are still very sick to go back to work when they are incapable of working and when, as Fiona pointed out, they could make mistakes in their work as a consequence of that illness, due to brain fog in particular, which would have negative consequences for patients? Does it want to force them to live in poverty by not providing them with a living income? We should remember all the thanks we had for healthcare workers and all the sacrifices they made for keeping our health service afloat, and support them by the simple measure that is in most European countries of recognising Covid and long Covid as an occupational illness. Why does the Government not agree to do that?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I am taking it on behalf of the Minister for Health. It is great to get an opportunity to provide an update and acknowledge the extraordinary role played by healthcare workers in protecting us during the pandemic.

In recognition of those exceptional circumstances, a special scheme was introduced in July 2022 to support eligible public health sector staff who developed long Covid. This was a temporary and exceptional measure, unique to the health sector, designed to acknowledge the particular risks faced by staff working in high-exposure environments before PPE, vaccination and widespread community transmission were established. While the scheme was extended on several occasions at the request of the Minister for Health, the Labour Court recommended a final extension in June 2025 and the scheme concluded on 31 December 2025. By that point, employees remaining on the scheme had received support at full pay for almost five years through a combination of special leave with pay and the special scheme itself.

Importantly, and I want to be very clear on this point, the conclusion of the special scheme does not mean that supports have ended. Staff who remain unfit to return to work have moved into the public service sick leave scheme, ensuring continuity of both care and financial protection. Since the conclusion of the special scheme, 104 employees have transitioned to the public service sick leave scheme, while a further 57 have returned to work, including through phased return arrangements. Under the public service sick leave scheme, staff may receive full pay for three months, followed by half pay for a further three months. They then have the

option to apply for temporary rehabilitative remuneration, which can provide up to an additional 547 days of paid leave. In addition, the critical illness protocol may provide supports for up to three years, where the relevant criteria are met.

Beyond financial supports, staff are also entitled to reasonable workplace accommodations to assist with their return to work. This may include modified duties or adjusted working patterns during rehabilitation. These measures are intended to ensure that staff are supported, not only financially but also in practical terms, as they recover and reintegrate into the workplace. All illnesses are treated equally under the public service sick leave regulations. This equity is a fundamental part of the public service sick leave scheme and avoids any perception that one illness or condition is more serious than others.

The Minister for Social Protection has responsibility for these regulations and schemes. He has reviewed the EU recommendation on recognising Covid-19 as an occupational illness and has determined that it does not meet the criteria required for recognition under the social welfare Acts. While many other countries did recognise Covid-19 as an occupational illness, this related to Covid-19 itself rather than long Covid. From the information available, it is not clear that any country provided sustained full-pay supports for long Covid comparable to Ireland's special scheme.

While many staff members have already returned to work, the Minister is conscious that others continue to face difficulties. As such, she will meet with the Minister for Social Protection with a view to exploring what supports, if any, may be accessed by those facing long-term challenges in returning to work.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister responded by saying that this does not mean the Government will not support workers. He said that staff may receive full pay for three months, which is correct but we are coming to the end of that, followed by half pay for a further three months. People have their childcare bills, their mortgages and the costs of just existing in this cost-of-living crisis. They have a lifestyle based on their pay and will not be able to survive based on half pay. The Minister went on to say that they have the option to apply for temporary rehabilitative remuneration. That is capped at 37.5% of salary. You go from full pay to half pay and then down to just slightly more than a third of pay.

There was a reference to the critical illness protocol, which "may provide supports for up to three years, where the relevant criteria are met." The problem is that many healthcare workers have been turned down for the critical illness protocol, with the HSE citing that long Covid does not meet the criteria. The employer needs to approve it. It can be dressed up in whatever way the Government wants but by shutting down the special scheme and not doing the long-term solution, which is making long Covid an occupational illness, it is throwing these workers who were on the front line, whose health was sacrificed for all our benefit and who put themselves at risk, to the wolves. We really are putting them in an awful situation.

On the rationale for not recognising long Covid as an occupational illness, it seems the Government makes a distinction between Covid and long Covid. The reason people have long Covid, however, is they got Covid, likely in the workplace. All illnesses are not treated equally. We have an occupational illness scheme that is different. As I said, if you contract HIV or hepatitis as a result of your work, you are treated in a certain way, as these are occupational illnesses. Long Covid should be treated the same.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I acknowledge the extraordinary service of our healthcare workers during the pandemic. The temporary special scheme for long Covid was an exceptional measure that was introduced in recognition of the unique risk faced by staff in those early days and uncertain times. It provided sustained support for nearly five years, which was a level of protection unmatched in any other sector. The Deputy is dressing this up in another way that is not reflective of the level of support that has been provided to date. Although the scheme has concluded, it is important to reiterate that staff will not be left without support. Those who remain unfit to work will transition into the public service sick leave scheme with continued access to a full range of supports, including temporary rehabilitation remuneration, the critical illness protocol and reasonable workplace accommodation. This approach ensures that there is fairness and equity across the public service and that we continue to provide meaningful and appropriate support for those affected.

I want to reassure the Deputy and the House that the Department of Health will continue to work with the Minister, Deputy Calleary, in the Department of Social Protection and the HSE, staff representatives and those across Government to ensure those supports are delivered effectively and compassionately to those who are affected.

Electric Vehicles

Deputy Brian Stanley: I raise the issue of charging points in Laois - or the absence of the charging points in most of the county. We have a situation where there are 21 publicly available charging points in the county. That is the latest information I can get. I have a map of Laois which shows the charging points run down the centre of the county. That is fine because there is the N7 and N8 but there is the N80, the R44 and many other roads. The whole east and west of the county have been left out of it.

The biggest barrier to getting people to move to electric cars is range anxiety and access to charging points. If drivers have to travel to charge or they have to queue, that deters them. Laois has them in the middle of the county. It is a county with a population of almost 100,000. There are none in the east of the county. There is nothing the whole way from Portlaoise to Carlow town. There is nothing in Stradbally, Ballylynan, The Swan, Newtown or Graiguecullen. In the south and west of the county, Durrow has none along with Borris-in-Ossory, Castletown, Camross, Errill and Clonaslee. In Rosenallis, there are none. Mountmellick has a population in the region of 5,000 and has just one charging point.

While 75% to 80% of charging will be done at home, I think the Minister of State will agree that we need public charging points. I welcome the chargers that have been put down through the middle of the county and there is a need for more. However, the east and west of the county is completely blank, according to the map and the documents I have.

As the Minister of State and I know, people in rural areas are car-dependent. There are a few Local Links but for work and at other times, people need to use a car. This week has shown that we need to try to move away from fossil fuels. They will become more expensive so people will go electric. We have to make it easier for people to get children to school and to get work, get to hospital appointments and do their business in local towns and villages. There

is not a bus going up every road, even though rural transport has improved. You cannot have one on every boreen and I think we accept that.

As I understand it, the number in the State is in the region of 2,500 but we have only 21 public charging points in Laois. According to information given in answer to previous parliamentary questions, I see the aim is for between 3,200 and 6,210 public chargers. That is a huge variation and the Minister of State might just address that. Is there a target and timeframe for that? They need to be better distributed.

We cannot have a situation where the price of petrol and diesel will go up and up in the coming years. We know that with Donald Trump and Israel's crazy war in the Gulf fuel prices will not go back down to what they were at before that. We know that. It was the same in Covid. Prices went up but they never went back to pre-Covid levels. It will be the same with this.

We need to provide the option and make it easier for people to move to electric vehicles, including people in rural areas. The Minister of State is from a rural constituency and so am I. He understands what I am saying to him. If people in the far corners of the county have to travel to work or beyond that, we need to ensure there are those charging points. What is the plan to increase the number in the State? What is the plan to increase the number in County Laois?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank Deputy Stanley for raising this important matter of EV charging points in Laois. I am taking this on behalf of the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. The Government is fully committed to supporting a significant expansion and modernisation of the EV charging network over the coming years. Having an effective and reliable charging network is an essential part of enabling drivers to make the switch to electric vehicles. A significant challenge to EV uptake by consumers is perception around availability and suitability of charging infrastructure. While over 80% of charging is expected to happen at home and will address most users' charging needs, there is a need for a streamlined public charging network to provide for situations or instances where home charging is not possible.

Currently, there is an obligation on charging point operators and owners to publicly share charge point data under the EU alternative fuel infrastructure regulation. Data from January 2026 shows that in County Laois, there were approximately 20 publicly accessible charging pools - locations with at least one charging point - with 67 charging points across these pools. There is an aggregated power output of 5 MW across these pools. It should be noted that this data is provided by charge point operators, CPOs, and there are some small differences in approach across CPOs in relation to the format of data provided. Zero emission vehicles Ireland, ZEVI, an office in the Department of Transport, is finalising a data strategy and associated data platforms that will, once in place, enhance the Department's ability to monitor this infrastructure more accurately. This strategy is being finalised following consultation and will be published shortly.

The system will enable measures to be put in place to enhance accuracy of data provided by charge point operators in relation to charge points in near real time and provide this comprehensive data on an open data basis. The new draft national EV charging infrastructure strategy 2026-2028 was published on 26 February and aims to further accelerate the delivery

of EV infrastructure across Ireland. It includes a comprehensive plan to expand and future-proof the national EV charging network, ensuring that charging infrastructure continues to keep pace with the growing demand for electric vehicles. The strategy will build on previous ZEV publications, such as the regional and local EV charging network plan and the national road EV charging network plan.

The national road EV charging network plan sets out targets for en route charging across the national road network, whereas the regional and local EV charging network plan focuses on neighbourhood and destination charging locations that will be led by local authorities in partnership with both public and private sectors. Laois has been identified under region 2 with counties Longford, Roscommon, Westmeath and regional lead Offaly. Local authorities will be funded to develop local and regional EV charging network strategies and implementation plans. This process will identify the number of charge points required in each area, including on-street chargers to serve residents without access to private off-street parking.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I thank the Minister of State for his answer. The strategy being developed needs to look at the reality on the ground and at the geographic locations. You cannot have a situation where there are chargers down the middle of the county but nothing either side of it. If you travel the 28 miles to Carlow from Portlaoise, there are none. On the other side of the county, if you travel down the Slieve Bloom side of it and into Roscrea, there are none. I am highlighting the fact this needs to be included.

I agree with the Minister of State that up to 80% will be done at home and I understand that. In a lot of the locations where there are chargers, such as in towns like Abbeyleix, Mountrath and Rathdowney, there is just one charging point. Mountmellick with its population only has one. That needs to be looked at. They are all expanding towns. In all of those towns, the population has gone up in recent years. It is important there is that service.

I listened to the Minister of State's response and Departments will talk about strategies, phases and all of that.

Some things need to be kept simple or they do not happen. In short, what I am saying here is that this does not take a genius to work out. When you have large geographical rural areas, like the east and western sides of Laois and parts of the south of the county, left out, we need to fix that. I think the Minister of State will agree, given the debates we had in the House this week around fuel costs and the challenges we are facing there, we are going to be moving more to electric and the easier we make it the better. Let us try to make it easy for the motorists, the people in rural areas, who will continue to have to use their cars. Rural transport is shown to be a success. We need to make this a success as well. It will not happen if we leave out rural Ireland.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank Deputy Stanley for his advocacy and for raising this matter on the floor of the Dáil. It is not the first time he has raised it and it is an important issue for those who have EVs. They do need more security and predictability in regard to charging networks and facilities. There are three ongoing schemes, LDV1, LDV2 and LDV3, being administered by the Department of Transport and these will ensure Ireland meets its EU targets for a publicly accessible EV charging network. For LDV1, a total of 131 high-powered recharging points will be built across 17 charging pools providing over 24 MW recharging. One of these is

located in County Laois at Portlaoise Plaza on the M7. Regarding LDV3, which comprises of 192 high-powered recharging points, there will be three locations in County Laois under this phase, each location with the minimum capacity of 100 KW that will be installed. The majority of the EV infrastructure delivered under each of these schemes is expected to be operational by the end of this year.

In addition, ZEFI is also running a scheme in conjunction with the Department of the Taoiseach and using funding for the shared island fund. Deputies may be aware that this scheme provided funding to install a network of publicly accessible chargers in communities nationwide and there were five eligible clubs in Laois for new charging points, namely, the Heath Golf Club, the Heritage Golf Resort, Park Ratheniska GAA club, Clonaslee St. Manman's GAA club, and Annanough GAA club. I will take the Deputy's points back to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, as regards an accelerated programme to try to meet our EU targets with an emphasis on ensuring the Deputy's constituents in County Laois are supported.

School Facilities

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I wish to raise with the Minister of State the situation of Cloontagh National School in County Longford. This is a rural DEIS school between Ballymahon and Longford town where the children and the staff are being asked to learn and work in conditions that are simply not acceptable in 2026. I visited this school recently and I was struck by the artwork on the walls, the colour, the kids out in the yard having the craic as all kids should be, and the passion that the teachers and the staff brought. However, that could not and will not hide the reality of the condition of the buildings in which the children are being taught. There is constant damp. There is mould on the walls, the ceilings and even on the floors. Dehumidifiers are running constantly. Equipment and laptops in use by the teachers have been replaced due to moisture damage.

The principal wrote to the Department in November outlining how the school was in crisis mode and had genuine health, safety and well-being risks. A photograph I am showing here from an engineer's report was also sent to the Department. It shows glue sticks black with the mould from being in that classroom. This is simply not good enough from any school, never mind a primary school.

The biggest concern that was outlined to me was the prefab structure that is also on-site. It is decades old and it is clearly failing. That engineer's report from February of this year shows visible deterioration of the external walls, mould growth inside the toilet area, water ingress through the ceiling, and even lifting floors and peeling walls inside the teaching space. The accommodation itself in the prefab is a small lobby, a toilet and a classroom and the only way I can describe the floor in certain areas of that prefab is that it is squishy when you walk on it. No prefab floor should be squishy when you walk on it but that is exactly what is happening. There is also significant and concerning signs of structural instability in that prefab and that is the reality for those kids today.

The principal wrote to the Department last year describing persistent damp mould, maggots and flies appearing inside the classroom, heating that cannot keep the building warm and the damage to the ICT equipment because of the moisture level, clearly stating how the school was in crisis mode and that the building is no longer fit for purpose. She is not exaggerating. She

is pleading for help because this school was already approved for a new building in 2022. The agreed designs were of the Department's standards and were well above what the school itself had originally asked for. Land has been purchased, designs prepared, engineers paid and plans drawn up but today those children are still in that same prefab and the building is simply not fit for purpose.

I asked a parliamentary question as to where this school was on the timeline for additional school accommodation and I was told that no timeline can be given for when construction will begin. That answer may satisfy a file but it certainly does not satisfy the parents and the staff nor does it meet the needs of the children who have to sit in that school every day. This is not a luxury project by any stretch. This is not a wish list. This is a basic requirement for a safe, dry and modern school building.

Cloontagh National School may be a small school but the children who attend that school deserve the same standard of facilities as any child anywhere else in the State. Will the Department recognise that this case is urgent? Will it be prioritised? When will the project move to construction and, in the interim, will a full health and safety audit be carried out on the existing facilities? This current situation cannot continue.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter and giving me the opportunity on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, to update the House on the current position regarding Cloontagh National School in County Longford. Cloontagh National School is a two-teacher school based in Killashee parish. The school is under the patronage of Bishop Paul Connell and a Catholic ethos is upheld. School enrolment has decreased from 23 in 2021 to 2022, to 14 in 2025 to 2026, reflecting the national decline in primary demographics. At a national level, primary enrolments are projected to decline by 100,000 over a ten-year period. In 2022, on foot of an application, accommodation was approved for this school under the additional school accommodation scheme. This project will provide one mainstream classroom, one special education needs classroom and ancillary. A stage 2 report was submitted to the Department officials in quarter 3 of 2025. This report is currently under review from both a technical and cost perspective. All projects, including this one, will undergo the necessary due diligence outlined in the infrastructure guidelines. Given the detailed nature of the evaluation process, the need to ensure full cost compliance, and the requirement to align the project with the prioritisation framework under the national development plan, this review process is necessarily thorough.

In July 2025, the Government announced an allocation of over €7.55 billion for the Department of Education and Youth for a period up to 2030 under the national development plan. As part of the NDP allocation, the Department will place a strong emphasis on provision for children with special educational needs, with a particular focus on meeting annual school place needs. Regarding project roll-out for large-scale projects and additional school accommodation scheme projects, the approach will be to continue to maximise the capacity of the existing school estate as much as possible in the first instance and also provide the necessary additional capacity through targeted and prioritised project roll-out over the course of the 2026 to 2030 period to meet the most urgent and prioritised needs.

The sectoral plan for the education and youth sector will be published shortly. The first tranche of projects to progress to construction will be published at that time.

This national development plan, NDP, implementation plan will optimise ongoing outputs from the NDP allocations, with a strong focus on maximising existing school capacity, progressing priority projects where local capacity across schools in the area is insufficient and ensuring delivery that is affordable, offers value for money and meets functional needs. All existing school building projects and applications for accommodation will be considered in this context, with a particular focus on ensuring existing capacity is maximised.

The Department had recent engagement with the school and will continue to work with it to ensure current and future school place needs are prioritised.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I thank the Minister of State for his response, which is very similar to a response to a parliamentary question I received. He emphasised special educational needs. The school in question has a child waiting to start in the special class promised in 2022. The class has not materialised and the child is still waiting.

The Minister of State also referred to cost capacities and value for money. Department officials came to the school and told it what should be built, which was far in excess of what the school itself had asked for. Today, there are children sitting in a classroom with walls that show signs of structural instability. I certainly would not accept one of my children being in a school like that. Would the Minister of State? I do not think any parent should have to do that.

I will give another fact about this school. In the concrete part of the school, there is one classroom and a multifunctional room, and I use that term lightly. This multifunctional room is the principal's office, the secretary's office and the staff room. It is also where children with special educational needs are taught. That part of the room is divided from the secretary's workplace by a row of filing cabinets.

The school build, as it stands, is simply not fit for purpose. The school was given a commitment that this build would be done. Now, almost four years later, there is still no sign of it. The staff are doing the best they can in inappropriate facilities. Pupils are learning in unsuitable conditions and members of the school community feel they have been left behind. I am very disappointed that there is nothing in the Minister of State's response that would indicate they are wrong to feel that way. The €7 billion announced means nothing to them; they are not included in it. Their children are still going back to a cold, damp, squishy floor in a mould-covered school tomorrow and after the Easter break.

I want to bring it back to this issue because it is what is important here. This school is in the children's community. It is the local school, and the six teachers and staff are doing fantastic work. These are not just my words that I am putting on the record here. Everything I have said has been confirmed by an engineer's report and in correspondence sent to the Department.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy again for raising important points regarding a school in her constituency. I will ensure I take those points back to the Minister for education, Deputy Naughton. I emphasise again that the Department is fully committed to ensuring there is appropriate accommodation available for all school pupils and will, in the wider context, continue to engage with Cloontagh National School and ensure the building project for the school is subject to the required diligence under the Government's infrastructure guidelines.

We all understand that the construction environment is challenging across all sectors, not just in education but also in housing. The Department is required to manage the timing, scope and cost of individual projects within its budgetary requirements. As I said, further engagement is required and I am sure the Deputy and many of her Oireachtas colleagues in her area will engage further with the school management on how we can progress and enhance the school environment to ensure that pupils have appropriate conditions and that any refurbishment or existing emergency works are implemented in a speedy manner, while progressing the project itself as required and approved.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this important Topical Issue. I raise the issue of the need for a new school building for Dunboyne junior and senior national schools. This is, in the first instance, an excellent school. The principal there is J.J. Brennan. There are 470 pupils in the senior school, while the junior school has in the region of 450 pupils, so it is a large school. The principal says the staff are very dedicated. It is the only school in Meath that has a platinum STEM award for science and technology. It is one of only 25 schools in the State with that award. The school is involved in local history projects, and clean air and pollinator projects. It also has a tremendous new drama club, with over 80 people involved. However, the condition of the hall has recently been commented on.

The staff are absolutely excellent and dedicated, but the building is letting them down. The principal stated that while the school has a large number of accolades and awards, staff are working in terrible conditions, which is bad for the morale of staff and not fair on students. The chair of the senior and junior national school parents association, Karen Gunning, stated that while the staff handle the situations with professionalism and calm, the stark reality is that young children are being educated in infrastructure that is visibly failing. Hundreds of children continue to learn in an ageing building that no longer meets the needs of a modern primary school. The staff are excellent, incredible and innovative, but they do not have the facilities to match.

The junior school is 30 years old but the senior school was built in 1971 and some of the prefabs are 20 years and older. The conditions are dire. The school has leaking roofs in five classrooms and uneven flooring. In one portacabin, the floor collapsed recently and the class had to be relocated. There are infestations of rodents - rats, mice and more. It is simply unacceptable. There are nine portacabins housing ten classes, and there is an autism class in one of the prefabs. There are proposals for another autism class in the senior school but there is a question regarding what space will be used to accommodate it.

Since the announcement of the first tranche of NDP funding, we know there are many disappointed schools which are not on the list. I make the case to the Minister of State that not all schools waiting to get onto the list for the next tranche of funding, or even the existing one, are equal. I make a specific case for Dunboyne junior and senior national schools. This project has been in the offing since 1995 and in planning, in some shape or form, since 2008. Its ten-year planning permission for works will expire in August. I have told the Minister of State this is an excellent school. I have also told him about the conditions staff and pupils are living with at the minute. The school's ten-year planning permission is about to expire and we need to get works commenced on this school before it does.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank Deputy O'Rourke for raising this matter and giving me the opportunity, on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Naughton, to outline to the House the current position regarding the school projects for Dunboyne junior and senior national schools, Station Road, Dunboyne, County Meath.

These school building projects will deliver a new 24-classroom primary school, with additional classrooms for children with special educational needs for the senior school, and the construction of an eight-classroom extension planned refurbishment, with classrooms for children with special educational needs for the junior school.

The school was authorised to proceed to stage 3, tender, in December 2020 and in May 2021, it was authorised to issue a letter of intent.

The tender report relating to reserved specialist contractors was received from the design team and sent to the Department for review in July 2021. Due to the passage of time and in light of the increased construction costs, a decision was made in November 2021 to reprice the tenders. These were returned in quarter 1 of 2022. Following a review of the tender report, the authorisation to issue the letter of intent was issued in October 2022. In June 2024, a decision was taken to collapse the tender to allow for an increased scope of works, which, following consultation with the design team, was deemed necessary. Decarbonisation measures were included in the revised project scope in line with climate action objectives.

The Department of Education and Youth received the revised stage 2b submission report for the senior school from the design team in June 2025. Department officials will carry out a full review of the stage 2b report, and the school and design team will be kept informed of the next steps. The Department is currently engaging with the design team regarding the process of removing and replacing the temporary accommodation at Dunboyne Junior National School. In July, the Government announced its largest capital allocation of over €7.5 billion for the Department of Education and Youth under the national development plan, NDP. As part of that allocation, we will see a strong emphasis on the provision of accommodation for children with special educational needs, with a particular focus on meeting annual school placement needs.

In relation to the roll-out of largescale projects and additional school accommodation scheme projects, the approach will be to continue to maximise the capacity of the existing school estate as much as possible in the first instance, and to provide necessary additional accommodation through targeted and prioritised projects. The NDP implementation plan for education has seen its first tranche announced, and that will be progressed this year and next. It will be revised on an ongoing basis.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I think the Minister of State has made my case for me. One TD after another will say that their local school or a school in their constituency should be included when it comes to funding under the NDP. Very few - I would suggest none - would say that the planning permission is about to expire and that the project, through no fault of the school, has been to the brink and back on two occasions. Covid interrupted this project. It was interrupted again in light of other circumstances. This school is in desperate need. Very particular circumstances obtain in the context of Dunboyne junior and senior national schools here. Will the Minister of State bring those circumstances to the attention of the Minister, Deputy Hildegard Naughton? The Minister of State has the details of how far advanced the

project was before it was pulled back and of how far it was advanced again before demands were made by the Department in relation to decarbonisation. It is almost back to square one again. If this project does not proceed, there is a risk that the planning permission will expire in a handful of months.

I have a written response from the Minister which states, "My department is conscious that the planning permission for the project ... will expire in August 2026 and the Department will work with the school authorities to identify an appropriate pathway forward". Will the Minister of State please explain what that means? As he will appreciate, the real concern is that the planning permission will expire, and then the whole school community will be back to square one. In the context of all the additional information on how we are going to spend funding in the future and identify priority projects for further tranches, this project will not be considered. I am asking that this project be put on the list of tranche 1 funding in light of the particular circumstances involved.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I again thank Deputy O'Rourke for bringing this important matter to the floor of the Dáil. I certainly agree with him regarding the time dependency relating to this project. I will take the points he has raised back to the Minister, Deputy Naughton, in the context of her consideration of the needs of Dunboyne junior and senior national schools and ask that they be considered as part of the ongoing Department-led prioritisation process. The consultation with the school patron and the school authority will continue.

Notwithstanding that, any interim accommodation requirements will continue to be assessed and considered by the Department on a case-by-case basis. This project certainly deserves merit in that regard, particularly if it is at stage 2b and planning permission is already in place. The level of need has been identified, but there is then the prioritisation need and the approach the Department has taken in selecting the initial projects to progress. It is no different in County Mayo. Many schools there were not selected. I am sure many other Deputies would reflect the same situation in their constituencies. It is certainly reflected in the number of education Topical Issue matters that have been raised today. I will take the points raised by the Deputy back to the Minister.

Energy Prices

Deputy Cathy Bennett: As I said earlier this week, people understand that the Government is not responsible for the international energy crisis that has emerged. What people hold the Government responsible for in the first instance is the framework it had in place in advance of the crisis. In the second instance, they hold it responsible for its response. I contend that said response has been delayed, minimal and not of sufficient substance to meaningfully protect, as best we can, the people in our communities who need support.

Ordinary families, workers, businesses and farmers have been struggling with out-of-control energy prices. More than 320,000 households are in arrears with their electricity bills. One in four households are in arrears with gas bills. When the Government withdrew the energy credit supports as part of budget 2026, it justified its action on the basis of a projected inflation rate. That rate has proven to be 50% lower than projected. The decision it made was based on fundamentally wrong information. As a result, I contend that the Government made

a clearly and undeniably the fundamentally wrong decision. Does the Minister of State dispute that inflation projections were wrong and that the Government's decision to withdraw energy credits was fundamentally flawed? If so, what is the Government going to do to redress the terrible impact of its clearly ham-fisted decision?

I would appreciate it if the Minister of State could give an explanation as to why nothing seems to have been done more than 400 days after the Government gave a commitment to divert surplus renewable energy to households living in energy poverty. In that period, the Government has allowed surplus renewable energy valued at €560 million, or €1.3 million, to go to waste every day. This is equivalent to 512 million tanks of hot water that could have been used by households.

The Government has been very prone to saying that it would welcome constructive ideas from the Opposition. My party colleague Deputy Pa Daly, Sinn Féin's spokesperson on climate, introduced legislation to enhance the power of the energy regulator to hold energy companies to account and to tackle price gouging. Will the Government commit to supporting that legislation? Sinn Féin has brought forward proposals to ensure that data centres pay their fair share through a restructuring of the PSO levy. Is the Government content that households pay six to eight times more than data centres? If the Government is not content with it, will it agree to support the Sinn Féin proposal? I ask this because, to date, it seems that the Government's policy on energy is predicated on supporting data centres at all costs while ensuring that any measures to support ordinary families are minimal and as temporary in nature as it thinks it can get away with.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for raising this important topic. The irony here is that Sinn Féin voted against yesterday's cut in excise duty, which will make the cost of fuel at the pumps cheaper and reduce the cost of energy and fuel for households and families. The Deputy is about blaming the Government for its lack of action, when we actually took action. Sinn Féin was the only Opposition party to vote against the cut.

5 o'clock

It looks like Sinn Féin is making it up as it goes along every single day. Even the Private Members' Bill it brought forward last week had no mention at all of the fuel allowance with regard to the 470,000 households impacted, or the measures we have introduced which are targeted and supportive of those who are at risk of fuel poverty and on the lowest income deciles.

Energy affordability is a priority for this Government. The increase in energy prices in recent weeks is a real concern. What we have seen are not just normal price fluctuations, but a real geopolitical shock that has immediate consequences across the world. Military action in the Gulf is impacting crude oil prices significantly, and market volatility is certainly causing a risk of supply and huge disruption. The energy security group met on 8 March to assess the implications of the conflict, and that ensured the Government is fully informed of the ongoing developments as regards global energy markets. The group reviewed the current supply and price conditions across oil, gas and electricity, and heard from fuel industry representatives. On 11 March, Ireland agreed to participate in the International Energy Agency to release international strategic reserves to address any supply issues which may result from the conflict. Indeed, Ireland has contributed to the IEA 400 million-barrel release, with 1.6 million barrels

in place. The Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment is also liaising with the National Oil Reserves Agency, NORA, on the operational element of that release.

The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, chaired a meeting of the national energy affordability task force on 15 March. That focus was very much on ensuring that the Government is informed of the ongoing developments. We also had a subsequent meeting on 26 March, this afternoon, with regard to the Government taking action to help households and businesses in respect of the fuel and energy crisis. Earlier this week, the Government introduced temporary and targeted measures, as I outlined earlier, cutting diesel by 22 cent, petrol by 17 cent and marked oil by 5 cent. These measures will have a significant impact in terms of the diesel tax rebate scheme, supporting the haulage and bus passenger operators who are also exposed. We are very worried about heating oil and have extended the fuel allowance for those who would have seen an end to it at the end of this month. That has been extended by an extra four weeks, with an additional €152 to support those in receipt of it. We have allowed those on the family working payment to be included in the fuel allowance, which affects an additional 50,000 households. Overall, the Government will continue to actively monitor the geopolitical situation and continue to make adjustments as we see fit over the weeks and months ahead.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Sinn Féin voted against Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil's tax reduction-

Deputy Alan Dillon: Sinn Féin voted against the cut.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: -----because it did not do enough. The Minister of State knows it did not do enough. He is fooling nobody; not the families, farmers or haulage workers. Everybody knows.

Deputy Alan Dillon: People will see.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The limited resources the Government did introduce via the National Oil Reserves Agency will see the cost of home heating oil reduced by only two cents per litre. Is that a joke? This was wholly inadequate in terms of households reliant on home heating oil in and of itself, but it will also be negatively affected by the Government's planned increase in carbon tax on 1 May. Why in the name of God does the Minister of State think it is a good idea to increase the cost of petrol, diesel and home heating oil in the midst of an energy crisis? Government Ministers are fond of saying it is funding needed for farmers, but I suggest the Minister of State go back to the Comptroller and Auditor General who makes it patently clear it is not farmers who are getting paid from that fund.

The carbon tax was meant to be a behavioural tax to encourage people to change behaviours, but people do not have the choice of public transport or any alternatives to using their car to drop their kids to school, go to work and about their daily life like many others. Many people in my constituency of Cavan and Monaghan do not have choices and cannot change behaviour. All this tax can do is screw over people who are already struggling. My final question to the Minister of State - I appeal to him to answer this - is will he postpone further planned increases in carbon taxes on petrol, diesel and home heating oil while the energy crisis persists? He said that tax is to happen on 1 May. I hope the Government is not going to do it.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for raising the points she has. On this side of the House, we do not agree with them. The carbon tax has been one of the most progressive taxes we have introduced. It has contributed-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Farmers have not seen it.

Deputy Alan Dillon: -----more than €4.7 billion to the Exchequer.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I asked the Committee of Public Accounts. Farmers have not seen it.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): I ask the Deputy to let the Minister of State respond.

Deputy Alan Dillon: It has allocated more than €170 million-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: It was not used for farmers. It was put into the central pot.

Deputy Alan Dillon: -----to the ACRES scheme. That is a programme that has a direct impact on rural communities across the country. It is the Sinn Féin model to spend fast, wide and worry later. How would we replace the revenue streams that support these vital programmes-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Look after the most vulnerable.

Deputy Alan Dillon: -----not just ACRES but also the fuel allowance and the expansion of the fuel allowance? It supports the fuel allowance. How would we generate the revenue that supports 470,000 households and indeed the likes of the home retrofitting programme? It has made a substantial difference. That is why we have expanded it for four weeks. It is targeted to those who are most impacted. We have also put in measures to reduce the cost and we have been very upfront that we cannot cover all sectors and households-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Cover the data centres.

Deputy Alan Dillon: -----but the €250 million package announced on Wednesday will be of enormous benefit by any yardstick.

If we look at what Sinn Féin is doing up the North, it is introducing a measly €30 that will not be introduced until 1 July. Its hypocrisy in telling us down here when it stands still in the North when it has a Minister for the economy and finance doing absolutely zero, shines in the face of its lack of responsibility or urgency in regards to these needs. We have put the measures in place and legislated for them, and we will see that reduction at the pumps over the next 24 hours.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 5.08 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 5.13 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 5.08 p.m. and resumed at 5.13 p.m.

Organisation of Working Time (Leave for Health Screening Purposes) Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Duncan Smith: I move: “That the Bill be now read a Second Time.”

I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Alan Dillon. I acknowledge his endurance this afternoon after taking eight Topical Issue matters in advance of this debate. I also thank Edel O'Shea, a constituent of mine, who worked with me on this Bill. I thank the Irish Cancer Society, which as many of us in this Chamber will know has always been fantastic with providing data and detail on all things related to cancer services, cancer treatment and cancer screening in this country.

This Bill is simple. It would stop workers having to take annual leave for hospital appointments for national screening programmes. Better still, it would encourage those workers particularly who are in insecure or low-paid employment, giving them protections to take part in and take up national cancer screening programmes. It would be a Bill for people who cannot afford to take a day or some time off, whether that be due to insecure work or fear of missing out on any part of their much-needed pay cheque. Ultimately, it is about equity for people so that nobody suffers from developing cancer just because they could not afford to take some time off to catch and detect it early.

There are four national screening programmes: BreastCheck; CervicalCheck; BowelScreen; and Diabetic RetinaScreen. BowelScreen is a home check so the practicalities of this Bill would not apply to it but it would apply to the other three. This is not to say that we are failing in terms of take up. BreastCheck, for example, exceeds the 70% take-up target, which is the standard for screening programmes. There has also been a 36% increase in the number of women who will be completing mammograms this year, and an 18% increase in the number of women who will have cervical screening tests. These are all massively positive and this Bill is not about criticising the Government about the take up of the screening schemes, it is just an opportunity to work together, to work better and to continue to strive for improved take up. As we know, we can always do more.

Important research was conducted for the HSE by Sophie Mulcahy Symmons at the end of 2023 on the take up of national screening programmes. The research indicated, among other things, that people and workers in lower socioeconomic groups are less likely to take up a national screening programme appointment. The majority of people in lower socioeconomic groups are likely to be in vulnerable, insecure or low-paid work. We know that these types of jobs come with fewer safeguards, fewer entitlements and fewer protections. The take up of trade union membership and trade union cover in these areas is also lower.

With this Bill we believe there are no losers. There would be no way to take advantage of the day's leave without having to take part in a screening programme. Safeguards and protections would be included. We do not believe this type of leave would be manipulated or used for any other reasons. As the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, will know, on a purely financial level it is more cost effective for the State if a cancer diagnosis is caught early and if treatment can be administered as early as possible. It is important to acknowledge in the

financial costings for businesses, in that people are not going to be going to a screening every year. This is a facilitator for the year when someone does go to a screening.

As the Minister of State can appreciate from representations in his own constituency, some screening checks involve a geographic distance. For those of us in Dublin or in major centres, the distance can be quite short and workers may only need a short period off in a morning or afternoon. People who live in more remote parts of the country may need to take a full day off work to take part in a screening programme. This should be seen as an investment for each employer to ensure their employees are getting checked through the national programmes as early as possible. If there is an anomaly or, God forbid, someone does receive a cancer diagnosis through the screening, we know that early detection means earlier treatment and the earlier the treatment the less invasive it is and the healthier people can remain. This means they can remain in work for longer and continue to be able to engage in other parts of their lives. We believe this makes sense. It is something that would not have too much of a cost impact on employers or on the Exchequer. In fact, it would be an investment.

We also believe that morally, and from a leadership point of view, it is the right thing to do. It sends the right message that as a State we are placing positive health policy front and centre and that we support people to take part in these programmes to safeguard their health and their ability to be able to continue in the workforce and with their lives.

The Irish Cancer Society estimates that approximately 40,000 people get cancer in Ireland each year and approximately 30% of all deaths per year are from cancer. We know through our own history of screening programmes, and unfortunately the scandals that have brought screening programmes to the fore of people's minds, that the earlier people get checked the greater their chance of survival. We are now in a situation where we have increased trust in our screening programmes and the trajectory of these programmes and their take up is going in the right direction. Trust has been hard won and it is a credit to organisations like the Irish Cancer Society, the clinicians, the practitioners and the people who run these schemes that we are trending in the right direction after so much hardship and tragedy.

We do, however, have an opportunity to progress more. We must do everything we can to reduce every barrier in people's way to ensure they can take up these screening programmes. We believe this is a truly common-sense measure. It is a pro-health measure and the type of measure the Government often claims the Opposition does not offer. We believe it is constructive. We have just had this year's Daffodil Day where the right to be forgotten was supported by this Government in what is a really good piece of legislation. It is the Government taking a really positive step. This Bill, either in its current form or through an amendment, would be a win for the Government.

I will work with the Ministers for Health and enterprise, and with the Minister of State currently in the Chamber, to get this through. In 12 months, on Daffodil Day 2027, perhaps this Bill or the core principles of it will be something we can celebrate going into Government.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank Deputy Smith for introducing this Bill. It is understood that this Bill seeks to amend the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 to create a statutory entitlement to leave with pay from employment in order to enable an employee to avail of cervical, breast or colon cancer screening programmes provided by the national screening service or any other

screening programme recommended to employees by his or her medical practitioner. Improving participation in the HSE's national screening service is something we all recognise as a public health priority and while the intention to support participation in the service is understood, and while it is constructive, the Government opposes the Bill for two key reasons. First, the Organisation of Working Time Act is not the appropriate legislative mechanism for introducing a new health-related leave entitlement. Second, increasing access to screening services is considered a more sustainable and equitable solution than legislating for paid leave.

I will outline these reasons in further detail. Government is of the position that the Organisation of Working Time Act is not the appropriate legislative vehicle to provide for such entitlements. The Act is a statute with a specific and narrow function. It gives effect to the EU working time directive, and in doing so, it regulates maximum weekly working hours, rest periods, night work and paid annual leave. It is a framework for managing working time and not a framework for health-related entitlements. The Bill would extend the Act into areas that relate to public health screening, which are matters that the Act was never designed to address. The Act is not aligned with Departments or agencies responsible for public health. Placing a medical entitlement within a horizontally applicable working-time statute creates a structural misalignment between the nature of the entitlement and the purpose of the legislative instrument. Irish law has consistently located health-related and care-related leave such as maternity and parental leave, adoptive leave, medical care leave and carer's leave in stand-alone Acts or within broader family- or care-related statutory frameworks overseen by the Departments of Health or of Children, Disability and Equality. These frameworks reflect the medical, care-based and equality-based nature of those entitlements. Placing health screening leave into the Organisation of Working Time Act would represent a major departure from these long-established approaches, and the Government is therefore satisfied that the Act is not the appropriate legislative home for such an entitlement.

My colleagues across government and I believe that enhancing access to the HSE's national screening service is a more sustainable, equitable and inclusive solution than legislating for employer-paid leave. This work is already under way across all four national screening service programmes, which are BreastCheck, CervicalCheck, BowelScreen and Diabetic RetinaScreen. The service's equity framework is designed to ensure that population-based screening programmes in Ireland are accessible, inclusive and effective for all eligible individuals, regardless of their background, socioeconomic status or employment situation. Screening eligibility is based on age, gender and clinical criteria and not employment status. This ensures that people who are unemployed, self-employed or in insecure work are not disadvantaged in being invited or receiving care. The national screening service carries out a range of programmes and projects to support accessibility and equity, and the outcome of these efforts is clear. Recent data from quarter 1 to quarter 3 of 2025 show strong and often above average participation, including that BreastCheck achieves an uptake rate in the region of 74.7%, exceeding the 70% target Deputy Smith outlined. CervicalCheck screened 74.8% of eligible women within a five-year period, against a target of 80% and BowelScreen reached 52%, above its 45% target. These results show that the public is highly engaged with preventative health programmes, which is an essential factor in early detection and reducing cancer mortality.

I will briefly explain some of the accessibility and equity programmes and projects which the service has developed, in addition to some recent improvements in the delivery of the

programmes themselves. The national screening service has developed a wide range of initiatives aimed at improving equity, access and participation, including the community champions health promotion project, which trains community health workers to provide practical information and support about screening services, an intervention toolkit to support community workers to encourage screening uptake, a pregnancy-specific eye screening pathway for women with diabetes, accessibility training for staff to better support people with disabilities, a cancer prevention and screening project with the Traveller community, a literacy-focused initiative to support diabetic eye screening among Travellers, improved access to cervical screening within Limerick female prison and dedicated breast screening initiatives for Ukrainian women.

While increased flexibility of appointment times remains a key objective of health service policy, the national screening service is committed to actively promoting its service and ensuring that screening is accessible, inclusive and effective for everyone across Ireland. This approach not only aligns with national priorities but also guarantees equitable access, empowering individuals to take charge of their own health. Recent developments in each of the four screening services have also improved equity and accessibility for users. BreastCheck is currently offered through a network of 24 mobile and four static units nationally, enabling women to be screened close to where they live. These additional mobile screening units have been added since 2020. The service is also upgrading the mobile fleet and has identified three new sites for additional static units. BreastCheck now sends text reminders and appointment details through the HSE health app, making it easier for users to confirm, change and consent to appointments, helping to ensure that no screening slot goes unused. CervicalCheck is delivered by over 6,500 sample takers providing screening nationally through GP practices and clinics. There are 15 colposcopy clinics nationally providing follow-up testing and treatment for women who need it, also close to where they live. BowelScreen is now offered to people aged between 58 and 70. The number of BowelScreen units nationally has increased and the newest unit opened in late 2025 in Cork University Hospital, bringing the total number of units to 16. BowelScreen is accessible with a home test, making it widely accessible and flexible to people. Diabetic retina screening is provided through 146 screening locations nationally and a network of eight treatment centres for onward referral and treatment. A new screening mechanism is being piloted, meaning people will be able to drive to and from appointments, increasing accessibility.

In 2026 appointment information will also be provided through the HSE app to make it easier to confirm, change and consent to appointments.

Considering the breadth of existing initiatives under the national screening service, including ongoing improvements in accessibility and service delivery, the Government believes these measures represent a more sustainable and equitable approach than creating a new statutory entitlement to paid leave for employees. It is also important to be very clear the Organisation of Working Time Act is not the correct legislative vehicle for introducing a health-related entitlement of this type. For these reasons the Government is opposing the Bill.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: I thank Labour for bringing this Bill forward. As usual, the Government is opposing anything constructive that comes from the Opposition.

Paid leave for health screening purposes should be a must for workers. I recognise the employers that already pay their workers for time off for screenings and cancer-related appointments. This is done through their good will. The Government must recognise the significance of this legislation in protecting workers' rights and ensuring they have access to essential healthcare and screening without being punished financially for taking time off work. Sinn Féin firmly believes no worker should have to choose between their health and their income. This Bill, which proposes as statutory entitlement to paid health screening leave, is a step in the right direction. It allows employees to attend cervical, breast and colon cancer screenings without the fear of losing pay or facing repercussions at work. This is especially important as we know early detection can save lives, particularly with the cancers targeted by this Bill. We support the introduction of fully-paid health screening leave but we must also acknowledge the cap of three days per year may not be sufficient. Many screening appointments require travel and preparation and if multiple screenings are needed workers could easily exceed this limit. Many screening appointments require travel and preparation and if multiple screenings are needed workers could easily exceed this limit.

We must ensure health screening leave reflects the reality of people's lives and the complexities of healthcare needs. While this Bill focuses on specific cancer screening types it is vital that, if possible, we broaden the scope of this leave to include other important preventative healthcare appointments. Workers should not only have access to screenings but also to follow-up care. The ongoing cost-of-living crisis and economic volatility make it more urgent than ever to strengthen worker protections. This Bill helps eliminate the grey area whereby workers might previously have felt compelled to use their annual or sick leave for health screenings. For this Bill to have the intended impact, the Government needs to address capacity constraints and reduce waiting lists for HSE screening programmes to allow for timely screening appointments. Every worker deserves access to healthcare when they need it. This Bill is a significant step forward but is just one piece of a larger puzzle. We will continue to advocate for comprehensive healthcare solutions and robust worker protections. Together, let us ensure every worker can prioritise their health without fear of financial repercussions.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I thank my colleague, Deputy Smith, for bringing forward this Bill. If the Organisation of Working Time Act is not the appropriate vehicle by which to legislate for this proposal, I ask whether it could be done through the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023. I am very disappointed by the attitude the Government has taken to this Bill because it is a practical one the provisions of which would cover HSE cancer screening programmes and other screenings recommended by a doctor based on age or health status. Workers must currently use their annual or sick leave to attend appointments, which can create financial and workplace barriers to early detection. Many EU countries include preventative health check-ups within their broader paid sick leave regulations and studies have shown that when paid sick leave is mandated and used often for screening, cancer screening rates are higher compared with areas without such mandates.

We have problems with cancer screening and we should not kid ourselves we do not. The European Union's Beating Cancer Plan, which we have signed up to, ensures 90% of the target population is offered screening but in many ways the country is going in the wrong direction. BreastCheck has missed its attendance target for a number of consecutive years up to 2026. Approximately 40% of first-time screening appointments are missed. If we look at

BowelScreen things are even more concerning and we are going in the wrong direction. Our figure is 65% and it is also declining. This is something that disproportionately affects people who are in lower-paid jobs in front-line industries like hospitality, retail and manufacturing. They have rigid rotas and cannot just nip out for an hour or a couple of hours. It is a fact that most of our screening services operate day-time appointments only and clinics rarely operate at the weekend or late in the evenings. This legislation is also something to benefit those who are in precarious work because employees on casual, temporary or zero-hours contracts may, because of the imbalance that is there with their employer, fear requesting time off for a non-urgent medical appointment will lead to them, for example, being offered fewer hours or affecting perception of their reliability to attend their job. There is no legal entitlement to paid leave for cancer screening and employees are often forced to choose between using annual leave or taking unpaid leave, which many people cannot afford, especially given the cost-of-living crisis we are in. There is also an issue with employers not allowing people to take a partial day off or a few hours off for an appointment. This means some people have to take an entire day of annual leave for a 15-minute test. There is an imbalance between the person in low-paid and more precarious work and their employer. These people are often younger and from working-class and migrant backgrounds. There is a real fear there of being perceived as unreliable or of receiving unfair treatment for asking for time off for health-related reasons, especially if they have already used their statutory sick leave.

As I said, this is a practical proposal. It merits much more consideration than being thrown out, essentially, by the Government. If the Organisation of Working Time Act is not the appropriate vehicle through which to legislate for this I really hope the Minister of State can find out if we can do it through the 2023 work life balance Act.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I acknowledge the contributions from those present. I reiterate the Government appreciates the intention behind this Private Member's Bill and the contributions that have been made. We are all in agreement that increasing the participation rates within the national screening service is something we recognise as vital to our public health priorities. Early detection saves lives and the commitment of the Bill is to supporting better health outcomes and ensuring people live a lot longer and that is very clear.

However, it remains the Government's position that the Organisation of Working Time Act is not the appropriate legislative vehicle to provide health-based entitlements. Most of the entitlements the Government has in place, such as maternity leave, parental leave, care leave, medical care leave, etc., are very much in stand-alone Acts. For that reason it is not appropriate that we would promote and increase access to the national screening service. Moreover, even the definition of what a national screening service encompasses is not clear. It is considered more sustainable and equitable that it would be legislated for as paid leave by the employer.

I explained earlier the fundamental purpose and structure of the Organisation of Working Time Act. It has always been a statute designed to regulate work hours, rest periods and paid annual leave in line with the EU working time directive. That provides a framework on how time is managed in the workplace, not a framework for clinical entitlements or health-related benefits. That is where we have the misalignment in regard to this Private Members' Bill. Also, introducing a health screening leave entitlement into that Act would cut across the long-

established legal framework, which would certainly create inconsistencies for both employers and employees.

Second, it is clear that increasing access into the national screening service can be done more sustainably through measures other than legislating for paid leave. I have spoken about the current targets that are being met across many of the current programmes. On the evidence presented by the Labour Party, I am not sure how paid leave will actually increase achievement of the current targets, even for those who are marginalised or who are not in employment. This measure is specifically for those who are in employment. The national screening service equity framework is designed to ensure that the programmes are inclusive and accessible and that everyone is eligible regardless of their background or even their employment status. The data shows that those initiatives have improved accessibility and equity and are succeeding, even though there are one or two we could improve on. The data is positive, as I explained. The national screening service has undertaken a range of additional measures to improve the accessibility of the service, such as the introduction of mobile screening units and the extension of the age cohort. The use of technology through the HSE's health app has also been an important element in this regard.

These improvements benefit not only employees but also people who are outside employment, those who are self-employed, those who are retired and those who are in casual or insecure work. Legislation that applies only to employees cannot be the main tool for addressing a wide population with public health challenges. For those reasons, and while fully recognising the positive intention the Labour Party is putting across within this proposal, we cannot accept or support the Bill. Nonetheless, our focus remains on promoting and strengthening the national screening service to ensure it is accessible and equitable to all.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I am deeply disappointed by the response. We believe the Organisation of Working Time Act is the correct legislative mechanism for this. What makes this different from carer's leave, maternity leave or paternity leave is that this is a short period of leave of no more than a day, sometimes a morning. This is not extended leave. This is not leave for weeks or months. The Minister of State feels differently. That is very disappointing.

We all agree with the Minister of State "increasing access into the national screening service can be done more sustainably". We have acknowledged the need for an improvement in this regard. Everyone is supportive of that across the House in terms of access to these programmes. We define within this legislation that it is the HSE national screening programmes. There are four of them. They are tightly defined. It is an evidence-based approach. I referred to the Sophie Mulcahy Symmons research which we are basing this on.

We are talking about workers in retail, service workers and workers in insecure low-paid employment. This legislation is not for self-employed people. It is not for retired people. It is for workers in low-paid and insecure employment. If it were applied, it would have a marginal to low impact, but it would have an impact. It would increase the number of people availing of screening. Through word of mouth, it would create a culture of doing so among workers where there is a low density of trade union representation. This word of mouth element would ensure workers know their entitlements in terms of being able to take a few hours off to take part in these screening programmes.

I am aghast that the Government is opposing this Bill on Second Stage and not allowing it to go through for further discussion. There is a constituency out there listening to the debate on this Bill about this potential entitlement who will be disappointed and will make that known to their local Government representatives. I am disappointed the Minister of State did not respond to Deputy Sheehan's question about whether it could be done through the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2023. I thank Deputies Guirke and Sheehan for contributing to this debate. I am disappointed with the Government's response to this. While it is not unexpected for the Government to oppose Opposition legislation, I am surprised - and not just because it is my legislation - that the Government is opposing this Bill.

Question put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 15 April 2026.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 5.46 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 14 Aibreán 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.46 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 14 April 2026.