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DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

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(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 15 Aibreán 2026

Wednesday, 15 April 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan) i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

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9 o'clock

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): 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 John Paul O'Shea - To discuss the need to expand WWTP capacity in Kanturk.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss battery energy storage systems and solar planning guidelines in rural Ireland.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern - To discuss the proposed relocation of the An Post Edmondstown sorting office to Lucan.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue - To discuss a school building at St. Mary's, Oldtown, County Dublin.

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

Deputy Tom Brabazon - To discuss the LDA's plans for the development of Clongriffin.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil - To discuss junior cycle certification processes for students in special schools.

Deputy Rory Hearne - To discuss the new school building at St. Aidan's CBS, Whitehall, Dublin 9.

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

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss plans for a multidenominational secondary school in Dublin 8.

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

Deputies Conor D. McGuinness, David Cullinane - To discuss the situation of sheep farmers in the Knockmealdowns in County Waterford.

Deputy Thomas Gould - To discuss the crisis building in Cork's nursing home waiting list.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger - To discuss the exclusion of St. Patrick's Junior and Senior National Schools, Corduff, Dublin 15, from DEIS plus.

Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss the expansion of specialist supports for children with dyslexia, dyspraxia or apraxia of speech.

The matters raised by Deputies Thomas Gould, Tom Brabazon, John Paul O'Shea, Ruth Coppinger, Conor D. McGuinness and David Cullinane have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Nursing Homes

Deputy Thomas Gould: As the Minister of State and I both know, a 19-bed unit in Heather House was first announced in 2022. Four years later this special dementia unit has not been opened and all we are getting is excuse after excuse and no date for when it will be open. The latest update from the HSE is that following HIQA's inspection, it is now looking to make amendments to the building. There is still no opening time. I was told in response to a parliamentary question last October that this was ready to go. I was told it again in November and in December. Then I was told that all the Government was waiting for was a licence from HIQA to open it.

I want to outline to the Minister of State just how serious the situation is with the special dementia unit not being opened. I have a lady who is living in the nursing home in Cloyne. Cloyne nursing home is doing a great job but this lady and her family are all from the northside of Cork city. The lady has dementia, and what the staff tell the family is that on the days when they go out to visit her they can see an improvement in her. The problem is that she has two elderly sisters who do not drive. She has family, but they have their own families and jobs. Cloyne is a fair spin from the northside of Cork city. We are talking about 45 minutes, depending on traffic, and it could be even longer. If Heather House was open they would be in to her every day, sometimes multiple times a day. Family members and other family friends who live in the community could also call in. People should get nursing home care in their communities. That goes to the heart of looking after older and more vulnerable people. We do not have answers.

I have another gentleman who is in Ballincollig. His sister and his two granddaughters try to get in to see him. The girls are working. His sister is looking after the family. Heather House is from here over to Dawson Street away from where those families live. There is also another family.

We were successful in saving Mount Cara. I was also involved with successful campaigns to make sure that Sarsfield Court dementia unit and nursing home was not closed down. It is really important that we get Heather House dementia unit open. The thing about it is that it is a brand new purpose-built building that cost millions. It is ready. It is unbelievable - we are looking at a building that is ready. It is fully equipped. What I cannot understand is how after four years HIQA is now coming back looking for more to be done. HIQA was asked in January and it came back to the HSE four months later. Is there a reason that Heather House is not being opened?

We have people with dementia in inappropriate settings. This is the unit that was designed and built for them. That is where they should be. I am not sure if the Minister of State understands the situation. We need compassion from the Government, the HSE and HIQA. We need to get this nursing home open. There is a huge crisis with nursing home spaces on the northside of Cork city. People from the northside are going all over Cork county to get nursing home spaces.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Gabhaim buíochas.

Deputy Thomas Gould: That is not right.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I thank Deputy Gould for raising this important matter. Heather House Community Nursing Unit, CNU, provides important and valued services for the people of the northside of Cork city and surrounding areas. There is a typo in the reply. I understand the significant role the CNU plays in the community and the importance of the facility.

Heather House Community Nursing Unit was opened in 2011, and a 60-bed extension was added in 2023. The CNU is currently registered with HIQA to accommodate a maximum of 60 residents in two units, namely, Poppy and Lily, which are located in the new extension. The two units in the original building, Daisy and Primrose, are currently closed. The HSE informed me today that the new 17-bed dementia-specific unit is at the final stage for application to register with HIQA. Deputy Gould name-checked 19. HIQA has come back and said that there are two twin rooms and they want them to be single, so it is going from 19 to 17. The HSE advised that the final works, as agreed with HIQA, are in progress and will be completed in the coming weeks.

I want to see this unit opened as quickly as possible as well. I am getting directly involved, as Minister of State, to ensure we get it open as quickly as possible. I assure the Deputy that I am committed to working alongside HSE South West to get Primrose, the new dementia-specific unit, opened in Heather House as soon as HIQA registration is obtained.

I wish to inform the Deputy that the 25-bed Daisy unit located in the original building is currently undergoing essential fire upgrade works and the HSE advised me that it is scheduled to reopen at the end of 2026. I am going to look at that as well to see if we can expedite the opening of the 25-bed unit.

HSE South West has been working to increase the quantity of public nursing home beds in the region to offer further long-term residential care capacity and choice for older people living in Cork city and county.

The HSE continues to focus on providing a residential care service focused on quality and safety while also meeting the needs of individual residents. HSE South West continuously reviews the community's needs in line with population health planning and Sláintecare principles. To this end, it is committed to ensuring that optimal services will continue to be provided and developed for older people in Cork. Older persons' services in Cork will soon be enhanced by the opening of two new community nursing units. St. Finbarr's in Cork city will have a total of 105 beds and Midleton CNU will have a total of 50 beds. With specific regard to dementia, I advise the Deputy that 30 dementia-specific beds will form part of the bed complement at St. Finbarr's CNU.

I assure the Deputy that I am committed to working alongside the HSE to address all concerns in respect of the residential care of older people in Cork city and county over the coming years. I will give him a commitment that I have already made direct contact with the HSE and with my officials and that this is something I am going to personally follow up on myself. I am going to see what the reasons for the delays are and how we can expedite the opening of the new dementia unit. I also want to look at including the 25-bed unit in the Daisy wing. The key element here is that, if they are all opened, there would be 102 beds within Heather House. That is hugely significant in terms of increased capacity. That is the up-to-date position. I will listen to the Deputy's follow-up and then come back with a closing statement.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I appreciate that the Minister of State has said he is going to look into this personally but I am really disappointed because four years on it is still not open. The 25 beds in the nursing home are also really important but people with dementia are really vulnerable. They are scattered around nursing homes all over County Cork when there is a purpose-built nursing home at Heather House.

I was hoping that the Minister of State would be able to give me a date today. Regardless of whether it is June, July or August, I would like to have a date for those families. There is one gentleman who is in a special unit at Cork University Hospital because there is nowhere for him to go. His family are afraid that he is going to die in hospital. He comes from the area. He comes from Church Street. This unit is at the top of Gurranabraher, right next to Church Street. The family are saying they want to bring him home or as close to home as they can. For too long, the HSE and HIQA have not been giving answers or a date. I want a date so I can go back to the people of the northside. I could fill that dementia unit. Does the Minister of State see this notebook I am holding? It contains the details of people who could enter this dementia unit. I could fill the whole unit with people who are looking to get into it. I appreciate what the Minister of State is saying but we need a definite timeline for the opening of the unit. People on the northside are sick and tired of being the last to get anything and the first to lose services. Why is it that the northside must always fight? Why must I come in here every week to stand up for the northside? Heather House has been built and the funding is supposed to be there.

The Minister mentioned units at St. Finbarr's and in Midleton. I do not think they will be open before the end of the year. The Minister of State has said they will be opening and that those beds will be available but I have fierce doubts about that.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Community nursing units such as Heather House form an integral part of local communities and provide invaluable service to the people who live in those communities as they age. I have already outlined that there are currently 60 beds open in Heather House CNU. I will once again reiterate that the new 17-bed dementia unit is at the final stage of applying for registration with HIQA. The HSE advises that the final works agreed with HIQA are in progress and will be completed in the coming weeks. I have to work within a process. The process is that the HSE applies to HIQA and HIQA has to give approval. The unit cannot be opened until HIQA gives its approval. I cannot give the Deputy a final date today because I have to work through that process. However, I will give another commitment. I want to see the unit open as quickly as possible and I am going to get directly involved with Department officials and the HSE to see how it can be expedited. This redesigned Primrose unit will offer a choice in long-term residential care for people with dementia. I agree with the Deputy that dementia units are hugely important. As I have already outlined, the Daisy unit located in the original building is currently undergoing essential fire upgrade works and is scheduled to reopen at the end of the year. I want to see if that can be expedited. When complete, this will bring the total capacity of the Heather House CNU to 102 beds.

I am committed to maximising the number of beds for older people. As already mentioned, older persons' services in Cork will soon be enhanced by the opening of two new CNUs, St. Finbarr's in Cork city, which will have 105 beds, and Midleton CNU, which will have a total of 50 beds. I want to see those opened as quickly as possible. I am working with the HSE and the Department to make that happen. I think the Deputy will find they will be opened relatively soon. The HSE continually reviews its services in line with population health planning and Sláintecare principles to ensure adequate and appropriate residential care is available for our older population.

I will be following up on Heather House. I ask the Deputy to keep in contact with my office for updates. I will come back to him with a direct update. Any updates I get, I will provide to the Deputy.

Wastewater Treatment

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I will today highlight an issue of critical importance to the people of north Cork, namely, the urgent need to upgrade the wastewater treatment plant in Kanturk. Kanturk is a proud and growing town with a strong community spirit, vibrant local businesses and enormous potential for future development. However, that potential is being held back by infrastructure that is no longer fit for purpose. The current wastewater treatment plant in Kanturk is operating at or beyond its capacity. This is not just a technical issue; it has real and tangible consequences for the town. It is restricting housing development, limiting business expansion and placing unnecessary pressure on local planning decisions. Quite simply, without adequate water infrastructure, Kanturk cannot grow in the way it needs to. At a time when we are facing a national housing crisis, it is deeply frustrating that towns like Kanturk, which are willing and able to accommodate growth, are being constrained by outdated

infrastructure. We cannot continue to speak about balanced regional development while allowing bottlenecks like this to persist. Local families are also feeling the impact. Young people who want to build or buy homes in their own communities are facing delays and uncertainty. Developers are also hesitant to proceed with projects due to capacity concerns and businesses are also limited in their ability to expand and create jobs within the town of Kanturk. This is not acceptable and it is not sustainable.

Investment in wastewater infrastructure might not always grab headlines, but it is absolutely fundamental in delivering housing, supporting economic growth and protecting our environment. An upgraded treatment plant in Kanturk would unlock significant opportunities, enabling new housing developments, supporting local enterprise and ensuring compliance with environmental standards. I acknowledge the work of Uisce Éireann in the area to date and the engagement that has taken place with Cork County Council and the EPA with regard to putting in some bridging infrastructure and modular infrastructure alongside the current treatment plant. However, what is now needed is a clear commitment and prioritisation in respect of delivery. The people of Kanturk need certainty. They need to know that this project is not just being discussed, but that it is being actively progressed. We must ensure that Kanturk is included as a priority in the capital investment programme. Funding must be allocated, timelines must be set and the project must move forward without any more unnecessary delays.

This is about more than pipes and plants; it is about the future of a town and its people. It is about giving communities the tools they need to thrive. Kanturk has a great deal to offer. It is strategically located, well served by a strong community network and ready for growth. However, without the necessary infrastructure, that growth will remain stalled. I call on the Government and Uisce Éireann to recognise the urgency of this issue and to act decisively. Let us remove this barrier and invest in Kanturk's future. Let use ensure the town can realise its full potential.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I thank the Deputy very much for raising what is a very important issue for the area of Kanturk - an area that the Deputy is exceptionally passionate about.

The operation of public wastewater treatment, together with the operational issues locally, are matters for Uisce Éireann, which has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services, planning, delivery and operational at national, regional and local levels. Neither the Minister, Deputy Browne, nor I have a function in the matters which the Deputy refers. However, that being said, I have made inquiries with Uisce Éireann on foot of the Deputy's Topical Issue being submitted. I have been informed that there are, obviously, capacity constraints on the wastewater treatment plant at Kanturk. This is currently under review.

Any proposed development requires engagement with Uisce Éireann to assess feasibility on a case-by-case basis. In other words, connection applications need to be assessed on an individual basis considering their specific load requirements. Engagement with Uisce Éireann's connections and developer services team ahead of planning a project is recommended and required. Uisce Éireann recognises the need to enhance wastewater treatment capacity in Kanturk and a planned upgrade is under way. This project is currently at the strategic assessment stage, where Uisce Éireann develops the project rationale and objectives, project outcomes, lists of potential options and an indicative range of costs. This work will continue

in 2026 as the project progresses to a preliminary business case, which should be completed by quarter 1 of 2027. This involves undertaking a detailed analysis, developing a shortlist of solutions and finding a preferred option for the shortlisted projects.

That should be achievable in a shorter period of time. I will take that back to Uisce Éireann because the Deputy is correct. We cannot have a situation where we cannot have development in an area. The Deputy said it is not acceptable or sustainable and I agree with him in relation to that. There may be elements of bridging infrastructure that may be possible. I also point to the new developer-led wastewater services infrastructure initiative, which took effect on 4 March 2026. This might be an option for housing development in the interim. This developer-led infrastructure enables developers to design and construct wastewater infrastructure, in conjunction with Uisce Éireann, to agreed standards with the infrastructure owned by Uisce Eireann upon completion.

In areas such as Kanturk where capacity is currently constrained, an application under the developer-led infrastructure initiative may provide a pathway to support development in advance of planned network upgrades, subject to meeting the relevant technical, environmental and planning requirements. Uisce Éireann is available to engage with developers at an early stage to assess proposals and support the progression of suitable projects. Uisce Éireann has made investments in upgrading wastewater treatment infrastructure across County Cork since 2014 and remains committed to doing so under the future investment plans, which the Government has funded under the national development plan to the tune of €11.7 billion. This investment is going to support the delivery of key projects in cities and regions to deliver additional water services capacity for the new housing targets. That is what we expect Uisce Éireann to do with the capital allocations that we have made as a Government.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): I thank the Minister of State for the Kanturk update. Deputy O'Shea has two minutes to respond.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I thank the Minister of State for his correspondence and response on the issue with the wastewater treatment plant in Kanturk. I particularly welcome the opportunity of maybe having some bridging infrastructure which would take place. There are serious discussions ongoing with Cork County Council, the EPA and Uisce Éireann on this matter. I certainly hope that in his position as Minister of State he will follow up with Uisce Éireann and try to urge the continued push on this because the situation on the ground in Kanturk makes this even more stark than ever before. There are houses that have already been built in good faith but cannot be occupied now because they cannot secure a wastewater connection. Families are in limbo. Homes have been completed yet are still sitting idle.

At the same time, there other sites in and around Kanturk that have secured planning permission but cannot proceed to construction because a connection to the system cannot be guaranteed. This is a deeply frustrating and unacceptable position for homeowners, developers and the wider community to be in. It represents not only a waste of time and investment, but a missed opportunity to deliver much-needed housing. Local families are feeling the impact. Young people who want to build and buy homes in their own community are facing delays and uncertainties. Developers are hesitant to proceed with projects due to capacity concerns and businesses too are limited in their ability to expand and create.

There are plenty of options available for Kanturk. It is good to see that Irish Water has it on its priority list. It is important that we work collectively with Uisce Éireann to make sure that the €12 billion that has been given to it by the Government is spent and spent wisely and rapidly to ensure towns like Kanturk can continue to develop into the future.

Deputy John Cummins: There is no question that our water and wastewater systems require substantial and sustained investment over a number of cycles to be able to bring it up to the quality required for a modern service. On the upgrading of plants, there have been many plants across the county that have been upgraded over the past number of years. I compliment Uisce Éireann for its work in that respect. However, there is a hell of a lot more work to be done. That is why the Government is investing record sums of money in Uisce Éireann.

The Deputy mentioned points on bridging infrastructure, the piece that I mentioned around the developer-led infrastructure, and of course, there is the overall upgrade of the plant, which is necessary. In the interim, as the Deputy rightly pointed out, there may be options worth exploring. I will take it away from this Topical Issue debate to write formally to Uisce Éireann in that respect to see what may be done in the interim period. I recognise that a town of the nature of Kanturk and many equivalent towns right across the country have to be able to be developed if we are to achieve our housing targets. It is one of the reasons we have introduced that developer-led infrastructure initiative and are learning from the mistakes of the past where substandard infrastructure was put in place. There is now a very clear framework that is in place between Uisce Éireann and the EPA that projects would be delivered to a set standard and specification and on completion will be taken in charge and operated in perpetuity by Uisce Éireann. That may be an option. I thank the Deputy for raising this matter.

Land Development Agency

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I wish to raise the Land Development Agency's phase two plans for Clongriffin. A lot of these issues will also affect the neighbouring area of Belmayne. On the phase two plan that the LDA has consulted with locals on, locals are telling me - and I agree with them - that this is not being handled correctly. There is a huge investment in housing in this area. It is unprecedented. We all agree that we need housing. However, at the same time we must put together the surrounding infrastructure in terms of parking, community facilities, transport, health facilities and proper policing facilities. This is not being done.

One of the big concerns in relation to parking is that the LDA told me that as a result of its consultation with one of the statutory consultees, the National Transport Authority, that the NTA is dictating to the LDA that there would be 0.4 of a car parking space per unit. We have seen this type of policy before, where people are allocated housing on the basis that they do not have a car, but they do have a car and the car parking overspills into neighbouring communities. It pits neighbour against neighbour. It does not bode well for future development or future sustainable community and neighbourly relations.

Regarding the NTA, this is the same NTA that is unable to provide a regular 15 bus service to Clongriffin. I could tell the Minister of State the countless representations I have made in relation to ghostbus services and, while I know it is not his portfolio, it is all highly relevant to the proposed development. This is also the same NTA that cannot build a bus shelter to keep

people who want to use public transport on the Hole in The Wall road out of the rain. I passed it this morning and there were about 40 people standing at the bus stop cowering under umbrellas.

There is a huge gap in this programme. There have been ongoing discussions between Dublin City Council and the LDA in respect of provision of community facilities. None has been provided to date by DCC or the LDA. We need to plan for successful communities. There is no agreement between DCC and the LDA in respect of those community facilities. I could stand here all day and talk about those needs but in four minutes, I do not have the time.

Transport is a major issue. Residents are dealing with problems with transport every day of the week, between traffic congestion and no clear plan for any additional capacity alongside this development for buses and additional DARTs. I know we have the DART+ coastal plan, which was recently passed, but that is probably going to take ten years to start delivering. That means we are just doing a box-ticking exercise.

With policing, Coolock Garda station, which is the local station, got three extra gardaí under the latest tranche, despite the fact the population in this area is burgeoning and growing on a daily basis with new residents moving in. Policing resources are stretched beyond capacity and none of the design and safety concerns I raised with the LDA in respect of crime prevention has been taken on board. I asked it if it consulted the crime prevention office and I was told it had but I do not see any evidence of that. Any points that have been made to the LDA it robustly bats off and does not acknowledge.

Deputy John Cummins: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter in the House today. As the Deputy knows, the Land Development Agency, LDA, acquired land beside Clongriffin train station from the market with existing permission in 2023. It subsequently sought and was granted approval for a revised planning application, broadly similar to the existing planning which took into account the new objectives and policies in Dublin City Council's development plan 2022-2028.

The development on the site has an overall potential for more than 2,000 homes upon full completion. Construction of Phase 1 commenced in February 2025 and will provide for a total of 408 apartments, comprising 367 cost rental and 41 social housing homes to be delivered across two blocks. I note the Deputy said there is a deficit in community infrastructure but my notes say that in addition to the much-needed homes, a créche to cater for up to 99 children, together with community and arts space, along with landscaped public areas and a new public park, are also planned for delivery within this phase of the development.

The Land Development Agency has advised officials in my Department that phase 1 of this project is on course for delivery of new homes from quarter 4 of this year, which is obviously a positive development. Subject to planning permission, which is the thrust of the Deputy's Topical Issue this morning, phase 2 will see the delivery of over 700 new homes. My understanding is that will comprise of 630 affordable and 70 social units across a whole range of housing typologies, together with the provision of a second créche space and other cultural amenities.

I understand that the commercial focus during this phase will be the strategic distribution of amenities, such as retail and other services across Main Street, Market Street and Station

Square, and consolidating activities around Station Square to create a real town focal point, providing for both day and night-time uses. Furthermore, the Land Development Agency is also advancing engagements with Dublin City Council and other agencies on the provision of consolidated multi-purpose community space for the Clongriffin area, to be delivered in phase 3 of this scheme.

As noted previously, the development of this site has an overall potential for more than 2,000 homes and its completion will assist in meeting our housing need in this part of north Dublin, the Deputy's constituency, which I know he represents with distinction. I am assured the Land Development Agency will continue to prioritise the delivery of the much-needed social and affordable housing, along with the provision of the other amenities on this site. However, I note some of the Deputy's comments regarding the engagement, which I will perhaps take up in my follow-on.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I thank the Minister of State for the response but it appears the LDA has given him its party piece in respect of this particular development. I know there has been engagement but the engagement has been more or less window dressing. The plan has not changed in any way as a result of the consultation with the local community. I attended a meeting before Easter with some of my Oireachtas colleagues and several councillors from the area, and there was palpable anger among all the public representatives in respect of the lack of flexibility shown by the LDA. It was its way or the highway as far as we were concerned. The LDA refused to listen to the issues and the problems.

I subsequently engaged with Dublin City Council, which is doing its level best to provide community facilities and which may in fact be given charge of some of the community facilities that are going to be there. However, the Minister of State says there are going to be 2,000 homes there, and it is absolutely crucial we get the community infrastructure correct.

One thing I will say for the LDA is it is providing créche facilities. That is absolutely welcome and is necessary, and I will not fault it on that. However, the local scouts group, for example, needs a hall-type of area but the facilities being provided are on the ground floor of the apartment block, so there are pillars in the middle. This renders it unsuitable for the scout group. There has been no flexibility shown by the LDA in respect of that. It is talking about a green landscaped area. To me, that is going to turn out to be like a mugger's alley. I am very fearful for the future of this area if the LDA and the Department of housing do not start sitting up and listening to the genuine concerns of the people of this area.

Deputy John Cummins: I thank the Deputy. Obviously, the successful delivery of projects of this scale are certainly dependent on a number of factors and that includes engagement with the community. Certainly, I know the Deputy would have written to his colleague, the Minister, Deputy Browne, in this respect and I am informed that there has been consultation meetings which have included meetings with local councillors, drop-in clinics for members of the public, meetings held with the community association there, as well as engagement with Oireachtas Members and Dublin City Council.

I take the Deputy's point as regards the meaningful nature of that and trying to shape the community and plans that are required and obviously meeting the needs of the community in the area. The Deputy mentioned the scout group. Having been involved in scouts all my life,

I understand the needs but I also understand that scouting organisations, by their nature, are well able to adapt. In my days in scouting, we were in a very small area. That being said, I understand the need for community facilities.

Créches are obviously important for a growing community like this one which has the potential for 2,000 homes. However, I will take back the Deputy's comment to the Minister who engages with the LDA on a regular basis. It is important when we are developing new communities of scale that we get it right and that we learn from issues of the past. Certainly, the Deputy, as an Oireachtas Government representative, Deputy Ó Muirí and others will continue to engage on this matter.

School Funding

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I am raising the issue of DEIS plus, which is a new scheme announced to give enhanced supports to the most disadvantaged schools in the country. Obviously, I am all in favour of enhanced supports for schools, but there are a number of problems.

I bring to the attention of the Minister of State the Corduff area of Dublin 15. I have been contacted by the principals of St. Patrick's Senior National School and St. Patrick's Junior National School in the area. They will be in the DEIS band 1 scheme but have been excluded from the DEIS plus scheme. One of the principals, Mary O'Riordan, spoke to *The Irish Times* about this. For example, she said the area has been beset by a vicious feud involving local rival gangs in recent years. There was absolute devastation at the school when they learned they were not included in the new scheme. She has worked in the area for 26 years. The level of disadvantage is massive, with issues such as addiction, poverty and crime. While I do not know whether crime is a criterion for the scheme, I do know that trauma is a criterion. It is mentioned that up to 50% of children in the schools under the DEIS plus scheme will have experienced trauma. One of the issues in Corduff, which is frequently in the news for all the wrong reasons, is that gangs have historically been located there.

The principals of the schools in question say that a lot of parents are doing a brilliant job but that others are struggling. The schools have put additional supports in place. For example, both schools are currently paying a trained counsellor and play therapist to work at each school one day per week, at a cost of €350 per day. They used to pay for four days but they can no longer afford to maintain that level of support. Both schools need a counselling service five days per week. Children often come to school and it is noticed straight away that something has happened to them. The schools want to open nurture rooms but they need to pay staff members to staff such rooms. That is something for which the DEIS plus scheme would provide. It would provide a well-being co-ordinator and extra teaching support.

In general, the way this scheme has been implemented is a bit strange. While I am all in favour of the scheme, it seems that a super league is being created whereby schools will nearly have to compete to get on it. As the Minister of States knows, or maybe he does not, Dublin 15 is one of the fastest-growing areas in the country. One in four people there is under 15 years of age. Only one school in Dublin 15 has got onto the DEIS plus scheme. It does not make any sense given the population and social profile of the area. Not one of the 25 secondary schools got on the list, despite having massive diversity. Corduff, Tyrrelstown and Mulhuddart

in particular are the fastest-growing areas in the whole of Fingal. Other schools in Blakestown and Mountview, which are currently in the scheme, have also not been included. That seems a bit bizarre. These schools are dealing with the huge and complex social issues of crime and drug addiction that have historically been experienced in the area. In the statistics and data, Corduff is described as very disadvantaged. In the Pobal HP deprivation indices, there is colour coding on maps for the area. Corduff is marked by the strongest orange colour. In fact, it is even more deprived than some other areas that have been included in the scheme.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Naughton. The Deputy's raised issues relating to a vicious feud and rival gangs, as well as issues around addiction, poverty and trauma. The latter have caused serious problems in Corduff and many other areas. I am familiar with Dublin 15. Addressing educational disadvantage and ensuring that every child and young person can reach their full potential is a key priority for the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Naughton, and the Government.

The DEIS plus scheme, as the Deputy is aware, will commence this year as part of the DEIS strategy to 2035. It represents the most significant expansion of targeted educational supports since the establishment of the DEIS programme. It is designed to provide enhanced, evidence-based support to a cohort of 121 schools with the very highest concentrations of children and young people experiencing persistent and intergenerational disadvantage, which the Deputy outlined. This forms part of a wider full-year investment of €48 million, with approximately 30,000 children and young people nationally benefiting from inclusion in the scheme.

The Deputy raised the question about St Patrick's Junior National School and St Patrick's Senior National School in Corduff not being included in the targeted DEIS plus scheme. I acknowledge, as the Deputy did, the exceptional commitment of the school leadership and staff, who work day in and day out to support children and families facing significant and huge challenges. Their work is critical. It is important to stress that a school not identified through the DEIS plus model does not in any way imply that the Department of Education and Youth is saying that disadvantage does not exist within that school community.

DEIS plus schools were identified using a refined, rules-based model built on nationally available student-level administrative data. The model draws on a range of indicators associated with persistent and intergenerational disadvantage, including small-area deprivation, lone parenthood and unemployment, Traveller and Roma identity and children living in State-funded emergency accommodation or international protection accommodation. The Deputy said that she felt trauma should be included as an indicator as well. These indicators are applied consistently across all schools using enrolment data from the past three years.

Schools can and do show significant levels of disadvantage while still not falling below the statistical threshold required for inclusion in the scheme. A school-led application or self-reporting model would inevitably introduce inconsistency, inequality and inequity, which is why a transparent, data-driven and nationally comparable approach is essential. An independent OECD review of the DEIS identification model in 2024 highlighted the strengths

of this approach, noting that it is multidimensional, respects GDPR principles and places no administrative burden on schools.

The Department also recognises that some schools are operating in the context of particularly complex local pressures within their wider communities. While these challenges are often well understood locally, they are not always captured in data sets that can be fairly and consistently applied across the entire school system. A rules-based national model must rank all schools on the same basis. It cannot substitute locally held knowledge for data that are not available or comparable nationwide.

St Patrick's junior and senior national schools are recognised as serving very disadvantaged school communities. While they fall outside the threshold for inclusion in the DEIS plus scheme, they continue to benefit from enhanced supports through the DEIS programme. Under the new DEIS strategy, both schools will receive increased DEIS grant funding and enhanced home school community liaison provision, HSCL, with each school now having access to their own full-time HSCL co-ordinator from the start of the 2026-27 school year. Schools will have the opportunity to appeal the decision not to include them in the DEIS plus scheme. An appeals window will open in the coming weeks.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Obviously, the schools should appeal the decision. Hopefully, they will be brought up to the level of supports needed. There has been a huge problem in this regard. There has been a 500% increase in the number of schools contacting the financial support services unit of the Department because of the rising cost of living. It affects every school. In areas of severe disadvantage, parents do not have the same resources that more middle-class areas have. Are the schools supposed to drop the nurturing and well-being support they are providing because they cannot afford it any longer? I understand the Minister of State is saying they will still get supports from the DEIS scheme.

There is one other matter I wish to follow up. The Minister of State mentioned that there is new enhanced data and a way of analysing same. I am all for a scientific approach but the Minister of State said:

> While these challenges are often well understood locally, they are not always captured in data sets that can be fairly and consistently applied across the entire school system. A rules-based national model must rank all schools on the same basis. It cannot substitute locally held knowledge for data that are not available ...
>
> Where do locally held factors that are specific to an area come into it?

We hear about the Westies and about gangland crime over the years in Corduff. It has those historical local problems, and that should be considered. On the same day that the schools got the news they would not be included in DEIS plus, five members of a local organised crime group were sentenced to jail over an attack which the judge involved said bypassed any notion of humanity and which involved beating, burning, stabbing and branding their victim with the word "rat".

Children in these schools are being groomed into crime. They are not able to learn because they come into school having suffered trauma. Those factors have to be taken into account somewhere in the system.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: The DEIS plus scheme has a clear specific purpose, which is to target a relatively small number of schools with the very highest concentrations of children and young people who are experiencing persistent and intergenerational disadvantage. As the Deputy knows, it uses an evidence-based identification model. Applying this model fairly means that not every school serving a disadvantaged community can be included at this time. We have all been in this situation over the years. I would have questioned why some schools were not included even in the DEIS programme. I found that difficult to understand, but the new system seems to be very transparent and open. As the Deputy rightly stated, this does not diminish the very real challenges faced by St. Patrick's junior and senior national schools. Both schools serve disadvantaged school communities and continue to benefit from the enhanced support from the DEIS programme. This reflects the need of the supports needed in those communities.

Through the DEIS strategy to 2035, the Department of Education and Youth remains committed to continue reviewing how educational disadvantage is identified and addressed in order to ensure that supports are targeted in a fair, consistent and evidence-based way, which is what we all want. The appeals window will open in the coming weeks and schools will be given the opportunity to update their school enrolment data and whatever other data is there.

I encourage the schools to do that as quickly as possible. I want to show the Deputy that supporting children and young people in Corduff to enable them to reach their full potential through education remains an ongoing commitment, not just on the part of the Government but also on that of their parents, teachers and community. I thank her again for raising this very important issue.

Land Issues

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Sixteen hill farmers on the Knockmealdown Mountains in west Waterford are facing the imposition of rent increases of 900% by a British absentee landlord. This increase will put them off the land. These are generational farmers; families who have farmed the mountains for generations and centuries. I have met them several times. Only last week, Deputy Cullinane and I were up on the mountains with them.

What is happening is a stark injustice. It has echoes of darker times when absentee landlords, British aristocrats, pushed Irish farmers off the land. That is a comparison that should concern all of us, and it certainly should concern the Government. It is 2026 not 1846, yet farmers in Waterford are being forced off land that their families have farmed for generations. The Government is making matters worse. At the very moment that these farmers are under the most pressure in this land dispute, their farm payments are being withheld. The Government is holding them over a barrel and is strengthening the landlord's hand. The Government and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine are taking a side in this and are pushing these farmers towards the edge. I raised this issue previously with the Minister of State's colleague the Minister, Deputy Heydon. There have been protests. There has been strong public support. This has been raised by Congressmen and MPs in the United States and Britain, but there has been no action on the part of the Government. That is not acceptable. This cannot continue.

These farmers are doing everything they can to remain on the land. Will the Minister of State ensure that these payments are released to them? Will he meet the farmers to hear their concerns and stories? Will he clearly support their right to remain farming on the land in question and make a statement in the Dáil in the interests of supporting them and other hill farmers and sheep farmers in maintaining their way of life and agricultural activity?

Deputy David Cullinane: I do not know of any farmer, business or individual who could take a 900% increase in rent. This really is an injustice. I met with the hill farmers in question, as did Deputy McGuinness. In fact, we were there a number of weeks ago when "Prime Time" was interviewing some of them. The sense of injustice that they have relates to the fact that their ancestors, their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents, farmed that land for generations and that a British absentee landlord - a multibillionaire who owns thousands of acres of land in Waterford, Cork and elsewhere - is coming in and imposing a 900% increase. The farmers are outraged. They simply want to farm. That is all they want to do. They have no interest in getting involved in any disputes. The difficulty is that because of this stand-off with the so-called Duke of Devonshire, their farm payments are being withheld. That is really problematic.

The Department has to be creative. I echo the call from Deputy McGuinness that the Minister, or the Minister of State, if he is in a position to do it, should meet with these hill farmers to try to find a way to get around this and support these farmers. There obviously has to be some arrangement made on the rents and the absentee landlord has to be made to see sense, but the Government also has to come to the table and make sure that these people get their farm payments.

There is real anger out there. We saw what happened in the streets over the past number of weeks. When people see an injustice, they will respond to it. We are seeing it already. Deputy McGuinness and I are getting it in Waterford, where people are saying that this is wrong. People can see what is wrong. It is black and white. This is wrong. It should not be happening. These farmers should be just farming and doing what they want to do rather than having to talk to politicians, talk to the media, engage in protests simply to be able to secure their livelihoods. The injustice here is even bigger when we consider that it is a legacy of our colonial past. I ask the Minister of State to meet the hill farmers and for the Department to intervene.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I thank Deputies McGuinness and Cullinane for raising this issue. The farmers to whom they refer have been farming on the area in question for generations, indeed some of the families involved have had hundreds of years of continuous farming in the same area. However, I am informed by the Department that the land in question is, as the Deputies identified, owned by a third party. Regardless of how that came about or the historical dimension to it, it has to be accepted that it is a third party who owns the land. That third party has requested substantially increased rents for use of the land. Therein lies the problem for everyone. Unfortunately, the Department has no role in how farmers and landholders agree rental prices. This is clearly something that must be arranged between the landowner and the farmer renting the land. I do not see that situation changing in the future either; it is a private commercial transaction between two parties.

The Department routinely corresponds with farmers to establish that they have land at their disposal and that they are actively farming the lands declared on their applications. I understand that the farmers involved here are also concerned about payments that the Department administers which are dependent on the right to farm this rented land. Deputy McGuinness raised this issue during oral parliamentary questions a few weeks ago and requested that the Department waive the requirement for the farmers to have this land at their disposal.

It is a core principle of Common Agricultural Policy funding that farmers have the right to farm the land they declare; in other words, that the land is at their disposal. Unfortunately, in this case it is clear that these farmers will not have the land involved at their disposal as a result of all of the issues the Deputies raised as long as the disagreement over the rental price continues. The Department is constrained by the terms and conditions of the Common Agricultural Policy. It is not, therefore, within the gift of the Department to make payments to farmers who are not able to assert a legal right to be on land. I fully get the situation here, but, unfortunately, it is no different to circumstances where the Deputies might be renting land from me or where I might be renting land from them.

The historical context to this of course makes it challenging and emotive for all of us. I am aware that this has happened in other parts of the country as well. There is the infamous case of the Shirley Estate in Carrickmacross, which was the subject of protracted battles in the courts.

10 o'clock

Through the Deputies' colleague, Deputy Matt Carthy, they may be able to ascertain some information as to how those challenging issues were addressed. I see this as somewhat similar, from my own observation rather than from a departmental perspective.

It is challenging for all of us to grapple with it but I accept and recognise that it is most challenging for the 16 farmers whose lives and livelihoods depend on this.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The Minister of State and this Government need to make a clear intervention here. I am more than happy to say that what is happening here is wrong, that the demand of a 900% rent increase by a British absentee aristocratic landlord on Irish farmers is wrong. I would urge the Minister of State to make that statement and for his colleague, the Minister, Deputy Heydon, to make a similar statement. That would carry an awful lot of weight.

To return to the farm payments issue, it is important to put on the record here again that all farm payments are being withheld from farmers who are unable to produce this commonage letter from the aristocratic absentee landlord. Effectively, the proof that Government requires to show that these farmers are actively farming, on these lands that are in dispute and on all other lands they are farming, is a commonage letter from the landlord with whom they are in dispute, and that is an unfair burden. It is an unfair intervention into this dispute and it is not necessary. There are creative means by which the Department can establish that these farmers are actively farming land and ensure that they have some kind of income rather than holding them over a barrel while this dispute continues.

Deputy David Cullinane: There are sometimes cases where there is a grey area but I think this one is black and white. The people whom I have spoken to, including the hill farmers but also people in the wider west Waterford area and in Waterford city, are outraged that a British absentee landlord who goes by the name of the Duke of Devonshire, who owns tens of thousands of acres of land and is a billionaire as far as I can see, is imposing a rent increase of 900% on 16 hill farmers in the Knockmealdown Mountains who just want to farm. They say they are being driven off the land.

What they have asked the Minister of State, through us, is for him to meet them to try to see if there is some resolution. That is a reasonable request. That would be a big step forward if the Minister of State were to agree to that. That, in turn, could put pressure on the landlord, because the landlord needs to move. I accept that. This is an issue that the landlord has to step up to the plate on as well. It is greed that is at the heart of this.

I appeal to the Minister of State to meet these hill farmers.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I am aware of this issue, obviously, but I am also conscious of the constitutional rights of property owners. Deputy Cullinane says that there is often a grey area and this is black and white. Emotionally, it is black and white. For any of us and for any member of society, the picture that the Deputies paint is black and white in terms of what should transpire, but from a departmental perspective and from a Government perspective, we have to be conscious of the Constitution and the laws and be seen to uphold those and also uphold the terms and conditions of the Common Agricultural Policy, and that puts very significant constraints on what the Minister, Deputy Heydon, and I can do. However, I am more than happy to meet the 16 hill farmers as soon as possible and I will go through it with them, and if the Deputies or others can come up with a greyness or find a route through it or a solution, I am happy to look at that. As I said, I am more than happy to meet the 16 hill farmers.

Tackling Soaring Energy Costs: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Gary Gannon: I move:

That Dáil Éireann;

notes that:

— energy prices in Ireland are already among the highest in Europe and prices are continuing to rise rapidly;

— the cost of home heating oil rose by nearly 70 per cent last month alone, the largest month-on-month increase ever recorded;

— kerosene is the main heating fuel for 700,000 households across the country;

— the prices of petrol and diesel have exponentially increased in recent weeks, putting huge pressure on commuters as well as the transport and agricultural sectors;

— households in Ireland pay €360 more a year for electricity than the European Union average;

— gas prices in Ireland are now double what they were in 2021;

— there are 315,000 households in arrears on their electricity bills, up 20 per cent in just 12 months, and 180,000 households are in arrears on gas bills; and

— prices are also soaring across the economy, for groceries, housing, transport and insurance costs;

further notes that:

— sky-rocketing energy prices have been coupled with huge increases in other household costs, like groceries and rent, and are putting a huge strain on low-and-middle-income families;

— according to a 2025 Credit Union Consumer Sentiment survey, 15 per cent of Irish consumers would be unable to cope with a financial emergency costing €1,000;

— a Barnardos report last year found 75 per cent of parents had to cut back or go without essential items because of cost-of-living increases;

— a Child Poverty Monitor last year found the number of children living in consistent poverty nearly doubled, to more than 100,000; and

— Children's Rights Alliance Chief Executive Officer Tanya Ward has described the cumulative impact of continued soaring costs as "a landslide effect" for low-income families, meaning providing basic necessities like nutritious food or a warm home has become increasingly difficult;

agrees that:

— wholesale electricity prices have fallen by more than 70 per cent since their 2022 peak, but retail prices have only fallen by approximately 20 per cent during the same period;

— in fact, as electricity wholesale prices continued to fall last year, all but one commercial provider hiked their prices, most by double digit figures; and

— wholesale prices have continued to fall this year, but retail prices have not been cut;

further notes that:

— the Government consistently says it wants to target supports where they are needed most, but there is a huge gap between what they say and what they do;

— according to the Parliamentary Budget Office, the Government's recent budget reduced the incomes of the poorest households by over four per cent and massively increased poverty rates among elderly people from 13 per cent to 19 per cent;

— according to the Disability Federation of Ireland, Budget 2026 also cut the incomes of disabled people, among those most at risk of poverty, by up to €1,400 per annum; and

— the inadequate support measures the Government announced in March 2026 provided no support for households that rely on home heating oil and do not receive the Fuel Allowance; and

calls on the Government to:

— provide emergency relief to struggling individuals and families by immediately introducing a €400 energy credit, targeted at families earning up to €70,000;

— adopt the Social Democrats "Solar for All" plan which includes a doubling of grants for solar installation to €3,600, and the inclusion of solar panels in the "Warmer Homes Scheme" to help families cut electricity costs by an average of €450 a year;

— introduce a supplementary mileage scheme for essential workers like nurses and carers, who depend on their cars to travel for work; and

— increase the rebate scheme for the transport sector, to cover unsustainable increases in fuel costs, and introduce a rebate scheme for green diesel that can be availed of by agricultural contractors and others who use that fuel.

There is something in the air at present. You can feel it. It feels heavier. I can feel it in conversations every day, on the doors, in the shops, and when I stop and talk to people on the street. It is a level of pressure and of desperation that I have not witnessed since the period of austerity. People are not just worried any more; they are stretched completely to the limit. They are choosing between heating their homes and feeding their families. They are juggling bills, putting things off and hoping nothing else goes wrong because if it does, they have nothing left to give. People feel completely on their own while the Government is trying to tell them everything is fine.

We had Ministers and backbenchers yesterday pointing to record surpluses and offering platitudes while thousands of households were living in deficit and struggling just to get through the week. They are completely disconnected from the reality of what people are going through and this week showed that in the starkest of terms.

Wholesale electricity prices have fallen by more than 70% since their 2022 peak. Retail prices have fallen by approximately 20%. While this is happening, all but one commercial provider increased their prices, most by double-digit figures. That gap is not an accident. It is a choice of a Government that has failed to intervene. It is a choice that has been made at the expense of every family simply trying to get through the week.

The Government says that it wants to target supports where they are needed most but in the previous budget, it reduced the incomes of the poorest households. It cut the incomes of disabled people by €1,400 a year. The measures announced in March provided nothing for households relying on home heating oil that were not in receipt of the fuel allowance. That is exactly why we are bringing forward the motion today.

Our proposals are straightforward. They include a targeted €400 energy credit for households earning up to €70,000. In over 1 million households, people are working, contributing, doing everything right and still being left behind. We recognise that for our most vital workers, people without whom the country would collapse, the pressure is even higher. I refer to nurses, carers, people who cannot work from home and people who rely on their cars to do their jobs. Right now, and I wish this was hyperbole, many of them are effectively paying to go to work. We are proposing a supplementary mileage scheme for essential workers and targeted support for those people who need their cars to provide the service that we ask of them.

These are necessary responses to an immediate crisis but they are not sufficient on their own.

Fossil fuel energy appears cheap up front but when you are buying gas and oil forever, you have no control over the price set in global markets. Every few years, first with Ukraine and now Iran, we are reminded with brutal clarity of just how exposed it leaves us. Renewable energy works the other way. Admittedly, there are high upfront costs but once it is running, the fuel is free and the maintenance is low. That is the logic behind our Solar for All plan. The upfront cost is a barrier and that is precisely where the State must act. Research from UCD estimates that all homes in Ireland have the potential for solar. If realised, it could meet a quarter of all residential electricity demand. A typical installation saves a household over €400 a year. Ireland generates just 1.5% of our total energy from solar. Denmark, similar in size, population and weather, is at 5%. That is not a geographic difference. That is a political choice. We are proposing to double the solar installation grant to €3,600, to include solar panels in the warmer home schemes and to introduce a €1,000 battery storage grant. We are asking a straightforward question. Why did this Government cut solar grants while we lurched from one energy crisis to the next? The lesson was there but was clearly not learned. A credit will help families now, they need it now and we are not walking away from that, but solar investments help families for a lifetime. The State may not always have the fiscal room it has today. The question is whether we use this moment just to spend or whether we use it to invest, and we are choosing to invest.

Right now, there is an opportunity and a space for leadership. During the oil crisis shock in the 1970s, Denmark chose to invest in its renewables. That is why it has offset the worst pain for its citizens being experienced today during this crisis. What we need now is a Government of vision - people who will listen to the concerns of those who they meet on the streets and at the doors and respond to them with urgency, clarity and compassion - but we also need people of vision who will stand up and say that we are going to invest so that never again will we be in this situation. That is why we are bringing our motion today.

Deputy Holly Cairns: First of all, I thank Deputy Gannon for all of his work on this motion.

No matter how hard people work, it is becoming more and more difficult to stay afloat. People are holding their breath before opening their energy bills.

Small businesses are staring at their accounts wondering how much longer they can keep going, and workers who rely on diesel to do their jobs are trying to figure out how they can absorb another price shock. That deep crushing anxiety is what brought people onto the streets.

What the protests alongside the war in Iran have made clear is just how vulnerable we are to sudden and dramatic price spikes because we have not built the energy resilience we need at home. Successive Governments have failed to invest in renewable energy and to protect from exactly this kind of crisis. Ireland should be a leader in climate action. We have the resources to build an energy system that is cleaner, cheaper and more secure. Take solar energy. There are close to a million homes in this country suitable for solar panels, yet only a fraction have them installed. Why? For too many people, it is still too expensive. That is why the Social Democrats have put forward the plan Solar for All. It would double grants, expand access and make solar a real option for ordinary households, not just those who can afford large upfront costs. It would cut bills by hundreds of euro each year and give people real protection from future energy shocks. I refer to real solutions that, if implemented, could meaningfully help

people. That is what we need and what climate action should look like. It should be practical, fair and focused on improving people's lives. This transition must bring everyone with us.

The pressure being placed on farmers right now is unbelievable. The nature of the job means that the weight on their shoulders is immense. There is responsibility for livestock and a job that never lets up, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Alongside that, there is often loneliness, isolation and a mental health crisis that we do not talk about nearly enough.

When I meet representatives of Macra na Feirme, one of the core issues they raise with me is generational renewal, which is hardly surprising if you imagine being a young person who is thinking right now about taking over the family farm. Imagine how they have felt for the past week, seeing the crushing effect rising costs have had on farmers, their own families and their loved ones, seeing the toll that they are taking on people's mental health and hearing the Government patronise and dismiss people who have been driven to the brink. People are not protesting because they want to; they are protesting because they feel they have no choice. The protests are a symptom of a larger problem. The protesters deserve to be listened to and deserve a Government that is finally willing to act.

Deputy Liam Quaide: The cost of energy is one pressure among many bearing down on families already dealing with soaring costs of rent, groceries, insurance and transport. For many families, there is simply no give left in the monthly budget. The Government's response to the energy crisis so far amounts to a very expensive, broad-brush set of measures that leave clear gaps and whose modest effect will evaporate quickly if the situation in the Middle East becomes more entrenched. If you reduce fuel taxes, everybody who buys fuel gets some minor, short-lived benefit. That includes people under real strain, but it also includes people who are much better able to absorb rising costs. If you extend the fuel allowance, it matters for those in the scheme but it leaves out many households just above the threshold who are also struggling.

When the Government says it is targeting support, it is worth noting that it is spending substantial sums in a very diffuse manner. That is where the Social Democrats motion takes a better approach. It proposes a €400 energy credit for households earning up to €70,000. That is more direct because it is aimed at low- and middle-income households facing significant and increasing pressure with bills. It proposes a supplementary mileage scheme for essential workers such as carers and nurses. Again, that is more targeted because it recognises that some workers cannot simply reduce their amount of driving. Their transport costs are built into their jobs. The motion proposes stronger rebate supports for transport and green diesel users. That measure recognises the sectors where fuel inflation has the most considerable knock-on effect. Crucially, it includes Solar for All, which would double the solar grant to €3,600 and bring solar panels into the warmer homes scheme. That matters because it is not just about getting through the next few months. It is also about reducing bills on a lasting basis. That is a better use of public money than repeatedly spending large sums in ways that only shave costs off for everyone temporarily and so meagrely that nobody is satisfied.

There is also a wider point here. The Parliamentary Budget Office found that when temporary cost-of-living measures were withdrawn, the poorest households were hit hardest, with average losses of 4.5% for the poorest tenth of households. That same analysis also made the point that broad measures like the reduced VAT rates on gas and electricity were untargeted

and benefited low- and high-income households alike, while more targeted options would be preferable. The issue is not whether the Government has spent money, because it has, but whether that money has been directed well enough and with a sustained benefit for those who need it most.

This motion argues for a more deliberate approach, direct support for households under genuine strain, specific help for workers and sectors with unavoidable fuel costs, and longer term investments that reduce bills rather than simply soften them for a short period. That is a more focused response, a fairer response and a better use of public money.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I canvass regularly in my constituency, Dublin South-Central, and I hold clinics on a weekly basis. I can tell the Minister that people are far from all right in Dublin South-Central. When we set aside the issues with housing and also that of appropriate school places – I am the education spokesperson – we see that the next biggest issue in my constituency is affordability. When it comes to the energy crisis and what is going on in people's homes, I note that renewables, solar and all these things are absolutely beyond the budget of many of the people I speak to regularly.

People are telling me that they cannot afford their groceries or get an appointment with the doctor. They also tell me that they cannot get a hospital appointment or are left on a waiting list for a very long time. Children and young people with mental health difficulties cannot get an opportunity to meet staff from child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS. There are no appropriate school places for children and people cannot afford rent. All of this is creating a lot of crisis and a lot of difficulty for people.

The Social Democrats are not just a party that points out what is wrong. We also give solutions. We have done this regularly since I joined Dáil Éireann. Indeed, the parliamentary party did this before I became a member of it. I am not taking all the credit. Today, we are bringing forward another motion that outlines our proposal for how the people of Ireland can be supported with regard to the energy crisis we are in.

We need a timely conversation about the fact that we really need to move from fossil fuels to renewables. People cannot afford to do so, so we need to do what we can to make sure every household is able to access renewables. My colleague Deputy Jennifer Whitmore has introduced the Solar for All plan, and that plan includes a doubling of the grant for solar installation to €3,600 and the inclusion of solar panels in the warmer homes scheme. That will yield an average benefit of €450 for a family. That is what it will save. It is a practical plan and something that we need to implement in order to reach our environmental targets and help people throughout the country with energy costs.

What we see is that only people with additional incomes are able to afford solar panels. Solar panels are so easy to install and they give immediate results, so we need to harness that. We are an island. If the Minister has ever gone to the west of Ireland, as I am sure he has, he will know that if you stand on a cliff edge there, you will nearly be blown over. I am really at a loss as to why we do not use that wind power to power our schools, homes, businesses and hospitals.

Every day, I am contacted by families worried about costs. As education spokesperson, I really do have to say that although we have primary and secondary school education systems

that are supposed to be free, people are worried about the increased cost of school transport. I am absolutely delighted to see that there are free books at primary and secondary levels, but people are now having to fork out for tablets that cost up to €700. We had the college fees debacle in September and October, but I will not go back into that today.

This motion is very practical. We have solutions, and I ask the Minister to listen to us.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Minister for being here. The collective complacency of this Government has truly been astonishing. It might have survived the confidence motion yesterday but it certainly lost something. It lost some credibility. When we look back on yesterday, we will regard it as the beginning of the Government losing its mandate.

Less than two years ago, the Government went to the people of Ireland promising change and meaningful action on the issues that affected people's lives, but in truth things are getting worse. The Government told us that when it came to the cost of living, housing, homelessness, healthcare, education and childcare, change would happen and that it would listen. While the Government has gone about prioritising the EU Presidency and chasing policy ambitions that it has never campaigned on, it has wilfully ignored promises it made and the people to whom it made them. Somehow, the Government tells us to have patience with its social policy as it continuously fails us, while in tandem working to ensure investment funds have the perfect conditions to maximise profit. It seems that the Government only listens to them.

The Government does not listen to us. It pretends to listen on the doorsteps. It continuously ignores academic and organisational expertise.

It has been an expensive week for this Government but every week is an expensive week for people in our country. The Government's latest €500 million package will leave no legacy. It will make very little to no difference at all to families who have to continue choosing between heating and eating. Once again, it proves who this Government is actively listening to and who this Government chooses not to listen to.

I am asking the Government to listen to the Social Democrats today. The Minister could introduce an emergency relief for struggling people and families by way of an energy credit. He could listen to the merits of Deputy Whitmore's Solar for All plan. My worry is that while there are many things the Government could do to follow through on those long-forgotten election promises, many players in this Government are too busy fighting among themselves. They are no longer the parties that have their ears to the ground, but instead have their heads buried in the sand as to what reality is. Targeted measures for those who need them most, for those whom we all claim to represent, for those whom the Government claims to govern, are what are needed now, but this Government is not listening, exacerbating even further our worsening collective complacency.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: The stories on the front pages of the newspapers this morning were not about ordinary people dealing with the cost-of-living crisis. No, there are no front pages given to the pensioner at home struggling to keep their home warm, the disabled person taking the now hours-long trip to a hospital for dialysis because they can no longer afford to do it at home, the single mother skipping meals to feed her children or the dad tearing his hair out as he sees rent drain his family's bank account yet again. These stories are nowhere to be seen today.

They are drowned out by the lamentations of a Minister of State who presided over all of it, who voted for all of it, and at the last moment resigned from the Government to get his moment on the front page of every newspaper in the country. People say they are cynical about politics. Too often, they have every right to be. A budget in 2026 cutting disabled people's incomes by €1,400 was not enough for the resignation of a Minister of State. A repeated refusal to introduce an emergency payment for disabled people was not enough to lose that former Minister of State's vote. Nor was it enough for the Government to adjust its spending by 1 cent.

The repeated callousness and hypocrisy of this Government extended to its failures t introduce targeted measures in its package yesterday. There are no energy credits for the most vulnerable. There is no strong progress on domestic renewable energy. There are no plans that reverse poverty, only plans that deepen it. Of the €750 million fuel packages announced in the last four weeks by this Government, less than 10% was targeted at the most vulnerable, with a €150 extension of the fuel allowance in a time when electricity and gas bills were climbing by hundreds of euro. That is why we have brought forward this motion - to bring targeted relief to ordinary people across the country, including a targeted €400 energy credit for families earning less than €70,000 and helping people cut their energy costs with increased solar grants.

The Government has repeatedly said it wants to target the most vulnerable, yet it has been lacking. It has repeatedly said it cannot do everything, yet it pulled out all the stops yesterday. It has repeatedly ignored the pleas of 320,000 households in energy bill arrears, of disability organisations and of the most impoverished. What should I say to those people now, Minister? What should I tell them about their Government? What should I tell them about their representatives? Should they buy a tractor and blockade a port and then they might be listened to? Should they join with a despicable far-right rhetoric to be taken seriously? Should they threaten a rising in Kerry to take the scalp of a Minister of State? When will this Government listen to the most in need in our society? When will it act for them? I urge the House to support this motion to alleviate energy costs for the people who most need it.

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:

"notes that, the Government:

— remains deeply concerned about the conflict in the Middle East and Gulf;

— affirms Ireland's long track-record of support for international law and the United Nations;

— continues to seek de-escalation through dialogue and diplomacy so that these issues can be resolved;

— is acutely aware of the impact on households and businesses of the recent increases in fuel prices, and is actively monitoring the current geopolitical situation and developments in energy markets;

— affirms that energy affordability is a priority for this Government; and

— highlights that action has been taken to help households and businesses with the cost of fuel and energy by introducing one of the most comprehensive support packages in the European Union;

affirms that:

— the practical measures introduced by Government on 12th April include:

— a reduction in excise on diesel by a further 10 cent (including Value-Added Tax (VAT)) bringing the total reduction on diesel to 32 cent;

— a reduction in excise on petrol by a further 10 cent (including VAT) bringing the total reduction to 27 cent (including VAT);

— a reduction in excise on marked gas oil (green diesel) by a further 2.4 cent bringing the total to 7.4 cent (including VAT);

— a deferral of the planned increase in carbon tax, scheduled for 1st May until October 2026; and

— the reductions in excise include the National Oil Reserves Agency levy reduction (announced in March) and will take effect from midnight on 14th April and run until 31st July, 2026;

— Government will also be establishing a new Road Transporters Support Scheme as well as supports for coach operators providing local link services, at a cost of €40 million per month for three months;

— a comprehensive €100 million Fuel Subsidy Support Scheme to assist farmers, agricultural contractors and fishers will be put in place;

— this package of supports is in addition to the measures announced in March, which included:

— an expansion of the diesel rebate scheme, backdating it to January, to help sectors of the economy most impacted by the rise of fuel costs; and

— an extension of the fuel allowance season to help the most vulnerable with the cost of home heating;

— a range of protections are in place for customers experiencing difficulties in paying their bills, anyone who is struggling with their bill is strongly encouraged to engage with their supplier and suppliers will not disconnect customers that engage with them;

— the four biggest energy retailers have confirmed that hardship funds and focused measures are in place for any customers in difficulty;

— switching supplier or plan could save the average electricity customer up to €500 annually; and

— the Department of Social Protection can also provide support through the Additional Needs Payment to help households meet expenses, including those who face difficulties with fuel bills; and

further notes that:

— successive Budgets have provided targeted support to help households with cost-of-living pressures;

— on 11th March, Ireland agreed to participate in an International Energy Agency (IEA) release of international strategic oil reserves to address supply issues resulting from the conflict, Ireland's contribution to the IEA 400-million-barrel release is 1.6 million barrels (equating to approximately 10.5 days of supply);

— in Budget 2026, key measures included the largest ever increases to Child Support Payments, higher income thresholds for the Working Family Payment, and expanded access to the Fuel Allowance and Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance;

— recent data from the Central Statistics Office's Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2025, published on 11th March, shows a welcome reduction in the child Consistent Poverty rate in 2025 from 8.5 per cent to 7.8 per cent, demonstrating the impact of Government measures to date;

— Government has also established the National Energy Affordability Taskforce (NEAT) to identify, assess and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses while delivering key renewable commitments and protecting security of supply and economic stability;

— a dedicated NEAT subgroup is being established to monitor global and national energy supply, with a separate subgroup to advise on appropriate demand-side responses;

— the Solar PV Scheme operated by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland has gone from strength to strength in recent years, with increased budget allocations from carbon tax revenues year on year allowing for more households to avail of the support available;

— the Government remains committed to ensuring that low-income households benefit from Ireland's renewable energy transition and will continue to explore how best to integrate solar and other technologies into our energy poverty retrofit programmes;

— in the long run, the best way to protect Ireland from the impact of international fossil fuel prices is to reduce our dependence on them;

— Ireland is undergoing a renewables-led energy transformation, electricity generation from renewables has increased fivefold since 2005, the milestone of over 2GW (gigawatts) of installed solar capacity was achieved in November;

— offshore wind capacity is also being prioritised, with the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment, announcing the acceleration of the National Designated Maritime Area Plan (DMAP) for offshore renewable energy, which will identify sites for additional renewable energy development; and

— €3.15 billion of the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund is being provided to help achieve carbon reductions and environmental and nature objectives, this includes funding to the Department of Transport to support low-carbon transportation, and €500 million

to the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment to support climate mitigation and renewable energy development.".

I thank the Social Democrats for tabling this motion. It is undoubtedly timely and a lot of this was debated yesterday. The Government won the confidence motion, but I just want to assure Deputies that no one in government is telling people everything is all right. That is not the case. People and families are struggling, unquestionably, and not just in Ireland. It has been recognised as a global crisis.

I would like to address some of the specific items raised in the motion. I recognise it as a genuine attempt to feed into the debate and policy in this area. I assure Deputies that I have listened and I am here to listen to what is being brought forward.

In my response I would like to tell Deputies about the changes, particularly in renewables, and where we are going because I am wedded to the acceleration of renewables and we are seeing good progress in that space. To Deputy Hayes I would say that I am not responsible for who writes headlines, so I am not responsible for the media. He was lamenting the fact that certain things were covered in the newspapers today. That is one thing that the Government cannot be blamed for.

We all know the consequences of the conflict in the Middle East, and we have seen a greater shock in relation to oil and gas prices than we have seen since the 1970s. That is on top of what we have seen in the war in Ukraine and the massive spikes in inflation and elevated prices that we have seen since then. Again, these issues are not unique to Ireland. This Government is charged to respond in kind and endeavour to lessen the impact of those cost increases on families and citizens across the country. We recognise very clearly that this crisis for families and businesses is a very severe one, and that is why we have to deploy our resources in a sustainable and targeted way.

I want to run through some of those measures. Practical supports were brought forward on 12 April. These were: a reduction in excise and diesel by a further 10 cent to an overall reduction of 32 cent; a further 10 cent with regard to petrol, 27 cents in total; a reduction in excise duty on marked gas, 7.4 cent in total; a deferral of the planned increase in the carbon tax scheduled for 1 May until October and reductions of a further 2 cent in the National Oil Reserves Agency, NORA, levy up to 31 July. The supply chains are critical and these are normal businesses. I engaged directly with the hauliers and the coach sector in advance of any of the protests. I have been working through this with them for a number of weeks. I met the Irish Road Haulage Association, IRHA, on Good Friday and engaged directly with its representatives. We have now been able to establish a scheme of €40 million per month in fuel supports for the next three months that is very targeted at the SME sector within our supply chain. That is €120 million over a three-month period. There is another €100 million in a fuel subsidy support scheme to assist the very farmers, agricultural contractors and fishers Deputy Cairns spoke about. That has also been announced and will be deployed to give real cash payments to assist productive sectors, particularly food production, but also in the supply chain that are critically important to that. They are on top of additional measures that were taken, such as expansion of the diesel rebate scheme. The extension for a further four weeks of the fuel allowance, which has been referenced, is very important. What has not been referenced heretofore is that a quarter of the households in the country receive a direct payment through

the fuel allowance scheme because we have expanded that to the working family payment. We are talking about 470,000 homes of those who need it most.

If we look at the overall package, these are big numbers and we have to see how they are deployed down. It is a fact that the intervention we have made of €755 million on behalf of our people is the largest in Europe on a *per capita* basis and is actually numerically one of the largest, too. It is about seven times that of Germany and nearly 15 times that of Poland. It is significant, but we do retain the flexibility to respond further.

On budget measures, critically, a raft of social welfare changes were made, particularly to support carers on child support payments. I will not go through them all here, but on carers allowance the income disregard has increased from €375 to €1,000 for a single person and from €750 to €2,000 for a couple. The income limit for carers benefit will increase by €375 to €1,000 per week.

That change takes effect from July this year. They are measures that many campaigned on. We campaigned on them and were elected and are part of Government and we will make good on those on those commitments.

We also saw broad increases in the last budget of €10 per week to maximum personal payment rates benefiting pensioners, people with disabilities, carers and lone parents. There were proportional increases for people receiving a reduced payment rate and qualified adults. These changes took place from January of this year. That was in advance of the outbreak of this war. Most will understand that we have to manage the resources of the State in a careful and sustainable way. We have also increased fuel allowance by €5.35 per week and extended it to those on the working family payment.

I am pleased today to be able to have this discussion around renewables. Ireland has got to accelerate renewables further. We are the number one in Europe at integration of renewables into our grid. It is fine to be critical. I get that and that is political discourse but we also need to recognise how quickly we have moved. In 2015, just over ten years ago, 19% of our electricity came from renewable sources; last month was 49%. Solar is up to about 4% and that is increasing at a really significant rate. The suggestion for the expansion of solar is a good one that I am happy to look at in more detail.

With effect from 1 March, I have made significant changes to the retrofitting grant. Many of the Deputies and their colleagues were at the briefing I gave along with the SEAI in the audiovisual room. The purpose of that is to make sure that the grants are accessible to people, particularly those on middle incomes. Those on lower incomes can access the warmer homes scheme, which I will talk about in a moment. Looking at how we have broken those grants down, it is now a retrofitting passport. For the 250,000 homes that have already been retrofitted, including 53,000 in 2025, that provides resilience for those households against future energy shocks and reduces dependency on fossil fuel.

I agree with what the Deputies have said in the debate that we need to do more on that, and I intend to. This year I am targeting 73,000 homes with the money we have from the carbon tax. To be fair, the carbon tax is something the Social Democrats believe in because it is ring-fenced for retrofitting measures, not just for households but also for businesses. There were 4,000 business grants last year for retrofitting of businesses to improve energy efficiency and reduce costs. Households are making permanent savings of up to €500 per annum.

I got the most up-to-date figures in advance of this debate. These figures just came in in March. Since we changed them, many more people are accessing them. Between March 2025 and March 2026, roof insulation increased by 81%. There has been a 95% increase in heat pump applications. That is because we have increased that grant to €12,500. That is a major cost reduction for people once they get the heat pump working in their home. There has been a 62% increase between March 2025 and March 2026 in cavity wall insulation and we need to do more.

On the warmer homes scheme, we have done about 33,000 homes. I want to see us, through the SEAI, reducing the turnaround time from application to completion of work. They are 100% grant aided. It is for those in energy poverty or at risk of energy poverty and it works very well. It is a deep retrofit which entails a lot of work but I think we can improve the timelines and I am committed to doing that.

On the solar grant side of things, over 8 GW of renewable energy is integrated in our grid. Over 1 GW of rooftop solar in this country is not grid connected. Last year 33,000 homes accessed grants for solar and I want to increase that further. If I can accelerate that by changes to it, I am very open to looking at it. They are permanent savings, reducing our dependency on fossil fuel. By any fair assessment, we are doing well on that. Last year was good and we will have a significant increase this year. If we need policy changes to accelerate that, I am open to that. Grants for solar for medically vulnerable people are available. We have seen that deployed in the hundreds last year. I want to do that in the thousands.

I thank the Social Democrats for the motion, giving us an opportunity to debate this in a calm and civilised way. I appreciate that too. I have moved the countermotion but I am certainly open to looking at other aspects of the solar scheme to see how we can deploy more.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I want to be really clear. The Minister talked about the increase we have seen in renewables. I accept we have seen a large increase but the reality is that is not going to households. That renewable energy is going straight into data centres which are paying half what domestic users are expected to pay for their electricity. So, this is not a good news story for Irish households. It means the Government is prioritising large corporations accessing energy at half the price that individuals have to pay and risking energy security at the same time. Let us not paint this picture that Ireland is a renewable heaven for domestic users; it really is not. The benefits of renewable and the benefits of investment are going straight to data centres. The Government is trying to assist them even further by bringing in the private wires Bill which would essentially set up an alternative private electricity grid to enable data centres to access more renewable energy while leaving domestic homes at a loss. Let us be clear about that.

One million homes in Ireland are suitable for solar panels. A mere ten panels could save the average home €450 a year in electricity costs. It is really simple to put solar panels on a home; it takes a matter of hours. When talking about energy poverty and providing energy resilience, solar panels are really a no-brainer for a government to deploy. I do not understand why the Government has not done more in this space. At the moment approximately 150,000 homes have solar panels installed and that is welcome. However, the reality is that those 150,000 homes are homes that could afford to install solar panels. They are probably the homes that can afford to withstand the energy shocks as a result of what is happening in Iran and

Ukraine much better than many other homes. The Social Democrats want every person in this country to be able afford to access solar panels so that they can benefit from having cheaper electricity and be protected from energy shocks as the global system turns upside down.

That is why we have brought in our policy, solar for all. Really importantly with our policy we want to give free solar for people who are on the warmer home scheme. These are people currently at risk of energy poverty. They are people who get disability allowance, carer's allowance and fuel allowance. The Government needs to roll out an intensive scheme to assist those homes.

We also want to see the doubling of grants for households. Many working families are struggling just to keep their head above water even where both partners are working. They are doing everything right and they still cannot get ahead. It is really important that those people can access schemes like the solar panel scheme. For the life of me, I do not understand why the Government cut the grants to those schemes which were so beneficial to people.

We also want to see the grants for batteries reinstated because that means that people can actually charge up the batteries when electricity rates are cheaper at night. It just makes sense. We also need to see plug-in solar for apartments. Thousands of people are living in apartments in this country and they have no access to solar. I ask the Minister to look at our policy. He should take it at face value and actually consider it.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I thank the Minister for being here this morning. I am very proud to support this motion. It embodies what the Social Democrats stand for - targeted supports which support the people in society who most need them at this point of crisis right now, and a long-term vision for how we can work our way out of these crises and inoculate ourselves as a State against the next one to come along.

While I appreciate the Minister acknowledging our calm and civilised manner in the delivery of this motion, I can tell him that we are as enraged as the constituents we represent at this Government's continued failure to deal with the cost-of-living crisis that is reaching is every single life in this country.

I am going to read to the Minister something from my inbox this week.

> Many, including myself, are living from one wage to the next with little financial security. As a single mother, I do not qualify for support such as the fuel allowance or back to school schemes due to strict means testing criteria that do not reflect the true cost of living after tax. People in my position are working hard yet still struggling daily to afford basic necessities such as food, electricity and heating. We feel overlooked and forgotten despite our efforts to contribute positively to society.

The Minister in his statement spoke about a task force for the renewables space, which is welcome, of course, but people are sick of hearing about task forces, strategies and reports. They want meaningful change in their lives and it is not coming. Another thing that was lacking in the Minister's statement was mention of energy poverty. That was something the Department spoke about a number of years ago but all we hear now is energy affordability. The Minister is denying the lived reality of many people in society who simply cannot pay for heating anymore - the 300,000 households which are in arrears. Those people are not being helped by the many, many statistics the Minister quoted. Yesterday, I listened to the

contributions from the Minister's benches on both the motion of confidence and the financial resolutions. In particular, I listened to the Minister, Deputy Calleary, who spoke about the real harsh realities that we as a State and we as a globe facing. Despite the constant narrative from this Government that we do not understand, we are well aware there is no magic money tree. It is not about what we are spending as a State that we are so enraged at but how we are spending it. The Government simply relies on market solutions. Where it spends money is easing it for private sector contributions which it expects will help citizens but which is failing again and again to do so.

Deputy Rory Hearne: It is extremely frustrating to come back in here and put forward these proposals. We put forward key, targeted proposals for the budget last year and the Government completely ignored them. The Government has thrown its hands up and said the cost-of-living crisis is down to an international situation. It is blaming global oil prices for the cost-of-living crisis but the reality is core aspects of this cost-of-living crisis are down to the Government's own policies.

What did the Government do just two months ago in the middle of this cost-of-living crisis? It allowed rents to be increased further for institutional investors and corporate landlords. Record rents were allowed to be increased even higher. After households pay their bills, rents and mortgages, in this country, how many children are in poverty? One in four of every child in this country is living in poverty after their family pays their rent or their mortgage and the Government says its policies are working and it is doing all it can. This is an absolute failure. In one of the so-called wealthiest countries in the world, 320,000 children live in poverty and the Government has increased rents. It has done nothing to stop house prices rising even more and acts as if this cost-of-living crisis has nothing to do with it when fundamental parts of it are because of its policies. We in the Social Democrats have put forward solution after solution which the Government has ignored. That is why people across this country are so angry and frustrated and we are too.

We need a policy change - a dramatic change - and we need investment in our future so that we do not leave ourselves in this situation again. We need investments in solar panels and in renewable energy, and not hand it over to the private market and leave it to the private market in terms of who can and who cannot afford it. The State has to lead because there is massive inequality in this country between those who can afford the solar panels, renewable energies and the EV cars and those who are stuck in mouldy, damp properties. They cannot afford the rent or solar panels. It is not acceptable and the Social Democrats do not accept it. We believe there is a much better way. That is why we put forward this motion and we will continue to push it.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Social Democrats for introducing this motion here today. We know energy prices have risen by 11% in a single month and 12% over the past year but the Government's response to that has been nothing short of paralysis. At the same time wholesale energy prices have collapsed. They are 72% lower than their peak in 2022. With the commercial mandate, as sure as night follows day, price gouging is inevitable but the Government has left the regulator toothless. It refused to regulate the standing charges and it refused to rein in the hedging.

We have had legislation on this for the past four years but the Government has completely ignored it. In the middle of a cost-of-living crisis the energy credits were pulled. That is not a mistake - it is a political choice by this Government. At the same time, the price of petrol and diesel have surged. People, particularly rural areas, who rely on home heating oil have been left to hang out to dry because the price of that home heating oil has doubled.

Let us be clear about who has been protected. Households are fleeced but data centres are getting sweetheart deals. Families are paying 6% to 8% more in network charges while the biggest energy users are let off scot-free. That is clearly unfair. On top of this, people who cannot afford renewable alternatives are punished by the regressive carbon tax which, no matter what anyone says, is not working. The cost of home heating oil has spiked by 70% in the past month alone.

There is another path. Sinn Féin has laid it out clearly: reintroduce the emergency electricity credits; scrap the carbon tax increase; cut excise on petrol and diesel by 25% a litre at the pumps; remove excise entirely from home heating oil; strengthen the regulator to end the price gouging once and for all; and make data centres page fair share.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Energy poverty is on the agenda now. It is really welcome to see that other parties now recognise what Sinn Féin has been saying for a very long time but that is why I was really disappointed to see the Social Democrats and the Labour Party back the Government last night in locking in carbon tax increases right up to 2030. In the middle of a cost-of-living crisis and energy poverty crisis, the very least that people should be able to expect of their representatives is that they will not use their vote in here to make matters worse for ordinary people who are really struggling.

Yesterday afternoon we heard the cost of energy prices being attributed to the US, Israel, Iran and even the pandemic but the reality is that Government has had the means to insulate vulnerable people from this shock. It simply chooses to give the money to data centres, developers and anyone else it thinks is big enough to warrant a tax break or support but it is certainly not for the ordinary man and woman. Before there was even a mention of the US and Israel declaring war on Iran or access to the Strait of Hormuz being limited, over 340,000 households were in energy arrears. Figures from EnergyCloud show the full picture which is there are an additional 220,000 households which are cold in their homes. They turn off their heating and are terrified of getting into debt. They remember what the crash feels like and they turn off their heating. They are cold in their homes. The Minister knows this because he sees them as well as I do.

People are sick to the back teeth of his excuses. He blames the Opposition, the global economy and you blame the protesters. He should get a mirror, have a look in it and see where the blame lies.

Deputy Mark Ward: I make no apologies for voting no confidence in this Government last night. It was the right thing to do. There is never a wrong time to do the right thing. It is a pity that some Independent TDs put their own political ambitions before the needs of ordinary workers and families. Ordinary workers and families have lost confidence in the Government. The Government is not listening. It still has not taken the necessary steps to make fuel affordable at the pumps.

It did nothing on home heating oil. The ordinary workers did not want to protest over the last couple of weeks. They did not want to take to the streets. They wanted to be able to get to work, but the Government left them with no choice. It did not listen. It refused to engage. Instead of de-escalating the situation, it made things worse. All they wanted was dialogue, but the Government threatened ordinary citizens with the Army.

Yes, the protests were about fuel and the Government's mismanagement of the cost-of-living crisis, but the cost-of-living crisis is only the tip of the iceberg. When the cost of living is put on top of the multitude of Government failures, it was the straw that broke the camel's back. We have record homelessness, rents and house prices are going through the roof, and people with disabilities are €1,400 worse off this year than they were last year. Children are waiting on life-changing interventions like scoliosis surgery, assessments of need and mental health supports in CAMHS. The Government promised €200 per month for childcare. Where is it?

I only have a couple of minutes to speak today, but I could go on and on about Government failures. Last night, Sinn Féin proposed an alternative, fairer solution to tackle rising energy costs, but again, the Government chose half measures. This Government is out of touch and running out of time.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I stood with the people yesterday, and I voted no confidence in the Government. People protesting over fuel prices appreciate that the Irish Government is not responsible for the international crisis. People were protesting because when a crisis occurs, they expect their Government to have their backs. Twice now, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, alongside the so-called Independents, have made an absolute hames of it, and the country is so disappointed in them. They could have cut diesel by the maximum amount possible, but they did not. They could have removed excise, including the carbon tax on home heating oil, but they did not.

That is where that frustration is coming from. People are struggling to heat their homes. Farmers, hauliers and coach operators simply cannot afford to absorb this shock within already very slim margins. The frustration has already been fostered by the Government because even for the paltry measures it has taken, it had to be brought kicking and screaming into this Chamber. Petrol and diesel are set to hit record prices, and home heating oil is already there. Energy credits have been pulled for over 300,000 households already in arrears on electricity bills. There has been a €1,400 cut for people with disabilities, who are not getting their energy credits.

Despite the miserable measures, does the Minister think the people have it easy? The time for half measures is long past. If the Government wants farmers to be able to produce food, hauliers to be able to bring food to our villages and bus operators to bring people to the shops, then we need the Government to stand up and stand with the people. Sinn Féin has outlined how we could achieve the cuts to fuel prices that we have advocated for. The question for Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil TDs is: why not?

Deputy Ann Graves: The Government may have won the confidence vote yesterday, backed by Independents, but I can assure the House that I and the public have lost all confidence in it. The Government still has not taken the necessary steps to make fuel affordable at the pumps, and it did nothing on home heating oil. This is despite the fact that heating oil has hit the

highest price on record. The last-minute proposed package does not go far enough. Coach companies do not know what the support scheme offers them. Where are the details of the direct payments? Households are struggling. They have to deal every day with a cost-of-living crisis. Fuel, food, rent and heating have all spiralled out of control. There has been an increase in school bus prices, which are up from €50 to €100 for primary students, and from €75 to €100 for post-primary students. Families look to the Government during tough times for leadership, and there is none. Some 320,000 people cannot afford their electricity, and 25% cannot afford to pay their gas bills. Everyone else is running just to stand still.

Sinn Féin brought forward legislation over a month ago to reduce the cost of petrol, diesel, green diesel and home heating oil. We called for the maximum reduction for everyone, directly at the pumps, but the Government opposed these common-sense measures. We needed an immediate 25 cent off the price of diesel and petrol. The Government's miserly offer was swallowed up in days. Sinn Féin proposed the removal of excise, including the carbon tax, on home heating oil. We also called for the maximum cut to excise, including the carbon tax, on green diesel.

The Government created a situation where people felt ignored, so they took to the streets in protest. This was like the Right2Water mark II, but they were met not by a government willing to engage, but with pompous lectures and finger-wagging. The Taoiseach totally underestimated the level of anger towards this Government. Every day in my constituency office, I have individuals and representatives calling in. It is the Minister's constituency as well. He needs to do better.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the Social Democrats for bringing forward the motion and allowing us the opportunity to speak about the people who have been left behind. The Minister is still not listening. He is certainly not listening to the people in rural Ireland. I will tell him about the plumber I met at the protest on Monday morning in Ballina. These are the same protests that the Government is trying to condemn, and write to Coimisiún na Meán about to tell it to reel them in and to cover this differently, and all of that, in order to control the media in relation to the protesters. That plumber told me that he has been called out time and again each day, when oil tanks in houses are airlocked. The reason they are airlocked is that people have to buy drums of oil for €30, put that in to last a day or two, and then go back and get another drum. He asked how he can charge them a callout fee when they barely have the €30 for the drum of oil to keep the house heated. That is the reality for too many people in rural Ireland. We absolutely feel it. There are over 700,000 people who are reliant on home heating oil. They feel completely left behind because they cannot heat their homes. That is why I support this motion.

Regarding the energy credit, how the Government managed to spend €9.4 billion in the last budget and still leave so many people behind, and leave people with disabilities €1,400 a month worse off, is mind-boggling. Then, the Government hits them again. Energy credits have to be given to people, not least the 320,000 people who are already in arrears with their electricity bills. The Minister needs to listen, and he also needs to listen to the home helps.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The reality is that this Government is not into listening, and there is no confidence out there. It should be very worrying for the Government if any of them were on the protests. We had supporters of Independents and some people who probably never voted

before, but also a huge number of people who would have supported the Government partners over generations. You could feel the anger of people who felt they had been absolutely let down. The only way to say it is that the Government, in particular the Taoiseach, managed to put fuel on the fire and stoke the whole thing up in the middle of last week. It showed an element of ineptitude in not realising just how angry people were. These are people who did not want to be out on protests.

Let us look at the reality. It is about the cost of fuel. We all accept that this was started by Donald Trump and genocidal Israel, but it is about what the Government did not listen to and did not do. It is about not realising that there are 700,000 households across this State that use kerosene, yet there is nothing in the package for them. We all know the issues for agricultural contractors, farmers and hauliers. They would say that they have had issues for years, and this was the straw that broke the camel's back. Bus and coach operators would say that there are supports for some but not for others. None of this is good enough.

There has been an absolute failure to do at the pumps what needs to be done. It is about green diesel, petrol and diesel. None of it was sufficient. We could have seen a 25 cent reduction in diesel and petrol, but the Government was not interested and did not listen. It is absolutely out of time in relation to where the people are at the present.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: If we ever needed evidence that the Government is out of touch, then the protests, supported by a huge majority of people in two polls over the weekend, are a wake-up call for this Government.

11 o'clock

Unfortunately, the vote is over. However, the fight for fairness for workers and families goes on. We know from yesterday's vote that this Government is not for the people. Here is a message for the people: the next chance they are going to get is in the upcoming by-elections. They will have a chance to give their view and use their voice. I ask everyone to turn out and show how sick and tired they are of this Government.

The Minister is one of the main people talking about solutions. When motions like this are put forward, solutions are put forward time and again. Does the Government ever take them on board? It never does, but the Minister still goes on about how there are no solutions from those on this side of the House. We will give them - 25 cent off the price of diesel, the complete removal of excise duty, including carbon tax, on home heating oil, and a maximum cut to excise duty, including carbon tax, on green diesel. In the medium to long term, we will talk about renewable energies. The Government is going to do what it always does, namely sell it off to private industries. What will those industries do? Like the energy companies and all the developers in this country, they will profiteer. If the Minister really wants to solve the problem, he should keep renewable energy in State ownership and make sure that the people profit rather than the profiteers.

The Minister talked about how we are going to pay for this. Under the sweetheart deal agreed by Fine Gael, the banks paid less than 1% on over €3 billion in profits last year. Taxing them would cover it. The Government gave developers €250 million for apartments they were already building. The State had a €12.5 billion surplus last year, €2 billion over what the

Government had projected. There is where the money is coming from, and this so-called magic money tree. It is there. Support the people.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: I thank the Social Democrats for tabling this motion. Many of the measures in the motion align with proposals Sinn Féin has previously brought before this House, including energy credits and supports. At present, the Irish people are facing unprecedented challenges. They are trying to make ends meet in the face of an ever-expanding cost-of-living crisis. Workers and families the length and breadth of the country are being hammered by soaring prices. If it is not rents, student fees, voluntary contributions or insurance, it is energy bills. Households are bracing themselves for a round of energy price hikes, just like the 700,000 households who depend on kerosene to heat their homes. Over 300,000 people are in arrears on their electricity bills, while the number of people who cannot pay gas bills has soared to over 183,000. This crisis is putting more people in debt, at risk of poverty and in a state of continued anxiety. Ireland already has the eighth highest electricity prices in Europe.

Ireland's crippling energy prices are not inevitable. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have repeatedly ignored, pushed back against and rejected Sinn Féin's and the Opposition's proposals to get prices under some control. They dismissed our calls to overhaul the Government's regressive approach to network charges and the public service obligation levy in order that data centres would have to pay a fair share. Not only have they totally failed to accelerate renewable transition at a pace required, they also continue to prioritise private interests of corporate developers overseas over the interest of people on this island. It does not have to be this way. The Government has shown whose needs it is going to prioritise and who it favours. It is not ordinary citizens.

Enough is enough. The Government cannot detach itself from the reality that the decision to withdraw energy credits and the failure to deliver an effective cost-of-living package is causing hardship and leading to more people falling into arrears. The reality is people are having to work overtime just to keep up with the cost of living because every week things are getting more expensive. The Government must accept that the most vulnerable people, especially people with disabilities, need an immediate cost-of-living package and a reintroduction of energy credits as an emergency measure.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Since the start of this fuel crisis, and even long before that, the Government has been totally out of touch with the reality that households are facing with rising costs. It has failed to support them. Last week, we saw farmers, contractors and hauliers - ordinary men and women - assemble to peacefully demonstrate their desperation with the rising cost of fuel. They were people who did not want to be out protesting. Many had never protested before, but they felt they had no choice. What was the reaction from Government? It decided to enflame tensions, it refused to talk or engage and it even threatened to send in the Army to deal with peaceful protests. It brought representatives from Galway up to Dublin for talks and then locked them out of the meeting. Those people were told their names were not on the list. It was schoolyard stuff. Every time the Taoiseach and Ministers spoke with disrespect toward ordinary people, the protests grew in size. That is what I experienced in Galway last week. The question I was constantly asked was how the Government could be so clueless and out of

touch with those who told it they cannot keep their businesses going or cannot afford to keep their homes heated.

The Government had the chance to reflect on this failure during yesterday's confidence motion. All we saw, however, was the pure arrogance of the Government when it comes to this crisis. It still does not get it and still is not listening. Those in government stood up in the Chamber yesterday to pat themselves on the back, but the reality here is that they are still continuing with half measures. They had the opportunity to cut the excise duty on home heating oil, but they did not do so. This means that the more than 700,000 households which rely on home heating oil across the State will continue to receive no support, even though the price has doubled. There were half measures in respect of petrol, diesel and green diesel, and carbon tax increases have been locked in until 2030. Has the Government learned absolutely nothing from this? It is clear that it is completely out of touch with the lived reality that households are facing right now. It is totally incompetent when it comes to facing these challenges. The best thing this Government can do is to follow the lead of Deputy Michael Healy-Rae and stand down. It has lost the confidence of the public.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: Gabhaim buíochas leis na Daonlathaithe Sóisialta as an tairiscint seo a chur chun cinn. Tacóidh Páirtí an Lucht Oibre leis.

One of the greatest risks we face as a country is our overdependence on fossil fuels. The climate crisis is existential. Even if we leave the fact of our dying planet to the side, the surge in prices over the past number of weeks due to Trump and Netanyahu's illegal wars has illustrated in no uncertain terms the financial costs associated with our continued dependence on oil and gas. Maybe we finally have an argument for a switch to renewables that even the climate sceptics will listen to now that their pockets are being impacted.

Time and again, workers here have been expected to absorb the consequences of global geopolitical upheaval through higher petrol prices, higher home heating costs and more expensive commutes. The eruption in frustration and anger that we saw on our streets last week was the result of years of what feels like a perpetual cost-of-living crisis. Unfortunately, the Government has offered next to nothing to households that are struggling to keep up with their energy bills. We know that there are 320,000 households in long-term arrears on their electricity bills. That is 320,000 people unable to cope with the mounting costs of keeping their home running. Figures released to me by the CRU recently have shown that the total value of debt held in arrears by these households is about €185 million. To put that in context, the Government package yesterday for the haulage and farming sectors was worth almost three times the amount it would cost to write off that debt. There was virtually nothing in that package for regular PAYE workers. As usual, they have been left high and dry by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Independents who remain in government.

The events of recent weeks must serve as a reminder to the Government of the urgency with which we need to transition our economy away from its reliance on imported, intermittent and expensive fossil fuels and towards clean, indigenous renewable energy. Where is the urgency when it comes to developing our offshore wind capacity? We are being left vulnerable to an increasingly unstable geopolitical arena and it is ordinary households that are paying the price. The Government and, in particular, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, talked a lot about energy security, but it is interesting that the approach they have landed on to achieve energy security

is to import more LNG - a highly polluting fossil fuel - and drive a stake through our climate and planning Acts in the process. We will not reduce our dependence on fossil fuels by importing more fossil fuels. We will not ensure our security of supply by continuing to rely on volatile and increasingly intermittent fuels. Moreover, the European benchmark price for LNG soared by 60% in the days following the launch of Trump and Netanyahu's illegal war on Iran.

We have been told that developing an LNG facility would cost about €1 billion over the course of a decade, and we need an updated figure on that now from the Minister because, presumably, the Department had not accounted for price fluctuation of as much as 60% when it was doing the maths. We also need transparency from the Government regarding who is going to pay for that. It will not be large energy users like data centres. It will not be our biggest polluters. It will be ordinary households funding it through higher network tariffs and higher bills. They will be paying for it, as always.

Opposition Members on the climate committee have called on the Government to halt this proposal and carry out a new energy security review. In light of the recent events, I reiterate that call in the strongest possible terms. Fundamentally, the only way we are ever going to end this cycle of energy crisis after energy crisis is by ending our dependence on fossil fuels. We cannot perpetually tax cut our way out of them. I spoke last night of my deep disappointment and disgust that of the many different policy options open to the Government to alleviate the cost of energy, it has decided to jettison and dump carbon taxes and the polluter pays principle. I do not know how the Government has not gotten this yet. The only urgency we have seen from the Government from an energy perspective is the attempt to run roughshod over our planning laws in order to speed up the development of the proposed LNG terminal.

Where is that level of commitment when it comes to renewables, developing offshore wind infrastructure and solar energy? Look at what the UK is doing with plug-in solar panels? Where is the necessary level of commitment when it comes to decarbonising our transport sector, electrifying our haulage fleet and making electric cars more affordable for low-income households? This most recent crisis is further proof of the case for moving away from our reliance on fossil fuels. If this Government will not do it for the good of the climate and our environment, it should do it for the good of our constituents - our people who are feeling the consequences of the dependence to which I refer in their pockets.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I thank the Social Democrats for tabling this motion. It is a really good motion. I want to say something to Sinn Féin. Its Deputies have left the Chamber. Last night, those in Sinn Féin, including Deputy Thomas Gould, engaged in an attack on our party. Deputy O'Reilly has done so again this morning in the context of the motion. Those in Sinn Féin did not support the measures that were brought forward to help people who are struggling across the industry last night, which is ironic. They are criticising us for doing so. I do not get that. They are engaging in voodoo economics, and espousing no carbon tax ever, no USC, and no local property tax. Where in the name of God are we going to get taxation revenue from? This is voodoo economics, and it needs to be called out. When seeking an alternative government and partners to serve in such a government, this is a very strange way of going about it.

I do not want to repeat many of the things that have been said. However, I have to say that, politically, the past two weeks have been disastrous for the Government. The Minister of State would probably agree. The measures that were brought in respect of industries that involve

high fuel usage were absolutely necessary. How it was not seen that this was necessary previously is beyond me. Where is this going? I will tell you where it is going. It will lead to ordinary workers getting pay increases, and the Labour Party will support them 100% in that regard. The trade unions of Ireland need to be knocking on the Government's door today and saying that people cannot sustain this. Workers, those on fixed incomes and the vulnerable cannot sustain it. The signal that the Government was going wrong started with the budget last year when it took out all the necessary payments to those who are vulnerable and to workers.

The commentary is to the effect that the Government is out of touch. I would like to tweak that. In order to be out of touch with something, you have to be knowledgeable and in touch in the first place. The Government has been neither for a long time. The only people it has been in touch with are those who pressured it into making some ridiculous changes in taxation in the budget. Those who are really affected, who have to deal with grocery inflation of 6.5% and growing, those who have to deal with all the energy issues, including that relating to kerosene, which has been spoken about so often, those who have to deal with higher education costs, which, unbelievably, the Government is pushing through, those who have to deal with increasing medical bills and a range of other issues and those who are rearing families are the ones who I absolutely guarantee will be knocking on the Government's door.

While there were thousands out protesting and while the changes that were brought about relate to high fuel users in particular sectors - and the downstream impact across all other industries in Ireland is so important - it must be remembered that the majority of those who were protesting are just ordinary people. There is literally nothing for them. Any small changes as regards fuel costs will be absorbed within weeks. What is the Government going to do for them? How will it ensure that they are protected? The anger of people will get much worse. They will mobilise - we and the trade unions will help them to mobilise - and they will be knocking on the Government's door. It will not just be a couple of thousand people; it will be hundreds of thousands who will be expressing anger like has never been seen before. It reminds me of the end of the Government that held office between 2007 and 2011, which the Minister of State will remember quite well. That is the level of anger I have seen.

We will need pay increases for workers. We will need energy credits. We will need changes in the context of working from home. We will need changes with regard to public transport costs. We will need maximum price orders. We will need to deal with grocery inflation in a way that it has not been dealt with already. We will need to look at all the extra costs that have been brought in by this Government in the past few months. When a Government believes that bringing in the Army is the solution, rather than dealing with ordinary workers' and ordinary people's concerns, that is not a Government that is out of touch; it is a Government that has lost its mandate.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The reason we are experiencing an energy price crisis in our country is because of Ireland's over-reliance on fossil fuels. Until the Government takes decisions that will break that over-reliance, our economy and our people will continue to be vulnerable. The war in Iran has shown for the second time in four years how our economy is at the mercy of the whims of Putin, of Trump and the Ayatollah. Yesterday's ESRI report reiterates that point. Our high electricity prices are driven by our disproportionate reliance on natural gas, but it also found that renewable energy provides protection against fuel price volatility. Speeding up that move to renewables will give us energy security, it will protect

families from higher prices, and it will help our country to decarbonise. On Sunday, the Government announced a huge package of over €500 million to address the fuel price spike being experienced right now. The Green Party believes that Government needs to take similar big, bold steps to ensure that this is the last energy crisis that Ireland ever experiences. Let the response to this crisis be more than just being about getting the blockades lifted.

I want to highlight measures across three broad areas. First, the Government needs to speed up the delivery of offshore wind farms that were successfully bid for during the term of the previous Government. An Coimisiún Pleanála and the Marine Regulatory Authority need additional expert staff so they can more quickly decide on planning applications for offshore wind. The Government also needs to speed up the investment and development of our ports. Right now, Belfast is the only port that could sustain the development of offshore turbines. That needs to change.

We know solar panels on people's roofs and balconies provide immediate savings for households. The Green Party has proposed the introduction of a scheme to provide six free solar panels for every household that gets the fuel allowance, immediately cutting electricity costs for some of the most vulnerable households. As a short-term measure, the Government needs to allow for plug-in solar to be used in Ireland just as it is in the UK and across the EU, giving people without a roof access to the savings of solar energy.

I have two brief points on electric vehicles. The Government should cut VRT on imported electric vehicles. We are developing an industry here. Let that continue to roll out.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: People do not protest because they like protesting. They protest because they feel they have no choice and because their backs are against the wall. That is clearly why the hauliers, contractors and small farmers came out and protested. Their backs are against the wall because they have faced absolutely gigantic hikes in the cost of being able to earn and maintain an income. Because they protested, and only because they protested, the Government has been forced to make some concessions to them, although these are still far short of what the protestors actually asked for, namely price controls. People Before Profit are the only people in this Dáil, even to this day, who have said that we need price controls. I reiterate it and remind the Minister of State that it was a Fianna Fáil Government, in 2007, that brought in the Consumer Protection Act, which states that in a situation of emergency, the Government can act to impose orders to control the price of goods that are affected by that emergency. If this is not an emergency, with the hikes in petrol, diesel, home heating oil, gas, and electricity, then I do not know what an emergency looks like.

This is self-evidently an emergency. It will potentially get worse because of the warmongering of Donald Trump. I seriously hope the people who were cheering on Donald Trump are thinking about it now. The signs were there. He is a property speculator. He made his money from property speculation and now turns out to be a bloodthirsty warmonger as well, whose warmongering is leading to farmers and workers in this country suffering economically as well as death and destruction raining down across the Middle East.

We need the Government to use the legislation that Fianna Fáil introduced in 2007 to impose price controls. The Government cannot leave workers behind. Some 320,000 people are in electricity and gas arrears. The number of those arrears has doubled in the past few years.

Workers will fight in the same way as the hauliers did if the Government does not do something serious to address their concerns.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I want to remind the Government that the group which led the way on the cost-of-living struggle until the past week or so was disabled people. Outside the Dáil they again led the Affordable Ireland campaign protest a few weeks ago. Why were they to the fore? It was because they were the ones who were hit hardest in the budget with €1,400 worth of cruel and targeted cuts. For months, despite all of the pleading, protest, argument and stories about people having to choose between heating and eating, the Government ignored their request for a €400 emergency payment so that they could pay their winter heating bills. Instead, the Government lectured disabled people and carers that it had to be responsible and careful with the State finances.

Now suddenly the Government, on a Sunday night, found over half a billion euro down the back of the couch. Some of that will trickle down to workers, disabled people and carers, which is welcome. It would not have happened without the protests. The Minister of State said on "Morning Ireland" that the cuts will be wiped away by the international price of oil going up further, which is as result of Trump and Netanyahu's illegal wars. This cowardly Government has still not condemned Trump or Netanyahu for their wars despite the claptrap about standing up for international law.

It is often said that power comes from the barrel of a gun. In this country, it seems that power comes from the engine of a tractor. The message from the Government is very clear. If people do not take militant protest action, it will ignore their demands no matter how reasonable and justified they are. It does not want to know. The trade unions have to take heed of this as they enter into pay talks. We are in a new phase of militant protest. Workers do not need heavy machinery to force the Government to listen to them. The most effective form of disruptive action is the strike and that is the power that all workers have. If they use that, they can fight not just for higher wages but for universal free public services, real rent controls, increases in social welfare payments and universal measures on the cost-of-living crisis, including breaking with the reliance on fossil fuels which is what has gotten us into this crisis in the first place. The most immediate thing that can be done is free public transport. That could be done tomorrow. It needs to be done.

Deputy Brian Stanley: This is the most serious fuel crisis since the 1970s. I contacted the Minister's office last week and spoke to his good secretary about this, and she passed my concerns on to the Minister. The level of preparedness has been shown to be awfully poor. The response and reaction has not been what was required. There is no mechanism to deal with price gouging. The CCPC needs to be abolished or given some powers because its report this week stated that controlling prices in a competitive market is outside the scope of competition and consumer protection law.

The steps that can be taken have been outlined during this debate. Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Austria have made a call for a joint EU windfall tax, the funds from which could be used to ease pressure on consumers in the face of high energy prices. They also say it would send a clear message to those companies making a profit from the consequences of war. Ireland is not one of the names on that list. I urge the Minister to put Ireland's name to that call and push for this.

Greece went one step further and has put a limit on the amount of profit that can be made at retail and wholesale level. At retail level, the limit is 12 cent per litre. Greece has done that legally; it is a member of the European Union. It has put a five cent per litre limit on wholesale profits. I understand the argument about price gaps and the taxpayer ending up with a big bill. This is a way around this. This can be done. It is a practical measure at no cost to the Exchequer. The Government needs to sort that out.

The move to renewable energy is painfully slow. We have zero offshore wind. Anaerobic digestion is minuscule. Hydro is non-existent. Solar is only starting up. I support the call to improve the grants for solar panels on homes. Progress needs to be made in all of these areas.

Last week, one Minister after another made things worse. The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, said he would bring in the Army. People envisaged troops on the streets with guns but what he actually needed was a tow truck. He did not need a big tow truck to move a few pallets on the bridge in Galway. As I said yesterday, a Massey Ferguson 35 with a front loader would have moved the bundle of pallets on the bridge. The comments of the Minister put fuel on the fire. The Government needs to be more careful in future and listen to people.

Deputy Michael Collins: I appreciate Minister of State is here but I thought the Minister for energy would be before us today because the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, is before us every day of the week on every issue. He will soon become Taoiseach of the country. He had a great go at us on RTÉ yesterday. That is part of the game.

This is a very serious issue. I am very critical of the Green Party because it spent four or five years in government and did not move us properly towards renewables and we are now left in a crisis situation. People are in a desperate situation. I received a message last night from a fisherman who told me he was out at sea for 14 days, which cost him €31,000 in fuel. The Minister knows the crisis situation with regard to fisheries. The few days fishermen can go out costs them more. The same person to whom I referred employs 33 people and is worried about how they will pay their workers never mind pay for fuel.

Fuel protests over the past few weeks should tell us that people all over the country are hurting. People cannot afford the never-ending taxing of everything. We need to do something about the cost of heating. There needs to be some type of package for the regular householder, the middle man and woman who cannot fill their oil tanks. People who used to get a fill or half a fill are now buying five gallon drums of heating oil. I ask the Government to seriously consider something for these people.

The Government has spent years piling tax on to diesel, and telling us we have to meet our climate targets and that is climate action while doing very little to reduce harmful emissions. People who depend on diesel have to earn a living. It is about survival. Farmers, hauliers, fisherman and contractors are being punished for using the only fuel that will do the job while practical solutions are ignored or quietly parked.

Hydrotreated vegetable oil, HVO, is a renewable diesel made from waste oil. It works in existing engines. It cuts emissions immediately and does not require people to scrap vehicles or machinery that have years of life left in them. That is common sense climate action but good luck trying to get HVO in Ireland. There is no domestic production, almost no availability and no urgency from the Government to make it accessible to the sectors that need it most.

Separately, there are engine based technologies like hydrogen on demand systems. These are not fuels and do not replace diesel. Rather, they are devices designed to make engines burn cleaner and more efficiently. Whether they succeed or fail should be decided by a proper independent assessment, not by indifference or refusal to engage. People are sick of new ideas being waved away while carbon tax goes up without hesitation.

If this is really about emissions, the focus should be on enabling cleaner fuels like HVO and seriously evaluating technologies that could reduce pollution. This morning, I read that the Chinese are making a plane that can be flown with water instead of fossil fuel. That tells us the world is moving on but Ireland is a laggard in terms of movement on renewables. Technologies could reduce pollution and stop the habit of using taxation as a substitute for solutions. Right now people see more tax, more lectures and very little practical help.

I spoke to the Taoiseach about the Barryroe oil field on Leaders' Questions in 2022 when Eamon Ryan was wagging the tail. In 2026 he says Ursula von der Leyen is wagging the tail and he cannot reopen it. Parties in here say that we cannot have fossil fuels. They are all living in a different space age than I am.

The fact is that, as we have seen in the last few weeks, if anything happens to the link from Moffat in Scotland, we would cease to operate in about a week without fuel. That is the bottom line. What I have always suggested is that we drill off Barryroe and any oil that we get from there would pay for renewables in this country. We could tax them to the hilt to pay for it - not the people but those who are drilling out there - and then put in our renewables. Where are our wind energy and solar panels? If it costs €20,000, you get €1,800 back in a grant. We are not on the real planet here. We are out of touch completely when it comes to solar, retrofitting, HVO, and hydrogen on-demand systems. The price of electric cars is astronomical. Manufacturers promise that cars will do 450 km but when you speak to the service mechanics, they tell us that you would be lucky to get 350 km. We also need to look at battery trucks. The problem is that we are laggards. Countries like China and New Zealand have lorries that run on batteries. They have battery chargers that take ten minutes. I know a gentleman in my area in Schull who has experienced that and worked with it. He keeps asking why we have to wait for the rest of Europe to do it before we might consider it in 15 or 20 years' time. Where was the vision when the Green Party was in government? It did not deliver for renewables as it was supposed to do.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I want to raise the comments in relation to the Minister with responsibility for the media. When the media covered the protests, they covered the ordinary men and women. The Minister responsible, who holds the purse strings for the media, called for an investigation into the media. What an abuse of ministerial power. This is the most authoritarian thing that we heard in recent days. The truth is that this Government introduced a rescue package in excess of €700 million last year for RTÉ to bail it out. Is this what he paid for - this level of control that he is trying to exert? The truth is that this Government tried to blacken the names of protesters. Then the Government looked to the media to try to support it and spread that propaganda. They were ordinary men and women. That was deeply wrong. I have written to the Chair of the Oireachtas committee on media. The Minister should be hauled in to account for his comments.

The truth is that the Government, and the previous Government of which Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael were a part, have pursued a policy of high energy costs. In fact, embedded in the carbon tax was the intention to increase fuel prices year on year. It was baked into legislation irrespective of the cost. That was the policy, and now it is starting to unravel.

The Minister condemned the protesters for blocking fuel, but it was his Government that banned oil and gas exploration. It made us reliant on the international markets and now it is blaming those international markets for the cost of fuel even though it was the Government's policy to begin with.

We should be focusing on incentivising small-scale renewable energy generation like solar and biodigestion, but there are significant issues in relation to that. Just the other week, I spoke to a farmer who had a biodigester. Even after several months, he still cannot get connected to the grid. Other farmers have applied for the targeted agricultural modernisation scheme, TAMS, grant for solar generation, but just 10% of applications have been successful.

One arm of the Government does not know what the other arm is doing. The Government's policy is totally wrong. It has created this crisis and now it is complaining that the people are raising concerns. It is time that the policy of high energy costs is reviewed.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: We are moving the focus in the debate towards solutions for people to reduce their energy bills. I welcome this motion. As I said before, we need to be moving towards giving better grants for solar in households, including in the very short term plug-in solar. You can now go into Lidl in the UK and get some of these, which would cut your bills straight away.

The focus of much of the debate has been on the short-term pressure and how the Government did not respond enough or fast enough to it. We have said that. I first referenced Ronald Reagan's term "voodoo economics" in 2002, talking about the bubble. I said bubble bubble would lead to toil and trouble, and it actually did with the demise of the Celtic tiger. Money does not fall off trees. You only have a certain amount of revenue coming in and you have to work within those constraints.

We have had arguments on different sides of the House about protecting the most vulnerable and where the money should go. The renewables debate is a wartime situation because we are so dependent on fossil fuel imports. The next crisis down the road is going to result in more pain for people. We need to be looking at a wartime situation where we are putting our windfall assets into upgrading the grid and investing in offshore wind, tidal energy, solar and other capacity so that we are net exporters of energy through battery storage and green hydrogen. I am going to say this 50 more times during the lifetime of this Dáil, but we are not actually doing that. We are not ramping up. The Ukrainians could ramp up drone technology because it was an existential crisis for them. It is an existential crisis for the people of Ireland to be so dependent on foreign actors to heat our homes. We need to get real and start putting in that long-term investment.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, for being here today. Like many of the first-time TDs, I have been elected for 16 months. In that time, I have made 1,400 representations on behalf of people all across Mayo. I have met people at weekly clinics

in Westport, Achill, Belmullet and Bangor Erris, and more are planned. We have helped people to get the fuel allowance. I welcome the extension into May of the fuel allowance, which means an extra €152. For some people, that fuel allowance is not enough, so we have helped them with the additional needs payment or the supplementary welfare allowance. We have also had many people in who we are helping with the SEAI grants. I am really seeing the difference that new windows and doors or pumped insulation can make.

This past fortnight, I met with different people, ones who have not come to clinics or the office and who have not emailed - families, farmers, hauliers and small business people. They are people I knew were struggling with the cost of living but I did not know just how much they were to the pin of their collar. People were emotional when they were talking to me about the fear at the shop checkout, the petrol pump and when the electricity bill came in.

I acknowledge David Heraty and John Scanlon who, on behalf of 500 people, came to my office this week with a petition with 500 signatures. Those men said they had never been in a TD's office before. I am here today to say I am listening. I understand. I hear the frustration. I hear the fear. I also welcome the many people who took to the streets legitimately. For many, it was the first time that they ever protested because they felt that their voices were not being heard. We hear them loud and clear. We have to ensure that at the next available opportunity, we go further than the €770 million package for working people and small business owners.

Everybody knows this is not a crisis that is only affecting Ireland; it is affecting the whole word. Geographical tensions are causing crises everywhere. We can go back to the invasion of Ukraine and now we have what is going on in the Middle East.

We are under pressure to support our citizens. I acknowledge that the €770 million package is a huge amount of money. For some people, they hear the budgets in terms of billions and €775 million does not sound that much. Speaking as the Chair of the Joint Committee on Children and Equality, I acknowledge the lack of childcare and how much that is causing people to struggle in their households. There was a recent announcement of €135 million over the lifetime of this Government to deliver State-led childcare. When we compare that €135 million with the €775 million, it is going to be swallowed up pretty quickly. It is just putting the amount of money into context. I think €775 million is similar to the whole budget for disability services, so it is a huge amount of money.

In saying that, for some it is still not enough. We must be responsible in trying to respond. The farmers are happy to hear that there is €100 million in this package for them and the hauliers. I hear that they are worried that it is going to be another scheme similar to the agri-climate rural environment scheme, ACRES, or TAMS and it is going to be hard to access. We need to make it easy for them.

At the next available opportunity to give back, we have to look at our income tax bands and other ways to give back to the hard-working people of this country. As a Government backbencher, that is what I will be doing for the people of Mayo. I will call for this at every single opportunity.

However, we must insist on responding in a targeted, sustainable and responsible way in the midst of what we are facing globally. Lots of people have come to my office and had conversations with me about solar panels and how they are working. People got grants for

solar panels last summer and are now starting to see the bills reducing. We have to keep working to support people to access those kinds of grant.

We must acknowledge that we have made progress. Last month, 45% of our energy was from renewable sources. However, to avoid another crisis like this, we have to push to get that to 80% by 2030. We need to make homes and businesses all across Ireland more sustainable, warmer and cheaper to heat.

I will keep speaking to use the time we have left, if that is okay. I want to talk about public transport. People in Mayo and elsewhere in rural Ireland do not have the luxury of switching off our cars when the price at the pumps gets expensive. We cannot leave the people in rural Ireland exposed. A fantastic initiative was rolled out in Achill this year, TFI Anseo. I want to see that rolled out across Mayo, in Erris, Louisburgh and all rural parts of Mayo. People can use this app or make a phone call to access public transport in real time where there are not bus services every five minutes and where we do not have the Luas and so on.

The Government and its backbenchers have learned an awful lot about communication in the last fortnight. Sometimes, we are doing things well but do not communicate that well. We may also not be communicating well enough how we are using the people's taxes. People are asking us to scrap carbon tax but then you sit down with them and speak about how carbon tax is used for the fuel allowance, the living alone allowance, the working family payment and ACRES. There is an education gap here. People see us talking about millions and billions of euro. We have to make more of an effort to communicate clearly to people and to listen to them.

Every time an international crisis causes prices to spike, it is rural Ireland that takes the hit first and hardest. Speaking for my constituency of Mayo, we have to be at the centre of Ireland's energy future but that energy future cannot just happen to Mayo; it has to benefit Mayo. If turbines are going up, the community should see their bills go down. People in rural Ireland will support change if they see a return for themselves. I will keep pushing for short-term supports and long-term solutions for the people of Mayo.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Táimid i gcónaí ag caint faoin rud seo. Is é an rud ná nach bhfuilimid ag déanamh an rud is fearr gur féidir linn, go háirithe agus muid ag smaoineamh faoi curtailment and dispatch down. I have spoken about this before. One of the biggest solutions introduced by the German Government, which was a quick fix, was to allow plug-in solar. I have raised this in the Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy and was told that, in 2022, a consultation was done and plug-in solar was deemed dangerous. I have requested details on who said it was dangerous. I presume it was rooftop solar installers who would not like to lose their business. It is a simple fix for the apartment dwellers in north Dublin whom I represent. They could clearly install a system on their balconies, plug it in and have an in-built system that would reduce their energy costs.

I will always give solutions. I will not just say things that can never happen. That is one thing that will help the Irish people regarding our energy security and help with surging costs. At the moment, while we have huge amounts of solar and wind energy, the grid cannot take it. The Minister of State is well aware of this. I welcome the fact that we had a meeting on this. Long-duration energy storage systems, including battery energy storage systems, gravity pumps and green hydrogen, are being established across Ireland. Dr. James Carton, who was

a professor of mine, was one of the founding pushers of this and has consulted with the Government but it is not happening fast enough. At the moment, we see a mix of green hydrogen being introduced in the UK. We can establish such a system to reduce carbon emissions and also to reduce costs. If any other country had the seabed and the potential that Ireland has, it would use them to benefit its people. Before the crash, we had huge ambitions to fast-track offshore renewable energy and other renewables. Due to the crash, that all fell through. We are now getting foreign direct investment, FDI, in it but we need to do it in a way that benefits the Irish people. We need to invest more in national security.

If the current energy crisis shows us anything, it is that we need to move away from being a petro-state to being an electro-state. The Germans are doing this way faster than us. We should look at the model they are employing across the board. The Irish people are screaming out for a decentralised grid. They understand that a decentralised grid reduces demand on the grid and that reducing demand on the grid reduces energy costs. In the response to a parliamentary question I recently submitted regarding the dynamics of energy costings, it was shown that, while we had higher grid input from renewables and the customer should be seeing that happening at a faster rate, they are not. The people of my constituency are screaming out for quick solutions. I hope the Minister of State will respond to my point on plug-in solar. I know a lot of countries are looking at small modular reactors to reduce the burden on their people.

I will refer to the private wires Bill. The Government's private wires Bill is welcome but we do not need two regulators. The CRU should be the single sheriff in town to determine if a private wire should be allowed. That is the difference between my Bill and the Government Bill. There are other differences in amendments. I will continue to work on my Bill. I look forward to constructive engagement with the Government, which I have had so far, in this regard. It is a key priority for me and would benefit the Irish people. We cannot allow our energy to be wasted. We cannot allow solar farms in Waterford or Wexford to turn off generation at 11 a.m. and lose energy. We should use everything we can to benefit the Irish people.

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I thank the Deputies for raising very important issues and matters. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the pressures that households are facing as a result of high energy costs. It is important to say that the Government remains deeply concerned about the conflict in the Middle East, including the Gulf. Ireland has a long track record of support for international law and the UN and we continue to seek de-escalation through dialogue and diplomacy so that these issues can be resolved. The Government is also very aware of and concerned about the pressures placed on households and businesses by the high energy costs arising due to the conflict. Providing supports to alleviate this pressure has been, and will continue to be, a priority.

Recent days have shown more evidence of the Government taking action to help households and businesses with the cost of fuel and energy through the introduction of an additional package of measures. These measures come on foot of Ministers holding a series of constructive meetings with representative groups, culminating in this further significant support package to address the ongoing crisis. As somebody who was involved in those discussions on the Government side, I will pay tribute to the representative bodies, which did

their business efficiently and had remained in contact with the Government since the first package of measures was introduced. When that package of measures was introduced, it was hoped it would address the significant impact being felt at the time. However, we all know that international energy prices moved in the intervening period.

The package we introduced on Sunday, which was voted through the House last night, is in addition to the previously allocated €250 million in targeted supports to assist those experiencing real and immediate financial pressure. It is also in addition to the range of measures introduced in budget 2026 that aimed to help households with energy costs. These measures included: an extension of the 9% VAT rate currently applied to gas and electricity, saving households up to €100 million per year; enhanced social protection measures, including an increase in the fuel allowance rate of €38 per week with an expansion in the eligibility rules, which I know from experience in my constituency office brought a lot more people into that support scheme; and a record allocation of €640 million for SEAI retrofit schemes, allowing us to target 73,000 home energy upgrades this year. This includes about €340 million for the warmer homes scheme, which provides fully funded upgrades for those in energy poverty.

While there has not been any increase in the price of household electricity or gas since the conflict began, I note that there are a range of protections in place for customers experiencing difficulties in paying their bills. Anyone who is struggling with their bills is strongly encouraged to engage with their supplier. Suppliers will not disconnect consumers who engage with them. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has engaged with the four biggest energy retailers in recent months to ensure that hardship funds and focused measures are in place for any customers who are in difficulty. That is why I find it difficult to accept the suggestions of some, including a contribution made on the radio this morning, that it was a toss-up as to whether people would heat their home or charge their wheelchair. The situation is stark and grave but we all have a responsibility to share with constituents, consumers and customers that there are supports available, including hardship grants, and that the Department of Social Protection can provide exceptional needs payments in those crisis situations.

Even when things were less complex, those measures were still there. There were people in better times who ran into difficulties for all sorts of reasons. The Department of Social Protection on the ground has flexibility. We need to encourage people who find themselves in those really straitened circumstances to seek the help that is there. In addition, the Department of Social Protection can provide support through that additional needs payment to help all who seek to meet expenses, including fuel bills but also at a wider level.

Structural factors impact on our energy prices. Ireland is import dependent on energy, making it particularly vulnerable to price volatility in the wholesale gas market. Ireland's isolated island location, low levels of interconnection, widely dispersed low density population and reliance on fossil fuels are also important price determinants. Retail prices are also influenced by factors other than wholesale prices, including supply or hedging. This is the practice of purchasing energy in bulk ahead of time, protecting customers from the day-to-day volatility of the energy markets but also having long run effects on retail prices. This, as well as the current conflict, highlights why Ireland must reduce its reliance on imported fossil fuels, accelerate the deployment of renewables and expand interconnection with trusted European partners. I suggest that is a better route to go than spending time, money and energy in looking back at the Barryroe opportunity, which nobody can quantify as to whether it has the perceived

bounty that is being suggested. Considering the regime that existed here before in terms of very much encouraging developers of facilities like that over the past decades, nobody advanced in any real way there. I doubt that it is the bounty some would seek to suggest.

I agree with many Members this morning who talked about advancing the case for renewables. The Government is very committed to that and has already begun a scheme. We saw the first wave of the south-east coast area that been identified with the Tonn Nua site back in December, auctioning 900 MW with three other auctions to come soon after. We are also developing a national DMAP towards our commitments for 2040, so we identify by the end of 2027 key sites that will be used for the capturing of offshore wind. We have invested very significantly in our grid. Between €3 billion and €4 billion has been set aside to allow our grid infrastructure to spend up to €18 billion by 2030.

We are also working to ensure that households benefit directly from the renewable transition. Since 2019, SEAI schemes have provided almost €1.7 billion in support to homeowners delivering 250,000 home energy improvements, including almost 32,700 fully funded upgrades for households at risk of energy poverty under the warmer homes scheme. In 2025, nearly 5,000 businesses and community groups received grants to retrofit their properties and install solar. In fact, a rooftop revolution is under way across Ireland. A total of 155,000 homes have received grants to install rooftop solar and free solar panels have been provided to 2,000 schools across the country. This reduces energy bills. Where excess energy is produced, it can be sold into the grid under microgeneration. The national energy affordability task force will play a key role in how we address energy affordability in the period to come. The task force was established by the Government to identify access and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses while delivering key renewable commitments and protecting security of supply and economic stability. This will be a crucial element of the Government's work to improve competitiveness, complementing the action plan on competitiveness and productivity.

The first report of the task force published last November set out measures for consideration in budget 2026. A key output of the task force will be an energy affordability action plan, which will identify a comprehensive range of solutions, including measures targeting households and, indeed, energy poverty as so many Deputies identified today. The plan is currently being developed and is due for publication in Q3 of this year.

I reiterate that this Government is aware that people are concerned about energy security and energy costs at this unprecedented time. As the geopolitical situation continues to evolve, we will remain focused on ensuring that Ireland's energy security remains robust while endeavouring to assist those experiencing real and immediate financial pressure.

I wish to address another issue raised by a Labour Party colleague, Deputy Ahern, in relation to the LNG facility that the Government is moving ahead with. That is a critical piece of infrastructure that is necessary to give us energy security. It is not about another source of fossil fuels into our grid. It is about providing resilience to ensure that in the event of a significant rupture to our current gas supply, we are able to provide gas to our key infrastructure, such as hospitals, and that we have the capacity to do that. I hope that all would see that. The whole programme behind it is about the State controlling it and with it being a floating facility, we are not building key infrastructure that we would beholden to in the decades ahead. It is aimed at providing that energy security.

I thank the Deputies from across the House for their contributions. However, we cannot accept the motion and I support the Government's countermotion.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I thank my colleague, Deputy Gary Gannon, for bringing forward this motion and, indeed, everyone who has contributed to the debate. The price increase for every day basics are relentless. Rents, food, heating, electricity, petrol and diesel are all through the roof. People's wallets do not stretch indefinitely when their wages stay the same. We are reaching a breaking point. People contact me every day who are unable to cope. Could the Government not see that the country was already in crisis before the tractors had arrived in Dublin? Home heating oil jumped nearly 70% in a single month - the biggest increase ever recorded. Irish households are paying some of the highest electricity and gas prices in Europe. People are stretching every euro just to heat their homes, drive to work, keep the lights on and put food on the table.

There are home care workers protesting outside the Dáil right now who are at the coalface of this cost-of-living crisis. Workers from Northside Home Care Service do long and hard hours taking care of our sick and elderly. They provide professional and compassionate care but are not paid properly for their Trojan work. Most are paid just above the minimum wage. This is simply not enough to survive on. They deserve a fair wage for the essential role they play in our community. I urge the Minister of State to speak to his Government colleagues and ensure this pay dispute is resolved. There must be a sectoral wage for care workers and there must be full pay restoration.

The Northside Home Care Service workers are just one example of hard-pressed workers struggling to keep their heads above water. People are crying out for help from the Government but are being ignored. There is a real prospect of continued energy price shocks over the coming months and years. This means that to make the best use of possible resources, the response from the Government must be to target resources to help those who need them most and, crucially, to build resilience and reduce our dependence on fossil fuels.

Our proposals get to the root of the cost-of-living crisis. A €400 targeted energy credit would provide much-needed relief for those who need help most. A supplementary mileage scheme for essential workers is also needed as well as a roll-out of solar panels across the country. Every home, every business and every farm building in Ireland should have solar panels. The Social Democrats' solar for all plan put forward by my colleague, Deputy Jennifer Whitmore, would bring down people's bills while also helping us to reach our climate targets. Our proposals are targeted, fully costed and would make an immediate impact while protecting us from future shocks. If the Government is serious about this crisis, it would adopt our proposals.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I wish to make three points on this. I hope the events of the past week have been a wake-up call for the Government because people across the country are under huge pressure with the rising costs of living. The Social Democrats have put forward real solutions to that, including a targeted €400 energy credit. I urge the Government to implement that as soon as possible. I hope the Government understands that we have to have better energy security, energy independence and move away from imported fossil fuels.

12 o'clock

The Minister of State talked about people being able to access help from the Department of Social Protection but there are huge barriers to people accessing help. There is so much bureaucracy there and people struggle to access some of the supports he mentioned. The Government needs to look at that and make the supports the Minister of State says are there more accessible and more available for people.

The key point is we need a green energy revolution. We need to stop burning imported oil, gas and fracked gas and to move to domestic solar and wind energy. We need to make this as accessible for people as possible, which is why we have put forward solar for all proposals. We have to do this to avoid a climate catastrophe but I do not get a sense of urgency from Government on this. The Minister of State talks about identifying sites by 2027. We are not seeing the urgency that is needed to have the huge transition to a green system of energy produced domestically.

While we have these failures we have to support people in the here and now. It is not just farmers and agri contractors as there are people right across society who need support. As health spokesperson for the Social Democrats, I support the call from the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation for supports for nurses and midwives working in the community who are using their own cars to travel across communities to support people. These nurses and midwives support people from cradle to grave. I am thinking of public health nurses, community midwives and palliative care nurses who are driving around in their own cars. Some are covering up to 400 km a week to support people and we need to support them with an increased mileage allowance. We call for that in our motion and I call on the Government and the Minister for Health especially to support the nurses who are under particular pressure, as well as other essential workers, with the increased cost.

The overall message is I want to see a change of direction here. We have to move to a green economy. We need green energy production here at home and we need to support people in the here and now who are massively struggling with the huge cost of living.

Deputy Gary Gannon: It is a shame the Government will not be supporting this Social Democrats' motion that provides solutions both immediately and for the future. I assure the Minister of State we will not be supporting the Government amendment. In three pages of testimony, basically, it is just telling us we will just continue as we are. Continuing on as we are is not acceptable any more. People are hurting too much. It is palpable. Government needs to listen, intervene and act.

As part of our motion we talked about an enhanced supplementary mileage scheme for healthcare and essential workers. The Government amendment does not even reference that fact. I sat in this Chamber yesterday while a continuum of Ministers talked about how people were not able to make their appointments during the protests last week. I also listened to the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation three weeks ago when it told us there were healthcare practitioners - nurses and midwives - who simply could not get to their patients when using their own cars because of the cost of fuel. That is why we made that proposal and it is lamentable in the extreme that the Government has simply averted its gaze from it. It is an insult to the healthcare workers we rely on.

We proposed a €400 energy credit for households earning under €70,000. We did that because people are struggling. The Minister of State told us this Government has given the

largest package in Europe but he stopped there. He did not say that Ireland has the highest energy prices in Europe or that we have 315,000 households in energy arrears as we speak. Most frighteningly of all, that figure has increased by 20% in the last 12 months. Can the Minister of State tell me that in six months' time that number will not have increased again? There are families who are genuinely terrified about another bill coming through their letterbox, so we are asking for that €400 credit. Also, in Ireland we pay on average €360 more than the EU average for electricity so the €400 we propose just brings us to parity, yet the Government has averted its gaze from it. We understand we need solutions both immediately and in the long term so we also proposed a solar power for all initiative. We need leadership, vision and a commitment that never again will we be in the situation we are in now. It is because of global factors and we appreciate that but at this moment we need vision, leadership and intervention. Ministers disgraced themselves last week with their reactionary tone. They inflamed tensions.

What we need here is people who provide solutions. The solar power for all initiative that is being developed by my colleague, Deputy Whitmore, is one that is cost-effective, evidence-based and enables the Irish State to say "Never again" by investing in our communities. It is a capital investment. It could be paid for through the excesses of the carbon tax and it will also mean that when these shocks come again, which they will, Irish households will be inoculated against the worst extent of the crisis. We are asking for bold intervention, an acknowledgement - by listening to the people we meet on the doors - that they are hurting and intervening with a €400 energy credit accompanied by a belief that never again should we be in this position by removing ourselves from fossil fuel dependency. That starts by recognising we can intervene here and we have a role to play. During the oil shock of the 1970s Denmark invested in renewables and it has inoculated its citizens from the worst effects of this particular crisis. I am sick and tired of hearing about how we are a wealthy country and that we have surpluses. Every single day I knock on doors of citizens who are operating on a deficit. That is a crying shame. There is capacity here and the Government will have support across the Chamber if we invest in people's immediate needs and also in the solutions of tomorrow. That should be a solar power for all initiative and that is achievable. It could make a huge difference. We will be opposing the Government's amendment and it is a damn shame it is not bringing forward the necessary solutions.

Amendment put.

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

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: Unusually, we are somewhat over time and there will be no red clocks during Leaders' Questions. If Members have not prepared within their time, that is their problem. I call Deputy McDonald to begin.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Go raibh maith agat. The Government may have survived the confidence motion yesterday but the Taoiseach should be under no illusion. The

Government has lost the confidence of the people because of its arrogance, because it does not understand their lives and because it refuses to listen. Yesterday, even as one of its Ministers of State walked away, the Government still would not listen and indeed we got hours of backslapping and self-congratulation. However, self-praise is no praise. This is a Government that makes things harder for people. There are increased school transport fees, exam fees are back for the leaving and junior certificates and there are eye-watering rents.

Why have Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael councillors hiked up rents for Dublin City Council tenants? Some people have seen their rents double. These are families stretched to the limit. They are workers, carers and pensioners. They are hit hard by the cost of fuel, gas, electricity and food but Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael councillors decided to squeeze them even more. The Taoiseach might not know this but us Dubs are very house-proud and none of us more so than those from my home neighbourhood of Cabra and those from the inner-city communities I am proud to represent, especially people who live in complexes of flats. These are the finest of people. They go out to work every day, they look after their children and their neighbours' children, they hold their communities together and they do everything to keep the show on the road. Many of them are out the door to work from 5.30 a.m. They are very resilient people because their communities have faced real hardship. Government after government - Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael - have left them behind. They pay their rent but they are left to live in conditions that frankly you would not believe exist in the year 2026.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am sorry to tell those in the Gallery that applause is not allowed.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: There is damp, mould, broken windows and doors and crumbling walls. Entire blocks of flats in this city are riddled with dampness. If the Taoiseach went to places like Sheriff Street, Seville Place, Ballybough or East Wall, or the flat complexes of Clarion Quay, Chancery House, Island Quay and Longboat Quay, he would find that out for himself.

Families are crying out for very basic and long overdue maintenance but they now believe they might be fighting a losing battle because the Government does not listen. People are fobbed off again and again and this has been going on for decades. Dublin City Council is not meeting its responsibilities and that is a fact. Central Government is not funding Dublin City Council to provide a decent, acceptable standard of housing and that is a fact too.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Hear, hear.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: To add insult to injury, along come the Government's councillors to hit people with rent hikes. Now that takes a brass neck, arrogance and disrespect. I want the Government to know that people are not taking this lying down. It is not just the hauliers and the farmers who are standing up. These families and communities are standing up too and they are demanding these rent hikes be scrapped. They are demanding maintenance for their homes. They are demanding respect.

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Why does the Government treat decent people in this way?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up. The Taoiseach to respond. While I welcome everybody in the Gallery, there are rules to be complied with and if they continue to interrupt, I will have to ask for the Gallery to be cleared. I am sorry. The Taoiseach to speak.

The Taoiseach: The Government won a confidence vote in Dáil Éireann yesterday by a substantial 14-vote majority.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: You lost the people.

The Taoiseach: That is the reality, despite the Deputy's description of what transpired yesterday. The truth is that I am extremely disturbed that Deputy McDonald has not yet, as the main Opposition leader in this House, had the courage of her convictions or the decency to separate what is right from what is wrong. Yesterday, one of her Deputies could not condemn threats or intimidation against An Garda Síochána. On a programme last night, Deputy Kerrane was asked a straight question-----

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: -----"Do you condemn the threats and the intimidation of gardaí?"-----

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: That is a question for you.

The Taoiseach: -----and the Deputy said, "I do not condemn the protesters."

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: That sort of question is for you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: On what happened, I fully respect the right of people to protest, even the people in the Gallery in terms of the Dublin City Council situation in regard to rent. People are entitled to protest. In my view, you seem incapable of saying it is wrong to blockade our only oil refinery. You cannot say that is wrong, even though it would have led to a scarcity of oil supply and an increased fuel crisis. You cannot say that it is wrong to blockade ports, even though it would destroy our economy.

A Deputy: You are avoiding the question, now.

The Taoiseach: You cannot say it is wrong to intimidate bus drivers. You do not have the courage. You are weak as a political party. Absolutely.

Deputy Máire Devine: Oh, that is nasty.

Deputy John Brady: That is not true.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: Nasty Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: You could not do it. You tried to jump on board. That is the sad-----

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: I did not interrupt you, Deputy. I would appreciate-----

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: I have a few things to say .

Deputy Mark Ward: What about the flats, Taoiseach?

The Taoiseach: I fully respect the rights of people to protest.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Noel Grealish: They do not like the truth.

Deputy Máire Devine: What about the flats? There is one minute to go.

The Taoiseach: I fully respect the right of people to protest-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies. Exactly, what about-----

The Taoiseach: I fully respect the right of people to protest but surely it is possible in this House for us to get agreement on basic rights and wrongs in terms of what should and should not happen.

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: That is something you have not been prepared to do. I regularly engage with people in terms of protest.

I am not a member of Dublin City Council. We have a system of local government in this country and there is a differential rent system. It is a critical piece of the State's system of local government which, as you know, is far better than the private rental sector or anything near it. It is subsidised housing costs and supports households. I believe Dublin City Council should do far more in terms of regeneration. We have funded local authorities up and down the country in terms of regeneration and they should do more-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The Government underfunds them.

The Taoiseach: -----in terms of refurbishing flat complexes, in particular, which I have been in in recent years and which I accept are not acceptable. A lot of capital money has been allocated to Dublin City Council and, essentially, there is a huge issue of housing maintenance. The city council obviously has a revised rent structure now. It is a matter for Dublin City Council, the executive and the council itself to explain and defend that. We do not run the councils.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: But the Government underfunds them.

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: Let us not pretend we do. I know the by-election is coming and I accept that but we do not run councils from Dáil Éireann and it is disingenuous and dishonest of the Deputy to say-----

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald to respond.

The Taoiseach: -----that I could not care less. We have eight councillors in Dublin City Council out of 60. The Deputy is in attack mode. That is what she does generally speaking.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. Your time is up.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I condemn all forms of intimidation. Anybody who has known me in any part of my life knows that while I may lack many things, I do not lack courage. I do not lack courage.

The Taoiseach: What about this specific one?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Let me tell the Taoiseach this. He has shown us again exactly who he is. I have asked him to address the lived reality of people from Cabra, Sheriff Street, Seville Place and East Wall. I have named all of the neighbourhoods and told the Taoiseach about the conditions people are living in. They are like something from *Strumpet City* . I could not describe to the Taoiseach how bad the living conditions are. There are families, women and men, who week after week and month after month paint over mould, scrub mould off their walls and who panic because their children have asthma or other medical conditions because they live in conditions that are not acceptable. Does the Taoiseach know that it is the norm in the inner city not even to have room to have a kitchen table?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is what the Taoiseach has presided over.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald. The Taoiseach, please-----

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Taoiseach is now trying to gouge these people for more rent.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McDonald, your time is up and I have said we will have no red clocks today.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I want the Taoiseach to tell them those rent hikes will be cancelled.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: Dublin City Council is responsible for housing policy. Government funds local authorities the length and breadth of the country.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Obviously not enough.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: You underfund them.

The Taoiseach: Sorry, it funds them very substantially, and funding has increased-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Allow the response.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It was obviously not enough.

The Taoiseach: Funding to local authorities has increased very significantly over the past five to six years.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: No.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: It has not.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It was obviously not enough.

The Taoiseach: There is no question about that. Also, the number of social houses we are building that are of a very high quality is the highest since the 1970s. There were close to 12,000 social houses delivered last year.

Deputy Martin Kenny: You did nothing for decades.

The Taoiseach: There is the highest number of direct builds ever built in our country - 8,500. There is a lot of work going on in social housing. I am not specifically responsible for what transpires in Dublin City Council and it is a matter for the council. Again, I have to go into the details of what is proposed. I do not have the details of the specific differential rent scheme the council is introducing.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. Deputy Ivana Bacik

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: On a point of order.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Ivana Bacik. I am sorry this is Leaders' Questions, so resume your seat Deputy Kerrane.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Resume your seat, Deputy. You cannot play to the Gallery. I will have the Member-----

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I have never heckled. Sorry, I have never heckled.

Deputy John Brady: That is not fair.

An Ceann Comhairle: Resume your seat.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: Resume your seat.

Interruptions.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I will not-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Resume your seat, Deputy, please.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: Never have I-----

An Ceann Comhairle: If you want me to suspend, we will waste further time. I call Deputy Ivana Bacik.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The Government has been weakened and damaged over its inadequate response to the energy crisis and fuel protests, with further challenges to come. The Government has now lost a Minister of State, and a backbencher - two Healy-Raes for the price of one, and a high price indeed.

The Government won the vote last night but the pressure for hard working families and households in this cost-of-living crisis has not gone away. For hundreds of thousands of PAYE workers, struggling to pay soaring bills, where is their support package? For those who turned up at the office, the shop or the factory or who logged on at home for work this morning, what message has the Taoiseach for them?

The budget last October delivered no relief for working people. Energy credits and one-off payments were withdrawn. The Government gave tax breaks to developers and fast-food chains – tax breaks paid for by workers. The Government could instead have taken the progressive step of indexing income taxes, as the Labour Party sought, but it did not. At the behest of business interests, the Government delayed the living wage and an increase in statutory sick pay while voting down our Labour Party Bill to give workers a real right to remote work.

There is real suffering across our communities. Households are facing rising bills. Grocery prices, already increasing, are set to soar further as food security is impacted by global shocks. There are rising rents and mortgages, and electricity and gas bills that families are struggling to pay. All of us are hearing this, that people simply do not know how they are going to manage.

The only relief the Government has given is a few cent off petrol and diesel. Over two emergency packages now, we have seen special supports for those that shouted loudest but nothing to relieve the real pressure on PAYE workers and families.

They are left with no option now but to seek pay rises in the months ahead. We will support the trade unions in that endeavour because more support is needed. In recent days, I have spoken to parents in Galway and Dublin desperate to see their children stay here rather than emigrate. I have spoken to young adults who see no future for themselves here. What help can the Taoiseach offer them? What is he going to do for the 320,000 households in arrears on their electricity bills, the highest number ever, or the 180,000 in arrears on gas bills? Yesterday, an ESRI report confirmed that Ireland has the highest energy prices in Europe. Yes, they were relieved in recent years by VAT reductions and energy credits but that took us down to eighth highest, and those credits are now gone. We know there are no easy answers to the global energy shock but the Taoiseach must heed the advice of the IEA. We need radical action now to harness more renewables, bring down energy costs, tackle climate emissions and ensure fuel security. Will the Government publish a national fuel security plan? Will it promise PAYE workers it will bring forward targeted supports for them and help the desperate households now in arrears on energy bills?

The Taoiseach: I fully accept people are under enormous pressures, in particular because of the war in the Middle East. People have had to endure a range of shocks going back to Covid and right through the war in Ukraine which had a severe impact on oil and energy prices and fed into general significant inflation in those years. Then we hit the tariffs a year ago, which is having an impact on a number of our companies, and now there is a war in the Middle East which has had a severe impact on oil prices again and is feeding into inflation. There is no question that people and families are under huge pressure. The ESRI also said successive Government measures shielded people substantially but could not cover everything. I would say no Government in the European Union has provided as many cost-of-living supports over the past five years as this Government.

Deputy Pa Daly: You got rid of them.

The Taoiseach: That is the reality but it still does not mean that people are not under pressure. We introduced some fairly radical schemes that would not have been thought possible five years ago, like free book schemes for every child going to school and free hot school meals. Across the board, we have brought in measures such as extending free GP care and many other measures in health in particular and in transport to try to ease the pressure on people in a systemic way. I would welcome a conversation because I think the Deputy has a responsible approach to politics although I thought last week she was noticeable by her silence.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We came out on Wednesday morning.

The Taoiseach: The reason being-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Allow the answer.

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: I understand why and I think we need a discussion about it in this House. There is a lot of what went on that the Deputy would not have agreed with, if she is honest. That was evident in the voting pattern last evening. I think the Deputy got a glimpse of what sidling up to Sinn Féin can mean for her party and the damage it can do to it in the time ahead. I would welcome a debate in terms of priorities or a discussion and engagement on priorities. The Deputy's party opted not to go into government; that is fair enough. That was her decision and she opted not to go into government because she was afraid of the people alongside her. We are in government-----

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: You wanted Michael Lowry. The Healy-Raes just left you.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: You did not look to go into government; you went on holiday.

An Ceann Comhairle: You have had your turn.

The Taoiseach: We are in government. I will accept any constructive proposal on the cost of living, a sustainable way in terms of climate and also energy security. Thankfully, we have national oil reserves. Last week, we had a round-table meeting with those involved in NORA and in energy security. I can share that with the Deputy if she wishes.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: With respect, the Taoiseach has got to stop rewriting history about Government formation. As he well knows, he had done the deal with the Lowry gang and the Healy-Raes before-----

(Interruptions)

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----the engagement with us.

Deputy Noel Grealish: That is not true.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: You were last in line.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Indeed, that deal is now unravelling, as we saw with the departure of half a Healy-Rae.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy deserves to be heard.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Also, the Taoiseach has to stop rewriting history about last week. The Labour Party in my name issued a statement last Wednesday morning calling on the Government then to engage with the representative organisations. It took the Government until Friday afternoon to do that. We also called for the lifting of the blockades on Wednesday morning. We had a very clear position and I will not accept the Taoiseach's claim on that. On the ESRI report, yes, it acknowledged Government supports had helped, but those supports are gone. The ESRI also pointed out that Ireland has such high energy prices because we have never diversified sufficiently into renewables where other counties have.

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

Deputy Ivana Bacik: What is the Taoiseach going to do------

An Ceann Comhairle: That is it Deputy, your time is up.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: -----to ensure radical action on climate and renewables that we need for energy security?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond, now.

The Taoiseach: We are going to diversity more into renewables. We have diversified substantially into renewables in this country. Over 40% of electricity generation now is onshore wind generation. We have had two successful auctions for offshore wind. I actually agree that the only way to avoid these types of global shocks is by having more renewables as they contribute to the grid. There is no other way. If one looks at all the shocks from the 1970s onwards, they were shocks because of wars or fossil fuel shocks. They have dislocated economies and caused pressures on families and jobs. We know that from various recessions we have had to encounter in previous decades. Therefore, it makes logical sense that we would invest in the resources we have. As the Deputy knows, we had auctions for offshore wind, which is a significant opportunity. I set up a clearing house from my Department to try to remove barriers and obstacles to the development of offshore wind because-----

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

The Taoiseach: -----I think it is essential------

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, thank you. The clock is in red.

The Taoiseach: -----to decrease our dependence on imported fossil fuels.

Deputy Holly Cairns: This Government was totally unprepared for the protests that swept the country last week, but how? After all, this did not erupt spontaneously overnight. The signs were there. They were not even subtle. There is a lack of empathy at play. I know the Taoiseach will take great exception to the fact that I am saying this. He will claim we do not have a monopoly on empathy or compassion but I ask him to reflect on what happened last week and his Government's reaction to it. There was, unquestionably, a deficit of empathy and a lack of foresight. What transpired what foreseeable, predictable and avoidable. The fact that the Taoiseach did not foresee, predict or avoid it calls into question his competence.

The Government talks about the cost-of-living crisis as if it suddenly emerged six weeks ago when Trump invaded Iran. There seems to be no understanding of the level of stress and worry people have endured for years. Week after week, we come in here and highlight the need for an emergency payment for disabled people, for investment in renewable energy and for targeted supports to the people struggling the most because the cost of simply existing in this country is growing and growing and it is crushing people. There is no let up, no relief and little to no help from Government. That is why people were on the streets last week.

Everybody understands that the Government does not control international oil prices but these fuel price shocks were a tipping point for so many people. The package of measures the Government brought forward will be of very little comfort to many of them. Incredibly, it does nothing to bring down the cost of home heating oil. Some 700,000 households are reliant on home heating oil. The cost has soared by 70% in just a month and nothing has been done to bring that cost down. The Taoiseach constantly says we have no solutions but the Social Democrats has been consistently asking him to introduce targeted supports to those who need them the most. Today, we gave the Government another opportunity on our proposals. The Dáil debated a Social Democrats motion this morning which proposed a targeted €400 energy credit for low and middle income earners, the creation of a supplementary mileage scheme for essential workers and a doubling of solar grants to help people reduce their energy costs by hundreds of euro per year. The Government is voting against those proposals, refusing to listen and refusing to act.

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

Deputy Holly Cairns: Why will the Taoiseach not introduce targeted supports for people who need the most?

The Taoiseach: The Government, before any blockade, was in discussions with the Irish Road Haulage Association, the IFA and farm contractors.

In fact, we had introduced a €250 million package three or four weeks ago in the House. As I said earlier, we have been introducing cost-of-living packages on an ongoing basis. The budget had some significant measures, including the DEIS plus scheme, for example, to help low-income families in particular, the fuel allowance and so on. Everybody accepts that people are under enormous pressure - everybody in the House does - because of global crises. The war in particular has exacerbated matters and prices have shot up. That has really caused concern.

I do not think the Social Democrats predicted what happened last week. They said very little last week at all, which is fair enough. They said nothing.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl did, apparently.

The Taoiseach: Last Sunday was Deputy Cairns's first speech, and that is fine. I am just making the point. I accept fully the point on more investment in solar. We have invested a lot in solar, and we will do more.

There is a €750 million package on top of the budget. We have a further winter to go. We do not know where the war is going to go, what the trajectory will be or what is happening in the Strait of Hormuz. There are two dimensions to this. One is supply, which is critical. That is why I could not understand the blockade of an oil refinery and why we could not get consensus. That makes no sense, because it leads to a scarcity of fuel and to more prices going up. Surely we can all agree that this is not the correct way to protest because you damage jobs and the economy. That is a reasonable point to make, and I should not be condemned for making it.

I am not condemning anyone other than saying protest absolutely. It is important we have protest. It is important that we have people advocating and agitating for change in society. I believe passionately in that, but I also believe in human rights for people. I received an email earlier in terms of people belonging to a particular group who said they had to leave the protest at Whitegate because they could not believe what happened. A lot went on that no one here is prepared to call out. I refer to lorry drivers being intimidated, a GAA club being targeted online because buses were parking there and the bus company involved being targeted and intimidated. These are elements. The vast majority of those involved are reasonable, decent people who, correctly, were highlighting and identifying fuel protests, but it is disturbing.

I accept fully that the Opposition wants the Government to get a kicking. I do not expect the Deputy to defend the Government. That is accepted. However, it is disturbing that she does not have the courage of her convictions in calling out that. There is an element of people out there - not even in politics but in communities - who are afraid to say that and who feel intimidated to articulate it. That is, unfortunately, where we are.

Deputy Holly Cairns: It is undoubtedly welcome that the Government engaged with the hauliers and farmers. That was obviously desperately needed. What is unbelievable is that the Government still does not seem to be listening or engaging with people who are struggling. I asked about home heating oil. There are 700,000 households reliant on home heating oil, the price of which has gone up 70% in the space of a month. I asked about disabled people who are out protesting because they simply could not afford to live before any of this happened. I

asked about single parents and ordinary families who are so hard-pressed, but all the Taoiseach does is come back and try to attack the Social Democrats. He talks about investment in solar. It is unbelievable that the Government is not focusing on investment in solar. Never before has it been so exposed how vulnerable we are because we are so reliant on fossil fuels. The Government's investment in solar predominantly benefits data centres as opposed to ordinary people. There are 1 million homes eligible for solar. Only 10% have it. They are the households that can afford to meet the impact of price shocks. We are asking the Government to extend grants to people who need to be protected from price shocks.

The Taoiseach: I welcome constructive proposals in respect of solar. We are investing in solar. Solar is doing very well and is growing very fast as a contributor to energy.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: For people who can afford it.

The Taoiseach: There is very strong potential in solar. We are supporting ordinary people in terms of the installation of solar panels on their roofs. We created a retrofitting industry in the past five years in this country through successive investments and commitments, and that remains.

On the cost of disability, the Minister, Deputy Calleary, is working in consultation with stakeholder groups, to have, once and for all, a proper programme and provision in respect of a cost-of-disability payment. It is not simple, and it is better that we do it systemically and embed it in the budgets of the future. That is what we are committed to doing; just as we significantly increased the thresholds around the carer's allowance, which was a substantial measure in the budget, and just as we put an extra €500 million into disability to improve services for people with disabilities.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Last week, the Taoiseach told Radio Teilifís Éireann that he was open to all forms of energy supply. He also acknowledged the fragility of Irish dependence on imported fuels. That admission is important - and it is important to the House - because Ireland imports approximately 86% of its energy, which is one of the highest dependence rates in Europe. At the same time, the Government made a deliberate decision in 2021 to ban oil and gas exploration. This was not a forced decision or an inevitable decision; it was a policy choice on the part of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the Green Party. Does the Taoiseach accept that the banning of domestic exploration, while remaining overwhelmingly dependent on energy imports, has left Ireland dangerously exposed? As he knows, this country is sitting on a potential offshore resource, including the Barryroe field off Cork, close to the Taoiseach's constituency and mine, which independent assessment suggests could contain up to 1.6 billion barrels of oil. This is probably €157 billion worth of oil.

Can I put it to the Taoiseach that he is saying that all energy options are open while some are actively prohibited by law? In that context, will the Government reverse the 2021 ban on oil and gas exploration and allow Ireland to at least give access in order that it might develop its own resources? Will he commit to reviewing and repealing the legislation that prohibits nuclear energy, which was first introduced in this House in 1999 and the provisions of which were continued in the development Act of 2024? The State's position in this regard is not credible. Ireland bans nuclear-generated energy at home and, yet, through the Celtic

interconnector, we import the nuclear energy directly from France. I put it to the Taoiseach that the latter is not climate leadership; it is a policy contradiction.

Does the Taoiseach accept that Ireland's exposure to this crisis is not just global in origin but domestic in design? Norway operates in the same markets and the United Kingdom faces the same pressures, but they produce energy. We import it. They have options. We have none. This is about not abandoning renewable energies. I see the importance of the latter, but this is about realism. We know that renewable energy meets is a very small share of the total energy demand in this country. We have to face the reality that oil and gas are here for decades to come. Even if we speed up reducing our dependence and increasing the development of wind energy, wave energy and the rest, we will still have to use oil and gas for at least this generation if not the next. I have a simple question for the Taoiseach. Will Ireland produce some of its own energy or will we continue to import energy that comes at a market price?

The Taoiseach: Ireland will continue to produce its own energy, but it will be in renewables overwhelmingly. We have a very poor record in terms of oil and gas exploration over the decades. Kinsale gas was first brought onshore in the 1970s, and we have had Corrib. Barryroe never showed any prospects. Barryroe could have been exploited if it had the prospects which Deputy O'Flynn said it had decades before any legislative prohibition on oil and gas exploration.

We are overly dependent on imported fossil fuels. I accept that. There needs to be a strong grid connection with Europe and the UK. The interconnection with France will be a significant milestone. I hope it will come on stream next year. I met the Spanish Prime Minister recently, and we agreed that we would explore a grid connection between Spain and Ireland. There is potentially strong European funding for greater interconnection and grid connection across Europe. That is a key strategy of the European Union. The reason our Anglo-Irish summits are so important is because we have a very strong economic relationship but we also have a strong energy relationship. We have the gas interconnectors with the United Kingdom. We are exploring with the UK further combined work in terms of offshore wind in particular and how we can complement supply chains in the context of the generation of energy through offshore wind.

In terms of nuclear, again, the investment in nuclear is enormous. We are putting about €18 billion into the grid over the next five years' investment to both absorb additional demand and also to further integrate renewables into the grid expertly, which we do very well as a country. I see solar as a very significant growth area. Solar has grown exponentially over the last two to three years in terms of rooftops and so on, but a lot of companies are using solar, which is reducing their dependence on imported fossil fuels. In companies like Eli Lilly in Kinsale, for example, 25% of its energy is powered by a solar farm in the environments of the factory. There is rooftop solar in PepsiCo in Carrigaline. Many other companies are moving in that direction. I suggest the direction of travel has to be in the renewables area. I do believe in climate change. I know a lot of people do not; I do. It is interesting. I take the Deputy's point about nuclear-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Taoiseach. Time is up now. Deputy O'Flynn to respond.

The Taoiseach: ----- but the energy source that did most damage to the planet was actually fossil fuels.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I thank the Taoiseach for his reply but he is in contradiction with exactly what he said on RTÉ over one week ago when he said he was open to all forms of energy supply. I asked him quite clearly whether he is willing to look at the policy where the Government said in 1999 that we are going to ban nuclear. The Taoiseach has come to the House and told me. I assume he has read the independent analysis and independent report in Barryroe as well because I did not realise, along with the other expertise he has, that he has expertise in oil refinery and finding oil.

The Taoiseach: I did not advise the Deputy of that either.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I have invested enough of it. It is all very well to talk about renewable energy, and I do see the importance of renewable energy. I witnessed renewable energy when the grid in Spain took out Portugal, all of Spain and most of France just up to Paris, if the Taoiseach remembers that. That was an oversupply, and we never got to the end of that.

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

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: There are, therefore, challenges when it comes to renewable energy.

The Taoiseach: There are challenges, yes. That is why we have to invest in storage as well. That is a technology that is developing fast as well. I was at a recent investment in the midlands in Offaly. I believe Offaly and Laois can become a real powerhouse for energy into the future with a lot of industrial development alongside of it. That investment was from a Korean company partnering with an Irish company in terms of storage. On the integration of renewables into the grid, we have a good record in that respect in this country. We need to keep striving to do more of that. There are other forms like anaerobic digestion. I put it to the Deputy, however, given his capacity for campaigning for any group that develops an opposition to something, if a nuclear facility was proposed for Cork North-Central, I am not so sure what side of the coin he would be on.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I would send it over to the southside.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Carol Nolan: Despite the fact that we are in the middle of a crippling fuel crisis where energy prices remain the highest in the EU, this Government continues to enforce a ban on the commercial sale of turf - our own natural, affordable fuel. As I said recently in my own constituency, there is no better time to reverse this ban.

Rural communities in County Offaly and, indeed, across the midlands have relied on turf for generations. It is not just fuel; it is part of our culture and our heritage and for many families, it is the only realistic way to stay warm this winter. The current policy is absurd and

self-defeating. We are importing thousands of tonnes of peat and briquettes into this country every year, while at the same time banning Irish people from buying turf. Former Minister Charlie McConalogue previously outlined that 32,000 tonnes of peat were imported into this country in 2022 and, staggeringly, over 30,000 tonnes of this came from Northern Ireland. Therefore, we can ship in peat from the Baltic states and from counties around Belfast, but people cannot buy it from a shop in Banagher or, indeed, sell it. Instead, we criminalise the sale of our own domestic resource. This is economic madness. The contradiction does not stop there.

The recently enacted Environment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025 and, in particular, the changes to section 99 have made the situation even worse. As I understand it, by expanding regulation to cover past and potential activity, small-scale peat producers operating under 30 ha are now being reclassified as part of larger historic bog areas. As a direct result, most of the remaining domestic suppliers will be pushed over the planning and licensing thresholds and forced to close. This is catastrophic for Irish horticulture. The horticultural sector depends on these small producers for peat. Without them, domestic supply will collapse. Growers will be forced to rely on imported peat that is of inferior quality and it will cost approximately double the price because of transport and supply constraints. That threatens jobs, raises food prices and undermines the viability of Irish food production. Enough is enough. Will the Taoiseach immediately suspend the ban on the commercial sale, advertising and retail of turf so that rural households can access affordable fuel this winter? Will he work with me and, indeed, the small peat producers to introduce a practical, fair and legally robust framework for sub-30 ha operations, including the reintroduction of targeted exemptions so that we can maintain a sustainable domestic peat supply that protects both our environment and the future of Irish horticulture and food production?

The Taoiseach: I appreciate the Deputy's concern on the issue and thank her for raising it. As she knows, there has been a long-standing policy in terms of peat extraction because of the impacts it has in terms of both biodiversity and climate perspective. In the last iteration of this policy in the previous Government, my understanding was that small and turbary rights domestic users of turf would not in any way be impacted. It is still my view that they are not impacted. I think the Deputy is talking about smaller commercial extractors, or what she would describe as small, which would be 30 ha. That is not quite small. The trajectory of travel has been trying to wean ourselves off commercial extraction of peat.

As I said earlier, Bord na Móna has transformed its operations very effectively. I believe we are on the cusp, hopefully, of something significant in Offaly and Laois and the midlands, in particular, around a new form of energy, new types of initiatives and new types of investments that can create jobs in the area. Just as we set up Bord na Móna decades ago when the State needed employment in the midlands, it is our objective that we now reposition Bord na Móna and turn its land and its assets into opportunities for economic development. I have been at a number of investments around the energy field in the area, Shannonbridge on the last occasion, which was quite exciting and interesting. Just transition is there, then, to try to help people who are impacted by the change. I acknowledge that. I will have to engage with the Ministers concerned in light of the points the Deputy has raised and I will try to get a more updated position for her in terms of the detail of the situation.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Go raibh maith agat, a Thaoisigh. I thank the Taoiseach for his response but I feel that a more practical common-sense approach is now needed. The real impact of this ban on the commercial sales of turf is people being cold in their homes. Older people have the ranges and they depend on fossil fuels like turf. When we look at the emissions, we are talking about imports coming in from Baltic states here, which is causing environmental issues. We are talking about a small number of people who want to extract peat and we are talking about our horticultural sector. In Offaly, we have lost too much already. We bore the brunt of the unjust transition, as I would call it. We really bore the brunt of that. We cannot afford to lose one more job, be it in the horticultural sector or any other sector. I ask the Taoiseach to please adopt a common-sense, practical and logical approach because the real impact is not addressing this issue. I feel that we have to allow peat extraction. We have to allow it and we also have to be fair with people in terms of this issue.

The Taoiseach: As I said, our objective was never to impact on domestic or, indeed, smaller operations involved in peat extraction. The funding for just transition was designed to try to support people who had lost out with the closure of power stations of an older hue, namely peat-fired stations and so on. I will engage with the Minister. I will ask him to perhaps meet the Deputy and see where we can take the issue from that perspective. Notwithstanding all the various policy directions that people have moved in, the Deputy is saying that practicality or pragmatism are in order here. I will engage with the Minister and ask him to engage with the Deputy.

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

An Ceann Comhairle: I remind Members that questions and answers on Questions on Policy or Legislation are limited to one minute. If Members cannot make their points, they are asking their questions at the wrong forum. I call Deputy O'Rourke.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Government committed to 400 new special classes for September. Over 300 have been sanctioned at this stage, and that is welcome, although very few of them are ready. The related major concern is that 400 new special classes will be far too few. By how many, the Government knows but will not tell us. It is reported that we could be 200 classes or 1,200 places short. It is simply unconscionable that 1,200 children would be left without appropriate school places. Representatives of the Department of Education told the Committee of Public Accounts that a memo would go to Cabinet to provide extra school places. When will that happen? Will every child have an appropriate school place come September?

The Taoiseach: Some 420 new special classes have been sanctioned. There will be more. Our objective is obviously that every child will have access to an appropriate school place. There has been exponential growth in the past two years, and the decision by the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, and the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to extend the deadline has resulted in applications from a higher number of children than was anticipated. We are now working flat out to meet that additional demand, which is far above what applied, for example, last year.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I commend the amazing Lelia Doolan, the long-time neutrality activist and human rights campaigner. She is outside the gates of Leinster House right now having completed a mammoth 220 km walk from Shannon Airport. Lelia is 91 years of age and has been walking in a gentle, peaceful protest for a fortnight. She is protesting the use of Shannon Airport by the US military. She has asked for a meeting with the Taoiseach and Government TDs. I think she is right. I want to express the support of the Labour Party for her. As we all know, and as we have seen in recent weeks, Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu have unleashed a rain of death and destruction across the Middle East. They have launched an illegal war. The Government has so far failed to condemn that war. The commander-in-chief of the very military forces that transit through Shannon Airport threatened just last week to wipe out an entire civilisation in Iran. That was genocidal rhetoric. Will the Taoiseach meet Lelia Doolan today as she comes to Leinster House? Will he stop allowing US military use of Shannon Airport in the face of the war-mongering we have seen? Will he guarantee that the US military and, indeed, Israeli forces are not benefiting from the use of Shannon Airport?

The Taoiseach: I was not aware that Ms Doolan is seeking a meeting. I will see what I can do.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I will bring that back.

The Taoiseach: I have the greatest of respect for her, given her views, commitment and perseverance. It was an extraordinary journey to make in the context of her views on Shannon Airport. However, we need to be clear that Shannon Airport is not a US military base. Spain and Italy have US military bases, but Ireland does not. We need to be very careful that we do not mischaracterise Shannon Airport. That would damage the airport. I have concerns in that regard. Throughout the war in Gaza, there have been attempts to mischaracterise Shannon Airport as some sort of military base. It had no role, good, bad or indifferent, in respect of Gaza, nor does it have a role in respect of the war between the US, Israel and Iran.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Right across the country, people are being pushed to the pin of their collars. They are struggling to pay for basics, such as food and fuel. They are also struggling because of the Government's inability to provide basic health services. This is most evident in the dire state of primary care services for children. Figures released to me show that in just 11 months, the number of children waiting more than two years for an initial speech and language therapy assessment rose by an alarming 149%. Some 1,200 children have now been languishing on the waiting list for over two years. Even once assessed, these children just move straight from one waiting list to another, this time for their first speech and language session. At the end of February, nearly 7,000 children were waiting for their first speech and language therapy session. Over one third, almost 2,500, have been waiting for over a year. This is indefensible. Decent healthcare services for children should not be too much to ask for. Families are under enough pressure. They should not have to watch their children fall behind, denied the opportunity to reach their full potential. What is the Government going to do to address this crisis in our primary healthcare service?

The Taoiseach: We are doing a number of things. We are recruiting more therapists. We are changing the system. There were too many therapists involved in the assessment of need process and not enough in the provision of therapy services. We are also creating a new school-based therapy service, starting with special schools. There will be speech and language therapists and occupational therapists in the special schools and we will extend that into the mainstream as we progress. The Minister for education received funding this year from the Government with a view to implementing in-school therapy services in our special schools and we hope that the first phase of that will conclude in the next school year. We are committed to doing that and to building it up. That will be key because it would mean regular interaction for children with particularly severe needs on a regular basis with speech and language therapists.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Four short months from now, the scramble for school bus places will start again. There is going to be a shortage of drivers, as has been the case over the past two years. I welcome the announcement by the Government over the Easter period that it will allow those aged up to 72 to drive eight-seater vehicles. I take that to mean that there will be eight seats plus the driver's. Some companies use such buses, particularly for children with special needs. I acknowledge that this is a small step in the right direction. It is a very small step, however. The Government needs to go two steps further. It needs to be practical. It needs to allow such drivers to drive buses with up to 16 seats. It should also bring the age limit up to 74 or 75, provided there is a strict medical test, which has been announced. I heard the Minister say two weeks ago that such tests will take place twice yearly. The Government has built that in, and it deals with the concerns around health and ability. Extra drivers will be needed in September. Laois has lost several drivers over the past two years because when they hit 70 years of age, they are gone.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Brian Stanley: We need to put in practical, sensible steps-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. Point made. The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Brian Stanley: -----and move two steps further.

The Taoiseach: I advocated strongly with the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, although it was the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, who responded. This is a matter for CIÉ and Bus Éireann. They have responsibilities too, and the board has responsibilities.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The Government writes the cheque.

The Taoiseach: We write the cheque, but when it comes to health and safety and the protection of children, there are balances. The buck stops with the company, if we are honest. I hope that this initial breakthrough, whereby up to eight children can be driven by people up to 72 years of age, will be expanded. Perhaps we will learn lessons from this and see how it works, with a view to being in a position to expand it.

Deputy Michael Collins: I want to concentrate on the senior management in SouthDoc and their appalling treatment of a doctor and her patients in Clonakilty and its surrounds. Dr. Fiona O'Reilly has run an excellent practice in Clonakilty for many years. For health reasons, she is unable to do SouthDoc hours. Instead of SouthDoc working with Dr. O'Reilly, it has decided, in its wisdom, to punish her and her patients. Today, if you ring SouthDoc with an out-of-hours emergency, you are asked who your doctor is. SouthDoc will not attend to you if you say that you are a patient of Dr. O'Reilly. It will direct you to 112 or 999, or to an overcrowded accident and emergency department. This happened recently to a 16-year-old and an 84-year-old, among others.

SouthDoc has written to Dr. O'Reilly's patients - I have such a letter with me - telling them not to call if they are ill. This is nothing short of bully-boy tactics from SouthDoc management. It could well lead to a loss of life. I ask the Taoiseach to intervene on behalf of every patient in Clonakilty who is under the excellent care of Dr. O'Reilly and to demand of SouthDoc management that the people of west Cork be treated like every other person in the country and be entitled to out-of-hours medical services if they are required.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Michael Collins: An inquiry needs to be set up-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Michael Collins: -----as to who made this shocking decision.

1 o'clock

The Taoiseach: First of all, I introduced SouthDoc to west Cork, so I am a great believer in SouthDoc and that whole model. I thank Dr. Fiona O'Reilly for the work that she is doing. We are not responsible here in the Dáil for every management decision at local level or in the various co-ops. This is the first time that the Deputy has brought this to my attention. The Minister is here as well and she will follow up on the case.

We should avoid language like "bully boy tactics" because the Deputy is impugning the character of people in management in a given organisation. It is not the kind of language-----

Deputy Michael Collins: That is not good enough.

The Taoiseach: It gives licence to people to do things. We need to watch our language when we are talking about public servants.

Deputy Michael Collins: That is not good enough.

The Taoiseach: That is all I would say now.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I am sure the Taoiseach agrees with me that the men and women of our fire services, defence services and the Garda provide vital services to the State and to all our communities. In a welcome move two years ago, the retirement age for people in those services was increased from 60 to 62 years. I know from responses to parliamentary questions that 122 personnel in the Defence Forces and 112 gardaí have since remained in the force beyond the age of 60. Can we look at extending this further? It is a particular issue. I could not get the figures for the fire service, but this is being asked for in the fire service. If someone wants to work and can pass the tests that are required for their fitness to work, they should be able to continue to work. There is incredible institutional memory among these people. They can contribute in an enormous way. Is it possible for us to look, having done the extension from 60 to 62 in 2024,-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: -----at allowing continuing past that age limit?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. It is interesting that more and more people now want to continue their careers into their 60s. That is a positive story about lifespan. We are living more healthily with a better quality of life. As the Deputy is aware, the legislation allowed it to 62 years. He is ahead. He has all the detail. As he said, 112 gardaí have availed of the opportunity to continue working since the September 2024 increase to the mandatory age of retirement from 60 to 62. The Garda Commissioner may, with the Minister's consent, go beyond that age of 62 for retirement. To date, the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, has already consented to a number of such requests from the Commissioner and will continue to do so when requested. However, I will talk to the Minister. What the Deputy is saying is a good idea.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: And for the fire services.

The Taoiseach: For the fire services, we have had 629 new recruits since the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, agreement of 2023, but-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----I am generally in favour.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up.

The Taoiseach: We have to reflect the-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Joe Neville.

The Taoiseach: -----increased lifespan with increased working time and give that option to people.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach and Deputy can engage further. I call Deputy Joe Neville.

Deputy Joe Neville: I note the Minister is here. As the House knows, there is an urgent need to address the issue of GP access across Ireland. Last night, I spoke on the Critical Infrastructure Bill. We need to view GP care as critical infrastructure in its way and incentivise its creation and extension. I see this in my area of Kildare North, which is one of the hardest places in Ireland in which to get a GP, where people move into the county from other areas and are stuck using the GP from those areas before they can access new ones in north Kildare. I have met doctors in my constituency who want to extend their practices and others who want to set up new practices, but we need to make it financially feasible. In the upcoming budget, will the Government put in place a refundable tax credit for a significant percentage of set-up costs or extension costs for premises fit-out, medical equipment and digital systems to assist in setting up and extending GP services?

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I thank Deputy Neville. He highlights an important thing, which is the practicality of setting up and extending GP practices. The State supports GP practices to the tune of approximately €1 billion per year. However, we need more. In the Deputy's area, where there has been particularly concentrated population growth at a quick pace, more GP practices are needed. I will discuss the idea of a refundable tax credit with the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance. We need to look at every creative way to expand GP care. We are trying to recruit GPs to the HSE, but the State and private GP practices have a direct relationship - an important symbiosis - and we need to look at every lever we can use to increase GP capacity, either by extending or setting up new practices. I will discuss the Deputy's suggestion of a refundable tax credit with the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance for the upcoming budget.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I attended a protest in Dungarvan on Sunday, which was one of many that took place across the State. Hauliers, farmers, fishers and rural contractors, such as agri-contractors, were present, but people from other walks of life were also there protesting against the fuel cost increases and about the need for action. There were older people who were rationing heat; families who were making the invidious choice between putting fuel in the car, paying off some of their electricity bill arrears or feeding the adults in the family; disabled people who were struggling to get to appointments and keep their homes warm; and students and apprentices who told me they were borrowing money to put fuel in their cars to get to their training centres or colleges. What will the Government do for those people? The 10 cent announced yesterday is not anywhere near enough and the fact that home heating oil has been left out of the package in any meaningful way is nowhere near enough. We need action to look after all sections of society who are suffering and hurting because of the fuel cost crisis at the moment.

The Taoiseach: First of all, it is 32 cent on diesel that the Government has reduced prices by, and 27 cent on petrol. If the fuel package scheme is taken along with the green diesel reduction, you are up to 20-plus-----

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: It is not reflected in the-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy described it as 10 cent. It is 32 cent. If we can have factual analysis, that would be fine. If we did not do it, petrol prices would be 32 cent higher now. Sinn Féin has voted against reductions twice now. The key is that we have to-----

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: That is not true.

A Deputy: It is true.

Deputy Joe Neville: Shocking.

The Taoiseach: -----provide measures, as we did in the budget, to try to cushion, first of all, low-income groups. We felt we had to target prices there. The child support payments and so on were significantly increased, and we will in the forthcoming budget have a very strong focus on the cost of living. We will try to do it in an embedded way, not as just a one-off, but we will examine all options.

The Deputy mentioned third level colleges.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. I call Deputy Aisling Dempsey.

The Taoiseach: The Minister, Deputy James Lawless, has done a lot in terms of access.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach, but time is up.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Borrowing money to get to college. For God's sake, Taoiseach.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy McGuinness, your time is done. I call Deputy Dempsey.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: I wish to ask about Boyne Community School in my hometown of Trim, which was granted an extension well over a decade ago now. The Department is well aware of the situation and the need for the school to grow. It is so aware that it has granted 24 prefabs over the years to accommodate the growing school community. A few years ago, a site was purchased for the only girls secondary school in the town and the Gaelscoil to co-locate on a state-of-the-art campus. It somehow has jumped ahead. It is at stage 2B, whereas the Boyne Community School languishes at 2A. My question is really about the policy around the school building list. It is not transparent. If a school goes on that list, why it is not done in the order it goes onto it?

The Taoiseach: First of all, I thank the Deputy for her long-standing advocacy and work on this project. It is a large-scale project involving both refurbishment and extension of Boyne Community College. It is actively progressing through stage 2A, with work ongoing. As the

Deputy knows, stage 2A involves a design team, developing designs, full cost planning of the campus project, and preparing documentation to facilitate the lodging of statutory approval applications to Meath County Council as part of stage 2B. There are complexities on the site in terms of design. Work is ongoing to bring this stage to a conclusion as soon as possible. The Deputy is correct that significant modular accommodation has already been provided to the school. The next step is obviously to complete this stage 2A process. The issue then from a funding and policy position is to get it funded once we get through stage 2A to stage 2B. That is an issue that the Government is considering more generally in respect of school accommodation. A number of projects have been sanctioned, but there is a big-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. Deputy Keira Keogh.

Deputy Keira Keogh: Will the Taoiseach advise me of any supports for ferry operators in light of the increased operating costs due to the fuel crisis? I am thinking of the ferry operators operating ferries to Clare Island, Inishturk and our other islands. As we know, ferries are vital to get islanders to their healthcare appointments, education and other things. I welcome the packages for farmers, hauliers, contractors and so on, but we also must look at ferry operators. Government policy recognises the importance of sustaining island life, but recognition will not be enough here. We must engage with ferry operators, listen to them and make sure that we provide practical and sustainable solutions to make sure it does not affect the islanders.

The Taoiseach: To be fair, the Minister, Deputy Dara Calleary, alerted all of us to the ferry companies operating to the islands when we were discussing the package at the weekend. It will be covered under the transport package. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, will ensure the ferry companies operating to the islands are covered.

I appreciate the Deputy raising the question because it is an important one and Government was very happy to be in a position to do that. It is an important form of connectivity to our islands, which are a treasured part of our heritage, but also people need these ferries as their lifeblood.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I agree with Deputy Byrne when he spoke about firefighters and the need to be able to work beyond 62. A firefighter, a retained station officer, spoke to me recently and I think he has written to the Taoiseach. He is about to turn 62, so that is an issue we need to resolve.

I want to bring up the issue of Scoil Bhríde in Sheelagh. I was in it in the last while. It has been engaging with the Department for a number of years. In 2022, there was a new teacher. In 2024, an autism class and another teacher were added. Then the school got another one because its numbers have risen. It is on the Border and the school has done huge work in getting more children from the wider area in. You are talking about a staff of three becoming a staff of ten in 2025, but you are also talking about classrooms, one where there are two teachers and 40-odd students along with a whole pile of other issues. We really need to see when we will get additional accommodation, be it even modular.

The Taoiseach: It is a specific school project. Obviously, it has grown very fast from what the Deputy is saying. Has it gone from a three-teacher school to a ten-teacher school?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Ten staff, including SNAs.

The Taoiseach: There are special classes and so on. We have a very large school expansion programme on the way. Huge funding has been allocated to it. I will alert the Minister to the fact the Deputy raised it here this morning.

Deputy Mark Wall: Every day, housing is the biggest issue in my office. Today, I want to talk to the Taoiseach about social housing income limits. It was in January 2023 that the then Minister for housing announced new limits for social housing. In my own area of Kildare, the limit went up by €5,000. That was the first time in ten years. It was also mentioned then that there was ongoing work to look at income limits.

The reason I raise this today is over the past number of weeks, I have had a number of cases where people, upon review by Kildare County Council, have been struck off the housing list. One of the biggest issues is the working family payment, which is included in that review. As we all know, that is for the lower paid. In my opinion and the opinion of many, it should not be included in that review. Can the Taoiseach tell us whether the social housing income limits be reviewed? Will they be upgraded? Will the working family payment be excluded from that assessment into the future?

The Taoiseach: First of all, I will engage with the Minister in respect of this issue. I have in the past. It was increased, I believe, two or three years ago.

Deputy Mark Wall: It was in 2023.

The Taoiseach: I am sympathetic to an increase in the threshold because there is a cohort of people working whose income limits are not high enough to sustain a mortgage or cannot get a mortgage and who would like the opportunity to access social housing. We need to try to seek ways to accommodate people in that cohort. I will talk to the Minister about that. We have an open view on it.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Coppinger. My apologies, as I had skipped her.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: That is okay.

Before the break, I raised at Leaders' Questions the toxic, misogynistic culture in the National Ambulance Service and I have spoken further to workers and clients of the service, including another worker who was raped and sexually assaulted and whose career was ended by complex post-traumatic stress disorder as a result. Inappropriate conduct and grooming on the degree course in Tallaght between older tutors and younger students reported to me. Very worryingly, two people have told me about the unnecessary use of 12-lead electrocardiograms, ECGs, on female patients deemed attractive. In other words, you have to pull up a woman's clothing to put these leads on.

I have been told that men are gods in the National Ambulance Service. The bullying and harassment procedures are not followed. It is not good for men either. A noose was left in a

colleague's locker after they had just dealt with a suicide case. This is a very dangerous environment. Will the Minister investigate this?

Minister for Health Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy and acknowledge the number of times she has raised different issues in different sectors in relation to misogyny and questions of harassment. I want to make it very clear as the Minister for Health that in every healthcare setting, all people are to be protected and respected - men, women, people of any race and people of any gender. People are to be respected in all contexts. While I do not want to speak about any individual cases on the floor of the Dáil as Minister, as the Deputy will understand, I very clearly hear what she is saying in the case of all workers. There are close to 170,000 people working in the healthcare sector in different ways and every one of them is deserving of respect and dignity in their workplace, as every other person is.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Will the Minister investigate?

Deputy Eoin Hayes: Let me express my deep gratitude and support for An Garda Síochána for clearing the disruption and blockades last week. On 17 December, the Taoiseach told me in this Chamber that it was "not fiscally sustainable" that the Government change any of its spending plans in order to accommodate basic, targeted measures to help with winter fuel costs. Now, we see a raft of measures costing way above the meagre ask I was making at that time for a winter emergency payment for disabled people.

Of the €750 million in fuel packages announced over the past four weeks, less than 10% was targeted at the most vulnerable population in a fuel allowance extension. The package is welcomed but let me ask the Taoiseach something directly. If this package is fiscally sustainable, in his words, why is the payment for disabled people not fiscally sustainable? I never accepted that logic. Will the Taoiseach explain to me why he is so against targeted payments yet he is willing to give massively bigger amounts away in universal measures? Will he now support the Social Democrats' proposed €400 energy credit for all households earning less than €70,000?

The Taoiseach: We actually did do targeted measures. The fuel allowance in the first package-----

Deputy Eoin Hayes: Less than 10%.

The Taoiseach: Sorry, it is not less than 10%, actually.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: It is.

The Taoiseach: No. The bulk of the last measure is for the general reduction of excise on diesel and petrol, which will impact on everybody. That is far greater than the €100 million package for agriculture and €120 million for transport. By the way, transport is the lifeblood of everybody. We are not doing haulage for the sake of hauliers alone. We are doing it because we want to get goods and services across the country. We want to put stuff on supermarket shelves. We want to export goods that are produced by workers.

It is a bit inaccurate, to be polite, to do these simplistic calculations. Food production is very important for the economy. Both food and production and the haulage industry are engines for all of us to keep our economy going and workers going to work and so on like that.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: That is not going to pay the energy bills.

The Taoiseach: We are working on the cost of disability issue in terms of the budget.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: The school transport scheme is a vital support for families across the country and demand has grown sharply in the past number of years. There is a planned increase in fees in September. First, I ask for this to be reconsidered. Second, another issue around it is that for families living just inside the distance threshold, they have to apply for concessionary seats, pay the full free up front and still have no guarantee of A place. There is an additional issue with this. One family came to me and told me their child had a valid medical card and they were still required to pay because the exemption did not apply to concessionary applicants. It creates a gap where financial needs are recognised but not reflected in the fee structure. I ask that consideration be given to changing this and for a reconsideration of the planned increase in fees in September.

The Taoiseach: I will talk to the Minister concerned. We are looking at an additional €700 million increase in the current budget of the Department of education. It is largely around increased teacher allocation. That is over and above the budget that was passed only in October last. School transport costs will increase very substantially because the numbers are increasing all of the time but I will talk to the Minister. I will talk specifically about that issue of the distance threshold for the concessionary applicant and ask the Minister to engage with the Deputy on it. I will talk to her as well.

Deputy James Geoghegan: Over the past week, there has understandably been a lot of focus on the blockades of the refinery in the Taoiseach's own county, the blockades of the port and the blockade of O'Connell Street that lasted for days. Does the Taoiseach agree with me that when it comes to the policing of blockades, there must now be a zero-tolerance approach. It cannot be the case that O'Connell Street, the main thoroughfare of our city centre, could be blocked off. People were refused access to the Rotunda Hospital. I received phone calls in my office from people who had missed exams. The level of disruption that was caused cannot be tolerated.

What we saw from the Garda when it carried out its enforcement actions in all of the places I have just mentioned was very limited conflict and a very positive outcome. As we look and review the situations that took place over the past week, can the Taoiseach agree that there will be a zero-tolerance approach and when it comes to blockading and the prevention of public transport such as the Luas and buses, this simply cannot be tolerated in a democracy?

The Taoiseach: I do not believe the main street of the capital should be shut down for a week. I do not believe motorways should be blockaded for a week because it is an infringement on a basic human right - the right of free movement.

It is a very basic right. I have problems with that form of protest. I have articulated that from the very beginning. It is regrettable that others in the House cannot accept that the right to free movement should not be restricted by self-appointed groups. There are legitimate ways to protest - no issue with that - but the idea that you cannot drive on a motorway because of a blockade is a terrible restriction. I read in the newspaper this morning that a mother of a child with a life-limiting condition had to cancel a hospital appointment in Temple Street because of the blockade and conveys. That is not acceptable. There was a cancer consultant who spoke to a friend of mine. The consultant spent a week counselling cancer patients whose appointments for chemotherapy had been postponed. The cancer patients were worried about not getting that appointment, is it going to grow, etc. There needs to be some balance here and we need to have a discussion and some consensus as to what is right and what is wrong.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Having spoken to many farmers, there is deep scepticism about the Department of agriculture's capacity to deliver timely payments under the Government's €100 million fuel subsidy support scheme for farmers, agricultural contractors and fishermen and fisherwomen. The reason there is scepticism is that there were significant delays in payments under the agri-climate rural environment scheme, ACRES, which left many farm families waiting months. I have seen one family left waiting a number of years for an ACRES payment. Obviously, this money was promised and they had budgeted for it. It was not an isolated incident. Farmers have had long experience, unfortunately, of the Department announcing schemes with great fanfare only for there to then be delays and chaos. Will the Taoiseach confirm that additional staff will be allocated to the Department of agriculture to ensure that these payments will be made in a timely manner?

The Taoiseach: There had been issues with the administration of ACRES, which is a €1.5 billion scheme. By the way, a lot of the funding from this Government for ACRES comes from the carbon tax. It is 60% funded by the Government and 40% by the European Union Common Agricultural Policy.

I would take the Deputy's point. The Minister is doing everything he can to improve and enhance the administrative capacity of ACRES. The scheme that is announced is an important scheme of €100 million in value. There has to be a degree of working out of that both in terms of farmers, usage of fuel - some categories of farming have a higher usage of fuel than others - and then the farm contractors as well. We are fully aware of the need to have a seamless and a proper delivery system in place.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements

1. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach to report on his recent visit to China. [1549/26]

2. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach to report on his recent visit to China. [1552/26]

3. **Deputy Martin Daly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent visit to China. [14276/26]

4. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Taoiseach to report on his visit to China on 4 to 8 January 2026. [14277/26]

5. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach to report on his recent visit to China. [14464/26]

6. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach to report on his recent visit to China. [18161/26]

7. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach to report on his recent visit to China. [18508/26]

8. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent visit to China. [22078/26]

9. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent visit to China. [23833/26]

10. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl** asked the Taoiseach to report on his recent visit to China. [24951/26]

11. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his recent visit to China. [26748/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 11, inclusive, together.

I travelled to Beijing and Shanghai in early January, the first official visit by a Taoiseach since 2012. While there, I met with key political figures and Chinese leaders in a variety of fields, including business, tourism and education, with the aim of strengthening our political, economic and cultural links. Ireland's economic and trading relationship with China is informed by our support for accelerating the market diversification agenda as a means to encourage competitiveness and resilience. The latest available data from 2024 shows that Ireland's goods exports to China were valued at €10 billion and goods imports at €11.8 billion. Services exports to China in 2024 are valued at €12.7 billion and services imports €4.7 billion. My programme in Beijing included meetings with Chinese President, Xi Jinping, Premier Li Qiang, and Chairman of the National People's Congress, Zhao Leji. In my bilateral meeting with President Xi Jinping, we discussed the strong political, economic and cultural relationships between Ireland and China. We discussed EU-China relations, particularly our trade relationship and Ireland's upcoming Presidency of the EU in the second half of this year. We agreed the importance of international rules and open dialogue, as well as constructive and predictable relations on trade. We also discussed global issues and conflicts, including in Ukraine and the Middle East.

I also had a bilateral meeting and a working dinner with Premier Li Qiang, during which we discussed ways to improve collaboration between Ireland and China through our membership of multilateral organisations. I stressed the importance of a strong multilateral system to promote peace and security and to ensure a fair global trading environment. We also discussed political, economic and bilateral relations, including exploring the potential for increased collaboration in areas such as education, tourism and culture.

In all of my meetings, I raised a number of human rights issues, including Jimmy Lai's sentencing, the situation of minorities in Xinjiang, and the human rights situation in Tibet. My meeting with the Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, was similarly positive.

While in Shanghai, I met with Mayor Gong Zheng, discussing economic developments in the region and links between Cork and Shanghai, which recently celebrated 20 years of being twinned. We also explored the potential for further co-operation between Ireland and China in a range of areas, including connectivity and transport. While in China, I also had meetings with state agency clients in the tourism, research and innovation, pharmaceutical, and food and beverages sectors. I attended an education showcase where several partnership agreements between Irish and Chinese higher education institutions were signed. These agreements will expand our education collaboration with China, benefiting both Irish and Chinese students. My visit was an important opportunity to strengthen our bilateral relations with China, and I hope these will be built on in the coming period.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Chinese regime has condemned Trump and Israel's bloody war against Iran as irresponsible, reckless and dangerous. That is something coming from that regime. Deputy Geoghegan was talking about zero tolerance against blockades. China has that. For example, in 1989, when students blockaded and demanded democracy, it sent the tanks in. It sent the army in and mowed students down with tanks. It persecutes people in Hong Kong fighting for democracy, people in Tibet, the Uyghurs, the Falun Gong. You name it, they get crushed in China. I would be interested to know what China had to say about its human rights record, but frankly it looks like a pussycat compared to threats to destroy civilisations coming from Donald Trump and what Israel is doing in Lebanon. I have just come from a protest outside for Lelia Doolan coming from Shannon on her march, a woman in her 90s marching saying the Irish Government should not be facilitating Trump's warmongering by allowing the US military through Shannon Airport. Given what Trump is doing to people in this country, in the Middle East and in Palestine, does the Taoiseach agree with Lelia Doolan?

Deputy Paul Murphy: The backdrop to the wars, the genocides and the interventions we have seen over the past number of years is the rivalry between the declining power of the US and the emerging power of China. That is the context in which the Government has tried very vigorously to draw Ireland more and more openly into the US-led NATO camp. We can see now in terms of the war crimes being committed in Iran what that means. It is why the vast majority of people defend our neutrality, want to protect our triple lock and do not want to see us involved in US-led wars. It is why people will be on the streets at 1 o'clock on Saturday demanding the protection of our neutrality.

The rubber hits the road when it comes to the question of Shannon Airport. The Taoiseach said, when he was in the US, that there was no strong evidence that Trump was using Shannon Airport to pursue the war in Iran. What does he mean by that? Has he inspected any of the

planes? Has he evidence? Every single day, there are US military plans going through Shannon. Where does the Taoiseach think they are going? They may not be going directly to Iran. They are going to the Ramstein air base in Germany and then on from there into the Middle East.

It is time to follow the example of other European countries, some of which are even NATO members, and stop allowing the US to use our airports.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Mark Daly.

Deputy Martin Daly: I welcome-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Apologies, Deputy Martin Daly.

Deputy Martin Daly: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. He is a good man. I welcome the Taoiseach's visit to China. It is an extremely important visit strategically and economically for Ireland in an increasingly uncertain international climate. It is absolutely clear that there are, as has been pointed out, two superpowers in this world at the moment but that the European Union and other like-minded trading nations need to keep their options open and develop new trade and new ties based on international rules of trade and politics.

It is clear that, as a small trading nation, we must keep our options open at all times and develop new markets for our industries that we grow here. In addition to that, with the growth of more indigenous industries we need to create links to China, which is a huge market. I am also happy the Taoiseach has taken the opportunity to point out the deficiency in human rights in China because that is extremely important and something that would be expected by the Irish people of our Taoiseach in visiting China.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The Taoiseach said he had conversations in relation to multilateralism and, obviously, questions in relation to economics. I understand this was very early on in January and, with Donald Trump's regime, we are not entirely sure what the future holds other than it goes from terrible to even worse. We have since had an illegal war with Iran, we have the fact that the Israelis are continuing with their genocide in Palestine and what they are doing in Lebanon is utterly unacceptable in any way, shape or form.

Many of us were outside the gates of Leinster House with Lelia Doolan and would commend her for what she has done. I would like to think I will make it to 91 years of age and still be fit to do half of what she is doing. She has to be commended. It is about how there has never been more need for us to maintain international law and an independent foreign policy. That is why people will be on the streets with the Irish Neutrality League on Saturday. It is a matter of us not falling into the issues that exist now in this age of empires and where might is right. We must do our part to stand against that, given our history of anti-colonialism.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: It is often said that in the past century the global economy has lifted billions of people out of poverty. China's economic prosperity was responsible for more than 60% of that figure and it has been based on very different models to the ones we have here in Europe. While, of course, we must condemn human rights abuses in China, it is also true that

China now has more renewable energy than Europe, is a leader in electric vehicles and has built more homes for its people. The question of energy security is of particular interest, given the current geopolitical instability. China has managed to insulate itself relative to the EU and others.

Did the Taoiseach's recent visit to China cause any reflection on the improvements to energy policy we might see here in Ireland, particularly in terms of developing renewables as our best chance of securing a domestic supply, insulating ourselves in a similar way and for how the State can be more actively involved, as is the case in China?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I would like to ask the Taoiseach about the consistency of his approach to world leaders and dictators. While the Taoiseach was in China, which was some time ago, the attack on Venezuela took place. The Taoiseach condemned the terrible regime in Venezuela while he was actually in China, which I did think was somewhat ironic. China is not a democracy and there is severe repression.

The Taoiseach mentioned the solicitor representing Jimmy Lai being targeted. Were Irish journalists who were part of the Taoiseach's delegation prevented from filming while he was there? Is that the case? This is an example of the Taoiseach staying silent on human rights issues when he is in front of global powers, as he did with Trump. Would the Taoiseach agree that, when comparing world leaders, the most dangerous leader in the world right now is clearly the US leader? The psychopathic tendencies in Trump have accelerated since the Taoiseach visited on St. Patrick's Day and the dangers for the world are just incredibly pronounced.

The Taoiseach: I thank all the Members for their comments. With respect to Deputy Boyd Barrett and others, in terms of the human rights issues, we do raise them. China has no issue with foreign leaders raising human rights issues. Deputy Martin Daly emphasised the importance of raising them. However, one gets a robust response. They defend their position on the Jimmy Lai case. It was quite a lengthy conversation with the Premier in respect of that case and in respect of the Uyghur people in Xinjiang. They invited us to go down, which they do with all ambassadors in particular. It is my understanding that our ambassador was going to go down. Some ask if one can have freedom to move around and so on. However, our ambassador indicated to me that he would go down in terms of having an assessment of the situation as best one can given that it is, as Deputy Hayes said, a different model in terms of how it works as a society and as a system. We have expressed very strong concerns. I asked that he be released, even on humanitarian grounds, given his age and so on but there was quite a robust response, to be honest, and they defended it strongly. Our embassy is following that very strongly. We have a consulate general in Hong Kong. We also raised the issue of Tibet. We do that at the UN, in our work with the European Union and so on.

In terms of our relationships globally, we have a twin-track approach essentially. That is a values approach, a multilateralism approach and also looking at interests. Ireland cannot resolve every system in the world. It cannot fix every system. We have to engage and we have to have dialogue. A lot of the dialogue was positive.

There are huge issues between Europe and China in respect of manufacturing. Europe feels that there is a lot of excess manufacturing in China that is being dumped in Europe and that the renminbi is devalued and so on. These are ongoing issues. It was interesting that President Xi

was anxious that Europe and China would develop a better relationship on trade that would be less susceptible to a ping-pong battle on given sectors, for example, critical rare earth metals and things like that, which could become a choke point for European industry. It is extremely important economically that we have these engagements because there is an interdependence between countries all over the world. It is true that there is greater polarisation happening with the growth of both the US and China. It is very important that the US and China get on for world stability. The world is in a very difficult space right now.

In terms of Lelia Doolan, who Deputy Bacik raised earlier, I admire her and pay tribute to her commitment to her views and her cause. I do caution Deputies Boyd Barrett and Murphy about this mis-characterisation of Shannon Airport. It is not a military base.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Would you stop.

The Taoiseach: It is not a military base. If you want to see a military base go to Spain, go to Italy, go to Germany. We need to be accurate with our commentary. This kind of denigration of Shannon Airport will damage Shannon Airport, will damage the economy of Shannon and will damage jobs in Shannon Airport. Charter planes are used to bring soldiers home or whatever.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Just home, is it?

The Taoiseach: There is no US military base in Shannon Airport. It is wrong to characterise it as such. Go and look at what a military base is - structure, logistics and everything. That is not what Shannon Airport is.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Not officially.

The Taoiseach: I think we need a small bit of cop on in respect of it. That is my view on it. Deputies may disagree and they are entitled to disagree.

Again, we are committed to military neutrality. We are not joining any military alliance. Deputy Murphy is wrong in endeavouring to use the triple lock amendments. I do not believe Russia should have a veto on whether we involve ourselves in a peacekeeping operation or not. I do not believe the United States should have a veto. I do not believe China should have a veto on whether or not we participate on peacekeeping missions.

I think the Dáil, the Oireachtas and the Government of the day should, because it is utterly ridiculous otherwise. The problem is that the UN Security Council is paralysed. It is not functioning. It is dysfunctional. That is a big problem for the world, but that is the reality of it. In terms of peacekeeping, we should have greater freedom. That is all we are saying. We are not getting involved in any wars.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Sure they are using Shannon Airport for a war right now.

The Taoiseach: I am sorry, but we are not.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Murphy, please.

The Taoiseach: Look, it is so dishonest to say-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: We are involved right now.

An Ceann Comhairle: This is not the forum for a back-and-forth discussion.

The Taoiseach: We are not involved in any war right now.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Of course we are. They are using our airport and our airspace.

The Taoiseach: They are not using our airport for the war. They are not using it for the war.

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, there are other Members to speak.

Deputy Paul Murphy: How do you know that?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Murphy, this is not the forum.

The Taoiseach: I just want to make one important point. Deputy Martin Daly referred to us being a small trading nation. We need to export what we produce and make. I gave the figures earlier. What was interesting was that I spoke to Prime Minister Mark Carney yesterday. In the context of there being polarisation between two major powers, China and the US, there is now a growing movement from the European Union, Canada, Australia and other like-minded powers with similar values, rooted in multilateralism, to come closer together. I welcome Canada's pivot to Europe. Under our Presidency, we are going to advance that relationship with Canada and the European Union. That is why Deputies in the House should vote for the CETA trade deal, which will create additional jobs for Irish people. It has already created additional jobs for Irish people, and there has been about a 30% increase in exports for Irish companies. It beggars belief that people oppose it.

I apologise, but I did not get Deputy Ó Murchú in. The war must end. The sooner that war in the Middle East ends, the better. What is happening in Lebanon is appalling. I welcome the talks, by the way, but Israel is undermining the Lebanese Government, which is the first government in a long time in Lebanon that has the capacity to get some order and structure in Lebanese society and the Lebanese economy. Hezbollah should cease firing rockets. It should stop. It is causing immense damage to its own people and has done so for far too long. Iran should stay out of Lebanon and stop being a malign force in Lebanon also.

In terms of the economy, the relationship and air connectivity, a Cork-Shanghai flight is, hopefully, coming. There is also the Dublin–Beijing flight and so on like that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Did the Taoiseach cover the question from Deputy Hayes? I am not sure he did.

The Taoiseach: I covered a lot of people. I am sorry but I did not cover Deputy Hayes's point about renewable energy. We did actually discuss that with President Xi. They are very conscious of our offshore wind exploration and that we are putting a lot of focus into the offshore and onshore aspects. China manufactures wind turbines at an extraordinary rate. It more or less commands the global market in solar panels.

If we can get good multilateral relationships, there will be a benefit. There was a time when people felt we would not have enough supply and the supply chains would not be strong or resilient enough to deal with everybody going after offshore energy at the one time. China actually offers a bit of a solution to that, I think. Some in Europe are negative about that, but I think it does do because it manufactures a sufficiency of material for windmills and solar equipment that can help us make the energy transition.

Cabinet Committees

12. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will next meet. [14260/26]

13. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will next meet. [14272/26]

14. **Deputy Tom Brabazon** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will next meet. [14273/26]

15. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will next meet. [14274/26]

16. **Deputy Catherine Ardagh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will next meet. [14275/26]

17. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will next meet. [16841/26]

18. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will next meet. [17331/26]

19. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will next meet. [18507/26]

20. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will next meet. [18700/26]

21. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will next meet. [18703/26]

22. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will next meet. [22079/26]

23. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will next meet. [22091/26]

24. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will next meet. [23617/26]

25. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will next meet. [23829/26]

26. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will next meet. [23834/26]

27. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will next meet. [26562/26]

28. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will next meet. [26689/26]

29. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will next meet. [26736/26]

30. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will next meet. [26749/26]

31. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will next meet. [26751/26]

32. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs will meet next. [26809/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 12 to 32, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on justice, migration and social affairs oversees the implementation of programme for Government commitments that relate to matters under those areas. It was established in February 2025 following the appointment of the new Government in January. Its first meeting was on 10 April 2025 and it met most recently on 9 February 2026. The next meeting is scheduled to take place in due course.

The Cabinet committee covers a range of policy areas, including domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, DSGBV; policing and justice reform; migration; and initiatives tackling local area disadvantage. The Government has taken unprecedented action to tackle domestic, sexual and gender-based violence through significant investment, legislative reform and the implementation of the zero-tolerance strategy. Overall, our approach seeks to create a society

where DSGBV is prevented, victims are supported and perpetrators are held to account. Under budget 2026, almost €80 million was allocated to support Cuan and organisations working to address DSGBV and implement the zero-tolerance strategy. This was an increase of €12 million compared with the previous year. This funding will accelerate the delivery of additional refuge spaces and safe accommodation, while strengthening supports for those affected by violence.

Among other items, the Cabinet committee also oversees the development and delivery of the whole-of-government response to migration and integration, including through a national migration and integration strategy. The new International Protection Bill 2026 will give effect to the measures of the European Union migration and asylum pact. Enactment of the Bill and commencement of the Act is required by 12 June 2026. To prepare for its introduction, a phased transition that mirrors elements of the pact is currently under way. As part of this, applicants from designated safe countries of origin, including Nigeria, and in the context of the Dublin III regulation and inadmissible cases, are being processed under these new processes, with some minor exceptions. As of 24 March 2026, 1,280 applications were received under the accelerated process. Of these, 80% have received a first instance decision. Decisions were negative in 88% of cases, with an 11% grant rate and a number of withdrawals. Of those with a negative decision, 48% appealed and 86% of appeals were refused. A total of 482 deportation orders has been issued, with seven enforced removals and 42 voluntary returns having taken place. The median timeline from application to enforced removal was 24 weeks, and 15 weeks for voluntary return. This indicates the pact programme can meet the future timelines for the border procedure.

The number of international protection applications has been rising over the past number of years, reaching 18,500 in 2024. In 2025, application numbers reduced by approximately one third. In 2025, the International Protection Office delivered over 20,200 first decisions compared with approximately 14,000 in 2024, which is a 44% increase. The International Protection Appeals Tribunal more than doubled the number of appeals closed, from 3,100 in 2024 to nearly 6,320 in 2025.

In addition to meetings of the Cabinet committee, I have regular engagements with Ministers at Cabinet and individually to discuss issues relating to their Departments.

An Ceann Comhairle: A lot of Members are seeking to contribute. They have one minute each. I call Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Louth County Council is trying to update its tenant engagement and antisocial behaviour strategy, and I sat in yesterday for a short period on a consultative event. We can imagine the conversation. It is all about having a multiagency approach, strengthening community safety, embedding tenant engagement for the first time, improving well-being and neighbourhood cohesion and ensuring fairness, transparency and accountability. That is all sound. This is a continuation, however, of an issue I have brought up before. I think we have to be really serious in relation to the complex issues involved. I am sure many of us will have dealt with local authorities, the Garda and others in this context. The fact is we have to get very serious. I do not believe the community safety partnership is going to quite bridge the gap, however much I would like to think it would. I am thinking of Barrack Street in Dundalk.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is there a question?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Yes. This is about how we can get to having a proper, multiagency approach to deal with the complexity and early intervention and policing aspects. The big worry when we are talking about drugs and all that causes that problem is the national drugs strategy and the fear of moving away from the drugs and alcohol task forces and such community involvement.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I welcome the recent introduction of Grace's Law, the intention of which is to make scramblers illegal in public places. However, these vehicles are still causing havoc in my community and in communities across the northside of Dublin. I am inundated with correspondence from constituents who are sick to their back teeth of these vehicles speeding up and down roads and footpaths in a reckless and dangerous manner, putting the lives of the riders and other people at risk.

To combat this, I am asking that a statutory indemnity be introduced for gardaí pursuing scramblers and acting within reason so they can carry out their duty without fear or favour to ensure our communities can be protected. Will the Government now commit to introducing a statutory indemnity or some other statutory mechanism so members of An Garda Síochána who are going about their work in a reasonable way will be protected from prosecution?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: One of the most controversial elements of the omnishambles of last week was the threat of the Garda and the Army. The Government was actually calling in the Army when TDs like me were trying to negotiate a peaceful resolution of the situation. There is also chaos within the Government.

The Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, spoke to the Tánaiste and Taoiseach about utilising the Army for Whitegate refinery on Wednesday, 8 April. The next day, the Minister made public that a request was being made to the Defence Forces. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, was not informed until just before the request went in. Deputy McEntee is the Minister for Defence. She is the line manager when it comes to the Army. Why is it the case that we have this level of chaos within the Cabinet that the Minister, Deputy McEntee, is not being consulted? Did the public know about the Army being called in before the Minister for Defence knew?

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I attended a large public meeting in Kells last night, called for by the community in the wake of a spate of burglaries, attempted break-ins and break-ins. There is a lot of concern in the community. It was a very well-attended meeting, hosted by Oliver Figgy Curran and Councillor Michael Gallagher. Representatives of An Garda Síochána were present and took questions. A key concern that I said I would take to the Dáil today is the number of gardaí in Kells and County Meath. The figure is the lowest in all of Ireland by population. What measures are the Taoiseach and the Government taking to address the low number of gardaí in County Meath and Kells in particular?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I welcome the Northside Home Care Services workers in the Gallery. Deputy Murphy will be raising issues on their behalf, and I absolutely hope the Taoiseach will listen to them.

I want to raise another issue. The Taoiseach probably will not know about it but I ask him to raise it with the Minister for justice. Four years ago, Ned Connors died in prison. He died of alcohol poisoning. How the alcohol got into the prison and so on is a question. There was a report done by the prison inspector into the circumstances of his death, but it still has not been published. As of today, there was supposed to be an inquest happening. His family solicitors said the inquest should not go ahead until the prison inspector's report was published. Apparently, the Minister has for some reason prevented the report from being published. This is fuelling deep concern among the family. If the Taoiseach could ask about Ned Connors and the report into his death on behalf of his family, it would be appreciated.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy O'Rourke has the opportunity to ask another question if he wishes to exercise it.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Related to the public meeting last night to which I referred, another area is the roll-out of community CCTV, that is, the roll-out of CCTV in communities. There were restrictions in the past in terms of data protection and data management. What is the current position in relation to the roll-out of community CCTV across the State, the role of central government and the funding potentially available for that? Also, what is the role of local government in this regard?

An Ceann Comhairle: I apologise, Deputy Murphy was next. Deputy O'Rourke is ahead of him now anyway.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I thank the Ceann Comhairle. I have raised with the Taoiseach before the Northside Home Care Services workers who have been taking industrial action since January. Some of them are in the Gallery. He knows what the issue is here; it is about pay equality. Some of these workers have worked for 25 years and are getting just over €15 an hour. Others are on minimum wage and getting 30% less than others for doing the same job of providing vital care to approximately 500 people on a daily basis. What I raise today is the outrageous victimisation of their shop steward, Sonya Borwick, simply for standing up for the workers she represents. She was suspended yesterday on utterly spurious grounds. Supposedly she breached GDPR by asking people to sign a petition. She did not use any information she had about their data as a result of working there; she was simply talking to clients who support them, given the support they provide for them, asking them to sign a petition and for their address on a petition. Supposedly that is a breach of GDPR. That is blatant anti-union victimisation. I ask the Taoiseach to condemn this victimisation. Ms Borwick is in the Gallery. That she should be suspended is an action that should be utterly condemned by the Government. The Minister for Health needs to meet with these workers and instruct the HSE to treat them properly.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is absolutely taking liberties. I call Deputy Conway-Walsh.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The recent case and indeed the resilience and courage of former Garda Margaret Loftus exposed the systematic and institutionalised failures in

addressing domestic, sexual and gender-based violence in Ireland, particularly when the alleged perpetrators are members of An Garda Síochána. Reliance on self-disclosure leaves systematic blind spots, allowing potential perpetrators to maintain investigative authority over other victims. Without statutory oversight, independent monitoring and systemic reform, Garda structures can shield perpetrators and undermine public confidence. I welcome the recent setting up of the dedicated domestic violence unit, but does the Taoiseach agree that the mandatory reporting of barring and protection orders is now necessary? Does he believe it is right that a garda who is convicted of breaking the law should still serve in An Garda Síochána?

Deputy Gary Gannon: It would be impossible to talk about the next meeting of the Cabinet committee on justice, home affairs and migration without discussing the absolute disaster that was last week. I am going to preface my comments by answering a question I know the Taoiseach will probably ask, because he asked it of my party leader earlier. Yes, I absolutely condemn the blocking of critical infrastructure and the threats to gardaí. However, does the Taoiseach endorse the tactics employed by his own Minister for justice last week, in particular the press statement that went out on Thursday morning, in advance of "Morning Ireland", stating that the Army would be on the streets and that vehicles would be damaged and nobody should complain? The Minister went on to further antagonise and accelerate an already difficult situation by saying the protesters were being manipulated by some idiot in the UK called Tommy Robinson.

The C70 form sent by An Garda Síochána to the Defence Forces is an essential part of our security system. To politicise that, as the Minister for justice did on Thursday morning, is absolutely out of bounds. Does the Taoiseach endorse that? Should we see further protests on the streets, what lessons will be learned and how can we ensure it is not Government Ministers who inflame intentions?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: There are calls today for an all-island response to the epidemic of gender-based violence. In Northern Ireland, 30 women have been killed since 2020. It is one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman. A woman is more likely to be killed by her own son than by a stranger. The family and the home are very dangerous places. ROSA in the North has called a protest in Belfast for Saturday, 25 April to respond to the fact that 30 women have been killed and to say not one more should be killed. Two women were murdered in three weeks recently. This was at the same time as the Natalie McNally trial which showed a very premeditated killing by her former partner. In relation to gender-based violence in the South, the Taoiseach mentioned legislative reform but there has been very little such reform that I can think of. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission has added its voice to the call for access to counselling notes to be banned in gender violence trials. We need to see that legislation moved and we need to see what survivors want.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I could not believe my eyes when the Minister for justice outlined recently that it was his intention and the intention of the Government to introduce legislation to remove several proposed IPAS centres from the planning process entirely. I have raised this planning circumvention with the Taoiseach on a number of occasions. Both he and the Tánaiste have led the House to believe this was a temporary, emergency measure and would be removed imminently. Now we read it is the Government's intention to make this planning exemption

permanent. The IPAS system is the only accommodation system that currently avails of a planning exemption. I want the Taoiseach to be clear. What is the intention of this Government in relation to the IPAS planning exemption? Is it going to ensure that all citizens and communities are treated equally or is it going to try to continue this policy of running roughshod over communities? Is the Government going to make this planning exemption permanent? I refer to Government Deputies and backbenchers. Every time this has broken in local communities across the country, the Taoiseach has outlined that the Government wants to see community engagement and consultation with communities. This is the Taoiseach's opportunity.

2 o'clock

What is the Taoiseach going to do? Is he going to make this permanent or will he allow communities to have a say in relation to what happens to them?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputies for raising a range of issues. Deputy Ó Murchú was first in terms of antisocial behaviour and a multi-agency approach in County Louth. I agree with the Deputy that the most effective response is a multi-agency response. I support the drug partnerships approach that we had in earlier periods. The local community safety partnership has been effective. It is working in certain locations but we need to look at further initiatives in terms of community-based partnerships on the ground that are well resourced by the State. That is a view I have. I am advocating that from my position as Taoiseach and from talking to the Ministers concerned.

I thank Deputy Brabazon for raising the issue of Grace's law. It is extremely distressing and unacceptable that the Deputy and the people he represents are witnessing appalling activity by individuals using scramblers who are recklessly endangering life, causing the loss of life and so forth. I accept the rationale behind the Deputy's call for statutory indemnity to be introduced to protect members of An Garda Síochána who reasonably try to stop this activity. I do not think it is acceptable that a garda should be prosecuted if he or she is endeavouring to stop people endangering the lives of others through the illegal and reckless use of scramblers. The Minister for justice is bringing forward some form of review of the legislation in this area. This is a very important issue because if something is not done, the potential is that we will paralyse the Garda in terms of protecting people. I will talk to the Minister for justice. I know he is minded to do something in this area in light of recent court cases. I will liaise back with Deputy Brabazon on this.

I heard what Deputy Tóibín had to say. In the first instance, C70 requests made very regularly. About 140 were issued last year. Last week, a request was made with a view to calling in the Army to tow big lorries and trucks away from vital critical infrastructure. I do not know whether the Deputy condemns or agrees with the blockading of an oil refinery. I saw his posts all week. He supported the blockade of the oil refinery-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It was not-----

The Taoiseach: The Deputy did so. He went on the platform-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: You are not telling the truth.

The Taoiseach: You went on the platform and you supported the blockade of the motorway. The Deputy supported the blockades of ports. All I would say to him is-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There is a weakness in your argument. If you cannot tell the truth, then it is a weakness.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, do not use that type of inference. You can write to the Taoiseach. This is not a forum for back and forth; this is Taoiseach's questions. You ask a question. If you do not like the answer, you write to the Taoiseach. End of story.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is not that I do not like the answer; it is untrue.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is i t. End of story. We conform to the rules.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is not the truth.

The Taoiseach: I did watch the Deputy's social media posts. He described it as mediating, but who gives him authority to decide who gets oil in this country? Who gives him authority-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Taoiseach is asking me a question.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, he is not.

The Taoiseach: I am asking a rhetorical question. I do not need a response right now. I am making an absolutely fundamental point with regard to parliamentary democracy. The Deputy does not have a right to decide who gets access to work. He does not have a right to decide who gets access to a hospital. He does not have a right to-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There are nearly 1 million people on the hospital waiting lists.

An Ceann Comhairle: Every other Member needs a fair amount of time.

The Taoiseach: It was wrong of the Deputy to do what he did last week. I say that respectfully to him. No self-appointed group gets that right and no TD gets that right. A number of TDs were at that. Deputy Tóibín, more than most, stated that he had negotiated this or negotiated that. That is not right. For God's sake-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: We negotiated-----

The Taoiseach: -----we need freedom of movement for people. The Minister for justice and the Minister for-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Did the public know?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, that is enough.

The Taoiseach: -----Defence engage with each other in respect of this issue.

Deputy O'Rourke raised two issues on the concerns in Navan-----

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: In Kells.

The Taoiseach: In Kells. My apologies. The Deputy raised concerns about break-ins and burglaries. I will relay that to the Minister for justice. I am sure the Garda will tackle that in a concerted way. That is very disturbing for the people concerned. Garda numbers are improving every time a new intake goes through Templemore. As a result, I expect that we will be able to get there. We have done good work in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and other locations. As more gardaí come through, we are trying to get to as many areas as we possibly can in sufficient numbers, not just giving dribs and drabs, in order that we get good solid allocations.

The Deputy also raised the issue of community CCTV. I will have to get an update on that. It continues to be very effective and impactful in combating crime.

Deputy Paul Murphy referred to the Northside Home Care Service workers, as did Deputy Boyd Barrett. I am not familiar with the background to the suspension of the shop steward. I will ask for that to be investigated and checked by the Minister for Health. I am not saying that this justifies suspension, but I would be wary of using clients to sign petitions. I understand how it happens, because people need the service and people want the service to be supported. I will talk to the Minister about the general issue. Those involved were here a number of weeks ago as well, and this issue needs to be resolved. The process should be deal with through labour relations in order to get it resolved. Meanwhile, the atmosphere around this should be one that allows engagement and so forth.

Deputy Boyd Barrett also raised the issue of Ned Connors, who died in prison through alcohol poisoning. That is very disturbing. The Deputy said "Apparently, the Minister has for some reason prevented the report from being published." The Minister for justice, Deputy O'Callaghan, is a fair-minded person and is scrupulous-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Something has stalled the report.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: The Minister is scrupulous in terms of the application of the law. I do not know what the background is to this. Maybe they do not want to prejudice the process. I do not know. I will check with the Minister for justice in respect of the report. I think the inquest is due, is it not?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Yes.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Conway Walsh raised the issue of a former garda, Margaret Loftus, and members of An Garda Síochána. Again, there has to be clear rules in terms of our uniformed services, particularly our Garda and our military. There are rules in respect of people who are convicted of crimes. They should not serve. When people are charged, they are sometimes suspended pending the outcome of the investigation and so forth. I salute the courage of Margaret Loftus.

On the mandatory reporting of barring orders, I would like a report back on that. I think the Minister is working on something in that regard.

To be fair to him, Deputy Gannon condemned blockading. With regard to the decision that was made, we had to remove those vehicles from Whitegate. We simply had to. I got a phone call to say that the refinery was closing. That would have been ruinous for the country because one cannot restart a refinery straight away. How bad would that have been. The Minister for justice made the correct decision in asking the Army in because it has the equipment to remove big lorries, tractors and other machines. It would have been crazy if we ended up stopping the export oil from Whitegate.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are two more Deputies, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: It just would not have made any sense, and that is why it was done.

On Deputy Coppinger's question, through the shared island initiative, we support an all-island response to domestic and sexual violence. It is shocking, and Northern Ireland is a particular problem. I have discussed this with the First Minister and deputy First Minister at meetings of the North-South Ministerial Council. It was a theme and a topic at our most recent meeting. There is active co-operation to the effect that there should be a joint approach between our Government and the Executive in respect of domestic and sexual violence. It is a big worry. Deputy Coppinger reminded us of the 30 women who have been killed. That is shocking and wrong. With regard to the counselling notes, the Minister for justice is bringing forward legislation in which he will go as he possibly can to place real conditions on the use of counselling notes.

On Deputy Lawless' question, the Government has huge pressures. I gave the figures earlier. We are making a lot of progress in terms of a more rigorous, timely and efficient response to those seeking asylum. Nonetheless, people come into the country to seek asylum. They are legally entitled to seek asylum and our job is to process applications as quickly as we can. If people are entitled to asylum, they get it. If they are not, they should be deported or asked to leave.

Deputy Paul Lawless: The question is-----

An Ceann Comhairle: No.

The Taoiseach: The question is this. I am asking the Deputy his view. As they come into the country on a daily basis, where should people stay?

Should they be on the streets? What is the solution?

An Ceann Comhairle: No, we are out of time. The Deputy can request the information in writing.

The Taoiseach: We are under international legal obligations. This is a challenge-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy can write to the Taoiseach..

Deputy Paul Lawless: The question relates to planning.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. We are out of time.

The Taoiseach: We do not have time now to discuss it, but I would gladly discuss it with the Deputy again.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes Taoiseach's Questions.

(Interruptions)

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is fully entitled. We are finished.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 2.10 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.10 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 2.10 p.m. and resumed at 3.10 p.m.

Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motions

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Dáil of 5th February, 2025, or in the Order of the Dáil of 24th March, 2026, setting out the rota in which Questions to members of the Government are to be asked, Questions for oral answer following those set down to the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment, shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence:

Minister for Health

Minister for Education and Youth

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality

Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment

Minister for Social Protection

Minister for Transport

Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport

Minister for Defence

whereupon the sequence established by the Order of 5th February, 2025, shall continue with Questions to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Question put and agreed to.

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Dara Calleary): I move:

That, notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Dáil of 5th February, 2025, setting out the rota in which Questions to members of the Government are to be asked, Questions for oral answer following those set down to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence:

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitisation

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Minister for Finance

Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht

whereupon the sequence established by the Order of 5th February, 2025, shall continue with Questions to the Minister for Education and Youth.

Question put and agreed to.

Tenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection: Motion

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

That Dáil Éireann, pursuant to Standing Order 33, and with effect from 16th April, 2026, approves the Tenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 27th March, 2026.

Question put and agreed to.

International Protection Bill 2026: From the Seanad

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): Before we start the debate on the amendments on the cream list, I draw attention to four errors of a formal or typographical nature that have been identified in the Bill following its passage through the Houses. Pursuant to Standing Order 203, I ask that the Leas-Cheann Comhairle direct the Clerk to make the following corrections of a formal nature to the Bill. I will set out those four minor changes.

First, in respect of section 117 of the Bill version as passed by Dáil Éireann, in page 97, line 30, I ask that the Clerk be directed to insert a missing comma between the words "State" and "without". Second, in respect of Seanad amendment No. 104 in subsection (1) of the inserted section 110, I request that the Clerk be directed to insert the word "in" between the words "referred to" and "*section 109*", so that it will now read as "referred to in *section 109*".

Third, in respect of Seanad amendment No. 111 in paragraph (f) of the inserted section 117, the cross-reference to "*paragraph (a)*" should read as "*paragraph (d)*". I request that the Clerk be directed to correct this erroneous reference. Finally, in respect of Seanad amendment No. 258 contained on the first substitute list of amendments dated 14 April 2026, in paragraph (a) clause (ii) the cross-reference in the inserted paragraph (b) to "*section 144(e)*" of the Bill should read as "*section 144(1)(e)*". I request that the Clerk be directed to insert this missing reference to subsection (1).

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Pursuant to Standing Order 203, I hereby direct the Clerk to incorporate the four corrections requested.

The Dáil went into Committee to consider amendments from the Seanad.

Seanad amendment No. 1:

Section 2: In page 17, between lines 6 and 7, to insert the following:

" "Act of 1995" means the Civil Legal Aid Act 1995;".

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I propose that amendments Nos. 1, 6 to 8, inclusive, 18 to 20, inclusive, 22, 23, 117, 141 to 145, inclusive, 147 and 148 be taken together. Those amendments relate to the introduction of legal counselling for applicants for international protection as is required by the Asylum Procedures Regulation and the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation.

A key factor in creating a more effective international protection system is ensuring that from the earliest stages of the process applicants are sufficiently informed about asylum procedures and their rights and obligations. The Bill will achieve this through the delivery of legal counselling. Legal counselling is the provision of information, guidance or assistance to applicants on matters related to the application procedure. This will help applicants to be informed about legal issues that may arise in the course of the procedure and ensure they know what to expect during the process. Legal counselling is not a replacement for legal advice or legal representation, which applicants may still choose to avail of just as they can under the existing system.

I have brought forward amendments to provide for legal counselling on Committee Stage in the Seanad following extensive consultation with the Office of Parliamentary Counsel, the Office of the Attorney General and the Legal Aid Board. The definition of legal counselling will ensure that legal counselling will be provided in line with the regulations of the European Union while not being limited to only being provided by a solicitor or barrister. The Legal Aid Board shall appoint persons that it considers to be sufficiently knowledgeable and experienced in asylum procedures to deliver legal counselling. The definition for legal counselling I have provided will enhance the effectiveness of the system of legal assistance we currently have in place without disturbing it, and it ensures that procedures under the Asylum Procedures Regulation and the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation are fully accounted for. I also state that the pact already provides that legal counselling is to be provided free of charge.

Amendment No. 23 will introduce a new section establishing an applicant's right to consult legal representatives. Applicants may obtain legal advice at any stage during the procedure in

respect of their application to determine the member state responsible under the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation or in respect of an appeal. Legal advice is given the same meaning as it has under the Legal Services Regulation Act 2015 and may be provided by a practising solicitor or barrister.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I will make a couple of broad remarks that I think have been emphasised by the fact that at this Stage, the last Stage in the Oireachtas, the Minister has to bring forward further, albeit technical, changes to this legislation. The Minister's entire approach to this legislation has verged on the reckless. It is absolutely reckless in terms of his refusal to allow proper scrutiny of a piece of legislation that he has described as the most comprehensive legislation dealing with migration in decades. The approach has been guided not by what is in the best interests of the Irish people or delivering an international protection system that works and resolves the dysfunction that the parties of Government have created, but has been directed solely and entirely by the need to live up to the provisions of the EU migration and asylum pact.

This is a pact which Sinn Féin told the Government there was no need to sign up to and which undermines Irish sovereignty and our ability to manage our migration system. It is a pact that takes no account of the unique circumstances of this nation, which is a nation divided, with one part within the European Union's structures and the other part operating outside them. It is a pact that takes no account of the fact that we operate within a common travel area with a state that is not part of the EU framework or part of the pact.

In its efforts to through bull a Bill with the sole intention of adhering to the terms of the EU pact, the Government has been absolutely haphazard in its approach. It has undermined the role of Oireachtas at every turn. I will remind the House of that approach. The first stage was the heads of the Bill being brought before the Joint Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration. In an effort to try to facilitate the Department with what is comprehensive legislation, the committee tried to deal with it as quickly as possible. The testimony and written submissions of all the witnesses may have come from different perspectives, but they all agreed that the Government's approach was shambolic, that the heads of the Bill were incomplete and that this would not allow proper scrutiny to take place. The pre-legislative scrutiny report agreed across party lines set out very clearly that the decision of the Government to tie us in, lock, stock and barrel, to the EU migration and asylum pact was completely wrong, called on the Government parties to try to reconsider and set out very clearly that the gaps in the heads of the Bill meant it was not possible to carry out pre-legislative scrutiny.

The Government ignored all of that and brought forward a comprehensive 200-page Bill. Before the Dáil had even finished the Second Stage debate, the deadline for amendments had already passed. As a result, Second Stage counted for nothing. It did not matter what any Member of this House contributed to that debate, including, perhaps, inspiring amendments from either the Government or the Opposition. It was all just a box-ticking exercise.

The list of proposed Committee Stage amendments was as comprehensive as you will see, but the Government guillotined the debate and refused to allow the amendments to be discussed and analysed in the place where they should have been, which is the committee rooms of these Houses. The Government guillotined and curtailed the debate on the legislation. This was despite the fact most of the amendments to the Bill, which had just gone through Second Stage,

were put forward by the Minister. Despite there being numerous important amendments that this House should have had the opportunity to discuss, the Minister refused to allow that to happen and, indeed, criticised Members of this House for spending too long, as he saw it, discussing some amendments. Those amendments, if I may remind the Minister, related to community engagement, community impact assessment and to the gross profiteering taking place within the international protection and accommodation system and the obscene amount of being spent on that accommodation. Last year alone, €1.3 billion, for which there is no transparency or accountability, was spent on IPAS accommodation. There were amendments to address the failings of the legislation and the EU pact and to address the glaring black hole that is the common travel area and its implications for the Bill. The Minister criticised Members for spending time discussing those amendments when it was he who refused to allow them be debated in committee, and he then imposed a guillotine.

The Bill then went to the Seanad. It is now back here for a debate that will last just three hours. What has the Minister brought forward? There are 90 pages of amendments. Who are they from? Some 267 of them have been tabled by the Minister. This is the final part of the debate on the Bill. Once again, rather than detailed scrutiny, that debate is to be limited to three hours. That is absolutely disgraceful. The Minister has brought forward technical amendments, but there is no way the public can be confident that there are not other gaps in the legislation. The difficulty is that after today, the next gap or gaps - and they will probably be glaring gaps - will be identified not by an elected representative of the people but by a judge in the High Court. I have predicted on every Stage that this legislation and the Minister's approach to it are going to result in High Court cases. I believe some of them will be successful. There is no way anybody can say that there has been proper democratic scrutiny of this legislation because the Government has prevented it. Ultimately, this will result in infringement proceedings at European Commission level because the Minister has included provisions in this legislation that he has no ability to deliver. There is no confidence regarding the time it takes to process applications and to do so fairly. All the evidence in this regard points to a dysfunction that is embedded in the IPAS system. There is not a chance that anybody can have confidence in decisions being enforced. As for any prospect that the matter of the obscene sums of money that have been spent and, I would argue, wasted as a result of the Government's mismanagement will be addressed, nobody can have confidence that this will happen because it has refused, time and again, to put in place mechanisms that will allow transparency in the form of the publication of IPAS contracts and to allow communities to have a real say in what happens.

Something incredibly interesting from the past couple of weeks was seeing Simon Harris - he was actually having a go at the Minister - saying communities should have a say in what happens in their areas in the context of IPAS centres. He voted against amendments to that effect in this House just a number of weeks ago, but the good news is that, if we get to it, there is an amendment today that will allow that very provision. What he says is his affair, but it might be just another case of Simon says one thing and Simon does the exact opposite.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Address the amendments, Deputy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: This is verging on a charade. There has been no democratic scrutiny of this Bill. It is the Minister's Bill and his alone. He has been locked into a position by the

previous Government to sign us up to a pact with no consideration whatsoever for its implications. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael signed us up to the EU migration and asylum pact not because they thought it would lead to a more efficient system or resolve the dysfunction in the system but simply so they could say in advance of a general election they were doing something about migration when they are doing absolutely nothing.

The Minister has concentrated his entire Department's resources on a single Bill. He is forcing staff and officials to rush from one Stage to another. On every Stage, the legislation has required substantive change. The difficulty is that after today, whatever changes are going to be made will not by made by representatives acting on behalf of the Irish people but by officials within the European Commission or by a High Court judge.

I wanted to put those things on record because it is crucially important and the public deserves to know the Government is adopting the exact same shambolic approach to the international protection legislation as it has to the international protection system. That system has led to serious disquiet and division within communities and enriched a very small number of people at the expense of those who are seeking international protection and the communities affected by decisions made by this Government.

Deputy Gary Gannon: This Bill has the potential to not only be a disaster but to be a disaster in a way that impacts the lives of people in this State who are very vulnerable. I want to make it clear right from the off that when this fails - and I have no doubt it is going to fail - it will be the Minister's failure and his alone. This is without question some of the most important legislation we will deal with in this Dáil term, but from the very first moment the Minister has behaved in a way that was dismissive of the justice committee and has been extraordinarily vague about some of the most important aspects of the Bill. During pre-legislative scrutiny, I sat aghast while NGOs and legal bodies talked about the omissions from the Bill. On Second Stage, we tried to make it somewhat better but the Minister brought it into the Dáil rather than give proper select committee scrutiny of it. He knew that the implications of doing so were that we would not get to discuss all the gaps or all the amendments.

I had more than 100 amendments and I think we got to two of them. That is grossly insulting to the process and to the importance of the issue. There was a point where we could have had a really engaging and constructive debate on this in the Chamber. Deputy Carthy would probably disagree on a lot in terms of our approach to this area but what we will agree on fundamentally is that this was an incredibly undemocratic way to approach such important legislation. The Minister has tabled 90 amendments in a three-hour debate. In the Minister's estimation, how many of these amendments does he think we will get to and that are worthy of being scrutinised? The people elected us to assess laws and carry out proper scrutiny but, once again, on this Stage, when the Bill has come back from the Seanad, there are 90 amendments and three hours for debate knowing full well we will never get to discuss them.

Even if we talk about legal counselling, which the Minister brought up in the first amendment, it is still incredibly watery and vague and mostly undefined. There is no clarity on standards, on who will deliver it or on accountability. This has been raised time and again. In the Seanad, Senator Patricia Stephenson set a very basic and reasonable standard, in that legal counselling should be delivered by a qualified legal professional, individually and in-

person and, crucially, that it was not to be a substitute for legal representation. These amendments were the bare minimum but we are still struggling.

There are factors such as family reunification. Refugee family reunification is genuinely one of the cruellest aspects of these measures. In all of the time we have had to discuss this Bill in the Dáil, we have never gotten around to discussing an amendment relating to this or the policy itself because there has been so little time. I heard the Minister speaking in the media and he talked about the fact we had three different sessions and everybody had an opportunity to contribute but he knew full well that was not the case. There was not proper scrutiny of legislation. This is not a way of doing business and when this fails, it will be the Minister's failure.

Deputy Alan Kelly: The Minister has had a bad oul week and a half. This is bad as well. He will not have to bring in the Army for this one but you never know.

Deputy Gary Gannon: An army of lawyers.

Deputy Alan Kelly: He will have an army of lawyers coming in. I jokingly suggested to the Minister before that he may prove to be the Manchurian candidate for the legal profession because, I will be honest with him, I do not think there is a hope in hell of this Bill working in the manner in which it has been presented. It is deeply confusing at times. Even with the some of current amendments, you could read through them and get a different view of what they mean the more you read them. That is just bad legislation. I have been knocking around here for nearly 20 years and this is one of the worst pieces of legislation I have ever seen drafted and it is because of political direction, not because of the people who are doing the drafting. That is on the Minister's head.

We will be repeating what we have been saying here in the not too distant future because my colleagues who have spoken before me - I will not stress it again - have said how this has disregarded the democratic process, how we have not gotten through amendments and how the whole way in which this has been brought before the Houses has been a disgrace. That is all true but the ultimate thing is that this is the Minister's legislation and it is on his head. It is bad legislation. It is not going to work.

There are so many people who have contacted probably all of us here. They are pointing out that they do not understand many components of this legislation and how they will work them. The Minister cannot say he has not been warned and time will tell whether he will be playing back what the three Deputies here, including myself, have said, that this is not good legislation. This is not the way to treat the Houses of the Oireachtas. It was impossible to scrutinise this and to go through all of its components. Definitions are confusing. The make-up of the Bill itself is even confusing. If we are confused, I do not know where it will go outside.

When it comes to the issue of legal counselling, as I said before, my party is not shy of the legal profession either, and the Minister would know many of them. Essentially, they believe, with the amendments coming forward and the definitions, that it is even more confusing now. It is watery. As to where the legal parameters are as regards legal advice and legal counsel, I do not know why it was continued with and why we even bother with legal counsel. Why do

we have this makey-uppy thing? We all know how to define legal advice but legal counsel is not defined in a way that it understandable. It is a makey-uppy term and we know the reasons for that but it is not acceptable. It will ensure there are huge legal challenges across the many stages for people who are seeking protection and it will make a lot of money for a lot of people in the Minister's former profession.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I want to thank the three Deputies for their contributions, which I listened to very carefully. At the outset, I wish to say that the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, and I realise this is extremely challenging and complicated legislation before the Houses. Nothing we can do can remove the complicated nature of the legislation. It just is the case that with the international protection system, the asylum system, that is operating not just in Ireland or in other EU countries but throughout the world where many asylum applicants come from, there is an enormously complicated legal system in place for the purpose of dealing with those asylum applications. Part of the reason for that is that we are dealing with the rights of individuals and we want to try to ensure there is fairness for individuals who have applied for international protection and asylum. At the same time, we have to ensure there is balance as well in protecting the interests of the state that is receiving those applicants.

We know from the international protection system we operate at present under the 2015 legislation that it is also extremely complicated legislation. It is not anywhere near as lengthy as this but the reason this legislation is lengthy is that we are trying to consolidate in one piece of legislation how Ireland will respond to people who come to make an application here for international protection. One of the reasons the Bill is very lengthy is that we have decided to include within the legislation, for instance, the reception conditions directive and the requirements that are on Ireland as a State when a person comes into Ireland claiming asylum. Previously, that was dealt with through secondary legislation. It was not debated in the House; it was just a statutory instrument that was signed by the Minister. I could have done that again but I believed it was more appropriate to have it within the main body of the primary legislation.

I do appreciate the complexity, length and detail of the legislation and it is challenging for all of us. It is challenging for the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, for me and for officials in my Department and I appreciate it is challenging for Opposition Deputies. I do not say this in a patronising way but I commend the diligence of the three Deputies from the Opposition who have been here all of the time as the legislation has gone through the House.

Deputy Carthy stated at the outset that the fact I am bringing forward technical changes at this final stage is an example of the recklessness and flawed nature of the legislation. I think that is excessive, and I do listen to what Deputy Carthy has to say. Remember this Bill is around 270 pages long and has over 313 sections. The four technical changes I am making are as follows: first, I am putting in a comma; second, I am inserting the word "in"; third, I am changing the letter "a" to "d"; and finally, I am inserting the number "1" after section 144. I do not think that is reckless.

I will not go back to them but Deputy Carthy mentioned issues about the pact. I have set out my views in respect of that before.

No matter whether we are in the EU migration pact or not, we still have to deal with individuals coming into Ireland who claim asylum. We saw that the UK decided to get out not just of the pact but out of the EU and its issues in respect of international protection have not

in any way been reduced. However, we did - I commended the Deputy and the other Members here before - have a very thorough pre-legislative scrutiny process. We had a Second Stage debate here that went on over three days. I accept that the Committee Stage hearings were truncated because they were held on the floor of the House as opposed to the committee room. I am not asking the Deputies to agree with this but everyone in this House knows that if it had gone to Committee Stage in the committee room, it would have taken weeks if not months to get through.

We can discuss important issues that are dealt with in the amendments. For instance, the amendment we are talking about now concerns legal counselling. All three Deputies said that this would end up in the courts. As sure as night follows day, it is going to end up in the courts. There is no doubt about that but the success or effectiveness of a piece of legislation is not measured by whether it ends up in the courts. The reason it will end up in the courts is this is a highly litigious area and it is new legislation. When there is legislation of this complexity and length, Deputy Kelly is right - lawyers will be parsing it to see if there are any inconsistencies or failings. If the test was not to introduce legislation if it was going to be brought before the courts, we would do nothing in this House.

Deputy Alan Kelly: No. You have to play the percentages.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The current legislation is much shorter. In fact, I think Deputy Kelly was in government when the International Protection Act 2015 was enacted. If one looks at the judgments of the superior courts, there are endless judgments on the international protection system that operates in Ireland at present - people challenging it by way of judicial review and challenging the executive operation of it. It is a very litigious area because of the large number of people coming in and the very high proportion of refusals. There would not be any legal challenges if nobody was refused. There is a high level of refusals and because of that, people challenge it.

On legal counselling, I am conscious people may say it is inappropriate that legal counselling is not provided by qualified solicitors or barristers. I disagree. There are very many people able to provide legal counselling in respect of the procedures that apply in an area in which they have expertise. I believe this is one of them. If one looks at the definition set out in a later amendment, No. 7, there is a very clear definition of what legal counselling is. It means "any guidance, information or assistance given to an applicant on matters relating to the application procedure by a person appointed under" the legislation. It sets out that it will be guidance on the procedure and assistance with the lodging of an application, guidance on the different procedures, rules relating to admissibility, legal issues arising in the course of the procedure, guidance on and explanation of the criteria and procedure for determining the member state responsible, and issues such as that. That will be provided through Legal Aid Board. If they are not qualified solicitors or barristers, they will be very well trained paralegals who will be able to provide that assistance. That is something we provide to people bringing applications and as it gets to people appealing, there is an obligation to provide more by way of legal services. I recall we had a lengthy debate on Second Stage about legal counselling. Deputy Gannon understandably asked what it was about and where the term "legal counselling" came from. I have now set out a definition. It is a good definition of how information and counselling can be provided in circumstances where applications are being made. In many

instances, although it is an area of great complexity in the law, the process of applying for asylum is relatively straightforward. A person has to recount the reasons they are fleeing persecution or war and why Ireland should provide them with asylum. Those are the basic tenets of it. One does not need to be an extraordinarily qualified lawyer to explain that to the individual or to advise them of the procedures.

Seanad amendment put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 83; Níl, 61; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Boland, Grace.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Brian.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brennan, Shay.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Brophy, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Browne, James.	Collins, Michael.	
Burke, Colm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butler, Mary.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cronin, Réada.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Crowe, Seán.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cullinane, David.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Cummins, Jen.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Daly, Pa.	
Calleary, Dara.	Devine, Máire.	
Canney, Seán.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Clendennen, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Connolly, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gould, Thomas.	
Cummins, John.	Graves, Ann.	
Currie, Emer.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Daly, Martin.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Healy, Seamus.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Martin.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Lawless, Paul.	
Fleming, Sean.	Lawlor, George.	
Foley, Norma.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Geoghegan, James.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Grealish, Noel.	Mythen, Johnny.	

Harkin, Marian.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Harris, Simon.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Nolan, Carol.	
Heydon, Martin.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Higgins, Emer.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Lahart, John.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Lawless, James.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Lowry, Michael.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Maxwell, David.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McCarthy, Noel.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Quaide, Liam.	
McCormack, Tony.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
McEntee, Helen.	Rice, Pádraig.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Sheehan, Conor.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Smith, Duncan.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Wall, Mark.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ward, Charles.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ward, Mark.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Murphy, Michael.		
Naughton, Hildegarde.		
Neville, Joe.		
O'Callaghan, Jim.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Dea, Willie.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Gary Gannon and Alan Kelly.

Seanad amendment declared carried.

4 o'clock

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 2, 4, 9, 21, 28, 224, 230 and 260 are related and will be discussed together.

Seanad amendment No. 2:

Section 2: In page 17, between lines 11 and 12, to insert the following:

" "Act of 2018" means the Data Protection Act 2018;".

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: What we are doing here is putting in a definition of the Data Protection Act 2018. As I indicated, some of these are very minor technical amendments. The main amendment in this group is amendment No. 230, which proposes the insertion of a new section 224 to provide for the sharing of information by relevant bodies. The purpose of the new section is to make clear provision for the sharing of information, including personal data by public bodies for the purpose of carrying out functions under this Bill. Provision is made for necessary safeguards. Information may be shared under the new section only to the extent that it is necessarily and proportionate and subject to suitable and specific measures being taken to safeguard the fundamental rights and freedoms of data subjects in processing the personal data. Where information is shared under the new section, the relevant body with which it is shared may only use the information for the purpose of the performance by it of its functions and only to the extent necessary and proportionate for that purpose.

The proposed new section will enable the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to make regulations in relation to information sharing for the purposes of this Bill. Relevant principles and policies to govern the exercise of the regulation-making power are included. The Minister will be required to have regard to the need to safeguard the fundamental rights and freedoms of data subjects and to specify suitable and specific measures to safeguard these fundamental rights and freedoms of data subjects in the sharing of personal data. Relevant bodies will be permitted to enter into data sharing agreements subject to safeguards corresponding to those in the Data Sharing and Governance Act 2019. The sharing of personal data relating to applicants for international protection and beneficiaries of temporary protection is governed by a number of existing enactments. It is clearly stated that this new section is not intended to affect the operation of other enactments that permit or require data collection or data sharing.

The other amendments in this group are consequential on amendment No. 230. The purpose of these amendments is to ensure consistency in the references in the Bill to the Data Protection Act 2018 and the general data protection regulation. These amendments also clarify the definitions of information and data as used in the Bill.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Gannon.

Deputy Gary Gannon: This might be the last time the Minister answers the question here. One of the problems I have with the Bill in its totality is the fact the Minister has accepted and said previously that some 90% or more of people who claim asylum here come through the common travel area. In a scenario where somebody is coming through the common travel area,

that person does not tell us where the first nation he or she is fleeing from is. What information would be used to establish where that person may have come from previously if he or she came through the common travel area but has not given any other information beyond that? That is particularly relevant when it comes to detention. How would the Minister establish where that person came from, if he or she came through the common travel area, and how would that work for the purpose of detention?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy very much for his question. Obviously, in the first instance, when people arrive into Ireland claiming international protection, they are checked on Eurodac and they are screened. In respect of those processes, they are required to give biometric data. They get their fingerprints taken, they get their faces photographed and other information is taken in respect of them. They set out where they have come from. That is their objective. They have to say where they have come from. They have to set out the narrative of which country they came from but also in terms of the countries through which they travelled. The advantage of having Eurodac is that it will provide us with information as to whether or not an applicant was, in fact, in another EU country. The UK does not have access to Eurodac. It is not on it, although it is very interested and keen to gain access to it. However, there is going to be the sharing of some information with the UK and, in many instances, we will be able to identify whether the person has come from the UK. If a person comes from the UK, it can be the case that we determine his or her application to be inadmissible but there is a process in that to determine the inadmissibility of it. Then, even if we do determine inadmissibility, there is the issue about trying to return the individual. However, the way we would get the information is through asking the person the question, and we assume that the information we are going to be given is accurate and honest. The systems we also have access to include Eurodac. There are other systems as well that will provide information in respect to the individuals that will give us an indication as to the pathway of their journey through Europe.

Deputy Matt Carthy: In respect of the amendments regarding the Data Protection Act, of course, it is imperative that the full information in terms of decision-making in respect of individuals applying for international protection is known to the Department and that there is the ability to fully appraise the history insofar as it matters for an application of the applicant. As the Minister knows, that is why I have supported signing up to the Eurodac regulation. In that sense and in that instance, it makes sense that we would have the ability to share information with other EU states.

The Minister has highlighted a glaring deficiency, in that, as Deputy Gannon has said, it is broadly accepted that the majority of IPAS applicants at this stage probably come through the common travel area. However, we cannot say with any certainty in what proportion. As I say, the Minister's analysis assumes that everybody who does not claim international protection at one of our ports or airports must have come through the common travel area. There is a fundamental flaw with that. International evidence suggests that a portion - which varies, and sometimes the variations can be quite big - of international protection applicants who arrive to the State with a valid visa but for another reason, in the first instance, subsequently claim international protection, as is their right under international law. It is nonsensical and hard to believe that the Minister's Department does not compile information on the numbers of people who enter the State visa-free or with short-term travel visas, student permits or employment

permits. We need that information. If we are talking about having a managed migration system, we need to understand all of that. The Minister seems to be indicating he has that information but he will not share it with me. I have asked him plenty of times by way of parliamentary questions. His Department tells me that the information is not available and, while it is compiled on individual applications, it is not collated.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to stick to the amendment.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I am. This is in respect of data. There are a number of amendments there. If the Ceann Comhairle wants to go through them all, she can figure it out while I ramble on. I was coming to an end anyway.

Of course, none of us, nor the public, need to know personal information, but the Department needs to have it comprehensively. In terms of general information and data, the Government needs to be much better at sharing it with the public. The Minister made a statement. He or his predecessor said that 90% of applicants were coming through the common travel area. Will he acknowledge that there is no way he can say that unless he has the information that I sought and that his Department told me does not exist. Is the Minister going to ensure that information is going to be collated and published, and, if so, when?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The Deputies have accurately summarised the basis on which we think that 90% of applicants come in over the Border with Northern Ireland. These are people who apply at the office and do not apply at our ports. It is, therefore, a reasonable assumption that a significant majority are coming over the Border.

Deputy Carthy makes the point that individuals who were given work visas to come here might then subsequently claim international protection. That is correct. It is important to point out, obviously, that the State has that information about an individual. If an individual came to Ireland on a student application or visa application and was granted that visa and then when it came to an end, the person were to claim international protection, the persons in the IPO determining the decision would be aware that, previously, he or she was granted a visa and came here to study or work, and will see the narrative of the basis upon which the application for that visa was granted. That information is available. It is important that we retain that information on an individual basis.

We can try to accurately specify the exact numbers coming in over the Border. However, as Deputy Carthy knows, the only way we are going to be able to do that is by checking people at the Border. I know he does not want that to happen. The only way this State is going to know how many people are coming from Northern Ireland into the Republic and claiming asylum is by stopping people and checking and by asking to see their passports. If they are Irish citizens, there is no issue. We could get information that way but no one in this House wants that. It is a consequence of partition. The way we resolve it is to say that the UK, including Northern Ireland, which is a part of it, is a safe third country. When this legislation is enacted, I will, based on the information I have already and that will be presented to me, I assume, be designating the UK as a safe third country. That is the procedural mechanism by which we seek to deal with the numbers coming over the Border.

Deputy Gary Gannon: As it relates to the amendment relating to sharing data, if a person flies from his or her home country outside the EU straight to the UK and then arrives here through the common travel area, he or she is not going to feature in any Eurodac database. What information would potentially be shared with the UK and under what regulation or law would that be done as it pertains to this legislation?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: To fly from a country outside the EU into the UK, you would need a visa to enter the UK. If you are coming, say, from an Asian or African country, where there are a lot of international protection applicants, in general, you will need a visa. There are some countries for which the UK provides lots of visas. You can see that in our numbers. I am not going to start naming countries now because people will say I am picking on one country, but there are certain countries to which the UK readily gives out visas. The numbers of people from those countries applying for international protection in Ireland are quite high and we believe there is a correlation in respect of that.

To answer the Deputy's question, there is a lot of co-operation between the Home Office and the Department of Justice. They have access to some information in respect of EU applications, but the Deputy's question was about somebody who does not initially go near the EU but goes from a country outside the EU into the UK and then across the Border. If somebody comes down here and indicates that he or she has come from the UK, there is a mechanism for us to apply to the UK to find out information about that person. There is sharing of information.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister is missing the point I was making about the collation of data. On one hand, he is saying that when applicants make an application and give their background and history, we take them at face value. The initial assumption is that they are telling the truth. On the other hand, he is saying that we cannot know unless there is control on the Border.

The point I am making is that if we are to have a properly managed migration system, which I think everyone agrees we need even if they disagree about what it might look like, it means that in respect of international protection, it is important that to the best of the State's ability we get the personal information that is required to process the applications and the general information and statistical data to inform public policy. Therefore, it is, insofar as it is possible, important to know what states people have come from and what states they have transited through, and then the issues in respect of returns regulations and safe third countries can apply. It is equally important that we would have the information in respect of other mechanisms by which people apply for international protection. As I say, I have submitted quite a number of parliamentary questions. I have, as one must when one is dealing with the Minister's Department, tried rewording things in 15 different ways before the Department answers the question that it knew was being asked in the first place.

Deputy Alan Kelly: Hear, hear.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I also made a freedom of information, FOI, application after I asked those 15 or 20 different parliamentary questions. I got a response yesterday to my request for the number of IP applicants who had transited through another mechanism. The reply to the

freedom of information request stated the Department does not have that information and that it would be too burdensome to collate it. Is that the truth? Does the Minister have the information on the number of IP applicants who previously came on other types of visas?

An Ceann Comhairle: I do not think that information is relevant to the amendment.

Deputy Matt Carthy: It absolutely is. If we are talking about-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We are not asking for that today.

Deputy Matt Carthy: This is not the first time I have asked for the information.

An Ceann Comhairle: I appreciate that, but this is not the place to ask. We are speaking to the amendments.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I know, but-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I appreciate the Deputy did not get an answer.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----we are not going to get to all the amendments because the Minister has guillotined this Stage, as he has all other Stages. I am asking this at this point. I would like clarification.

Does the Minister agree that information would be helpful for guiding public policy and, if so, will he ensure it is collated and published?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I will deal with something Deputy Carthy said at the outset. He said we take at face value what applicants say. I am conscious that could be misrepresented. It is not correct. What people put down on their forms is part of the information processing, but we do not just accept, because they say they have come from Syria and are fleeing persecution, that they are fleeing persecution. The whole process is to probe that. It is important to say we do not take at face value what they say and accept it; it is tested. However, a lot of the information we rely upon and interrogate is provided by the applicant.

On the issue Deputy Carthy raised about whether we should be collating information to try to find out how many Irish visa holders claimed international protection, we know the general scheme. The general assessment is that it is about 90%. We know that a significant majority of people claiming international protection-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: How do you know?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: We know because there is a lot of information in the Department and for a wide variety of reasons. We know individually. If people have a visa application in Ireland, when they apply for international protection we will know they had a visa previously. We have access to the information, but what Deputy Carthy is asking us to do is to set up a process of collating all that information. There is a huge amount of work going on and we have

to be selective about which information we collate. Let us imagine I issue an instruction for that information to be collated and we get it. It will tell us that a significant majority of people are coming in over the border. We know that. I need to deal with that as opposed to trying to confirm what we know already.

Deputy Matt Carthy: On that point, the Minister said we know it is 90%. We do not know that. I accept that it is probably the case that a large proportion, if not a majority and perhaps even a substantial majority, of people who claim international protection come via the common travel area. It is one of the reasons we tabled amendments in respect of the common travel area, which the Minister rejected. I have been rightly critical - and will be vindicated as such - of the fact that the Minister is prioritising this legislation rather than pursuing a bilateral agreement with Britain.

However, we need to know exactly, percentage-wise, year-on-year, because that is how public policy is decided and developed. Likewise - and I hope I am not too far out because I am trying to think from memory - my understanding is that in one year in Britain, for example, it transpired after analysis that 3% of international protection applicants had previously entered the British state with an education visa. That allowed its Parliament to examine the education visa system to ensure it was robust and could not be used as a back door to bypass employment visa regulations or the international protection system.

The Minister says we know whether people originally came on an education, employment or tourism visa, but the fact he will not collate that makes it more difficult for the Houses of the Oireachtas to analyse whether there are areas in public policy that need to be addressed to ensure we have a migration system that is fit for purpose. It is one of the very many areas in which the lack of information and due diligence on the part of the Minister's Department means that public discourse takes place in a vacuum. People can go on Facebook and say that 80% of people who come as tourists from a particular state subsequently seek international protection and no Member of this House can say with certainty that it is downright false because we do not have the information because the Minister's Department will not publish it. I ask again. Will the Minister ensure his Department collates that type of information and publishes it to Members of this House so we can be better guided in public policy discourse?

An Ceann Comhairle: Is Deputy Gannon speaking on the same point?

Deputy Gary Gannon: No.

An Ceann Comhairle: Would the Minister like to answer that? No, go ahead Deputy Gannon.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Do we have data for how many people arrive and claim asylum here, presumably from the common travel area, who do not feature in the Eurodac database? Presumably we at least have that information. This will become quite important when it comes to which data we share with the UK.

The Minister said a few minutes ago that he will soon legislate to make the UK a safe third country. I appreciate he can legislate all he wants for that, but the UK has been explicit that it

will not take returns of migrants or refugees. That will create a significant lacuna in the law which I worry about the consequence of because, we will get to it shortly, but we are legislating for detention here also and detention of minors, so that will create a real gap in the law that none of this is addressing.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thought one thing Deputy Carthy and I agreed on was that the overwhelming majority of people who claim asylum in the Republic come through the common travel area. I thought we agreed on that. Yes, we do not have the exact specifics on it-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: But I want the exact specifics and the Minister should as well.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thought we agreed on it. Is he now saying that is not correct, that it is not the case that the majority of people come through the common travel area? We strongly believe it is. We do not have the data he is talking about collating. I will talk to senior officials in the Department about it but I suspect it will be a huge amount of effort to collate information which ultimately will not have a huge impact on public policy because it will not undermine the fact that the significant majority of people - probably more than 85% to 90% - come through the UK.

This leads me on to Deputy Gannon's question. If he looks at the nationalities of the people coming to Ireland - each week I publish details of the numbers of people coming in - they are coming predominantly from four or five countries which are consistently near the top. I will not name them here again. In assessing those applications, work is done to determine whether they are from people who previously had visas granted to them by the UK. Many of them do not appear to be people who were granted visas because we know the nationalities. There is one exception. There is one country, where the UK hands out a lot of visas to people from those countries for study and that may have an impact. They may be coming here as a result, but for the other main countries it is not usual for the UK to give out large numbers of visas in respect of them.

On what Deputy Gannon said about returns, the point he emphasised emphasises to me the need for Ireland to be part of a returns regulation that at present is the subject of a proposal by the Commission. It is important that we have a mechanism to deal with individuals who have claimed asylum and have been adjudicated not to be entitled to it. That is a problem no matter what we do. For it to work efficiently - and it does not at present - there must be a returns process as provided for under the Dublin III regulation. Every European country says that Dublin III does not work. That is why work is ongoing in the Commission to put in place an effective returns regulation.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I know the Minister does not listen to me, but------

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I do listen

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----I would love for him to listen to himself sometimes, because he has just set out a paradox in terms of his position. He said his Department publishes the nationalities of people seeking international protection on a weekly basis and, on the other

hand, he said it would be too burdensome for his Department to collate and publish their origin in terms of visa route. The information would be in exactly the same place. It would be in the application that was made. When people make an application, they state whether they have been in the State on another visa or come through a third country and what the country of origin was. It is just a matter of changing the software so the information is collated. If there is a logical reason - other than it being too much hassle - not to publish this information, the Minister should just say so. This is the problem.

With no disrespect to anyone in the Minister's Department, the Irish public does not trust the Department to manage migration. They certainly do not trust it to manage international protection and the more areas the Minister hides from accountability and transparency and the divulging of information, the more it is so. No one wants information about individuals or families; of course not. That is not what we are talking about. We are talking about general information to inform public policy. I have said it again. The Minister clearly does not listen to me because I have said about six times during the course of all these debates that I accept it is very likely that a significant proportion of international applicants come through the common travel area.

I accept it is probably a majority and potentially a substantial majority. I accept all of those things. However, the truth of the matter is I cannot say that for sure because the Minister will not give me the evidence that would allow someone to say that for sure. I am not the person who points and says figures like 90%, 85% or 80%. It is the Minister for justice and different Government Ministers who repeatedly cite different figures, which is a bit bizarre in itself. The Minister keeps repeating that but will not provide the public with the data. He says, "Oh well, we can deduct that, take A from B and end up with C", which allows us to think this is probably the situation.

It just points to the dysfunction. It points to a haphazard approach that has been the hallmark of how this system has been managed and has led to all the public distrust in the system. What I am trying to do is encourage the Minister to change the approach. Get away from the secrecy. Get away from building walls between information and the public and start building trust again in this area.

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Minister wish to respond?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I do not wish to respond but I will take it on board. I listened to what Deputy Carthy had to say.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: We move now to Seanad amendment No. 3. Amendments Nos. 3, 10 to 12, inclusive, 15, 24, 57, 61, 124, 125, 149 to 156 inclusive, 171 to 174, inclusive, 203, 204, 207 to 211, inclusive, 220 to 223, inclusive, 225 to 227, inclusive, and 265 to 267, inclusive, are all related and will be discussed together.

Seanad amendment No. 3:

Section 2: In page 18, line 3, after “2013/32/EU” to insert the following:

", as amended by Regulation (EU) 2026/463 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 February 2026 and Regulation (EU) 2026/464 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 February 2026".

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: They are technical drafting amendments to improve the clarity of the text and correct cross-references and minor errors.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 4:

Section 2: In page 20, line 4, after " "information" " to insert ", other than in *section 224*,".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: Seanad amendment Nos. 5, 13, 14, 29 to 56, inclusive, 116 and 229 are related and will be discussed together.

Seanad amendment No. 5:

Section 2: In page 20, between lines 11 and 12, to insert the following:

" "international protection guardian" has the meaning that "guardian" has in the Qualification Regulation;".

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Amendment No. 5 defines the phrase "international protection guardian" for the purposes of section 2. Later proposed amendments to the Children First Act 2015 and the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Act 2012 will rely on this definition. Amendments No. 13 and 14 are technical amendments that provide for updated cross-references within the Bill. Amendment No. 29 provides for the designation of the competent authority in respect of representatives for unaccompanied minors. Amendment No. 30 is an amendment that clarifies the notification procedure when it comes to the attention of a relevant body that an applicant may be an unaccompanied minor.

Amendment No. 31 is a technical amendment. The provision for presumption of minority for the purposes of the Child Care Act 1991 is no longer necessary due to amendment No. 242, which provides for the amendment of the Child Care Act 1991 to insert a provision for a presumption of minority. Therefore, the current section 42(5) is no longer necessary.

Amendments Nos. 32, 34 and 36 are technical amendments related to the improved layout of the chapter. The text proposed to be deleted is now provided for more coherently as a part of the revised section 47 set out in amendment No. 44. Amendments Nos. 33 and 35 are technical drafting amendments to improve the clarity of the text.

Amendment No. 37 recognises section 44 to clarify the procedure for representative organisations to appoint provisional representatives and representatives. Amendments Nos. 38 to 41, inclusive, is a technical amendment which adds clarity to section 44.

Amendment No. 42 facilitates the work of representatives by providing them with access to the unaccompanied minors file. Amendment No. 43 is related to amendment No. 42 and

facilitates the work of representatives by ensuring they are provided with the decisions and determinations sent to unaccompanied minors.

Amendment No. 44 replaces section 47 with a clarified text that more effectively describes the functions of provisional representatives and representatives. The text now emphasises the central function of the representative in safeguarding the best interest and well-being of the unaccompanied minors as well as setting out the case load, independence and training requirements to be applied.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 6:

Section 2: In page 20, to delete lines 14 and 15.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 7:

Section 2: In page 20, between lines 15 and 16, to insert the following:

" "legal counselling" means any guidance, information or assistance given to an applicant on matters relating to the application procedure by a person appointed under section 11B(1) of the Act of 1995 to provide legal counselling and shall include:

(a) guidance on, and explanation of, the procedure in respect of an application, including information on the rights and obligations of the applicant during that procedure;

(b) assistance with the lodging of an application;

(c) guidance on:

(i) the different procedures under which an application may be examined and the reasons for the use of those procedures;

(ii) the rules related to the admissibility of an application;

(iii) legal issues arising in the course of the procedure under which the application is examined including information on how to make an appeal (within the meaning of Part 6 or section 82, as the case may be);

(iv) guidance on and explanation of the criteria and procedure for determining the Member State responsible in accordance with Part 4 and the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation, including information on rights and obligations during all stages of that procedure;

(v) guidance on and assistance with providing information that could help determine the Member State responsible in accordance with the criteria set out in Chapter II of Part III of the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation;

(vi) guidance and assistance on the template referred to in Article 22(1) of the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation;".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 8:

Section 2: In page 20, line 16, to delete "means a practising solicitor or a practising barrister" and substitute "shall be construed in accordance with *section 28*".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 9:

Section 2: In page 20, between lines 32 and 33, to insert the following:

" "personal data" means personal data as defined in Article 4 of the Data Protection Regulation;".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 10:

Section 2: In page 21, line 13, to delete "or".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 11:

Section 2: In page 21, line 16, to delete "declaration;" and substitute "declaration, or".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 12:

Section 2: In page 21, between lines 16 and 17, to insert the following:

"(f) an application by a person under Regulation 4 of the European Communities (Eligibility for Protection) Regulations 2006 (S.I. No. 518 of 2006) in respect of which the Minister has determined that the person is not a person eligible for subsidiary protection;"

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 13:

Section 2: In page 21, line 25, to delete "section 44(a)" and substitute "*section 44(1)*".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 14:

Section 2: In page 22, line 17, to delete "*section 44(b)*" and substitute "*section 44(2)*".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 15:

Section 3: In page 24, line 1, after "*18*," to insert "*41, 87*,".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: Seanad amendments Nos. 16, 17, 59, 62, 90, 91, 101 to 115, inclusive, and 158 are related and will be discussed together.

Seanad amendment No. 16:

Section 5: In page 25, line 12, after "15," to insert "20,".

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Amendment No. 16 is a technical amendment that repeals section 20 of the International Protection Act 2015 which provides for the detention of applicants in certain limited circumstances. Following the commencement of this Bill, any applicants under that Act who are to be detained will be subject to the detention provisions of this Bill in accordance with the reception conditions directive. Therefore, it is necessary to repeal section 20 of the International Protection Act 2015.

Amendment No. 17 seeks to ensure an applicant is fully informed of their obligations to co-operate with a member of An Garda Síochána or an immigration officer for the purposes of section 23 of the Bill and the consequences for failing to do so. Amendment Nos. 59 and 62 are technical drafting amendments to correct cross-references and improve the clarity of the text. The proposed new Part 5 of the Bill gives effect to the provisions of the reception conditions directive relating to restrictions of freedom of movement, detention and alternatives to detention.

Amendment No. 90 describes the categories of applicants to whom the new Part 5 will apply. Amendment No. 91 lists the specific grounds under which an applicant may be considered at risk of absconding. These include the presentation of false or misleading information and failing to co-operate with competent authorities or procedural requirements. The procedural requirements an applicant must adhere to are also listed in this amendment.

Regarding Deputy Carthy's amendment to amendment No. 91, I do not propose to accept it. The purpose of this amendment appears to be to require the Minister to lay a report before both Houses of the Oireachtas, setting out particular relevant statistical information relating to applicants for international protection where the question of the risk of absconding is assessed under the new section. The collection of the type of data the amendment seeks to capture would require scoping by my Department as it is possible not all of this information is currently systemically captured by its IT systems in the manner specified in the amendment. While I cannot accept the amendment, I can inform Deputy Carthy that the International Protection Office publishes monthly statistics on applications for international protection that are publicly available on its website. It is also possible for material to be sought by way of parliamentary question.

Amendment No. 101 transposes Article 10.1 of the reception conditions directive and provides the grounds for the prohibition of detention, which includes the fact that an individual is an applicant, or on the basis that he or she is an applicant of a particular nationality. This amendment specifies that detention under Chapter 3 of Part 5 will not be punitive in nature. Amendment No. 102 transposes Article 10.4 of the reception conditions directive, which provides the grounds for the detention of an applicant.

These grounds include to determine or verify the identity or nationality of the applicant, to ensure transfer procedures are carried out in accordance with the asylum and migration management regulation and to determine the elements in which the application for international

protection is based, which could not be obtained in the absence of a detention, in particular where there is a risk of absconding. Where the grounds under amendment No. 103 apply, an immigration officer or a member of the Garda may apply alternatives to detention following an individual assessment of the applicant. Such requirements can include an obligation to reside at, or attend a specified place, or to report to an immigration officer or member of the Garda at a specified time or at reasonable specified intervals.

Amendment No. 104 provides that in exceptional circumstances an immigration officer or a member of An Garda Síochána may make a requirement under amendment No. 103 for a minor who is an applicant. This may occur where the parent or primary care giver of an accompanied minor is the subject of a requirement under amendment No. 103 where such a requirement safeguards the minor or where it has been established that making the requirement of the minor is assessed to be in his or her best interests.

Amendment No. 105 outlines that requirements made under amendment No. 103 must be based on an individual assessment to ensure applicants are kept fully informed of any requirements being placed on them. This amendment specifies that this information will be notified to the applicant in writing and will inform him or her of the reasons for this decision. In order to take the changing circumstances of an applicant's situation into account, amendment No. 106 provides that an immigration officer or member of the Garda may vary a requirement under amendment No. 103 where the circumstances relating to the making of the requirement change, and in such other particular circumstances as I may prescribe. To ensure that robust legal remedies are in place for applicants, amendment No. 107 provides that an applicant may avail of an appeals procedure to the District Court in relation to a requirement made under amendment No. 103 while the requirement is in force.

Amendment No. 108 provides for the arrest and detention of applicants, with the exception of minors, for as short a time as possible, where it is determined that other less coercive alternative measures cannot be applied and where detention is deemed to be necessary. This amendment will provide legal protections for applicants by ensuring they are informed of the reason for their arrest and detention and that they are entitled to seek free legal assistance and legal representation, consult a legal representative and challenge the detention. The grounds for the detention of an applicant will continue to be monitored, and where it is assessed that these grounds no longer apply, be brought before a judge of the District Court who will order the release of the person.

Amendment No. 109 provides for a very limited set of circumstances in which a minor may be detained. These are for the purposes of determining or verifying the identity or nationality of the minor where less coercive alternative measures cannot be applied effectively and where detention has been assessed as being in the child's best interests. All of these requirements must be met before a minor can be detained. Minors may only be detained for the shortest possible period and in a place which is appropriate to their needs. Any individual detained under this amendment will be able to seek free legal assistance and legal representation, consult a legal representative and challenge the detention order. I reiterate that this Bill does not permit the routine detention of minors, as has been suggested by some, and this will not become a feature of our international protection system.

To ensure the safety of applicants and those responsible for helping them during the international protection process, amendment No. 110 places an obligation on the applicant to

ensure that he or she does not endanger his or her safety, or the safety of others, or obstruct or hinder an immigration officer or a member of the Garda for performing their duties under this part of the Bill.

Where an applicant is detained under amendment No. 109, amendment No. 111 provides for the rights of the applicant and ensures they are able to avail of effective legal protections under this Bill, including access to legal assistance and legal representation. To ensure that persons with special reception needs are treated with care and consideration during the international protection process, amendment No. 112 provides that such applicants are not placed in detention where this might have serious negative impacts on the physical and mental health. Where applicants assessed as having special reception needs are placed in detention, the health of the applicant will be of primary importance, and robust supports and protections will be provided for them.

In the interests of protecting minors during the international protection process, amendment No. 113 provides for the Child and Family Agency to be notified where an applicant is detained under amendment No. 108, and the minor is in the custody of the detained applicant. Amendment No. 114 provides that for the purposes of the grounds of detention under amendment No. 108, any delays in administrative procedures that cannot be attributed to the applicant should not justify a continuation of detention.

Amendment No. 115 seeks to ensure that applicants who have been detained under this Part are provided with safe and secure conditions of detention. This includes the need to separate detained applicants from ordinary prisoners and other third country nationals who have not lodged an application for international protection. Provisions also made to allow detained applicants to contact with family members, legal representatives and persons representing relevant NGOs, and for access to open-air space.

Finally, amendment No. 158 provides for the insertion of a reference to the new Part 5 of the Bill into section 126, which deals with restrictions and freedom of movement during the asylum border procedure.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I wish to speak to amendment No. 1 to Seanad amendment No. 91 in my name. It is important to state very clearly what the Minister is opposing here. This amendment calls on the Minister "to record, and publish in anonymised and aggregate form, annual statistical information on the routes of entry of applicants to whom this section applies, including -

(a) the number of applicants presenting at a port or airport,

(b) the number presenting inland,

(c) the number reporting entry via the Common Travel Area, and

(d) the number whose route of entry could not be established,

and such information shall be published not later than 31 March each year.”.

I still do not think the Government has come to realise just how deep the public's mistrust is in its ability to develop an international protection system that works. There is a flippancy in terms of any discussion of any proposals coming from the Opposition. It is crucially

important the public knows how international protection applicants enter the State. It is also crucial, just to repeat the point, what permissions were granted prior to that. It is imperative that we have reliable information on entry routes in order to plan effectively and maintain the public confidence that we have spoken about. We also need to have better information in terms of data with regard to Britain and that is why I repeat that we need to have bilateral arrangements in terms of information sharing, returns and a very clear position on how we deal with our nearest neighbour and the source, as has been acknowledged here, of likely the largest number of international protection applicants. I have asked the Minister on a number of occasions. If I was a Minister and I was told there was information available in the Department that does not and could not prejudice, I would be saying to the Department that we needed to wise up here, get this information, pull it together and publish it. It is certainly nothing to do with personal data, and nobody is seeking that, but I am referring to general aggregated data. I know the Government loves commercial sensitivity as a reason not to provide any information in respect of IPAS but it cannot cite international sensitivity here.

If, on the off chance, we get to amendment No. 1 to amendment No. 91, I will be pressing it because it is really important. We hear members of the Minister's party and of Fine Gael talking all the time about wanting to have transparency, accountability and a clear process that works and how setting out the EU migration asylum pact allows everybody to understand how the system works. Yet, every single time the Minister is asked to be open with the public, he refuses. Therefore, if I get an opportunity, I will be moving this amendment.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I have a very brief question. Just to confirm, when the Minister says "places of detention", does he mostly mean prisons?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: It does generally mean that at present. I have indicated this to the Deputy before - or I do not know if it was him - but he knows this puts pressure on prisons. I have looked before but I am going to have to start trying to identify a secure location where detention takes place but which is exclusively for immigration. That may be something at which I have to look. I am not giving a commitment to it but at present detention under the migration laws is detention within our prisons.

What Deputy Carthy wants to achieve in terms of his amendment is for me to publish annual statistical information on the routes of entry. There are four requirements in his amendment. The first relates to the number of applicants presenting at a port or airport. That information is available. You can find out about individuals who have presented at the IPO office and there is sometimes information about people who present at ports or airports. We have that information and I think it is available. The second requirement relates to the number presenting inland. By that, I think the Deputy means the number presenting at the IPO. I assume that is what the term "presenting inland" relates to. Information in this regard is provided already; the statistics that come out show the numbers who apply at the IPO and at the airports and the ports. The third requirement relates to the number reporting entry via the common travel area. In effect, this applies to people who say they have come here from the UK. One would have to ask individuals about that to get that information and collate it. The fourth requirement relates to the number whose route of entry cannot not be established.

As I said to Deputy Carthy, the collection of the type of data he is seeking to capture would require inquiry within the Department because it is possible that not all of this information is

currently systematically captured by its IT systems in the manner specified in the amendment. I will look at it, but I cannot accept the amendment. I can inform the Deputy that the IPO publishes monthly statistics on applications. There is a huge amount of information contained within those statistics. However, the Deputy is correct that in terms of that primary information, it is guiding in terms of the policy that we have. However, it is overwhelmingly the case that the majority of people coming in and claiming international protection are doing so having come over the Border. The reason I can say that confidently is because if people were coming in through the airports, they would apply at there, as they are obliged to, and if they were coming through the ports, they would have to apply there.

Deputy Carthy offered one example whereby people who are in Ireland already on visas could subsequently apply for international protection. I would have thought that would be a small cohort. That may reduce the numbers we can say are coming from Northern Ireland.

I will look at it. Ultimately, there is no point in setting up a very complicated IT system for the purpose of telling us something that we know already. However, I will look at it and discuss it within the Department.

Deputy Gary Gannon: When we speak about places of detention, we are speaking about our prisons. The Minister knows, because we have had this conversation countless times, that our prisons are already overwhelmed. We have a scenario where there are people in our prison system who are awaiting deportation. That, in turn, is leading to a scenario where we are adding a burden to a system that is already broken. I appreciate that the Minister said we may have to look at something in the future. I would very much want to be over the scrutiny of that in terms of what type of building it is. Until that point, however, it would be impossible for me to vote in favour of what is proposed in light of what we already know about our prison system. I will be calling a vote.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: If we do not have a system that allows us to detain people who are to be deported, we can never have deportation flights. I just have to be realistic about it. We could never have these flights because people are obviously not going to turn up and ask "What time is the flight leaving at?" The realistic situation is that in order to ensure that people can be subject to enforced deportations, you have to detain them in advance. It is not the preferred way of doing it. The numbers in terms of voluntary returns are increasing quite significantly, but we would have a meaningless system if we could not have enforced deportations. In order to have enforced deportations, regrettably, we do need to have detention.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Nobody is disputing that for a second. Given the fact that we have a broken system of incarceration at this moment, however, the number of people being placed there is also adding exponentially to the suffering that is being experienced by the prison population and by people who are in prison are awaiting deportation. Until we have a solution - potentially the one the Minister outlined, although that would require oversight - this is going to place an extra demand on a system that is already broken. This is another aspect of this rushed accommodation.

We also have another scenario that I am very concerned about whereby when somebody comes through the common travel area, we cannot establish to where they should be returned

while awaiting deportation. You are going to have a person in almost indefinite incarceration awaiting deportation to a place we cannot determine because we do not have in place the arrangements with the UK that we should and that the Minister says we potentially will. We are going to have a system where somebody is indefinitely incarcerated in an overwhelmed prison system and the impacts that will have on that person and all of us. This is one of the reasons I am against the Bill in its entirety.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I hear what Deputy Gannon says. I am not going to repeat what I said earlier.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are no further contributions.

5 o'clock

Seanad amendment put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 86; Níl, 64; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Peter.	Collins, Michael.	
Butler, Mary.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cronin, Réada.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Crowe, Seán.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cullinane, David.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Cummins, Jen.	
Cahill, Michael.	Daly, Pa.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Devine, Máire.	
Calleary, Dara.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Canney, Seán.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Chambers, Jack.	Gannon, Gary.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Clendennen, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Connolly, John.	Gould, Thomas.	
Cooney, Joe.	Graves, Ann.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Cummins, John.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Currie, Emer.	Healy, Seamus.	
Daly, Martin.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Kelly, Alan.	

Devlin, Cormac.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kenny, Martin.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Lawless, Paul.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Lawlor, George.	
Fleming, Sean.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Foley, Norma.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Geoghegan, James.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Grealish, Noel.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Harkin, Marian.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Heydon, Martin.	Nolan, Carol.	
Higgins, Emer.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Lahart, John.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Lawless, James.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Maxwell, David.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McCarthy, Noel.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
McCormack, Tony.	Quaide, Liam.	
McEntee, Helen.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Rice, Pádraig.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Sheehan, Conor.	
McGuinness, John.	Smith, Duncan.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Stanley, Brian.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Wall, Mark.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ward, Charles.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ward, Mark.	
Murphy, Michael.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Naughton, Hildegarde.		
Neville, Joe.		
O'Brien, Darragh.		
O'Callaghan, Jim.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Dea, Willie.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		

Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Gary Gannon and Alan Kelly.

Seanad amendment declared carried.

Seanad amendment No. 17:

Section 24: In page 33, between lines 15 and 16, to insert the following:

"Obligation to inform applicant

24. Where an applicant (other than an applicant referred to in *section 22(6)(e)*) refuses or fails to comply with a direction under *section 22(2)* or a requirement made for the purposes of alternative arrangements under *section 23*, a member of An Garda Síochána or an immigration officer shall inform the applicant of—

(a) the obligations to cooperate referred to in *sections 25* and *63*,

(b) the grounds for implicit withdrawal of an application under *section 67*, and

(c) the powers under *Part 5*.".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 18:

Section 26: In page 35, line 30, to delete "shall inform an applicant" and substitute the following:

"shall inform the applicant concerned, as soon as practicable after the making of an application, and at the latest when the application is registered,".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 19:

Section 26: In page 35, line 34, to delete "*section 38*, and" and substitute "*section 38*,".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 20:

Section 26: In page 35, after line 36, to insert the following:

"(iii) the right, for the purposes of his or her application, to legal counselling in accordance with *section 27*,

(iv) the right, for the purposes of his or her application, to consult a legal representative in accordance with *section 28(1)*, and

(v) the right to apply for legal advice and legal aid in accordance with the Act of 1995,".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 21:

Section 26: In page 36, line 9, to delete "Data Protection Act 2018" and substitute "Act of 2018".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 22:

Section 27: In page 36, between lines 26 and 27, to insert the following:

"Legal counselling

27.(1) An applicant may request legal counselling at any stage—

(a) during the procedure in respect of an application and, without prejudice to *subsection (2)*, until the Determining Authority has made a decision on his or her application, and

(b) during the procedure to determine the Member State responsible in accordance with *Part 4* and the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation.

(2) Where an applicant makes a request under *subsection (1)(a)*, legal counselling shall, subject to *subsection (4)*, be provided to him or her as soon as practicable and in accordance with Article 16 of the Asylum Procedures Regulation.

(3) Where an applicant makes a request under *subsection (1)(b)*, legal counselling shall, subject to *subsection (4)*, be provided to him or her as soon as practicable and in accordance with Article 21 of the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation.

(4) The provision of legal counselling may be excluded where the applicant is already assisted by a legal representative.

(5) Where an applicant has been provided with legal counselling in accordance with this section, or where legal counselling has been excluded in accordance with *subsection (4)*, the Minister shall record such provision or exclusion in the applicant's file.".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 23:

Section 27: In page 36, between lines 26 and 27, to insert the following:

"Consultation with legal representative

28.(1) An applicant may consult a legal representative for the purpose of obtaining legal advice—

(a) in respect of his or her application, at any stage during the procedure in respect of an application,

(b) during the procedure to determine the Member State responsible in accordance with *Part 4* and the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation in respect of the application of that procedure, and

(c) in respect of an appeal within the meaning of *Part 6* or an appeal under *section 82*, *105* or *157(1)*.

(2) The functions of a legal representative under this Act shall be performed by a practising solicitor or a practising barrister.

(3) In this section, "legal advice" shall be construed in accordance with the Legal Services Regulation Act 2015.".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 24:

Section 27: In page 36, line 28, to delete "*(7)*" and substitute "*(7)*,".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 25 to 27, inclusive, may be discussed together.

Seanad amendment No. 25:

Section 28: In page 38, line 24, to delete "The results" and substitute "Subject to *subsection (4)* and *section 31(1)(e)*, the results".

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The purpose of this amendment is to ensure that section 28 reflects the requirements of the reception conditions directive.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 26:

Section 28: In page 38, to delete lines 31 to 35 and substitute the following:

"(5) Where the Minister considers that the applicant requires special procedural guarantees referred to in *subsection (1)(d)*, the Minister shall make arrangements to provide such guarantees in such form and manner as the Minister considers appropriate.".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 27:

Section 28: In page 38, line 38, to delete "under Article 25 of the Reception Conditions Directive" and substitute "under *section 77*".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 28:

Section 31: In page 42, line 19, to delete "Data Protection Act 2018" and substitute "Act of 2018".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 29:

Section 41: In page 49, between lines 33 and 34, to insert the following:

"Competent authority (*Part 3*) (*Chapter 2*)

41. The Minister shall by order designate a person to perform the functions of the competent authority under this Chapter.".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 30:

Section 42: In page 50, line 19, to delete "an applicant" and substitute the following:

"an applicant, in relation to whom neither a provisional representative person nor a representative person has been appointed or designated, as the case may be".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 31:

Section 42: In page 50, to delete lines 22 to 24.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 32:

Section 43: In page 50, lines 28 and 29, to delete "with the necessary skills and expertise".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 33:

Section 43: In page 50, line 32, to delete "that is the subject" and substitute "who is the subject".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 34:

Section 43: In page 50, lines 36 and 37, to delete "with the necessary skills and expertise".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 35:

Section 43: In page 50, line 40, to delete "that is the subject" and substitute "who is the subject".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 36:

Section 43: In page 51, to delete lines 1 to 6 and substitute the following:

"(2) The function of a representative organisation shall be to appoint individuals under *section 44* to perform the functions set out in *section 47*.".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 37:

Section 44: In page 51, between lines 28 and 29, to insert the following:

"Appointment of provisional representative persons and representative persons

44.(1) Where a representative organisation has been designated under *section 43(1)(a)* in respect of an unaccompanied minor, the representative organisation shall, as soon as possible, appoint an individual to provisionally act as a representative (within the meaning of the EU acts) for the unaccompanied minor (in this Act referred to as a "provisional representative person") until a representative person has been appointed.

(2) Where a representative organisation has been appointed under *section 43(1)(b)*, the representative organisation shall, as soon as possible, and within the period referred to in *section 43(1)(b)*, appoint an individual to act as a representative (within the meaning of the EU acts) for the unaccompanied minor (in this Act referred to as a "representative person").".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 38:

Section 45: In page 52, line 6, to delete "*section 44(a)*" and substitute "*section 44(1)*".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 39:

Section 45: In page 52, line 9, to delete "*section 44(a)*" and substitute "*section 44(1)*".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 40:

Section 45: In page 52, line 11, to delete "*section 44(b)*" and substitute "*section 44(2)*".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 41:

Section 45: In page 52, line 13, to delete "*section 44(b)*" and substitute "*section 44(2)*".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 42:

Section 46: In page 52, between lines 29 and 30, to insert the following:

"(b) ensure that the unaccompanied minor's file is accessible to the provisional representative person or representative person, as the case may be,".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 43:

Section 46: In page 52, after line 41, to insert the following:

"(4) Any decision, determination, direction, information, notification, report, warning or document (howsoever described) required under this Act or the EU acts to be sent, provided, given or otherwise made available to an unaccompanied minor by any person shall also be sent, provided, given or otherwise made available to the provisional representative person or representative person designated or appointed, as the case may be, in respect of the unaccompanied minor.".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 44:

Section 47: In page 52, after line 41, to insert the following:

"Functions of provisional representative person and representative person

47.(1) The functions of a provisional representative person or a representative person in respect of an unaccompanied minor in relation to whom he or she is designated or appointed shall be to represent, assist and act on behalf of the unaccompanied minor, as applicable, in order to safeguard the best interests and general well-being of the unaccompanied minor in a manner that enables the unaccompanied minor to benefit from his or her rights and to comply with his or her obligations under this Act or the EU acts.

(2) Without prejudice to the generality of *subsection (1)*, for the purposes of performing his or her functions under this Act or the EU acts, a provisional representative person or a representative person shall, in respect of an unaccompanied minor in relation to whom he or she is designated or appointed, exercise, as required, and where appropriate together with the unaccompanied minor's legal representative (if any), the following powers:

(a) to meet with the unaccompanied minor and take into account the minor's views regarding his or her needs where those views are relevant to the performance by the provisional representative person or the representative person of his or her functions in relation to that unaccompanied minor;

(b) to assist the unaccompanied minor in the provision of information that is relevant to the assessment of his or her best interests by the minor to any person for any purpose under this Act or the EU acts;

(c) to provide the unaccompanied minor with information relevant to the procedures provided for in this Act or the EU acts and to assist the unaccompanied minor in understanding the information relevant to the procedures provided for in and under this Act or the EU acts;

(d) where applicable, to assist the unaccompanied minor in relation to the provision of biometric and other data under *section 15* including providing the minor with information relevant to the provision of the data;

(e) where applicable, to assist the unaccompanied minor in relation to screening procedures carried out in accordance with *Chapter 2* of *Part 2*;

(f) where applicable, to assist the unaccompanied minor with an age assessment carried out in accordance with *Chapter 3*;

(g) where applicable, to assist the unaccompanied minor with the registration and lodgement of an application, or to register and lodge an application on behalf of the unaccompanied minor in accordance with *sections 37* and *38* and to submit elements and documents in accordance with *section 39*;

(h) where applicable, to assist with the preparation of, and be present for, the unaccompanied minor's personal interview and to inform the unaccompanied minor about the purpose and possible consequences of the personal interview and about how to prepare for that interview;

(i) where applicable, to assist the unaccompanied minor in relation to any measure applied in relation to the unaccompanied minor, or any related review or appeal, under *Part 5*;

(j) where applicable, to assist the unaccompanied minor in relation to procedures under the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation including preparing, and being present for, an Article 22 interview (within the meaning of *Chapter 2* of *Part 4*) and appealing a transfer decision;

(k) where applicable, to assist the unaccompanied minor in relation to an appeal (within the meaning of *Part 6*) to the Tribunal, including preparing, and being present, for an oral hearing;

(l) where applicable, to support the unaccompanied minor in any engagement with family tracing procedures carried out in accordance with the Asylum Migration Management Regulation or the Reception Conditions Directive.

(3) A provisional representative person or a representative person appointed in relation to an unaccompanied minor shall—

(a) be independent in the performance of his or her functions,

(b) not have any interests that conflict, or potentially conflict, with the interests of the unaccompanied minor,

(c) subject to *section 49*, be appointed in respect of no more than 30 unaccompanied minors at any one time,

(d) have the necessary qualifications, training and expertise to perform the functions of a provisional representative person or representative person, as appropriate, and

(e) treat any information received in his or her capacity as a representative person or a provisional representative person as confidential and not disclose such information to any person except—

(i) for the purpose of the performance of his or her functions under this Act or the EU acts,

(ii) when required, by an order of a court of competent jurisdiction, to disclose the information in civil or criminal proceedings, or

(iii) where otherwise required to do so in accordance with any enactment.".

Deputy Matt Carthy: I move amendment No. 1 to Seanad amendment No. 44:

After subsection (3), to insert the following:

"(4) A provisional representative person or a representative person appointed in relation to an unaccompanied minor shall, in the performance of his or her functions, comply with child specific safeguarding standards, and in particular shall—

(a) ensure that all actions taken in respect of the unaccompanied minor are guided by the principles of child protection, child welfare and the best interests of the child,

(b) have due regard to the minor's age, maturity, gender, cultural background, developmental needs and any indicators of trauma or vulnerability,

(c) take all reasonable steps to ensure that the unaccompanied minor is protected from harm, exploitation, re-trafficking, secondary victimisation or any treatment that may adversely affect the minor's physical, psychological or emotional well-being, and

(d) ensure that any interviews, assessments, procedures or engagements involving the unaccompanied minor are conducted in a child appropriate, trauma informed and culturally sensitive manner.".

The amendment seeks to strengthen protections for unaccompanied minors by requiring that all provisional and full representatives meet clear, child-specific safeguarding standards. This ensures that every action taken in respect of children is grounded in child protection principles attentive to age, culture, trauma and vulnerability. It obliges representatives to actively protect minors from harm or exploitation and guarantees that all procedures, interviews and assessments are carried out in a child-appropriate, trauma-informed way, reinforcing the best interests principle through the process. It is an important provision that strengthens the legislation and ensures there is no doubt but that there is a child-centred approach when we are dealing with children.

There is a broader piece of work around unaccompanied minors. Particularly with younger children, there is clearly often a hidden hand in terms of exploitation of the children entering the system, and we need to be very robust in dealing with that hidden hand and the individuals involved in trafficking minors.

For the minors themselves, it is crucial that we have a child-centred approach. That approach must ensure that, in Tusla accommodation in particular, we do not have people claiming to be minors where that is disputed in the same facilities as actual, verified minors.

This is where there is a huge question mark around the capacity of Tusla to manage the additional responsibilities this legislation will put on them. I raised this matter with the Minister of State, who said that Tusla would be fine even though Tusla very much is not fine at the moment. There are huge question marks over its ability to undertake the responsibilities it currently has. If we are in a situation where we need a three-tiered system, and two-tiered regarding unaccompanied minors where we have verified children and people for whom there is a dispute over their age - clearly with this latter category, we do not want them in adult-only accommodation either - this creates a big challenge. Tusla is an organisation that is stretched and there has been no clarification from the Minister's Department or its sister Department that has oversight of Tusla that additional resources, capacity and supports are going to be provided to help it carry out what could become a very difficult task, particularly given that Tusla is currently engaged in quite a number of for-profit contracts for the provision of accommodation for children. That is completely unacceptable.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Carthy for tabling his amendment to Seanad amendment No. 44. Section 50(a) of the Bill as passed by the Dáil provides for a regulation-making power that specifies the standards to be applied to representative organisations, provisional representative persons and representative persons. I do not believe this particular amendment is necessary. Moreover, section 50(b) provides that I, as Minister, shall make provision for the training of staff of representative organisations, provisional representative persons and representative persons. This will ensure that training is kept up-to-date and relevant and that representatives are fully aware of the applicable child safeguarding standards. Additionally, the best interests of the child are specifically stated to be a primary consideration in Chapter 2 or Part 3 of the Bill and in other Parts of the Bill.

Considering this, the provisions already in this Bill provide a solid basis on which to ensure that minors are treated appropriately in the international protection process. Provision is already made throughout the Bill for safeguards and protections for minors in the processing of international protection applications, with obligations and responsibilities being placed on the determining authority to ensure these.

Deputy Carthy has mentioned the problem that can arise if a child ends up in accommodation with an adult. It is a really difficult and complicated area. I would ask for a bit of - "sympathy" may be the wrong word - appreciation of the challenges that Tusla and other State authorities face.

If a person arrives at the International Protection Office, claims asylum and says that they are 17 years of age, if there is then an issue about their age or if there is a question mark over it, there obviously has to be some process put in place. The Deputy would be criticising the State if the State put somebody into child accommodation because they had said they were 17 in circumstances where it transpired that they were 19 or 20. All I ask colleagues to do is appreciate how difficult this can be for Tusla or, indeed, the determining authority, as it will be after 12 June, or the IPO now. It is a real challenge if somebody says they are an unaccompanied minor and yet the State thinks that is not the case. People can criticise the State all the time by saying we got it wrong by putting adults in with unaccompanied minors, but we are very much dependent on people being honest and stating accurately what their age is. In circumstances where people provide documentation that suggests they are minors and it

subsequently transpires they are not, there should be some appreciation of the difficult position the State finds itself in.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Deputy pressing his amendment?

Deputy Matt Carthy: I will just make a couple of comments on that. The Minister's rationale for refusing to accept the amendment is, I believe, that there is no need for it. I would contest that.

On the Minister's latter point, I do not think there is any suggestion that people do not appreciate the challenges that are involved. We have had quite an amount of discussion on this at the Oireachtas justice committee. For sure, the committee members fully appreciate that this is a very difficult situation to manage. In the first instance, we need to ensure that verified minors are not housed with adults. The point I am making is that there needs to be a secondary tier, as it were, for disputed minors because we do not want to have a situation where somebody whose age is disputed ends up in adult accommodation only for it to transpire that they were, in fact, children. It is not that we do not accept or appreciate the challenge. It is just that we do not have confidence in this Government to actually meet that challenge and deal with it. The evidence suggests that Tusla is not meeting its obligations, not only in respect of international protection, but in terms of vulnerable children generally. That creates the issue that needs to be addressed. Therein lies the problem. Tusla will have specific legal obligations as a result of this legislation. I asked the Minister of State, Deputy Colm Brophy, a number of times on Committee Stage what additional resources and measures would be put in place to assure that Tusla had the capacity to deal with the additional obligations it would have. The Minister of State simply answered repeatedly that he was satisfied that it would. That is not good enough and that is not an assurance to this House. I hope the Minister can give us a more substantive reassurance.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will put amendment No. 1 to Seanad amendment No. 44----

Deputy Matt Carthy: Will the Minister respond to the question I asked in terms of Tusla?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: He has responded already.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: We are talking about the Deputy's amendment. I have given my response to the Deputy's amendment.

Amendment to amendment put:

The Committee divided: Tá, 62; Níl, 84; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boland, Grace.	
Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Brady, John.	Brennan, Brian.	

Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Shay.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brophy, Colm.	
Carthy, Matt.	Browne, James.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Burke, Colm.	
Collins, Michael.	Burke, Peter.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Butler, Mary.	
Cronin, Réada.	Butterly, Paula.	
Cullinane, David.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Cummins, Jen.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Daly, Pa.	Byrne, Thomas.	
Devine, Máire.	Cahill, Michael.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Calleary, Dara.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Canney, Seán.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Gannon, Gary.	Chambers, Jack.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	Clendennen, John.	
Gould, Thomas.	Connolly, John.	
Graves, Ann.	Cooney, Joe.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Cummins, John.	
Healy, Seamus.	Currie, Emer.	
Hearne, Rory.	Daly, Martin.	
Kelly, Alan.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Kenny, Martin.	Dillon, Alan.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Dolan, Albert.	
Lawless, Paul.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Lawlor, George.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Fleming, Sean.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Foley, Norma.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Geoghegan, James.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Grealish, Noel.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Harkin, Marian.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Harris, Simon.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Heneghan, Barry.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	Higgins, Emer.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Keogh, Keira.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Lahart, John.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Lawless, James.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Lowry, Michael.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Martin, Micheál.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Maxwell, David.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
Quaide, Liam.	McCarthy, Noel.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	McConalogue, Charlie.	

Rice, Pádraig.	McCormack, Tony.	
Sheehan, Conor.	McEntee, Helen.	
Smith, Duncan.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Stanley, Brian.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Wall, Mark.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Ward, Charles.	Moynihan, Michael.	
Ward, Mark.	Moynihan, Shane.	
Whitmore, Jennifer.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
	Murphy, Michael.	
	Naughton, Hildegarde.	
	Neville, Joe.	
	O'Brien, Darragh.	
	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Dea, Willie.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	

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

Amendment to amendment declared lost.

Seanad amendment No. 44 agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 45:

Section 48: In page 54, to delete lines 10 to 16 and substitute the following:

"(a) in relation to a provisional representative person designated or appointed in respect of a relevant person and where the relevant person is an unaccompanied minor, a representative person is appointed for the relevant person,".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 46:

Section 48: In page 54, lines 17 to 19, to delete all words from and including "is" in line 17 down to and including "appointed" in line 19 and substitute "notifies the competent authority that it is satisfied that the relevant person".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 47:

Section 48: In page 54, to delete lines 24 to 31 and substitute the following:

"(c) the Determining Authority notifies the competent authority that the relevant person is a beneficiary of international protection, granted by the State or by a Member State other than the State, and an international protection guardian has been appointed for the relevant person,

(d) the Determining Authority notifies the competent authority that the relevant person has ceased to be an applicant,

(e) the Determining Authority notifies the competent authority that the relevant person has left the State without the consent of the Minister,

(f) the relevant person is a minor and the Determining Authority notifies the competent authority that an accompanying family member has become responsible for him or her such that the Determining Authority is satisfied that the relevant person is no longer unaccompanied,".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 48:

Section 48: In page 54, line 34, to delete "person," and substitute "person, or".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 49:

Section 48: In page 54, to delete lines 35 to 39 and substitute the following:

"(h) the designation or appointment of the provisional representative person or the appointment of the representative person is terminated by the competent authority in accordance with regulations made under *section 50*—

(i) because the provisional representative person or representative person has not adequately performed his or her functions under this Act or the EU acts,

(ii) on foot of a complaint that is made, and deemed to be well-founded, in accordance with regulations made under *section 50*, or

(iii) because the competent authority is no longer satisfied that the provisional representative person or representative person complies with the requirement set out in *paragraph (a)* or *(b)* of *section 47(3)*.".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 50:

Section 48: In page 55, to delete lines 1 to 3.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 51:

Section 48: In page 55, between lines 3 and 4, to insert the following:

"(2) The designation or appointment of a representative organisation under *section 43(1)(a)* or *43(1)(b)* in respect of a person (in this section referred to as a "relevant person") shall cease on the earliest of the following occurring—

(a) the individual appointed by the representative organisation under *section 44(1)* or *44(2)* has ceased being a provisional representative person or a representative person, as the case may be, for the relevant person concerned arising from one or more of the matters referred to in *paragraph (b), (c), (d), (e)* or *(f)* of *subsection (1)*,

(b) the competent authority notifies the representative organisation that the competent authority is no longer satisfied as to one or more of the matters specified in *paragraph (a), (b), (c), (d), (e)* or *(f)* of *section 43(3)*,

(c) the designation or appointment of a representative organisation is terminated on foot of a complaint that is made, and deemed to be well-founded, in accordance with regulations made under *section 50*, or

(d) the competent authority appoints a different representative organisation in accordance with *section 43(1)(b)* in respect of the relevant person concerned.

(3) Where the designation or appointment of a representative organisation ceases under *paragraph (b), (c)* or *(d)* of *subsection (2)*, any appointment by the representative organisation of—

(a) a provisional representative person under *section 44(1)*, or

(b) a representative person under *section 44(2)*,

shall also cease.".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 52:

Section 48: In page 55, line 5, to delete *"paragraph (g), (h)* or *(i)"* and substitute *"paragraph (g)* or *(h)"*.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 53:

Section 48: In page 55, line 7, to delete "under" and substitute "in accordance with".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 54:

Section 48: In page 55, between lines 7 and 8, to insert the following:

"(3) Where the designation or appointment of a representative organisation ceases under *paragraph (b)* or *(c)* of *subsection (2)*, the competent authority shall make an appointment under *section 43(1)(b)* in respect of a relevant person in relation to whom the representative organisation was designated or appointed, and *section 43(1)* shall apply as if the relevant person was the subject of a notification referred to in that section.".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 55:

Section 48: In page 55, line 8, after *"subsection (1)"* to insert "or *(3)"*.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 56:

Section 49: In page 55, line 39, to delete *"section 43(3)(e)"* and substitute "*sections 43(3)(e)* and *47(3)(c)"*.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 57:

Section 53: In page 58, line 40, to delete "*section 53"* and substitute "*section 54"*.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Seanad amendments Nos. 58, 60 and 157 are related and may be taken together.

Seanad amendment No. 58:

Section 61: In page 64, between lines 13 and 14, to insert the following:

"Authorisation to enter State

61.(1) Following the screening carried out in accordance with *Chapter 2* of *Part 2*, an applicant shall, subject to *subsection (2)*, be given an authorisation by the Minister that operates to allow the applicant to enter the State for the sole purpose of the examination of his or her application, including an appeal to the Tribunal in relation to the application.

(2) The Minister shall refuse to give an authorisation under subsection (1) to an applicant—

(a) to whom *section 64(a), 64(b)(ii)* or *130(3)* applies, or

(b) whose application is being examined under the asylum border procedure within the meaning of *Chapter 6* of *Part 5*, unless *section 118(4)* or *125(3)* applies.

(3) Where, following the giving of an authorisation under *subsection (1)*, the Determining Authority forms the opinion that *section 120* applies in respect of an application, the Determining Authority shall inform the Minister and the Minister may revoke the authorisation.

(4) Where an authorisation is revoked under *subsection (3)*, the authorisation shall be deemed never to have been given.".

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The purpose of Seanad amendment No. 58 is to give further effect to procedures regulation provisions relating to non-entry to the State of applicants subject to the asylum border procedure. Article 43.1 of that regulation provides that the asylum border procedure may be applied only where an applicant has not yet been authorised to enter the state. It is necessary to provide in the Bill for the distinction under the asylum procedures regulation between asylum border procedure applicants and other categories of applicants.

Subsection (1) provides that following the screening carried out under Part 2, I as Minister shall give applicants an authorisation to enter the State for the sole purpose of having their application examined. This provision is very similar to the current provision in section 16 of the 2015 Act.

Subsection (2) clarifies that an authorisation to enter shall not be given to applicants who no longer have a right to remain in the State because they made subsequent applications to delay or frustrate their removal from the State or because they are considered a danger to public order or national security, or those applicants who do not have the right to remain pending their appeal to the tribunal. The other category of applicants who shall not be authorised to enter are those whose applications are being examined under the asylum border procedure. There are exceptions to allow for an applicant to be permitted to enter the State when the deadline for the asylum border procedure expires and the applicant has not received a final decision on their application and for those applicants for whom the inadmissibility of accelerated procedure no longer apply. Exceptions apply also for applicants whose special reception or special procedural needs cannot be met in the border procedure or where there are medical reasons for not applying the asylum border procedure.

Subsection (3) provides that the Minister may revoke an authorisation given to an applicant where the determining authority becomes aware an applicant poses a national security or public order threat. In such cases, once the authorisation is revoked the applicant will be deemed never to have been given an authorisation. This is to ensure that even if an applicant was initially authorised to enter the State and their application is being examined under a different procedure, when information relevant to public order or national security comes to light at a later stage that applicant can be placed in the asylum border procedure with its associated restrictions of freedom of movement.

Seanad amendments Nos. 60 and 157 are technical amendments introduced to clarify cross-references to the new section proposed to be inserted by Seanad amendment No. 58.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 59:

Section 61: In page 64, to delete lines 22 to 27 and substitute the following:

"(c) comply with such conditions as may be notified in writing to him or her under *Part 5* by an immigration officer, a member of An Garda Síochána or an officer of the Minister.".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 60:

Section 62: In page 64, between lines 32 and 33, to insert the following:

"(a) an authorisation given under *section 61*,".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 61:

Section 62: In page 65, line 2, after "remain" to insert "in the State".

Seanad amendment agreed to.

Seanad amendment No. 62:

Section 67: In page 67, line 38, to delete "*section 61(2)(c)(ii)"* and substitute "*section 99* or *section 109(1)(c)"*.

Seanad amendment agreed to.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Seanad amendments Nos. 63 to 89, inclusive, 127 and 226 are related and may be discussed together.

Seanad amendment No. 63:

Section 69: In page 69, between lines 13 and 14, to insert the following:

"PART 4

RECEPTION CONDITIONS

CHAPTER 1

Definitions and application

Definitions (*Part 4*)

69. In this Part—

"accommodation centre" means any place in which applicants are collectively housed in accommodation allocated under section 72;

"clothing allowance" means the clothing provided to an applicant by way of supplementary welfare allowance under section 201 of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005;

"daily expenses allowance" means that part of the material reception conditions that constitutes a weekly payment made, under a scheme administered by the Minister for Social Protection, to an applicant in order for the applicant to meet incidental personal expenses;

"family member", in relation to an applicant, means the following persons who were members of the applicant's family before the applicant arrived on the territory of the

Member States and who are present in the State during the procedure for international protection:

(a) the spouse or civil partner of the applicant or the applicant's unmarried partner in a stable relationship;

(b) the minor children of the couple referred to in *paragraph (a)* or of the applicant;

(c) the unmarried adult dependent children of the couple referred to in *paragraph (a)* or of the applicant;

(d) where the applicant is a minor—

(i) the applicant's father or mother or another adult responsible under law for the applicant, including an adult sibling of the minor, and

(ii) the minor children of the applicant's father or mother;

"house rules" means the house rules made under *section 79*;

"material reception conditions" means—

(a) accommodation, food, personal hygiene products and associated benefits provided in kind,

(b) a daily expenses allowance, and

(c) the clothing allowance.".

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: The proposed new Part 4 of the Bill gives effect to the reception conditions provisions of the reception conditions directive. Seanad amendment No. 63 provides for the definition section of Part 4 to include definitions of "accommodation centre", "clothing allowance", "daily expenses allowance", "family member", "house rules" and "material reception conditions".

Seanad amendment No. 64 proposes that the provision of material reception conditions and the monitoring of reception conditions in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively, will apply to an applicant who is present in the State and not the subject of a transfer decision or a return decision. As the reception conditions directive is applicable to all international protection applicants, this amendment will ensure applicants who have made an application under the 2015 Act will also be able to avail of material reception conditions under this Bill.

Seanad amendment No. 65 aims to ensure material reception conditions are provided to applicants to guarantee they have an adequate standard of living while in the State. It is essential applicants receive this while ensuring those with the financial means pay for themselves.

Deputy Carthy's amendment to Seanad amendment No. 65 has been ruled out of order but I did not intend to accept it as it is overly restrictive to say such services cannot be provided by any for-profit provider, may significantly hinder the provision of material reception conditions to minors and therefore negatively impact the very people the system should be aiming to protect.

I am proposing the introduction of Seanad amendment No. 66 to ensure the adequate organisation of the State's reception system. This amendment provides that certain matters must be considered before allocating accommodation, including family unity, gender- and age-specific concerns, the special reception needs of the applicant, the efficient consideration of the applicant's application and the prevention of assault and violence to the applicant.

Regarding Deputy Carthy's amendment to Seanad amendment No. 66, my Department operates a high degree of transparency in relation to IPAS and centres. Any restriction on publication is based on residents' security, safety or privacy or commercially sensitive information the publication of which would damage the State's ability to achieve good value for money. My Department publishes figures detailing the number of residents in centres, with a breakdown of numbers of emergency accommodation centres on a weekly basis. There is full transparency from the Department in terms of providers receiving payments, with details of all payments over €20,000 and the recipients published quarterly on *gov.ie.* Inspection reports from all IPAS accommodation centres are published either on *hiqa.ie* or *gov.ie* and therefore it is not necessary to accept the Deputy's amendment.

The treatment of minors and their well-being during the international protection process is of importance to the Government. As such I am introducing Seanad amendment No. 67 which provides for key considerations to be taken into account when dealing with the reception needs of minors. This amendment provides that the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration with regard to the reception needs of minors. As with the previous amendment, this Government wants to ensure minors going through the process can avail of services that will help their development and provide education.

Seanad amendment No. 68 provides that minors are provided with the same access to primary and post-primary education and other supports.

To ensure applicants are provided with the opportunity to integrate, Seanad amendment No. 69 permits the Minister for further education to make arrangements to ensure applicants have access to courses.

Seanad amendment No. 70 is a substantive amendment that seeks to ensure applicants have access to adequate levels of healthcare.

To ensure special reception needs are identified as early as possible I am introducing Seanad amendment No. 71.

I cannot accept Deputy Carthy's amendment to Seanad amendment No. 71 as there are currently no nationally prescribed applicable qualifications to be an interpreter in Ireland, regardless of whether those interpretation services are provided to international protection applicants or to other persons. Interpretation services are made available to applicants by translation and interpretation companies contracted by the IPO. Such companies are contractually obliged to ensure interpreters possess the qualifications and competence appropriate to the tasks for which they are employed.

It is important applicants receive access to information on their entitlements to material reception conditions as soon as possible. As such, I am introducing Seanad amendment No. 72, which states the applicant must receive this information within three days.

To ensure there is a clear set of rules for IPAS accommodation I am introducing Seanad amendment No. 73, which provides for the making of rules in relation to an accommodation centre.

Seanad amendment No. 74 provides that a travel document may be issued to an applicant where there are serious humanitarian reasons or other reasons that require the applicant's presence in another state.

Seanad amendment No. 75 provides for the definitions of "material reception benefits" and "*section 82* decision".

Seanad amendment No. 76 provides the grounds on which I can reduce or withdraw an applicant's material reception conditions or the Minister for Social Protection may reduce or withdraw an applicant's daily expenses allowance.

Seanad amendment No. 77 provides for the requirements that must be adhered to where I or the Minister for Social Protection make a decision under amendment No. 78. This includes the need to inform the applicant of the reasons for the reduction or withdrawal of supports.

Seanad amendment No. 78 permits me or the Minister for Social Protection to restore or partially restore an applicant's material reception benefits after a determination that the applicant's conduct has ceased.

Seanad amendment No. 79 creates a regulation-making power for an appeal of a reduction or withdrawal.

Seanad amendment No. 80 provides the definitions for the terms used in Chapter 4 of Part 4 of the Bill. I am introducing amendment No. 81 which provides for the designation of a public body to be the monitoring body for the purpose of monitoring accommodation centres. HIQA is designated as the monitoring body until another public body is designated and it is the one that has responsibility under the 2018 reception conditions.

Seanad amendment No. 82 provides that I may set national standards for accommodation offered to people in IPAS. Regarding Deputy Carthy's three amendments to amendment No. 82, I do not propose to accept them. The Department received offers of international protection accommodation on an ongoing basis from external commercial providers. All offers are reviewed by the Department under a standardised appraisal procedure which aligns with processes in place for the award of State contracts across Departments and sectors. A team appraises each offer to accommodate people seeking international protection and the Department does carry out due diligence. All properties are subject to pre-occupancy inspections to ensure they adhere to standards. All new centres are supported by the community engagement unit. The engagement process is co-designed with the local authority. I am committed to ensuring local communities' access to accurate information and that structures to plan for the provision of essential services support are in place.

Seanad amendment No. 83 provides for the monitoring body may require a service provider to provide it with any information it considers necessary in order to determine the level of compliance by the service provider with the standards.

Seanad amendment No. 84 provides that the monitoring body may appoint employees to be authorised persons for the purposes of Chapter 4 of Part 4 of the Bill to ensure applicants are living in safe and adequately managed accommodation.

Seanad amendment No. 85 provides for the inspection of centres used to house those seeking international protection. An authorised person is permitted to enter and inspect a premises with the consent of the occupier or pursuant to a warrant. An accommodation centre that is subject to an inspection may need to give the authorised person information that is reasonably required for the purposes of the functions of an authorised person.

Seanad amendment No. 86 provides that an individual who prevents an authorised person entering such a dwelling is guilty of an offence.

To ensure high standards are upheld in the provision of accommodation, I am introducing amendment No. 87 to allow for a report to be prepared by individual who inspect accommodation centres.

Seanad amendment No. 88 provides that the monitoring body shall be notified within 21 days of applicants being allocated to an accommodation centre.

To ensure the well-being of applicants, amendment No. 89 provides for a requirement for notifying the monitoring body of any serious incident that takes place in the centre. Where such an incident or event occurs in an accommodation centre, the service provider must notify the monitoring body within three days of the date on which the incident occurred. In the case of an unexpected absence of a minor, the service provider concerned shall notify the monitoring body within 24 hours of becoming aware of the absence of the minor.

Seanad amendment No. 127 is a technical amendment to correct reference to new sections that give effect to the reception conditions directive.

Finally, I proposed Seanad amendment No. 226 to propose to reflect the fact that a body other than HIQA can be designated as the body responsible for monitoring accommodation centres and that this should be reflected in the provision for membership of the advisory board for the chief inspector of asylum and border procedures.

Deputy Gary Gannon: As we are approaching the end of the debate and are about to reach the guillotine I will speak to several of the amendments at once. The Minister used the term "family unity" in his contribution, which gives me the opportunity to speak about his family reunification changes. Of the measures contained within this Bill, that one is not based on any evidence and seems purposely designed, in the Minister's own words which he has reiterated time and time again, to send some form of message, but I am not sure the recipients of the message he is trying to send are deserving of the cruelty that is contained with it. Family reunification is provided for in international law precisely because it enables a scenario where somebody who has not only come here in search of sanctuary but has actually been given refugee status can be reunited with an immediate family member. The current process involves about 18 months on a waiting list and a year. The Minister is changing what was previously three to two, meaning a person will have to wait the best part of three or three and a half years, if they are given refugee status, to be reunited with a child or an immediate family member. This has never in any way had a great impact on the system. The numbers are fairly minuscule. When the Minister tried to explain the policy he is announcing to me in the Chamber a couple

of months back he seemed to be confusing different types of family reunification with the one specific to what we are speaking about now, which is refugee family reunification. Even at this late stage, I ask the Minister to reconsider that. It is something that actually aids not only the person who has received refugee status but also the communities in which he or she has start to rebuild his or her life.

I also implore the Minister in respect of Seanad amendment No. 76, pertaining to healthcare. Has the Minister taken a trip to Safetynet on Amiens Street?

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Where?

Deputy Gary Gannon: Safetynet on Amiens Street. It is a front-line service that deals with the most marginalised vulnerable groups and provides immediacy in terms of healthcare. The staff down there have stories that would send a shudder down most of our spines about providing healthcare to people who were previously in the asylum process but had then received deportation orders and lost access to all medical treatment, including mental health supports, and cancer supports in some scenarios. That is a grisly policy that has ramifications beyond the people who are losing their healthcare support because it means they are left in a community devoid of mental health supports and the medications that go with them. I will ask two things of the Minister. First, I ask him to reconsider family reunification and, second, to visit Safetynet on Amiens Street and hear the testimony. It might be very eye-opening in terms of some of the issues we discussed in the Chamber and the issues that stem from them.

Deputy Matt Carthy: You wait for a long time for a bus and then a number of them come at once. A number of my amendments are in this grouping and I will restrict myself to them, considering the timeline. I know amendment No. 1 to Seanad amendment No. 65 has been disallowed but I want to make the case very strongly that we need to end the use of for-profit providers of accommodation for those in Tusla care. That is what this amendment sought to do. A judge in Dublin District Court recently hit out at what he quite rightly described as the profiteering by private operators providing unregulated placements for the most vulnerable children. He described it as wrong and shameful, and he was right. Special emergency arrangements are unregulated placements provided by private operators. They are not compliant with national standards, they are not inspected by HIQA and they are typically in rented buildings. We know from recent reports that up to a quarter of staff working in special emergency arrangements last year did not have the documentation required to work with vulnerable children There is clearly a problem with those providers and whether the amendment is accepted or not, I hope it is something the Government will work on.

How is it that every time there are vulnerable people who need accommodation involved, the Government figures out a way whereby a few lads will make a lot of money on it? It is just unbelievable. That could be Tusla and the provision of care for children but where it is absolutely most blatant is in the IPAS system. There is continuing and ongoing failure not only to address the profiteering within the IPAS system but, on the Minister's part, to even acknowledge that it is happening. We know that a small number of private operators have made millions of euro from the Government's dysfunctional approach. What is worse is that there is no transparency, including around what actually qualifies some of these providers to provide these services.

The amendment to Seanad amendment No. 66 is simply about ensuring there is some transparency. We have called for a full review of every IPAS contract. The reason for this is that everybody who has looked at these issues objectively and every journalist who has carried out an examination of any IPAS contract has found blatant wastage of public money and a number of scandals have emerged. We do not have to ask politicians or journalists. The Comptroller and Auditor General, the Government's own watchdog, has found major weaknesses in IPAS contracting. The Minister tells us that this cannot happen again or will not happen again but there is nothing in policy form to provide a bit of transparency on that. This is an amendment that the Minister could accept that would send out the message that the Government is learning the lesson when it comes to the lack of transparency within the IPAS system.

6 o'clock

In the context of my amendments to Seanad amendment No. 82, I am surprised because I clearly heard Simon Harris, the Tánaiste and the leader of a main party in government, say that communities have to be engaged. The Government cannot proceed in the way it has up to now, namely where communities are disregarded and the only criterion to determine where an IPAS centre is located is that an operator has a building and is willing to use it for that purpose. Simon has an opportunity tonight to direct his party's Deputies to vote in favour of this amendment in order to make it clear that IPAS centres should only be placed in areas where the resources are in place to accommodate them and that communities have a real say in what happens to them. That would be better for everybody. It would be better for residents of IPAS centres and local communities.

Amendment No. 2 to Seanad amendment No. 82 deals with the absolute lack of due diligence and information regarding beneficial owners of those companies that have received IPAS contracts. Any information on scandals - and there have been plenty - has never come from the Department; it has always come from journalists or independent voices, and sometimes from residents who have raised serious questions. The pre-legislative scrutiny report we talked about earlier warned that due diligence processes for international protection accommodation were completely inadequate. It highlighted the incomplete checks in respect of planning permission, ownership, safety compliance and provider suitably. It concluded that weak oversight and inconsistent verification created financial, legal and operational risks within the accommodation system. If there is nothing to hide, there would be no reason to oppose this amendment. I have to make that point strongly.

Amendment No. 3 to Seanad amendments No. 82 states, "The Minister shall, by regulation, prescribe a maximum daily amount payable by the State for accommodation provided to applicants". Again, everything is being done to avoid any kind of transparency. On the notion of commercial sensitivity, as if there is anybody in the private sector going around with €1.3 billion to spend on accommodation. There is nobody in competition with you when it comes to this type of contract because nobody else would spend the amount of money the Department of justice is spending. Anybody else, even if it was devolved to local authorities, would get better value in the morning in terms of the money being spent.

There has been a lot of talk about price gouging in recent weeks. There has been serious price gouging going on over the past number of years. The average rate paid per bed rose by 68% from 2022 to 2024. This amendment would empower the Minister to take this by the

reins, set a maximum daily rate and ensure it is adhered to. Cases have been throughout this debate and unfortunately the Minister has just refused to listen. It has been the narrative of the past couple of weeks. This Government refusing to listen. The protests in recent weeks were about its refusal to listen with regard to the cost of living and the soaring cost of fuel. When it comes to the international protection system, the Minister has been refusing to listen. He just put all his cards into the EU migration pact basket. He has refused to engage in any constructive way with the Opposition on this Bill. We have repeatedly tried to engage with him in the context of increasing increase transparency and accountability, ensuring community engagement and resolving some of the problems he created in the context of mistrust between the public and Government on this issue. We have also sought to ensure that we get value for money and, ultimately, have an international protection system that works for everyone, namely applicants, local communities and the taxpayer. The Minister has refused time and again to engage, and now we are trying to talk about a number of important amendments in a matter of minutes because, once again, the Government has guillotined the debate on the Bill. The Minister has done himself, his Department, this system and the legislation a disservice with the way he has approached matters from start to finish.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputies Gannon and Carthy for their contributions. As an overview, when it comes to legislation like this, I, as Minister - I presume this is also the case for the House - have to try to balance conflicting rights. When dealing with international protection legislation, on one hand, we have to take into account the interests of the applicant claiming they are fleeing persecution or war to seek refuge in Ireland. On the other hand, I have to try to balance the interests of the State because, as Deputy Carthy indicated, there are huge costs involved in providing accommodation for individuals who seek international protection.

The primary driver of the costs involved is the number of applicants coming in. In 2024, 18,500 people applied for international protection in Ireland. I have openly stated that I want to try to reduce the number of people coming into Ireland claiming asylum in circumstances where many are subsequently found not be entitled to it. The point I have made is that there are too many people claiming asylum who are not entitled to it. That has been subsequently adjudicated to be the case. That is my objective. I have tried to shift the balance in a particular way in favour of the State.

That brings me to the first issue raised by Deputy Gannon, namely family reunification. Family reunification is an issue very much premised on the rights of the asylum applicant or in this instance the refugee who has been granted status. In Ireland, there are two or possibly more methods of achieving family reunification. The first is via the non-EEA family reunification policy. I updated and changed that last year. The policy applies in circumstances where people come to Ireland to work as nurses, carers or doctors and, having been here for a number of years, apply for family reunification. Under that process, they have to be able to show that if they bring their relatives over from the other country to live in Ireland, they will be able to pay for the upkeep of their relative once they have arrived in Ireland. That is reasonable. It is the balancing of rights. I have to ensure the State does not end up picking up the cost of looking after individuals who have come here and will then require many of the services we all know are under pressure. That is the non-EEA family reunification process. It

requires people to show an ability to pay for and look after the individuals who have arrived here as part of their family.

Separately, there is the refugee application for family reunification. This is not governed by the EU migration pact; it is a sovereign decision we can make if it is decided to support it. The change I am proposing is that individuals granted refugee status in Ireland will have to wait two years to apply to bring their family over to Ireland. Similarly, like people in the non-EEA mechanism, they will have to be able to show they have the means to pay for and care for them. That is not an unreasonable position for the State to adopt. We are an extremely generous State in terms of granting asylum but it is too much to say that family members brought over should be paid for by the State as well. That is why the proposals set out which state they have to wait to years and show they have the financial wherewithal to support their family if they want them to be reunified in Ireland is a reasonable proposal.

Asylum policy in Ireland must also take into account what is happening in the UK. I cannot ignore what is happening in the UK. It has a significant impact on what happens in Ireland.

Deputy Gary Gannon: You have ignored it completely.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: In terms of family reunification, on 4 September last year the UK on suspended refugee family reunification.

They suspended it in the UK. An aspect of UK policy I have to be conscious of is that if something is changed in the UK which makes Ireland a more materially attractive place for persons to come, it is a factor I have to take into account. It may not sound virtuous, but I want to try to reduce numbers of people coming into Ireland claiming asylum because I know from the statistics that there are too many people coming here claiming asylum who are found not to be entitled to it. I am not asking anyone to comment on the matter or agree with me, but that is the policy objective here.

One of my concerns was that if Ireland had a family reunification policy for refugees that was more attractive than in the UK it could become a pull factor in Ireland. The Oireachtas is entitled to objectively set out what we think is reasonable when it comes to family reunification. It is a big obligation to place on a State that when it takes somebody in who is a refugee, it will also take in their family.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Immediate family.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I know, but it is a big obligation and it comes at a big cost. I am entitled to try to - and the Oireachtas is entitled to say that we are going t -, shift the balance slightly towards the State on those scales. It is also the case that for family members who are already here it does not apply, and, obviously, it does not apply for an unaccompanied minor who is granted status here.

I will deal with Deputy Carthy's point on the cost of IPAS. I agree with him. I want to reduce the amount of money the State is spending on IPAS. It is too high and it needs to be reduced. Deputy Carthy has got to acknowledge that the driver of the cost is the number of people coming in. That is the main driver behind it. I hear what he says about contracts that

were entered into. I have said previously that contracts were entered into too highly. At present, I am making savings in the area of IPAS. In any renewal that has been done I am saving money and I am cutting down costs. I am being very careful with the amount of money that is being spent. I never heard anyone in the House say they disagreed with the reception conditions directive, which requires us to provide accommodation to international protection applicants. If people want to say we should not do so - and there are people in Ireland who say that we should not do so - then say it, but if it is the case that people are-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: Transparency is what the amendment asks for.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: If it is the case that people in the House are going to say that we should stick with the reception conditions directive and should provide accommodation, it necessarily means that we are going to have to spend money on accommodation. I am trying to get State accommodation to provide it. I am actively cutting down costs. I have cut down the numbers of people who have come to Ireland claiming asylum. As I said, in 2024 there were 18,500. In 2025, the number was 13,000. I want to seek to reduce it further.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time permitted for the debate having expired, I am required to put the following question in accordance with an order of the Dáil of 14 April: "That the Seanad amendments not disposed of are hereby agreed to in Committee and agreement to the amendments is accordingly reported to the House."

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 86; Níl, 62; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Peter.	Collins, Michael.	
Butler, Mary.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butterly, Paula.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cullinane, David.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Cummins, Jen.	
Cahill, Michael.	Daly, Pa.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Calleary, Dara.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Canney, Seán.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Chambers, Jack.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	

Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Gannon, Gary.	
Clendennen, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Connolly, John.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gould, Thomas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Graves, Ann.	
Cummins, John.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Currie, Emer.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Daly, Martin.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Hearne, Rory.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Martin.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Lawless, Paul.	
Fleming, Sean.	Lawlor, George.	
Foley, Norma.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Geoghegan, James.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Grealish, Noel.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Harkin, Marian.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Harris, Simon.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Nolan, Carol.	
Heydon, Martin.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Higgins, Emer.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Lahart, John.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Lawless, James.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Martin, Micheál.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Maxwell, David.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McCarthy, Noel.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Quaide, Liam.	
McCormack, Tony.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
McEntee, Helen.	Rice, Pádraig.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Sheehan, Conor.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Smith, Duncan.	
McGuinness, John.	Stanley, Brian.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Wall, Mark.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ward, Mark.	
Moynihan, Shane.		
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.		
Murphy, Michael.		
Naughton, Hildegarde.		
Neville, Joe.		
O'Brien, Darragh.		
O'Callaghan, Jim.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		

O'Connor, James.		
O'Dea, Willie.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Matt Carthy and Gary Gannon.

Question declared carried.

Seanad amendments reported.

An Ceann Comhairle: Agreement to the Seanad amendments is reported to the House. A message will be sent to Seanad Éireann acquainting it accordingly.

Football: Statements

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I invite the Minister of State to take the debate, I welcome Professor David Burn, who is president of the world Parkinson's association. We are hosting a three-day international conference here in Powerscourt. He and his members are most welcome. Deputy Grealish is hosting them this evening.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I very much welcome the opportunity to address the House this evening on matters relating to football, the most popular team sport in Ireland. Football can take us from the absolute peaks of delight, such as when Troy Parrott's toe-poke delivered the miracle of Budapest, to the absolute depths of disappointment that we all know too well too recently. It brings whole communities together. It provides social and emotional networks and a common language that we can all understand. It is hugely important for physical well-being and good mental health and is also usually great fun. That is why we all care so much about it and I hope that today's discussions will be beneficial to growing the game further.

At the outset, I pay tribute to the Irish senior women's and men's teams for their truly inspiring performances over the past few months. The double success of the men's team against Portugal and Hungary during one of the greatest weeks in Irish football history last November

gave supporters a tremendous lift. While the recent World Cup play-off semi-final against the Czech Republic in Prague ended in defeat, I am sure I speak for all in the House in congratulating Heimir Hallgrímsson and his troops on those performances. They have lifted the nation and breathed new life into Irish football, reconnecting with supporters through their honesty, passion, never-say-die attitude and pride in the green jersey.

The senior women's Nations League play-off victory over Belgium last October was equally inspiring. While they recently suffered narrow defeats to France and the Netherlands in the World Cup qualifiers, their performances against higher ranking teams gives us much to be optimistic about. Under manager Carla Ward and captain Katie McCabe, the team is transforming women's football, serving as inspirational role models for young girls, as was once again demonstrated by their wonderful performance against Poland last night, winning 3-2 away from home. We wish them well in the return fixture on Saturday, 18 April, in the Aviva Stadium.

The Football Association of Ireland, FAI, is the recognised national governing body for association football in Ireland. The Government, through my Department and Sport Ireland, the statutory agency for the development of sport, has a long-standing funding relationship with the FAI to support the development of football in Ireland. In recent years, the FAI has made significant progress in reforming its operations, including through implementation of the recommendations and conditions set out in the memorandums of understanding, MOUs, between the Government and the association. Following the financial collapse of the FAI in 2019, the Government and the FAI, in January 2020, agreed an MOU that included an enhanced funding package of €5.8 million per annum for the period 2020 to 2023, underpinned by 163 governance reform recommendations and conditions. During the lifetime of this agreement, the FAI made significant progress on reform, with 159 of the 163, or 98%, MOU recommendations and conditions either completed or phase 1 completed.

As the FAI's financial position remained challenging, a second MOU was signed in December 2024, which increased State funding to the FAI to €6 million per annum for the period from 2024 to 2027. The bulk of this funding goes towards the FAI's youth field sports grants, which are aimed at encouraging and creating more opportunities for young people to participate in football through coaching and games development supports. The youth field sports programme is based on an ethos of developing the grassroots of the game, growing participation numbers, embracing communities outside of the traditional base of the sport and improving coaching and playing standards.

The current MOU contains 16 recommendations and conditions for the FAI, including completing any outstanding recommendations and conditions from the previous MOU; maintaining governance reforms introduced under the previous MOU; providing information and reports to Sport Ireland to facilitate oversight of the MOU; and cascading governance reform to affiliates and grassroots. While the FAI has introduced significant governance reform at a national level, the broader football ecosystem remains complex and fragmented, with large representative structures, multiple committees and inconsistent governance models across its affiliates, leagues and grassroot clubs.

I very much welcome the FAI's commitment to cascade good governance and structures throughout the entire football ecosystem. To achieve this, a comprehensive review of league and affiliate governance will be undertaken by the association, including a review of grassroots

league structures to deliver stable and geographically logical leagues for women, men and children. Training and resources will be provided by the FAI throughout the football pyramid to support this reform.

The FAI continues to strengthen governance, safeguarding and operational standards across Irish football through two interconnected national accreditation frameworks. The FAI club mark is a national accreditation system for governance, safeguarding, club administration, volunteer services and structures, and long-term player development. The FAI league mark is the complementary accreditation programme designed to raise governance and football operations standards at league level. The FAI has significantly expanded its governance support infrastructure across both programmes.

Sport Ireland and my Department continue to engage with the FAI on progressing the recommendations and conditions set out in the current MOU. The first MOU provided the association with financial stability but also brought about the necessary governance reforms to allow it to rebuild itself. The current MOU will allow it to further progress its corporate governance reform agenda while at the same time giving it the financial support needed to continue to develop football across the country.

Continued Government investment is essential to further increase participation levels in all sports across all sectors of society. In 2018, total funding to sport from my Department was €111 million and the national sports policy committed to doubling that figure by 2027. That target was actually achieved in 2025. In 2026, we will invest over €300 million in sport, an increase of €67 million or 28.7% compared with 2025. The Government has invested well over €1 billion in sports infrastructure and development in Ireland since 2018. The return on this investment in terms of community participation, inclusion, integration and physical and mental well-being is substantial. It is important to note the sizeable financial support directed by the Government to the FAI and to football more generally over the past few years. The State allocated approximately €80 million in current funding to the FAI between 2019 and 2025 to support football development and grow participation. This included a total of €33.7 million in Covid-specific supports in the period from 2020 to 2022. It also included €1.3 million under the sports energy support scheme to help alleviate the impact of increased energy costs for clubs.

In addition to its core funding grant of €6 million, the FAI was allocated €300,000 in 2025 under the Government and Sport Ireland's women in sport programme to enhance the delivery, recognition, promotion and development of participation and leadership initiatives and opportunities for women and girls in football. It also received €200,000 in 2025 in dormant accounts funding to support participation programmes for those who are economically, socially or educationally disadvantaged, or people with disabilities.

Significant capital funding has been granted to football projects across the country in recent years. My Department operates two capital funding programmes for sport, namely, the community sport facilities fund, CSFF, and the large-scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF. The CSFF, formerly known as the sports capital and equipment fund, is the primary means of providing Government funding to sport and community organisations at local, regional and national levels. The fund aims to foster an integrated and planned approach to the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and assists the purchase of non-personal sports equipment. The LSSIF was established under the national sports policy, published in 2018, to

provide Exchequer support for larger sports facility projects, typically those requiring investments greater than the maximum available under the CSFF. Since 2015, approximately €192 million has been allocated to football projects under all sports capital programmes to support the development of grassroots soccer facilities nationwide. Just over €96 million of this was allocated under the LSSIF and almost €96 million was allocated to over 1,500 football projects under the CSFF. Over €250 million was allocated to more than 3,000 community sports clubs and facilities in 2024 from the 2023 round of the fund, representing the largest ever investment in sports facilities in communities across the country. Over €50 million of this was allocated to football clubs and a total of 536 football projects. This funding has facilitated improvements in the quality and quantity of football facilities in virtually every village, town and city.

In line with previous rounds of the fund, a review of the current funding round has been undertaken and will be finalised shortly. I have asked my Department to prepare for a further round of the CSFF in 2026, which I expect to open early in the summer. I encourage all football clubs to prepare for this and to ensure applications are fully aligned with the goals and guidelines of the fund. It is anticipated that this next round will particularly target areas and sports that have been underinvested in over the years.

A total of €297 million has been invested through LSSIF across 68 projects. The 2018 round awarded €124 million to 33 of those, with €173 million awarded in November 2024 to 35 projects following record demand. Of the €297 million allocated under the LSSIF to date, €96 million was awarded to 18 football projects that are either directly sponsored by the FAI or incorporate football elements. Under the LSSIF round in 2018, eight football projects were allocated €11.8 million in funding. They included Atlantic Technological University, iRos, Cavan Regional Sports Campus, Thurles Regional Sports Campus, Dalymount Park, East Galway Sports Campus, Finn Harps and the Munster Centre of Excellence in Glanmire. Under LSSIF 2024, €84.3 million was awarded to ten football projects, which were Dalymount Park, Sligo Rovers Stadium Development, Atlantic Technological University Letterkenny Regional Sports Activity Hub, Cork Northwest Community Sports Hub, Wexford Football Club Hub, Tallaght Stadium, Marlay Sports Hub, Cavan Regional Sports Campus, Mayo Community Sports Campus and Seafield Sports & Community Facility. All projects under LSSIF 2024 are currently being progressed in accordance with the infrastructure guidelines set out by the Government. Regarding a future round of the LSSIF, our current focus is on ensuring project delivery under the first two rounds, but we intend to open a new round later in 2027.

The programme for Government confirms that we will maintain sports funding to get more people participating in all levels of sport, particularly targeting cohorts in society where there is a lower than average participation level, including people with disabilities and older people. In this context, and having regard to other relevant commitments in the programme for Government, it is important we take a strategic approach to capital investment. In the context of the development of the next ten-year national sports policy, a process I recently initiated, capital investment must deliver on the emerging policy priorities. This could take the form of more targeted investment while allowing for some demand-led funding. Such targeted funding, for example, prioritises the delivery of swimming infrastructure as highlighted in the recently published Swimming Pool Gap Analysis Report. Other areas for prioritised investment could be socially deprived areas of our inner cities and facilities therein. We should also consider

priority funding for historically underfunded sports such as boxing and sporting organisations that do not own or that lease their land or premises.

There may also be a need for an enhanced role for local authorities as we seek to provide sporting facilities proximate to new housing developments, while also taking account of the sporting preferences of our new and emerging communities. Given the challenges of increased demand and a growing population, I consider there is real merit in the development of municipally backed, shared, multi-use facilities and I encourage national governing bodies, NGBs, of sports and local authorities to collaborate in this regard.

As part of budget 2026, I was pleased to announce a €3 million multi-annual allocation to support the development of a modern and professional football academy system that will provide the structures and pathways required to support future generations of Irish players, male and female, and maximise the potential of Irish football. This is on foot of the programme for Government commitment to exploring new mechanisms for the creation of football academies. This builds on the additional funding of €1 million provided by the Department to the FAI in 2024, which enabled it to produce a detailed report on the League of Ireland academies system. That funding also enabled the appointment by the FAI of an academies administrator to support the development of new academy programmes and to track their impact.

The League of Ireland Academy Global Findings Report benchmarked Irish football academies against international standards based on an audit of existing academy structures and needs and provided a basis on which to commit to multi-annual funding support. The report revealed that Irish football talent development is significantly behind international standards, particularly when compared with nations ranked 51 to 100 by FIFA. The report outlines 50 recommendations which, if implemented in the coming years, should create a strong academy system that would underpin a sustainable domestic football league and, ultimately, strengthen the quality of players coming through to the national teams. As well as consolidating key insights, the report presents strategic recommendations to guide future progress aimed at building a robust, performance-driven environment where the next generation of Irish footballers can thrive. The report will enable informed decision-making and long-term strategic planning for elite player development and will guide future, long-term investment rather than short-term fixes.

Alignment between the FAI, the league, clubs, the Government and other stakeholders, is crucial to the successful implementation of the report's recommendations. To deliver proper oversight of the ongoing development of the League of Ireland academies, the FAI proposes to establish an academy oversight committee, a subcommittee of its national leagues committee. The FAI has invited a Sport Ireland representative to join this committee. I am pleased to update the House on the significant progress made to date on the League of Ireland academy investment since the announcement of funding in budget 2026. There has been an exceptionally strong response from across the football community to the League of Ireland academy recruitment panels. The FAI received almost 300 applications for the roles of academy director and head of academy coaching. This demonstrates both the scale of interest and the growing confidence in the League of Ireland academy system. Following the initial screening process, 50 applicants were shortlisted for the academy director role and 74 applicants for the head of academy coaching role. From this highly competitive process, 24

candidates were successfully appointed to the academy director panel and 32 candidates to the head of academy coaching panel. It is particularly encouraging to note that a significant proportion of applicants are young Irish coaches who have previously had to pursue opportunities abroad due to the limited domestic football industry. This investment in League of Ireland academies is now providing a credible pathway for these individuals to return home and build their careers within Irish football.

The panels have now been formally communicated to eligible League of Ireland clubs, many of whom have already commenced their recruitment processes using these panels. This represents an important step in strengthening the overall academy structure and ensuring a consistent, high-quality approach to talent development across the league. The first appointees will be in position before the end of this month with others coming on stream throughout the year.

However, the FAI wishes to highlight one area of concern. The number of female applicants across both roles was low, with a total of six applications received, representing approximately 2% of the overall applicant pool. The association has engaged with Sport Ireland on this matter and has provided feedback gathered from potential candidates who chose not to apply to better understand the barriers that may exist. While it is encouraging that one female applicant was successfully appointed to the academy director panel, this remains an area that requires focused attention.

The FAI has also put in place a comprehensive programme of training and guidance for clubs to ensure they fully understand both the requirements and the expectations associated with delivering recruitment processes to the highest possible standard. This investment in capacity building has not only enhanced the quality and consistency of recruitment practices across clubs but has also strengthened the overall foundations of the wider football ecosystem, embedding better governance and professionalism at club level.

Alongside the recruitment process, the FAI has developed a robust and comprehensive grant agreement framework. This sets out clear conditions for funding, including performance milestones, reporting requirements and governance standards. It ensures that public funding is subject to strong oversight, with clear accountability at club level and mechanisms in place to monitor delivery and intervene where necessary. This is a key safeguard for the Government and ensures that investment will translate into measurable outcomes. I am confident that the measures being implemented by the FAI will leave a lasting impact on the growth of the game nationwide.

The continued growth of the League of Ireland is a credit to the FAI and the clubs. Growing on an annual basis, the league is thriving, with soaring popularity and attendance at games. Its competitive nature means that for fans in the stands and watching from home, every fixture now feels like it carries significant weight. It boasts a strong mix of exciting young talent and experienced older heads, which makes for some great games. Clearly, the League of Ireland is on the up and I have no doubt this positive trend will continue.

In January, Mason Melia made the switch from St Patrick's Athletic to Tottenham Hotspur, while Josh Honohan joined Lincoln City from Shamrock Rovers. While it is a loss for the League of Ireland to lose such potential, it proves that the division boasts serious quality. The return of 36-year-old James McClean to Derry City from Championship side Wrexham will

also be a draw for supporters keen to see players who have performed on some of the biggest stages. One of the positive aspects of League of Ireland football is that it is still very much true to its roots and boasts a strong connection to its communities. While some competitions abroad may have lost their magic as commercialism takes them over, supporters of League of Ireland clubs can still enjoy an authentic matchday experience that perhaps cannot be found elsewhere.

I am particularly pleased to see how the women's domestic game has grown in recent years in the League of Ireland and generally. The FAI's strategic cycle from 2022 to 2025 saw a 79% increase in participation among women and girls compared with the previous strategic cycle, which is a tremendous achievement.

The FAI has been at the forefront in growing female participation in sport, building on the legacy of the women's national senior team competing at the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup and underpinned by its women and girls football action plan and targeted programmes like the In Her Boots campaign. There are now more women and girls playing football than ever before.

Female participation in sport is an important element of our national sports policy and represents a core priority for me and my Department. The Government is committed to eliminating the gender participation gap in sport, which has been reduced to 2.8%, and to promoting a "sport for all" approach, aimed at ensuring that all persons can partake equally in sport regardless of gender. Sport Ireland's women in sport policy supports national governing bodies as well as local sports partnerships, clubs, schools and communities in championing women and girls in sport, regardless of role or level or ability. Significant progress is being made in this regard, with increasing numbers of women and girls participating in sport and greater female participation and representation in the governance and leadership of sport in Ireland.

Our women in sport funding programme has been in place since 2005 and over the past two decades, over €30 million has been invested in promoting gender equality in sport. In the past three years alone, Sport Ireland has allocated over €1 million to the FAI to support its women in sport participation programmes, from grassroots participation and coaching to leadership, officiating, volunteering and high performance. As Minister of State with responsibility for sport, I will continue to tackle issues to ensure that women's sport reaches parity with its male equivalent and that females do not drop out of sport due to a lack of adequate training facilities or access to opportunities. I am steadfast in my commitment to continue to increase women's sustained involvement across all sports and at every level, from grassroots to high performance.

Media representation of women in sport remains uneven and greater efforts are needed to ensure women's performances and stories receive equitable coverage. Sport Ireland recently provided the first insights from its gender representation in Irish sports media research, a comprehensive analysis of sports media in Ireland examining how women in sport are represented. Analysis of more than 30,000 sports news stories across television, radio, print and online media last year showed women remain significantly under-represented in Irish sports media. Sport Ireland has previously supported several initiatives to support former athletes transitioning to a career in the media, including training, workshops and internships. The research showed women accounted for just 15% of all sports journalists and that they were 1.5 times more likely than male journalists to cover women in sport.

This landmark research serves as a powerful reminder of the visibility gaps that still exist and highlights the need to amplify women's sport across every platform. I believe there is substantial public interest in women's sport, and this is illustrated, for example, by Kate O'Connor being the third most visible athlete in media coverage in 2025, with Sarah Healy and Leona Maguire also featuring in the top 20. We have made significant strides with regards to participation and governance and the next barrier is visibility. Ultimately, coverage decisions are matters for the media and broadcasting organisations concerned and I am aware that the Future of Media Commission has called for the development of a diversity and inclusion strategy for sports reporting and broadcasting. It is essential that we increase the visibility and profile of our female athletes. Shining a spotlight on the achievements of women in sport is crucial as the heroes of today will inspire young girls to follow in their footsteps.

The Sports Action Plan 2024-2027 contains a commitment to increase participation in sport among those with long-term illnesses or disabilities to 40% by 2027. Despite recent progress, there is an enduring participation gradient between persons with either long-term illnesses or disabilities and those without such illnesses or disabilities. The Irish sports monitor survey reports that this participation gap stood at 22% as of 2024. Both the Government and Sport Ireland are extremely committed to making this participation gap in sport a thing of the past. I was pleased that increased funding secured for sport in budget 2025 enabled Sport Ireland to appoint a disability in sport lead in February 2025. The role has the potential to be transformational and the disability in sport lead will work with national governing bodies, local sports partnerships and other sporting bodies to develop and promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in sport.

Sport Ireland allocates €1.2 million at local level to fund a national network of sports inclusion disability officers, aligned to each of the 29 local sports partnerships in the country. The sports inclusion disability officers work in a co-ordinating capacity with all relevant stakeholders to increase and sustain participation opportunities for all people with disabilities. Sport Ireland has also allocated an additional €2.4 million for supporting disability sport-focused national governing bodies to continue their work in this area. This investment will help to ensure that anyone with a disability at any level, grassroots and above, can avail of their absolute right to enjoy and reap the benefits of sport and physical activity. We need to ensure that every person with a disability can step into a club, a pool, a pitch or a gym and feel that it is a place for them. A person's disability should not be an obstacle to being physically active.

The FAI has led this space for many years, beginning with the recruitment of a dedicated national lead in 2002 and the launch of its Football for All strategy in 2017. Football for All is a national programme using football as a tool for social inclusion, well-being and community development, ensuring participation is not limited by physical, sensory, intellectual or social barriers. With around 3,800 participants across 82 clubs, the programme provides a pathway from grassroots to elite level for various disability groups, including cerebral palsy, CP, amputee, deaf, blind and powerchair football. In January, I was delighted to join Muscular Dystrophy Ireland and the FAI in presenting six new wheelchairs to the Association of Irish Powerchair Football. It was truly inspiring to see the great work being done by the FAI in this regard and it was a pleasure to promote a project that so clearly demonstrated what sport could achieve when inclusivity was at its core.

A new international sports diplomacy framework for enhancing the country's international engagement through sport was published last year. The resulting strategy was launched earlier this year and provides a comprehensive basis to advance Ireland's sports diplomacy objectives. The hosting of major international sports events, such as the Ryder Cup in 2027 and the Euros in 2028, will be central to the implementation of the strategy by establishing Ireland as a sporting hub and building a global reputation as a premier sporting nation, fostering opportunities for international partnerships, cultural exchange and diaspora engagement. Major international sports events can play a key role in increasing sports participation, encourage domestic and international tourism and promoting Ireland as a destination for education and business opportunities. They present a wonderful opportunity to showcase Ireland and our world-class tourism and sports offering to Europe and the world. Last September's first ever American National Football League game to be held in Ireland was a great example of this and provided a tremendous boost to the Irish economy.

Through structured initiatives, the Government aims to leverage international sports events, like the UEFA Euro 2028 tournament, to boost participation levels in sport, together with building a lasting social, economic and sporting legacy for future generations. At the launch of Euro 2028 last year, it was confirmed that Ireland would host seven games during the tournament, including a quarter final. The Government will invest just over €92.9 million in supporting the event and it is anticipated that the tournament will generate €449 million of socioeconomic benefits for Ireland. This will be the one of the largest sporting events Ireland has ever staged. The hosting of the tournament is a unique opportunity for effective collaboration to realise a meaningful legacy for wider society and I am determined to ensure that there will be a lasting benefit to all communities.

Ireland's national legacy plans for the tournament are being developed in collaboration between my Department and the FAI. These plans will have targeted initiatives that are designed to increase participation, broaden access to football, positively impact behaviour at all levels of football and deliver for wider society. In addition to these legacy plans, there is an opportunity to work collectively with our hosting partners around key projects to deliver an impact that is beyond what is possible individually. In this regard, a community programme is being developed that will connect the participating nations and leverage the power of a UEFA Euro tournament to create additional impact for communities and drive meaningful benefits.

Euro 2028 can also be a platform to amplify key national policies, such as using an event as an exemplar for sustainable practices. It is important that the tournament enhances the sustainability and legacy benefits for sport and related sectors, such as tourism, while minimising associated climate impacts, such as transport emissions and waste generation. My officials continue to work closely with their counterparts in the other host nations and all key stakeholders to ensure that Euro 2028 is delivered in a co-ordinated and cohesive manner that meets the objectives of all partners.

We have seen the benefits of hosting major international football events most recently when the UEFA Europa League final was held in Dublin in 2024.

7 o'clock

The event played a significant role in stimulating economic growth, job creation and tourism in Dublin while also highlighting the city's cultural heritage. The final attracted a substantial

global audience of 49.5 million viewers and generated a total gross added value contribution of €17.4 million to the economy. It saw 47,000 spectators packing out the Aviva stadium with over 25,000 attendees coming from overseas, and it is estimated to have supported almost 300 jobs. It gave us a significant taste of what it will be like when we host EURO 2028 games in Dublin. Another potential major football event that is under consideration for support by my Department is the UEFA Women's Champions League final in 2029. The FAI recently submitted a preliminary bid to UEFA to host the final. The potential hosting of this event represents an opportunity to promote the growth of women and girls' football in Ireland and to build on the momentum of co-hosting EURO 2028.

Sports tourism delivers great value and hosting major international sports events enriches the tourism and hospitality sectors all across the island. These events stimulate trade, foster community pride, and contribute significantly to our ongoing economic development. They can also inspire a sense of national pride and shape both how we see ourselves as a nation and how we are perceived internationally. Guided by the Government policy and strategy framework for the hosting of major international sporting events, we will continue to support the hosting of major football events in Ireland and to explore further hosting opportunities.

The true value of sport goes beyond the playing fields and courts. Sport brings people together, fosters mutual respect and drives positive change across societies, inspiring us to be our best selves. It helps to build communities that stand together, where co-operation and mutual support are a given and our shared passion is mirrored in our individual achievements. It is a celebration of diversity and breaks down barriers, especially for the vulnerable, such as children, migrants and people with disabilities. From grassroots participation to elite and high-performance athletes, the Government is committed to supporting our sporting ecosystem and improving Ireland's standing as a sporting nation. The support that continues to be provided for football is a key example of that commitment in action.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I sincerely welcome these statements on football as an opportunity to talk about the sport I have always, and will always, love. Some of my fondest memories are of growing up in the terraces among the fans, come hail, rain or shine, supporting our home team of Drogheda United through the good times and the bad. If the emotion and love of football supporters - League of Ireland supporters, crucially - have for their teams was manifested in infrastructure, we would have more than 20 state-of-the-art stadiums around the country, an adequate academy structure and enough community football pitches for the hundreds of grassroots teams and the tens of thousands of girls, boys, women and men who play. However, this Government and every Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael government prior to it have never adequately supported Irish football. Their own real concern has been where to show up for a photograph when the senior men's national team is performing well. Government TDs could all probably name the men's team from the World Cup in the USA in 1994 but I have every confidence most on Government benches would struggle to name many of the players in the current senior women's national team. Roy Keane was good but, by God, he is no Katie McCabe. If Ireland is ever going to have success on the international stage, we need to support every local team and every local community from the small team format at under six and seven right through to senior men's and women's teams in the League of Ireland. If we want the League of Ireland to be competitive and, very importantly, self-financing, then we need to support the FAI's carefully put together plans. If we want the League of Ireland stadiums to be

adequate for use and safe for fans, we need to back the FAI's facilities and infrastructure vision and strategy. No one expects anything to happen overnight - that plan is a 15-year investment plan to address chronic underinvestment in Irish football - but sufficient investment has to start now.

That is the positive outlook for the future of football but it is not the reason for these statements today. We are here solely as a consequence of the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan's public denigration of the League of Ireland and its fans in recent weeks. His solo run, plague upon all their houses, collective punishment, sneering and classist approach to the League of Ireland after the Dundalk versus Drogheda match was utterly shameful. The Minister had to utilise Google Maps to even find his way to a League of Ireland ground to open the new AstroTurf pitch in Oriel Park and to watch the highly anticipated live derby between Drogheda and Dundalk. The Minister posted a video that showed fan's pyrotechnics prior to kick-off to highlight what a great occasion it was. That video clearly showing pyro is still in his social media today. It was all fun and games until it was not. Is it any wonder he is a gift to *Waterford Whispers News*? Regrettably, the new pitch was damaged by significant scorch marks caused by a small minority of fans throwing flares onto the pitch, which Drogheda United paid to repair in full. The Minister's response was to mete out collective punishment by announcing a pause in all AstroTurf funding for League of Ireland clubs. As the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, who is responsible for sport, confirmed, he was not made aware of this and stated here in the Chamber that he did not agree with it. Not only did the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, succeed in vilifying the many great supporters of the League of Ireland for the actions of a few, he also succeeded in undermining his colleague in his capacity as Minister of State for sport.

I have never condoned the use of pyro or flares at matches. Any right-minded football supporter at the League of Ireland would strongly condemn what happened in Oriel Park, and so do I. There is no justification for any damage to facilities, particularly when investment in infrastructure is sparse and hard won. I tell the Minister of State here now, and I hope the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, is watching from wherever is more important to him this evening, I am a League of Ireland fan all my life and I am not a plague on anybody's house. My family hails from deep in League of Ireland history and none of them are plagues on anybody's houses. Neither are all the good people and volunteers who keep the League of Ireland clubs running in spite of decades of underfunding from this and previous governments. Sadly, pyro is not a new problem for our league and it has posed challenges across the board in recent years for both the FAI and clubs to individually try to curtail. As somebody who has volunteered in a club for many years, I can attest to the challenges all clubs have in trying to make their grounds more secure. However, instead of jumping for the sake of headlines, I remain steadfast in my commitment to working with the league and other stakeholders to try to strengthen our resolve against this mindless behaviour. Government, on the other hand, has done nothing for decades to tackle this problem.

The FAI and the League of Ireland office in particular have a long history of working with clubs to highlight the dangers of pyrotechnics and making sure stadiums are safe. This is made increasingly difficult by the poor infrastructure and lack of support from successive governments, including this one. From 2013 right up to this year, the League of Ireland has run a series of education and awareness events supported by An Garda Síochána. I have attended many of these myself, so I know at first hand the conscious efforts made to try to

curtail this growing culture. The League of Ireland men's Premier Division clubs collectively spent over €2.7 million last year in safety and security for their games. This is a significant spend and highlights the fact that all clubs take safety and security very seriously. The Government, by its own track record, does not and it has little or no interest in investment in infrastructure to aid clubs or the League of Ireland in their endeavours. The Government's only interest sparked was an opportunity for a Minister to make himself relevant in a sport that one week did not know who he was to its supporters the following week displaying banners at matches telling him not so politely where to go. The Department of education in 1996 published a code of practice guidance document for safety at sports grounds, and there has been no updated version since despite all the changes in society, technology, infrastructure and, in more recent years, a growing culture of pyro. Before Government decides to vilify League of Ireland supports ever again, it should practise what it preaches and update its own code of practice for safety at sports ground into this millennium.

We all want safer stadium facilities. We want places where players young and old can play and thrive. The game is growing and attendances and support are growing. Overall last year, in competitions featuring League of Ireland teams, there was an 11.7% rise in spectators with a total of 1.1 million attending games. They achieved all this despite being underfunded. The momentum is there and it could be the easiest win of the Minister of State's Ministry to invest in the future of Irish football and take the credit for watching it bloom. To realise the full potential of football in this country, facilities have to be key. The FAI-branded League of Ireland facilities are archaic with only one stadium reaching more than 10,000 capacity, while Ireland is among the lowest in the EU for stadium projects. While average attendance has risen to over 4,000, many grounds rely on temporary structures and outdated stands. My own club is the same and has not been updated since my own grandfather built it by hand in the 1970s with the help of tradesmen in the town on their evenings and weekends. Yet, despite infrastructural constraints, the League of Ireland contributed €1.64 million to the Irish economy in 2023. Just imagine what that could bring in if significant investment by the Government was channelled into facilities. The future of Irish football lies in the Minister of State's hands and I implore him to take a realistic reflection of Government's investment in our sport. We need genuine tangible investment in the stadiums and academies if we want to see glory days again.

I wish to touch on comments made recently by me in my capacity as Sinn Féin's spokesperson on sport opposing Ireland playing Israel in the upcoming UEFA Nations League match. This, as everybody is aware by now, came at huge personal cost to me and led to me being removed from my role as chairperson of the football club I have grown up in and spent my life loving. Although this broke my heart and is something I am still trying to process and rebuild, I proudly and staunchly reiterate Sinn Féin's opposition, and my own, I might add, to Ireland playing Israel in this fixture. Israel is an apartheid state which has engaged in ethnic cleansing and genocide. Its slaughter of footballers and bombing of football pitches cannot be accepted and normalised. Front-line Israeli soldiers with blood on their hands lining out against our international team cannot be accepted or normalised. Sportswashing cannot be accepted or normalised. I am proud to have stood up and to speak up despite the consequences. Any representative of this Government who endorses this game proceeding needs to give themselves a good shake and be aware that they are going down on the wrong side of history.

Deputy Mark Ward: We only have to look at how we got behind Rory McIlroy at the weekend and his back-to-back Masters win to know the Irish people are sports mad. It was an absolutely tremendous achievement but I would argue that nothing lifts the nation like a successful Irish soccer team. It lifts the mood. I congratulate the Irish women's soccer team last night for a wonderful result away in Poland. We also saw how Troy Parrott and his team lifted the mood of the nation over the last couple of months and how the mood dropped after the agonising penalty shoot-out in Czechia.

The Government is very quick to take photo opportunities with the national team but you need to put your money where your mouth is. Population-wise, Ireland is very similar to Croatia. Croatia regularly qualifies for major tournaments and goes far in them. Ireland does not. Croatia has 190 full-time academy staff. Ireland has ten. There is a message in there somewhere. The Government has allocated €3 million for League of Ireland academies. That is welcome but it does not go far enough, particularly with the onset of the new national league, which will be the third tier of the League of Ireland. I want to congratulate Lucan United and St. Francis FC from my own area for achieving this status. I believe Letterkenny Rovers FC, in the Minister of State's neck of the woods, has achieved this status. Clubs like that will need assistance.

I am a passionate League of Ireland fan. I am at my happiest in Richmond Park cheering on St. Pat's. I travel to games up and down the country. However, the FAI has branded the stadiums in the League of Ireland as archaic, and I have to agree with it. There is only one stadium in the whole country in the League of Ireland that has a 10,000-plus capacity. When I was mayor of South Dublin County Council I had the honour of cutting the ribbon on Tallaght Stadium. It was a bit of a bittersweet moment for me as a St. Pat's supporter cutting the ribbon on a ground for Shamrock Rovers but it goes to show that, with the vision of a local authority like South Dublin County Council and the necessary backing, something like that can be achieved. All stadiums right across the country should be like that. We could have funded this through a simple 1% increase in the betting levy tax. The fact that the Government did not access the Brexit equalisation fund for League of Ireland clubs was a missed opportunity.

Like all sports, we have some bad supporters. This is true in the GAA, in rugby and in any other sports. I want to contribute my thoughts on what my colleague, Deputy Joanna Byrne, talked about. The handful of bad actors - bad Drogheda United supporters in Dundalk - were rightly condemned and nobody condemned them more than my friend, Joanna Byrne. However, the response of the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, response was absolutely disproportionate. In fact, it was snobbery towards soccer fans. It was like putting a plague on all our houses. Threatening to stop the funding for a whole league because of the action of a few is collective punishment. How dare he? As a League of Ireland fan, I find this totally unacceptable.

I also want to stand in solidarity with Deputy Joanna Byrne on her principled and moral response to Ireland playing Israel. As a season ticket holder for Ireland matches, I will not be attending this match. We should not play ball with genocide.

Grassroots soccer is something I have been involved in since I was a kid. I have been involved in it all my life. Grassroots clubs in my area are the mainstay of our communities. They keep our young people on the right road and they do not get enough credit or support. In my area the Coldcut land was recently bought by a speculator who is hoping to develop that

and get the land rezoned. I am again calling on South Dublin County Council to compulsorily purchase this amenity so clubs like Collinstown FC and Palmerstown FC can have a place to call home and grow.

Finally, I congratulate Quarryvale FC for starting an under-sevens' academy in Quarryvale Park. It is the first time in over a decade that we will see kids playing football in that park and the club needs to be commended. However, like all grassroots soccer clubs, it needs to be supported as well.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I am standing here as a GAA person. However, in my community I see the power and the work that soccer teams, soccer clubs and soccer coaches have done. I have seen over the last 40 years how the number one sport in Cork was hurling. The number one sport now in Cork is soccer. There are a number of reasons for that but I have seen it taking off. The amount of young people playing the game is unbelievable but some of the sporting facilities are horrendous. They are shocking. How this Government has failed soccer over the years is wrong.

I look at the community in soccer and how important it is. This Friday night there is the Togher *el clásico*. It is a soccer game that has been organised. I send my sincere condolences to the family of Eileen O'Leary following her tragic passing. She was buried this week. What happened was a real tragedy. Five other houses were damaged. Soccer teams are coming together - Pearse Celtic and Greenwood FC - and on Friday night they are staging the game as a fundraiser. That shows how soccer is at the heart of local communities. I wish them the very best with that.

I want to talk about the amount of clubs in my area. It is unbelievable. There is Castleview AFC, Temple United FC, Rockmount AFC, St. Mary's AFC, Mayfield United AFC, Blackstone Rovers FC. My problem is that if I start naming them I am going to miss some, like Blarney United FC and Ballincollig AFC. There are so many, but they need support.

I will give the Minister of State some figures because sometimes it comes down to figures and funding. Cork received, on average, €50 *per capita* in sports funding in 2023. That is €20 less *per capita* than the national average. That shows that Cork is not being supported the way it should be, and I believe the figure nationally is way too low.

It affects the smaller clubs. There is a club in my community, Knocknaheeny Celtic. Over the last year it has had no dressing rooms. Through work by local councillors, Michelle Gould and Kenneth Collins, Cork City Council and Ross O'Callaghan, the club now has temporary accommodation, but it has no fencing. We are trying to get more people playing soccer but the smaller clubs in the most disadvantaged areas are always the ones that lose out the most. Four soccer clubs on the northside of Cork city applied for funding in 2023. Not one of them got the full allocation. I will explain. If clubs from working-class areas or clubs from areas that are not as socially successful as others do not get all the funding they request, they will not be able to deliver the projects. That needs to be taken into consideration. We know that when kids are playing sports, especially kids from disadvantaged areas, it makes a huge difference to the outcomes in their lives.

We are very proud of the women who won the other night. Denise O'Sullivan from my community is a true leader and role model for everyone. The soccer boys did us proud. We should not be playing any games with Israel and I stand by Joanna Byrne 100%.

Deputy Pa Daly: Anyone with any interest in the League of Ireland knows there has been a huge increase in attendances at League of Ireland games over the past few years. In my county, Kerry FC has started from a low base and it has added so much to the fabric of the town. It is a place to go, even socially, every second Friday night. Those spectators are part of the more than 1.1 million people who attended games last season, an overall increase of 8%. There is no doubt, as we heard earlier, that the League of Ireland is severely underfunded. Facilities are not up to standard. However, despite that it contributed over €164 million to the local economy in the last year that we have numbers for.

Facilities are poor, especially when it comes to infrastructure and academies. Comparisons have been made to Croatia and Serbia. Croatia has 190 full-time academy coaches and Ireland has ten. Our budget is comparable to those in San Marino or Andorra. In fact, our youth set-up trails behind countries which are ranked 51 to 100 in men's and women's FIFA rankings. There was a plan to give €140,000 to each academy but now only €93,000 will be awarded to the 26 clubs. That is pennies compared with the money given to other sports. There should be a 1% increase in the betting tax and more should be given to soccer clubs because an awful lot more of the betting goes on football than on anything else. Last year the FAI presented a plan over 11 years of just over €7 million per year. Sinn Féin had suggested €5 million per year to build the infrastructure and return it to the top tier.

I, too, want to congratulate and stand with Deputy Joanna Byrne on the stand she took about the Israel game. The fanbase support her, the people of Drogheda support her and we support her.

I want to pay tribute to the club that is closest to my heart, Tralee Dynamos AFC. I pay tribute to the volunteers, the coaches and the players. It is Kerry's oldest club, at over 65 years old.

I learned so much from Frank Sheridan and Noel Hegarty. Running an extra lap around the low field stood to me in the years to come. I also pay tribute to the AstroTurf facility, and the people who did the work on it, and the girls in the women's club. Those clubs have been reaching out into the communities more than anybody else and deserve to be supported.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: Ireland's upcoming fixture against Israel should not go ahead. I want to state clearly that I condemn UEFA for its handling of this issue, a handling that shows a flagrant disregard for its principles. When Russia invaded Ukraine, UEFA acted swiftly to sideline it from the competition. Yet in the face of Israel's devastating and ongoing assault on Gaza, we see no such action. Why the double standard? Why is one state sanctioned and another afforded impunity?

In November, the FAI passed a motion calling for Israel to be banned from UEFA competitions. That was a principled position reflecting the views of the grassroots. Yet by February, that stance was abandoned, with the FAI confirming that this fixture would proceed as scheduled. I condemn the FAI for that decision and for failing to stand up for justice when

it mattered. It seems it has lost its moral compass. The Irish people have consistently shown that we would rather stand on the right side of humanity rather than be complicit in the oppression and destruction of another people.

Sport does not exist in a vacuum; it never has. There is always a political context and choices to be made about what kind of behaviour we are willing to tolerate on the international stage. On the pitch, we accept rules because there are consequences when these rules are broken. What message does it send, however, when a state that persistently breaks international laws faces no consequences at all? If this were a football match, Israel would be shown the red card. In the case of the Eurovision last year, RTÉ made the right call, reflecting public sentiment and Ireland's long-standing commitment to freedom and self-determination. We need that same courage now. The people of Palestine deserve nothing less than our continued support. Trump's so-called peace agreement, which excluded Palestinians, has done nothing to address the structural violence they face nor to advance any meaningful or just resolution. Illegal occupation continues with impunity. Ireland should have no hand, act or part in normalising that reality. Seasaim go bródúil le mo chomhghleacaí Joanna Byrne a bhaineadh go héagothrom óna post mar chathaoirleach ar Drogheda United tar éis di seasamh suas don rud atá ceart. I support the grassroots call for the GAA to end its sponsorship agreement with Allianz, a company with strong links to Israel. Thousands of GAA members have campaigned for ties to be cut and I commend their efforts.

I take the opportunity to congratulate Newbridge FC for joining the FAI National League this year, the first team in County Kildare to do so since 2009. My son played for the team and many of his friends still do. I look forward to supporting the team and I hope to see other clubs join in the future. For our local and national teams to succeed, we need adequate investment in the League of Ireland and its academies from this Government right here, right now. If the Government can prop up industries steeped in animal cruelty, surely it can invest in the League of Ireland.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The League of Ireland and the GAA have undeniably done tremendous work over recent years. This is clearly borne out by attendance figures, especially for the League of Ireland, which saw over 1.1 million people attend games. There has been more than an 11.7% rise in the number of spectators year on year. Soccer and GAA clubs have innovated in how they raise funds and how they support their local communities in all sorts of ways. I wholeheartedly commend everybody involved in football clubs. They deserve credit, especially the very many volunteers.

While Government figures will always be willing to put out social media posts during a national team campaign, the fact of the matter is that the successes of the League of Ireland have been in spite of the Government rather than because of it. The League of Ireland severely lacks investment and proper infrastructure. There have been a lot of League of Ireland jerseys outside the Chamber today. Unfortunately, while County Monaghan does have many fantastic clubs, the only professional team in my county folded back in 2012 because of debts of just €6,000. There is no League of Ireland club in County Cavan. I ask the Minister of State to put more funds into encouraging that happening in Cavan and Monaghan. We all know how beneficial it is to children and young people growing up. Instead, as a TD from a Border county, today I had to wear a Derry City jersey, which is reflective of my ambition that we would see an all-Ireland league and national team.

What we would like to see from the Minister of State is an update of the code of practice for safety and the putting in place of funding to help clubs to meet it. I also ask him to fulfil his party's commitment to increase the betting tax by 1% and put that money into sports funding, and to commit to multi-annual funding for facilities and infrastructure while working with organisations to become self-sufficient.

I also commend and show solidarity with my party colleague, Deputy Joanna Byrne. As chairperson of Drogheda United, she was central to the fantastic work that has taken place there. I note some Government figures were very quick to express opinions that the Ireland-Israel game should take place. I also welcome that the Minister for foreign affairs only recently launched a sports diplomacy policy. Let us be real, however. The Government does not have a sports diplomacy strategy for the love of the game. It is diplomatic soft power, sport being inherently political. I invite the Minister of State to reflect on his party's support for that game and perhaps consider his Government's role in supporting the soft power and sportswashing of the genocidal Israeli regime.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: As someone who worked in soccer refereeing for 15 years, I was probably called every name under the sun twice, and that was before I got into politics. I saw first-hand during that time the vital role that football plays in our society. It is far more than just a game; it is an anchor to local communities. It is a source of pride and a powerful force that connects people across generations, from young people taking their first steps in academies to older people representing their clubs and towns. The sense of identity and pride that football fosters is truly remarkable. It brings people together in a way that very few other activities can.

However, if we are to sustain that and grow this impact, we must commit to a greater investment in football from the ground up. Grassroots clubs are the lifeblood of the sport. They need the resources to thrive. In my constituency of Dublin Fingal West, there are clubs such as Rush Athletic FC and Skerries Town FC - both of which I played for, but I can only wear one jersey - Lusk United AFC and Glebe North FC in Balbriggan. These local football clubs are doing incredible work, but they cannot do it alone. They require sustained support and investment to continue serving communities and we must support them in doing this. At the same time, investment must go hand-in-hand with strong governance. Clubs, and not just soccer clubs, must be inclusive, transparent and open to all. Robust safeguarding policies, adult safeguarding policies and welfare policies are essential to ensuring that every person who participates in sport feels safe and respected and State funding to sporting organisations should be cut if they are not adhering to those codes of conduct.

We must also be clear in our stance against any form of discrimination, bullying or harassment. Football, as well as all sports, should be a space where everybody belongs. We have seen a concerning level of online abuse which also needs to be stamped out. We must also support and develop those who give their time to the games - the volunteers. Whether these are coaches or committee members, they are the backbone of our clubs. They deserve proper training and support to ensure the highest standards and best practices are taking place across not just soccer clubs but all clubs. We need to invest not just in facilities but in people, values and community. Football will continue to unite and inspire for generations should we do this.

Deputy Duncan Smith: In the long history of this Dáil there have only been two debates on football. This is the second, and the first was in 2023, put forward by the Labour Party. This debate is only happening because of a request from the Labour Party to put football front and centre in terms of much-needed funding. Our colleague, Deputy Ged Nash, is convening a cross-party group on football in the coming weeks, which we hope will have input from Members on all sides, to push the agenda of grassroots League of Ireland men's and women's football throughout this country.

That is how important the Labour Party believes football to be. When these statements were originally scheduled a couple of weeks ago, the Ireland men's team was two games away from the type of summer that many young people have never experienced and would never forget. However, there is still a bright future ahead for our men's team. There is a huge, bright future for our women's team.

Luckily - I say luckily because it is not as a result of support from the State - we have the most vibrant and exciting offering in all sport on this island, namely the League of Ireland, which runs right through the summer. Again, it is hampered from investing in itself by the rules of funding and schemes such as the large scale sports infrastructure fund, LSIF, which is very difficult for a League of Ireland club to avail of in relation to upfront funding costs. We need to invest in our stadiums in order to harness, attract and increase the numbers of people, some 1.1 million, who came through the turnstiles last year. The League of Ireland needs the support of Government, a change in the funding model and real commitment.

What was really revealing was the response of the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, a few weeks ago to the scenes in Oriel Park. Funding, such as it is, for the League of Ireland and football in this country seems to be hung and swung over the heads of those in the football community by this Government. They have to meet a bar that is so high that even a slight digression will result in the withholding of funding and support. That is just not on. It is unsustainable and proves to the football community in this country that it does not have the full support of the State. It is a feeling the football community has had forever. Those in that community have always been the poor men and poor women of Irish sport in the context of structured funding.

An independent audit completed last year found that youth football facilities in Ireland lag well behind those in another countries. Of youth facilities in the 100 countries surveyed, those here were ranked 51st by FIFA, football's world governing body. Only 4% of our clubs here have a full-time head of coaching. This compares with 46% in associations of equivalent rank. No League of Ireland club has a minimum of four full-time academy coaches. In the aforementioned FIFA-ranked countries, the figure is 36%.

I ask the Minister of State to work with the FAI, grassroots clubs and the League of Ireland. They have pulled themselves up without structured help from the State to provide the best offering of sport in this country. They need further support.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: It has been a long time since our international teams gave us such pride and pleasure. I want to pay tribute to our international women's team in particular, which pulled off a great win last night. Good luck to the team next Saturday, and indeed to the men as well for the future.

The visceral sense of excitement in the north inner city over recent weeks, particularly because of Troy Parrott, has been something to behold. I am very proud to stand here as a member of Bohemians FC. The turnaround we have seen with that club over the past number of years, which previously faced bankruptcy, which now has a high level of demand among its fans to attend matches week after week and whose the women's team reached the FAI club final last year, has been nothing short of incredible.

I want to use my time to talk not about where players are now but where they came from. That is not in any way to take away from the conversations that are desperately needed, particularly in the context of women's football, and the large disparity that exists in terms of resourcing and respect for women. It will be ten years next year since the international women's team had to go on strike.

With regard to grassroots football, across the city and beyond, football leagues in catch-up mode because vital weeks were lost in January and February as a result of weather conditions. There were teams that could not play because of the rain. This was a cruel reminder of how poorly served boys and girls in this city and beyond are because of a lack of playing facilities such as all-weather pitches.

In the time I have left, I want to make the point about how badly designed the capital sports programme funding is and how it is very much designed for rural clubs as opposed to urban clubs, many of which cannot buy sites or access long-term leases. I know of one club, namely Drumcondra AFC, which has a very proud tradition and which is more than 100 years old. That club had to partner with a private sports club and a school in order to put forward a sports capital funding application in the most recent funding round. Those involved applied for €200,000 to convert defunct tennis courts into all-weather soccer pitches for their teams. They got approximately half of what they requested in their funding application. When that happened, the private sports club withdrew its co-operation. As a community, we do not have those all-weather soccer pitches now. When I rang Killarney and said that this was problem because the private club got funding for one purpose and is using it for another, I was told "That's the way it is." That needs to change. If clubs are being allocated money for specific purposes, it needs to be used for such purposes. If I had more time, I could talk about much more about sports capital funding. We need to overhaul the way in which that funding is used in order that clubs, particularly those in disadvantaged communities, get the benefits they need.

Deputy Mark Wall: I am glad the Minister of State is here. I want to start by paying tribute to my colleague Aodhán Ó Ríordáin MEP, who was something of a lone voice in the previous Dáil when it came to football in this country. As my colleague Deputy Smith said, this is only the second time we have discussed football in this Chamber, which is simply not good enough.

I also pay tribute to the Irish women and their terrific win last night against Poland. They are role models for a growing sector of our communities, and young girls are looking up to them. However, there are issues around that which I will refer to. Unfortunately, Kildare County FC is no longer with us, having folded in 2009. I welcome the fact that Newbridge Town FC will form part of the new third division of the League of Ireland when it gets up and running.

I am an avid follower of football in this country and of the League of Ireland. It is absolutely brilliant to see the levels that clubs here have achieved, particularly in Europe. I do not think

enough credit is given to our League of Ireland clubs for their achievements in Europe over the past couple of years and for what they have done in terms of putting Irish football on the map. As has been said, we need to invest in the stadiums. Some of those stadiums are sheds. They are simply not fit for purpose and will not encourage younger people to get involved in the game or thousands of people to come out and support their clubs.

In the time remaining, I want to talk about grassroots football, because that is where it all begins. The Minister of State knows from his area the terrific growth there is in grassroots football. In my hometown of Athy, we have two wonderful clubs, namely Athy Town AFC and Clonmullion AFC. Both of those clubs struggle for facilities. For the growing population of my town, there are very limited opportunities for new people to join those clubs because of limited facilities. I have raised with previous Ministers for Sport and I raise with the Minister of State tonight the need for local authorities and Government to invest in shared facilities. I will provide an example in this regard. In Athy, 13 acres are zoned for a shared facility, yet we are not able to progress that. We have 13 acres that would make a difference to both of the clubs I mentioned and to other sports clubs in the town. What should be happening in every local authority area is that the Government should be investing and local authorities should be managing matters in order to that there are facilities and that clubs which are so desperate can grow by being provided with access modern facilities. This is something that previous Ministers for Sport said was a great idea. Unfortunately, it stopped at that. I plead with the Minister of State to investigate this idea, which we in the Labour Party have brought forward previously. Shared facilities are the way forward. The cost of land is preventing so many clubs from expanding. If we have shared facilities, that could make a difference to the football clubs of this country, particularly those in my wonderful county of Kildare.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I thank my colleague Deputy Smith for working tirelessly to get these statements on the agenda of the House. I pay tribute to the senior women's team on their win last night.

Soccer is often seen as the sport of the working class. From the outset, when clubs and teams were established by workers in industry and in working-class communities, up to the present day, soccer clubs have played a pivotal role in communities. Modern professional soccer may be dominated by money and the wealthy, but it is ordinary working people who make the sport what it is. Whether it is in Cork, Dublin or Belfast, soccer has deep roots in Ireland. It continues to be the most participated in team sport in the country according to Sport Ireland's Irish Sports Monitor 2024. At a push, all you need are two hoodies and some semblance of a ball to kick around the street and you have yourself a game.

The recent utterances of the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, about collective punishment for the League of Ireland exposed the clear dissociation and neglect the sport is often the subject of in Ireland.

The funding made available through the Department each year must be fairly distributed as it is often the case that soccer clubs are the ones scrambling for a pittance while others thrive. As with many sports, it is the community at grassroots level that keeps soccer alive and thriving. We can see it all over Ireland. In my constituency and in my town we even have two clubs, Mallow United AFC and Mallow Town Football Club. The prosperity and success of community clubs is reliant on the volunteering and fundraising of dedicated members of our

communities. Clubs like Mallow United host "Strictly Come Dancing" type events to raise funds for their facilities, like the one in the Charleville Park Hotel on Saturday, 18 April to which I will be lending my dancing skills, or lack thereof, in support. Not only do we see this positive reflection on community at grassroots level, we also see professional clubs like Cork City Football Club and their community kit room initiative that provides good condition goalkeeper gloves, jerseys, training gear, boots, used footballs, training bibs and cones at no cost, supporting those in the community who otherwise would go without. That is what soccer is: the people's game, a unifier, and the world's game.

I want to touch on the Nations League fixture between Ireland and Israel. I will not waste anyone's time by asking the Minister of State with responsibility for sport to do anything here, but I will say that this game should not be going ahead. Israel should be banned from participation in FIFA and UEFA competitions. The Israel Football Association has breached multiple UEFA and FIFA statutes. Six Israeli clubs play on occupied territories - Palestinian lands. There are reports that over 500 people associated with the Palestinian FA have been murdered by Israeli forces. The governing bodies are failing the sport with Israel's continued inclusion. No Irish player should be put in a position where they have to compete against a team representing a state like that. Any player who feels in good conscience that he or she cannot participate should be fully supported by the association and by the Department of sport. One thing is for sure, the fans will support them.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. Before calling the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, I extend a welcome to the Flemish minister for agriculture and environment, and the ambassador, who are here with the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan. You are very welcome.

For those in the Public Gallery, it is good to see so many in attendance. I mention in particular the representative from Taiwan, Daniel Diann-Wen Tang, his wife, Stephanie Chang, and Christina Hong, here with Deputy Barry Ward. You are very welcome. I must also mention that Deputy Timmins is in the Gallery with some visitors. You are all very welcome. It is good to see the representative here from Taiwan and the Flemish delegation too.

We now move to the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Football is one of Ireland's most popular sports and we as a Government are proud to back it at all levels, from grassroots clubs where our youngest players take their first kick to professional academies that will shape the next generation of our Irish international players. Football is a hugely popular sport in Carlow and I could take up my entire time slot here naming every football club in the county. The work our football clubs do within our community is extremely important. They bring our local communities together for social occasions and for physical activity. Any evening of the week, or any day or at the weekends we see children, young people and adults out training on football pitches across the county. I give particular mention to the football teams, both men's and ladies, at the South East Technological University, SETU. We are blessed to have such an amazing sporting facility in Carlow thanks to SETU. It is also wonderful that the young people in our communities are able to witness such high-quality football being played in our county in such fantastic facilities. We saw how much joy and excitement the Irish team brought to the country recently as they

pushed for the World Cup qualification. Sadly, they did not make it but the whole country was behind them. I also mention our Irish women who won last night against Poland. We hope they can recreate their run to the World Cup. We all remember the excitement of seeing them play in the last World Cup in Australia. I hope as many people as possible turn out to support them this weekend in the Aviva Stadium.

The Government's commitment to Irish football is reflected in the numbers. From 2020 to 2024, over €71 million was awarded to football-specific projects under the community sports facility fund. A further €52.4 million was directed to football under the large-scale sports infrastructure fund, giving clubs across the country the modern, high-quality facilities they need and they deserve. A total of €6 million per year is provided to the Football Association of Ireland to support football development programmes at every level of the game. In budget 2026, the Government provided a landmark investment into the League of Ireland academies, providing multi-year funding to professionalise all 26 League of Ireland academies. This will create full-time coaching roles across the country to provide our most talented young players with the high-performance training they require to fulfil their potential. As the saying goes, "If you can't see it, you can't be it". This is why under the large-scale sports infrastructure fund the Government has ensured there will be equal access to funding and facilities for men and women. Our investment in grassroots girls' programmes, the FAI women's and girls' action plan, and the development of female coaches at all level of the game, reflects our belief that women's football must be supported as a priority.

Football is more than just an elite level sport. As a Minister of State with responsibility for public health and well-being, there is a lot of great work going on in my Department to promote physical activity throughout the country. Under our walking tracks fund, €400,000 was provided to football clubs last year to develop walking tracks in the clubs' grounds to make facilities as accessible as possible for the whole community. Healthy Ireland also provides funding each year to promote physical activity. This includes park runs, which are huge successes and which continue to go from strength, and the active schools' flag programme. Funding is also provided to promote walking football, which I know is a valuable outlet for so many of our older adults who still love the game and want to stay active.

I thank the Minister of State for his commitment. He has been visiting a lot of clubs around the country. It is hoped the grant scheme will be ready. The Minister of State is committed to providing the supports needed to ensure that we have top-class facilities throughout Ireland. It is so important. Everybody's health and well-being is so important. Being active and seeing communities involved in so much sport gives exceptional benefits.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I appreciate the opportunity to be here this evening to speak and make statements related to football. I have a couple of points I would like to make, My initial point is to say a massive thank you to all the clubs in the country, especially in my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny, to all the volunteers, all the executive, all coaches, all parents and all players. It is a fantastic asset to have for a community. I have seen at first hand incredible developments in Kilkenny and in Carlow in soccer facilities, soccer infrastructure and increased participation in sport and soccer, particularly among females. It is fantastic to see. A huge amount has been done but we need to continue to do more to encourage participation in sport, especially among our females.

It is in that context I want to talk a little bit about the sports capital grant or the community sports facilities fund, which will be announced shortly. The total allocation of that has increased significantly over the last terms. It had gone from €70 million to €170 million, and the last tranche was €270 million. There is a fantastic opportunity here now for all sports clubs but for soccer clubs in particular to really increase the infrastructure and the capacity of their sports facilities, whether it be dressing rooms for girls, AstroTurf pitches, floodlights or walkways around them. There is a significant pot of money going to be made available. I would encourage every sporting organisation and every soccer organisation in Kilkenny and in Carlow to get their applications ready, to give me a shout, and we will make sure we get as many of those over the line as possible.

In relation to the FAI and the proposals for the summer league, which was a very hot issue around 12 months ago, I acknowledge and thank the FAI for its openness in discussing it and in allowing every county to decide what is best for itself. I am from Kilkenny and we are a massive GAA county. We love our hurling but we love our soccer as well. The summer calendar would not have worked because people would have picked one sport over the other. They can co-exist. I commend the FAI on allowing each county to decide what is best for itself. In Kilkenny and Carlow we have a fantastic situation where, in the winter months, our soccer is played brilliantly and we have the facilities for it with AstroTurf and floodlights, and in the summer the GAA takes over. They can absolutely co-exist. In the context of the sports capital grant or the community sports capital fund, I encourage the Department to support joint applications.

We have a lot of situations where communities and areas have come together, and the local GAA club and soccer club are side by side. I encourage that applications involving a soccer club and a GAA club be prioritised in this round in order to make sure that amount of money involved is as high as possible.

I pay particular tribute to a group of girls involved with Highview Athletic in Graiguenamanagh, which is my club. The first girls' team was formed approximately five years ago. They have been campaigning and playing. Two weeks ago, they won the league. It is a great story of resilience. It was the first girls' soccer team ever in the history of the club. There is now a girls' soccer team at every single age group. They went on and won the league, but it is not about winning the league. It is about the friendships they have made and the spirit the group has formed together. It is about the coaches and the work they have done. It is about the parents. I commend every person involved in that group, from the coach to the grannies who dropped girls to training and the whole soccer community, because that was an incredible achievement. It goes to show the importance of sticking together, the importance of sport and the importance of resilience and the life lessons learnt.

We need to continue to invest in sport and in football. I encourage the Minister of State to fight as hard as possible to make sure that as much funding as possible is made available to the FAI and the football sector and to the grassroots. That is really important.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I welcome this debate on support for football throughout the country. I welcome the Minister of State's commitment to invest in football. I also welcome the investment in academies that was announced for this year. We have seen new leadership within the FAI. The vision those people have for our national teams, the League of Ireland and

grassroots football is critical. As others have said, the investment we will see as part of the next round of the sports capital fund is very important in that regard. Clubs that work in partnership with other clubs and local authorities and that are the backbone of the communities we all live in must receive support. I know this from speaking to people from many of the clubs I meet with regularly in my community.

I echo the comments about how it is often difficult to get access to land in fast-growing areas and urban centres. There must be regard for fast-growing communities and the pressure they are under. I represent one of the fastest growing constituencies in the country. I look at Gorey Rangers, which my dad was involved in founding in 1962 and which is attracting so many young people who are coming into the town and playing on the schoolboys' and schoolgirls' teams. They need the support to be able to develop more pitches. It is similar with Gorey Celtic. There is also Courtown Hibs. Courtown Riverchapel is now the fifth largest urban settlement in County Wexford. Courtown Hibs is by far the largest sporting club in that community. It is incredibly inclusive, particularly in what it is doing for those with disabilities. I look at Arklow Town FC, founded in 1948, which is the backbone of Arklow and supported by people within the community. There is also St. Joseph's in Kilmuckridge, which is a huge club in a rural and strong GAA area. Yet, this is a club with over 500 members that works closely with Coláiste an Átha, the secondary school in Kilmuckridge. There is Tombrack United in a really small community, but everybody is involved because in many of our communities they are not just involved in the soccer clubs or the local school. They are involved in every aspect of what happens.

Soccer clubs are not just for playing football. It is about how they contribute toward community life. What we have to be about as a Government and as a society is not just building housing, which we really need, we must also communities. That is about investing in community, sports and cultural facilities, and providing soccer pitches is critically important. I look forward to working with the Minister of State on the next round of sports capital grants, which will be announced in the coming months, and, in particular, on supporting the clubs that are doing so much to build our communities and grassroots football.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: Like everyone here, I was disappointed that our boys in green did not qualify for the World Cup on this occasion, but they made us proud and reminded us of what it is like to dream. I wish the girls in green the best of luck as they progress in the campaign for the qualifiers. They are inspiring young girls up and down the country. The key to this debate is investment in our young people, our clubs and our communities. Throughout my constituency are a number of excellent soccer clubs that are very well organised. There are Kilbarrack United, St. Malachy's FC, St. Paul's Artane, Killester Donnycarney, Raheny United, Howth Celtic and Baldoyle United to name a few.

Across the constituency, there are not enough facilities. I refer, in particular, to all-weather pitches. We have had a sodding wet winter, and the spring has not been much better. Ordinary grass pitches are not playable for periods of the year, and training is impossible. The solution to this is all-weather pitches. Unfortunately, we have had an issue with the habitats directive. Where there have been applications for all-weather facilities, there have been hiccups with regard to the brent geese. We are beginning to break through that particular problem, but it will certainly restrict the numbers of all-weather facilities that will be available to us.

Unfortunately, given our weather patterns, there will be a continued demand for all-weather facilities.

We have burgeoning numbers in clubs. We have burgeoning female participation. It is skyrocketing and it is brilliant that it is. These all-weather pitches are life savers to our clubs. Teams can train longer into the evening and the surface allows them to have training sessions and games right throughout the year. These teams want to play throughout the year. They do not want to just be playing when the sod is dry. Clubs in the area they tell me that female participation is exploding. That is fantastic to see this. I have heard countless stories from clubs that they do not have changing or toilet facilities for their girls' teams. This is unacceptable in this day and age, and it has to change. I urge that this be prioritised in the upcoming round of sports capital funding and will be made available particularly in tandem with local authorities. I think of St. Anne's Park in Raheny where a lot of clubs play and where there are no facilities for the female participants in particular. Our clubs take young people off the streets where they could otherwise get involved with the wrong things and go down the wrong road.

Investment in soccer and in sport is really important. Like Deputy Cleere, I thank the volunteers who get up early to set out the cones and hang the nets, who stay late planning training sessions and formations, who wash the kits and fill the water bottles and who give lifts in order that players and supporters can get to games and training. They are the backbone of our clubs. They do Trojan work that often goes unnoticed. This is really an opportunity for all of us in this House to thank them for the work they do. The grassroots are the most important part of any sport. It is not enough to praise our teams and players when they succeed. We have to support them long before they pull on the green jersey and have a senior cap.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak on these statements. I am a lifelong football fan. I am wearing a Bohs jersey. I am a supporter, a season ticket holder and a member there. The work they do not just on the pitch but also in communities is second to none.

I played a fair bit of football. In truth, it was an experience to change on the side of a pitch. Pitches were a set of goals, and a pitch marked out on a flat piece of agricultural land. Sometimes, it was not flat. We often had to clear dung off the pitch before a game. In the late 2000s, I played in the top division in Meath and Louth. We could not use our home pitch for games because it was just not up to standard, like so many others in the competitive league. In our case, our home pitch was where a decent farmer had let us use his land,. There were no changing rooms or any other facilities. That was the reality. While it is better now, there are still many clubs in Meath, Louth and across the State that do not have anywhere near appropriate facilities.

The standard of coaching has progressed light years from where it was. There are players from Meath, men and women, boys and girls, who are making progress like never before. All you have to do is look at the national team, the League of Ireland and elsewhere. Players who hail from Meath are right up there. The interest and the talent are there, but they are being let down by a lack of facilities, a lack of resourcing and a lack of investment. The Minister of State has to invest, particularly for our youngsters, both boys and girls, and in our academies. By any reasonable measure, he is coming up way short.

8 o'clock

We are light years behind. Croatia is a reasonable comparator. It has 190 full-time academy staff whereas we have just ten. I ask the Minister of State to please invest in academies. They are the places our future internationals learn their trade but they are being short-changed. The Government allocated just €3 million compared with an ask of €4.45 million.

My final message is on Ireland versus Israel and Israel versus Ireland. Netanyahu is a war criminal. His regime is genocidal. We cannot facilitate this attempt at sportswashing. Stop the game.

Deputy Ann Graves: I begin by acknowledging all the great work done by thousands of volunteers who ensure our young people have an opportunity to play football every week. We owe a deep gratitude to all the coaches who turn up week in, week out in all weathers to train our young players to be the best they can be both on and off the pitch.

The Dublin schoolboy league is the biggest football league in Europe and without the volunteers it simply would not function. I have seen the great work done by the coaches and board, with a special mention to Éoin Sherlock in my local football club Swords Manor. I am proud to wear its jersey as a mark of respect to the club and what it does for our community. Its impact is felt way beyond the football pitch. Swords Manor was founded back in 1995 and now boasts 600 members, 550 players, 30 teams and 75 volunteers. I also want to acknowledge the other local clubs in Swords. Swords Celtic was founded in 1962 and is one of the oldest clubs in Fingal. River Valley Rangers have 300 members with 22 teams in four different leagues. This is just a snapshot of the amazing work done by soccer clubs in Swords but it is also reflected across the length and breadth of Fingal east. Every club is making our communities better, healthier and safer places for everybody but they need support. They need additional pitches, including all-weather pitches. Many teams are making long journeys just to get to a playable pitch. They also need access to facilities and funding. The positive experience gained on football teams is priceless, so we need to invest more in our clubs.

I acknowledge my comrade Deputy Byrne. She grew up with Drogheda United and literally learned how to walk on the football pitch. She went on to become the first and only female chair of a League of Ireland team and I stand in solidarity with her. I also applaud her strength of character and the way she has dealt with an appalling situation over the last couple of months. There is no place for genocide in sport. The Irish football team should not play Israel.

I will finish by congratulating the Irish women's team and wishing them the very best at the weekend.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Picking up on the last speaker's comments, I too express my solidarity with Deputy Byrne and acknowledge the very difficult period she has been through and how well she has held herself throughout. I congratulate the Republic of Ireland women's team on their win yesterday against Poland in the World Cup qualifiers.

I will speak about sportswashing, grassroots facilities, the League of Ireland and supporting the women's game at this critical juncture. Football is the largest participation sport in the world and the largest participation sport in Ireland. It has such potential for good in our world but sportswashing is a blight on the game and has been rampant over the last period. FIFA and

UEFA permitting Israel's Nations League participation while a genocide is carried out is both abhorrent and damaging. It is also wrong that the decision was made by the FAI to participate in the Nations League Israel fixture. However, it has been heartening to see our domestic football community's response to the genocide and to sportswashing. In November, a resolution was passed by FAI members to submit a motion to UEFA to ban Israel from its European club and international competitions. The resolution requested the immediate suspension of Israel from European competitions and cited violations by Israel's football association of two provisions of UEFA statutes, the first being its failure to implement and enforce an effective anti-racism policy and the second being Israeli clubs playing in occupied Palestinian territory without the consent of the Palestinian Football Association. Some 63% of our domestic league players who are members of the Professional Footballers' Association of Ireland voted against Ireland fulfilling the Nations League Israel fixture and celebrated managers like Brian Kerr and Stephen Bradley have used their voices to condemn the sportswashing being carried out - and this is sportswashing. Week in and week out, fans at games hold Palestine flags in the stands to call for solidarity with the people of Gaza and the West Bank. This response by so many involved in Irish football is truly something to be proud of in the face of unprecedented attempts at sportswashing.

As the Social Democrats spokesperson on sports people come to me with their many concerns about the funding and governance of sport here, including football and including my constituency of Dublin Rathdown. Pitch space, especially in urban areas, is increasingly difficult for clubs to secure. Rosemount Mulvey Football Club in Dundrum have had to fight so hard for a second pitch and have told me of the very real fear of having to turn kids away because they simply cannot accommodate more members. While I am confident Rosemount's particular issue will soon be resolved, other clubs around the country are experiencing the same pitch issues. Many clubs struggle with a lack of facilities for playing, changing and conditioning, and in Ireland only 34% of clubs at grassroots level have female toilets. We know what the dropout rates are for girls in sport so basic facility provision is an absolute must.

We have to meet the moment when it comes to football in Ireland. It is fantastic to see crowds making their way to Dalymount after work for evening fixtures or families making the trip to watch a Rovers game in Tallaght Stadium at the weekend. The growth in our domestic game is undeniable. Viewership is up, attendance is up and participation across demographics is up, as are the crucial gifts to society delivered by football and sport more widely, like community, respect, solidarity, integration, friendship, health and well-being. However, in order to harness this growth, we must invest in it through the community sports facilities fund, the large-scale sports infrastructure fund and every avenue we have.

The women's game is certainly an area that needs continued and further investment. As a staff member of a League of Ireland club said to my office yesterday, you cannot grow the game from success; you have to prime it for success. We have the potential to be a top-tier nation in the game and we are at an important and exciting time with growth in women's football, so let us deliver for our domestic league, elite pathways and our national side and be vanguards for equality in football.

Media coverage is another area that is important for the women's game. It is great to see increased coverage of our women's fixtures over the last number of years but we need to see this in broader media coverage. Niamh Tallon, founder of Her Sport, highlighted recently that

the FAI and RTÉ both put out messaging that the men's World Cup qualifiers could lead to the first World Cup qualification by Ireland in 20 years, which ignored the fact that the women's squad competed in the 2023 World Cup. These standards and recognition matter in coverage. I mention also League of Ireland women because there really is something magic with that league. Today, I am proud to wear the kit of my local club, DLR Waves. The standard of football and incredible athletes we have in DLR Waves and across the league as well as the fan communities building around the country are phenomenal and I urge everyone here to get to a fixture.

I add my condemnation of the Minister's comments and reaction as classist, divisive and harmful to people and to a sport that is the lifeblood of so many of our most deprived communities.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I am wearing my Shelbourne top tonight because that was my boyhood club where I spent a lot of my Friday nights both as a kid and an adult. A couple of years ago, the fans of Shelbourne were at risk of losing Tolka Park, which the club had grown in, and embarked on a campaign to save the ground. It was an inspiring campaign that was fan-driven and culminated when Shels won the league. It was genuinely heartwarming, so I pay tribute to the fans of Shelbourne FC.

A couple of embarrassing statements have emanated from the Minister of State's Department, though admittedly not from him. A few weeks ago, even I had to step back when I read in the newspaper that the launch of Kerry FC's pitch, which had received €380,000 in well-deserved funding, had to be delayed because the Minister could not attend. It turns out that the Department has a policy requiring clubs receiving over €100,000 to give a month's notice so Ministers can attend openings. This is neither the Minister of State's money nor the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan's money but the people's money. Launches do not necessarily need to be delayed so that Ministers can attend. It led me to have a little step back because while Ministers are very quick to go cut ribbons, they are not so quick to show up when things are a little more difficult. It is more difficult to launch pitches in an urban city centre environment because the clubs do not have the space. They do not have the space from public land. They do not have the long-term leases by which they could avail of the sports capital grant.

That is a structural failure that has huge consequences. I have raised in the Chamber on any number of occasions that kids in the north and south inner city of Dublin have literally nowhere to play an 11-a-side football game. I raised this during Leaders' Questions a few weeks ago and highlighted the fact that, *per capita*, Dublin received only €26.50 per person under the sports capital grant. The national average is €54 per person and counties like Leitrim, which are very deserving, get over €100 per person from the sports capital grant. Dublin city, the place where Troy Parrott learned to play sports and where we have any number of national heroes, does not have an 11-a-side football pitch.

I understand that the Pobal deprivation index was designed to weigh applications for capital sports grants but you cannot weigh an application that has not been submitted. The application cannot be submitted if clubs do not own their own land or have long-term leases. My appeal to the Minister of State is based on grassroots football. It does not matter to me if a kid goes off and plays for Ireland, lifts cups or anything like that. Football is my sport, but sport in

general is the means by which we can galvanise a young person, give them the confidence, get them to do teamwork and have the role models like I had in Sheriff YC, and the managers who made sure many years ago when I was a kid that I was home on a Friday night for the match on a Saturday. When you have pitch bookings that are consistently being called off because they are water damaged or because the pitches you are playing on miles away from where you live are overbooked, it means we lose the capacity to give those kids the same chance to just play a game on an AstroTurf pitch the way they can in so many other communities around the country. We need to really look at how we allocate the sports capital grant and give more weighting to clubs that do not have the capacity to own their own land or have leases, or even moreso, invest in municipal facilities.

If Dublin City Council were to avail of the sports capital grant, which it has done, it has to give 30 cent on every euro it receives. I want Dublin City Council to be building houses. I want it to be confronting dereliction. If I am constantly on to Dublin City Council to build municipal sports infrastructure and if it were to avail of those grants, that money would be taken away from other immediate needs of the city.

I understand that an evaluation of the sports capital fund is going on. We need innovation and a somewhat different approach to level the playing field. Communities that I represent in Dublin Central, that Deputy Jen Cummins represents in Dublin South-Central and, I am sure, other communities, particularly in urban environments, do not have the leases and do not own the land. That creates a problem with huge deficits. I raised this matter with the Tánaiste a couple of weeks ago and he understood the issue and said we would arrange a meeting together. Understandably, I am waiting for that meeting as there have been other things going on. If we could sit down to see how best we could achieve that aim, it would be to the benefit of kids who simply love football and do not have anywhere to play it at the moment. I understand the Minister of State would be open to that.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I thank the Minister of State for still being present. I join with the congratulations offered to the women's national team on their heroic victory this week. I wish them the very best. I join with my colleagues and friends in offering our full solidarity to Deputy Byrne this evening.

I would like to speak to the Minister of State about Tadgh, Nathan, Cian, Jack, Sam, Morgan - bear with me - Damien, Donal, Luke, Dominic, Finn, Sean, Niall, John, Enis, MJ, Fiachra, Hugh, Liam, Ronan, Evan, Kyle, Oisín, Heidi, Conor, Rory and Ryan. These young people have been heroes to me since becoming their football coach for the under-7s at Prosperous United AFC about eight years ago. Like most other coaches, we just volunteered as parents. We had no coaching badges and we had no experience, just the best of intentions. Since then, we have spent most Thursday nights together and most Saturday mornings together and, in truth, it is the highlight of my week. We have experienced the highest of highs and the lowest of lows together.

The other coaches - Damien, Tommy and Diarmuid - and I made a commitment to this group many years ago that we wanted to teach them as much about life as we did about football. During that time, we have proudly watched them transition from children to fine young adults. They have learned about discipline, teamwork, integration, honesty, loyalty, belief, hard work, resilience and just so much more. I commend every volunteer coach involved with underage

football in this country, whether it is marking pitches, washing jerseys, hanging nets, organising games, pumping footballs or doing training courses, all for the love of the game, or the players for love of the club and their community.

As I see it, there are two important problems facing grassroots football in this country. One lies at the feet of this House and one at the feet of the FAI and the leagues. For those who get to play football, our league starts in early August and ends in May. That is the best part of ten months and during that time we have played ten league games this year. We have had more games called off than we have played. Ireland is simply not equipped for winter football. I know others in this House disagree but some clubs might have an AstroTurf pitch; most do not. We need to have an open conversation from a health perspective and from a climate perspective as to whether the future lies in AstroTurf pitches at all. What happens year after year in our league is that we end up cramming two or three fixtures into every week during late April and May just to get the season finished. There is very little enjoyment to that, as the Minister of State can imagine. I understand there would be significant criticism, and there has been, of the calendar season moving to summer football. If we act in the best interests of the children we are volunteering with, then I struggle to see how we can be opposed to that. There will be pressure with competing sports but, in truth, that is happening already. The GAA season has expanded for many young people in the county and they manage to compete in other sports right throughout the year. Until national and regional sporting bodies start talking to one another in the best interests of the young people, that will continue to happen. There might be availability issues during the summer, whether it is for referees or pitches, but we need to get around that because I am not alone in being sick of calling off games and waking up on Saturday at 7.30 a.m. and waiting on a phone call or text to say, "No game again" or "No training again." It is just really frustrating. A reality check is needed between the FAI, the leagues and those who we are working on behalf of.

What about the children who do not play football or who cannot play football? During the past couple of years of having the privilege of being spokesperson for children and young people, I have come to the conclusion that we are pricing children, young people and their families out of sport. It is happening quietly, but it is happening. Clubs are not rolling in cash. The ever-increasing cost of keeping a club going have resulted in the need to bring in huge sums of money annually. My understanding is the best-resourced clubs are those with someone on the committee who is adept at filling out grant application after grant application, or a crew that is willing to go to great lengths to fundraise every year to keep the pitches and doors open. If it costs €100, €150, or €200 to join the club before you even buy your boots, socks and shorts and pay for travel, what that results in is a cohort of children and young people simply never making it to the pitch. I ask the Minister of State again to support the Social Democrats' call for a €100 sports and culture voucher in budget 2027. What that would do is effectively guarantee access to sport for every child in this country. It would mean they could choose football. They might choose something else. It is a no-brainer.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I am glad of the opportunity to speak on these statements tonight. Soccer gives this country great joy, similar to all sports. In fact, I attended the opening of a new stand at Cratloe GAA Club in County Clare the other day. I had to deliver a speech and I asked the crowd, if we did not have sport, what would we have. It is such a way of life for people, whether they are playing it, being actively involved or volunteering at the local clubs.

Then there are those whose playing days are over. They may be bringing their kids to training and they are getting immense joy from that, whether it is watching the local teams or the county teams. Then there is soccer and the joy it has brought to us, particularly recently, because there have been bad days in Irish soccer. I was born in 1982 and grew up thinking Ireland would always reach World Cup quarter finals. It was not so but the joy it has brought again in recent times has been absolutely incredible.

It is lovely to see children going around wearing jerseys with "Parrott Number 7" written on them and Katie McCabe jerseys as well. What is wonderful is that, when I was growing up during the eighties and nineties, there was just men's sport. There was only one Irish football team to get behind. There has always been an Irish women's team but it is televised now. The names are household names. My daughter and her friends know the players and are behind them. Men are watching them and women are watching them. It is a sport for all, and long may that continue. Yet there is still a long journey to go in terms of women's sports. I ask that, when the Minister of State has any budgetary opportunities, whether it is on budget day or within his Department with allocations of sports capital funding, that he take cognisance of that journey that players, their parents and their coaches are making to bring women's sports to a level playing field.

As I mentioned on budget day, on the most recent budget day, the Minister of State made a positive announcement that there would be €3.5 million allocated to academies affiliated with League of Ireland clubs. That was fantastic. I do not know how the dates aligned but there was bad news around then that club development officers were being given redundancies. All except development officers affiliated with the women's senior, men's senior and men's under-21 teams were offered redundancy. The package to have academies affiliated with League of Ireland club was significant. It allows the next generation of Troy Parrotts and Katie Taylors to start at grassroots level. I am concerned, though, because League of Ireland is the elite structure of club football in Ireland but there are many counties, my own included, that do not have a League of Ireland club. There is Treaty United down the road, Galway and clubs in neighbouring counties. Not to take from that budget announcement, which was fantastic and long may it stand, but it would be great to have an additional layer of local development teams funded by the Government or local authorities leading out the counties as well. I am not going to get into naming all clubs or players; my young lads played with Corbally United up until recently. It is a fantastic club. There are so many clubs across Clare. In the southern belt of the county, some play in the Limerick district soccer league while many more play in the Clare league and even in the Tipperary league. It is fantastic to see youngsters on Saturday and Sunday mornings kicking the ball up and down the field, learning skills from coaches who give up their time. Like others, I commend the volunteerism. I ask that, going forward, we might have some budgetary package for that. For any clubs watching, the man I am addressing these comments to is the Minister of State with responsibility for sport, Deputy Charlie McConalogue - may it be repeated again and again over the coming months. He will be visiting clubs throughout County Clare and other counties. I look forward with my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, to bringing him to the clubs of County Clare. I hope he will deliver for a lot of us as the year goes on.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Football and sport more widely in Ireland, particularly at grassroots level, are some of the strongest forces we have in building communities. Many

Deputies were brave enough to wear the football kits of their local clubs today but I could not be seen to be wearing one club over another, particularly in Kildare North where we have so many clubs like, in my own hometown, Maynooth Town Football Club, Celbridge Town AFC, Leixlip United AFC, Confey FC, Kilcock Celtic FC, Ballyoulster United AFC, Straffan AFC, Kill Celtic AFC, Naas AFC, Sallins Celtic FC, Caragh Celtic FC, Clane United AFC and BBC United FC in Broadford. That shows the level of football throughout Kildare North. A lot of those clubs were established in the 1970s and 1980s when Kildare North started to expand and the population was increasing. They deliver so much to their communities. I want to mention in particular Maynooth Town Football Club because Maynooth Men's Shed was at a difficult point last year when it had to vacate the premises it was in. My colleague, Councillor Donna Phelan, and I were contacted by the men's shed and were looking for a new site for it. Councillor Phelan approached Maynooth Town Football Club, as did I, and it was extremely welcoming. Now, a brand new shed, supported by Kildare County Council, is on Maynooth Town Football Club's grounds. That shows the level of community involvement by these football clubs.

I also want to mention Klub Kildare. There has been talk of League of Ireland and its expansion. Klub Kildare has the potential to enter senior leagues and become a League of Ireland club. I initially thought that the then Maynooth University Town FC between Maynooth University and Maynooth Town Football Club could be that club, but Klub Kildare, encompassing the entirety of the county, is really the way forward. Two or three years ago, we had St. Patrick's Athletic FC and I thought "St. Brigid's Athletic" would be an apt name for a football club in Kildare. If we get the pathway right for clubs to enter the League of Ireland, it will be able to expand in a sustainable way.

We have seen the success and increased numbers attending matches. This is really positive for the homegrown game and for the future. In women's football in particular, there has been an explosion, with Katie McCabe and all the senior women's football team being really inspiring in their match against Poland.

On sports capital grants, a lot of clubs are crying out for all-weather pitches. Celbridge Town AFC is looking at an all-weather pitch, as is Ballyoulster. Ideally, every club would have one but we will try to be as constructive and strategic as possible working with these clubs. The most important thing is that, by investing in our sports clubs, be they soccer, GAA, rugby or whatever, we are investing in community infrastructure and the very fabric of our communities.

I commend the Minister of State on his work. I thank the volunteers, parents and everybody who contributes to clubs around Kildare.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity, like others, to contribute to this debate on football. I begin by acknowledging what we all felt in recent weeks - the excitement, unity and sheer emotion our national team brought to Ireland. An estimated 1.6 million people tuned in to watch the match against Czechia. That figure alone tells you everything you need to know about the reach and power of football in Irish life. The result in Prague was not what we wanted or hoped for but the journey reminded us of something important - football does not just entertain, it connects. Like others, I congratulate the women's football team on their result against Poland. I wish them continued success. Football connects communities, generations

and parts of the country that sometimes feel forgotten by other sports. I know this first-hand from my own constituency in Dún Laoghaire. We are fortunate to have a network of clubs that are the backbone of community life. Cabinteely FC is a very large club in south County Dublin with over 60 teams and has been part of the community since 1967. Granada FC in Blackrock is one of the largest in the constituency. It has had generations of young people pass through its doors for more than 50 years. Shankill FC, with over 30 teams and three academies, operates in one of the fastest-growing residential areas in the country and is crying out for more resources; I know the Minister of State is aware of that. Dalkey United Football Club, which Paul McGrath played for as well as Pearse Rovers in his earlier days, is working closely with Cuala GAA on plans for a new clubhouse at Hyde Park in Dalkey, a great example of sports working together. I want to mention TEK United and Valeview in Shankill, which has a long history and tradition in the borough as well.

All of these clubs face real challenges, though. Sallynoggin Pearse Rovers have been waiting years for a clubhouse and are engaging with the local authority. St. Joseph's AFC, or Joey's, in Sallynoggin is seeking a new all-weather pith. Like every grassroots club in the country, they are all short of pitch space, particularly in Dublin, and these are not isolated problems. The FAI's own data tells us that only 34% of grassroots clubs have female toilet facilities and only 10% have access to indoor facilities. At a time when female participation is growing rapidly, that is simply not good enough.

The investment case is overwhelming. Grassroots football delivers an estimated social return on investment of €1.8 billion, almost €18 returned for every single euro invested. The League of Ireland contributes €165 million to the economy. The Aviva Stadium alone generates €832 million annually in the economy. The Government has made a strong start. The €3 million multi-annual funding in budget 2026 is welcome and the €10.8 million in extra current funding for Sport Ireland is significant but the FAI has been clear that €8 million or more is needed to close the gap with other nations. The football facilities investment vision identifies a requirement of €860 million over 15 years to bring our infrastructure up to standard. Only one of 20 League of Ireland stadiums meets UEFA category 4 standards. That means our clubs cannot host European competition games in their own communities. With Euro 2028 on the horizon, an event projected to generate an estimated €450 million in socio-economic benefits, we have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to invest in legacy infrastructure that will serve communities long after the final whistle. I urge that the upcoming round of the community sports fund and the large-scale sports infrastructure fund be prioritised and expedited. Football is Ireland's most played sport alongside GAA, with 245,000 registered players and 80,000 volunteers, whom we thank. Let us make sure we continue to back it.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I thank the Minister of State with responsibility for sport for being with us today. Earlier I heard Ministers being criticised for turning up at high-profile events. In the past I have also heard Ministers being criticised for not turning up at high-profile events. It is the work that happens at local level that I am most pleased with. I thank the Minister of State for coming to my constituency where he visited McKelvey Celtic and Tolka Rovers. There was no press or hoo-ha; it was about informing the clubs of what was available to them in terms of supports and grants and talking to them about the challenges they had. I thank the Minister of State for that and I know his predecessors in the role, Deputies Chambers and

Thomas Byrne, made similar visits to different clubs. I will not get into naming all of them because I will forget some.

David Courell of the FAI circulated a statement in advance of this debate. The number of people involved speaks for itself, with 245,000 registered players, 80,000 volunteers and 1.5 million fans engaging. There is no doubt of the benefit that soccer provides to Ireland and to communities throughout the country. Other Deputies have spoken about the issues of sports capital grants, land and the opportunity to develop facilities. It is really important, and the Minister of State said it when he was out with us, that clubs do not have to own land to apply for the sports grants. There are equipment grants available to clubs and I would say to every club not to believe the myth that they need to own their land. There is some funding available to them. It might not be the greater capital amount but the lower-level equipment grant is available.

This is where the city council and other local authorities need to step in. There need to be more municipal facilities. The Minister of State's predecessor, Deputy Thomas Byrne, was out in Kildonan Park where Finglas Celtic and Finglas United both use a new fantastic all-weather facility put in by the city council. The council needs to be developing more of these throughout the city. I encourage the Minister of State to contact the office of the chief executive in Dublin City Council to ask whether there will be all-weather pitches for Dublin city this year. There are no planning applications ready at this point. The question is whether it would be ready even if an application were to be successful. I am really worried that we have an opportunity to provide more municipal all-weather soccer facilities in our public parks, animating our public parks, and we should be doing this.

I am passionate about football at school-age level. I have met many clubs involved at this level. I am concerned about the proposed merger of the north Dublin schools league with the North Eastern Regional League. Many of the clubs would like to be in the Dublin and District Schoolboys League, DDSL, so they play other clubs in their own areas and do not have to travel to Louth, Monaghan or Meath. It does not make any sense for clubs from my area to be travelling that distance given the cost. The issue is that the DDSL is under pressure for referees and resources. It is under pressure with regard to how many teams can come in. If the Minister of State could intervene with the DDSL, and if there could be a way of providing some funding through the FAI, I would appreciate if the Minister of State could try to make sure that children in these clubs can play with their own school friends in their own areas.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: We all know that grassroots soccer in the League of Ireland is severely underfunded, particularly in regard to facilities, infrastructure and academies in comparison with other countries such as Croatia. Countries smaller than Ireland boast of having 190 full-time club academy staff in comparison to Ireland's ten. Our budget for League of Ireland academies is comparable to those of Andorra or San Marino, which are very small.

Our clubs cater for the youth of Ireland and therefore need proper supports. It all starts at grassroots level. I am thinking of so many fantastic grassroots clubs in my area, such as Gorey Rangers, Gorey Celtic, Arklow United, Arklow Celtic and Arklow Town. There is huge demand for places in these clubs but they lack pitch space. There are also Courtown Hibs, Carnew FC and Camolin Celtic. There is a really good club at Avonmore FC in Rathdrum. There are also Aughrim Rangers, Coolboy Rangers and Killenagh Wanderers. We also have

Ferns United, Tombrack United and Shillelagh United. There are also other clubs in the south, including St. Joseph's AFC in Kilmuckridge, Bunclody FC and St. Cormac's AFC in Boolavogue. Wexford schoolboys represented Ireland in the Gallini Cup last week. This was a great achievement for Ireland. All the fundraising was local with no support through statutory funding. These are all fantastic clubs that need greater Government support and investment in facilities, including clubhouses, pitches and AstroTurf. This is an investment in our youth. Sport is crucial, as we know, for people's mental and physical well-being.

I will support any application by such clubs in the upcoming round of sports capital funding, which will be coming after the summer. As a country we owe massive credit to the management and many trainers in all of these local clubs, the ticket sellers, those who fundraise, those who get pitches ready, those who fill the bottles and those who give lifts. The fabric of Ireland is held together by an army of volunteers who give of their time so selflessly. The Government really needs to up its game in this regard and match the public support with proper funding for facilities as we see in other European countries. We need to see far more project support through the large-scale sport infrastructure fund. We see €400 million committed to projects related to the Ryder Cup in Adare. I am not knocking it but the Government's attitude towards the working-class sport of soccer is another story and this needs to change.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: The Minister of State will be relieved to know I am not going to name all of the football clubs in Dublin West because there are too many. It shows the strength of football in our community. The clubs exist not because of Government funding but in spite of it. Most of the money they use in their clubs is received through fundraising. They have to go through hoops to get every cent. Some of the figures are staggering, with 245,000 registered players, 80,000 volunteers and 60 clubs, and there will be 100 clubs next year with regard to Football for All.

As a lifelong Bohemians supporter I have visited most stadiums in Ireland and I hope that one day in a united Ireland we will have a united league. I am genuinely shocked that the Minister of State can talk about the growth in the League of Ireland without being deeply embarrassed. Yes, the growth in attendance across the League of Ireland has skyrocketed but this is in no way accredited to anything the Government has done. Most grounds are in dire need of refurbishment and some need to be completely knocked down and rebuilt. Only one ground in the Twenty-six Counties can hold a European match. The credit for the massive increase in interest lies solely with the clubs.

The Minister of State spoke about the massive increase in women's and girl's football, and it is fantastic, but the lack of facilities is shocking. We have girls and boys in our public parks with zero toilet facilities. We have many clubs still using steel containers as changing rooms and club facilities. This year due to the bad weather many grass pitches were closed for months on end, putting massive pressure on the all-weather facilities. Some are lucky to have them and most are not.

Beyond national pride, football also delivers a significant economic and social value. Grassroots football has shown a €1.8 billion social return on investment, with €17.64 for every €1 invested in the sport. Last year the FAI presented an €80 million plan over 11 years to build infrastructure. Think about the fact that greyhounds and horses got a 2026 budget allocation of €99.1 million for one year and think of the statistics I listed at the beginning.

The vast majority of the people oppose the upcoming Ireland-Israel game. It is beyond comprehension, given the team with members of the murderous Israeli army and I will not insult the victims of genocide by calling it a defence force. I will do my utmost to prevent that game from going ahead. I will leave the Minister of State with this. On 16 July 2014 at approximately 3.30 p.m. Israeli forces fired three missiles that killed four boys while they were playing football on Gaza City's fishing beach. I will never forget that and I believe most people will never forget the scenes of those four young boys playing football. How dare the Government stand here and allow the game to go ahead?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I echo the comments about grassroots football and the dire lack of funding. The way the clubs manage to provide a service is incredible. I will start by condemning the carry-on of the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, in stopping the funding for the entire League of Ireland based on one event, which was a flare being thrown on a pitch. He thinks that flare is a declaration of war but he is fine with what the Israelis are doing apparently.

I will focus my comments on the Ireland-Israel game. Of all the things that have happened in recent times, it is absolutely disgusting that the Irish Government, which is meant to be a neutral anti-imperialist country, is meant to support the ICJ case against Israel and is meant to support the Palestinian state and people, would not only consider that the game is appropriate but would actively insist and put pressure on the players and the team to play it.

Oscar Wilde said that a cynic is someone "who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing". That exemplifies the Government and the people leading it. They have got absolutely no moral backbone whatsoever. The Government is out of touch on this like it was on the fuel issue and the cost of living. It is way out of touch with where people are on this issue. This game should not happen. It will not happen, in my opinion, because I think people are going to mobilise. I think they will protest and will stop this game. I noticed that at 6 p.m. tonight, a campaign was launched online to stop the match. This is the beginning; it is the opening salvo in it.

Simon Harris said we should decouple sports and politics. We would love to. That is an absolutely facetious thing to say. The Minister of State knows there is no separation. Presumably, the Minister of State is okay with Russia not participating in FIFA. It is, therefore, a political entity. Micheál Martin said it should go ahead and, obviously, we have already talked about the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, saying that the team has no connection to the genocide. This is where the Government is absolutely and utterly wrong. The Minister of State, Deputy Byrne, said the same thing.

First, let us have a look at the destruction of sports facilities. Let us have a look at the destruction with 1,007 athletes, at least, being killed in the genocide including 421 footballers, most of them kids; 90% of the infrastructure in Gaza destroyed; and 288 facilities destroyed. The cruelty has not stopped. This is not a normal football federation. I will give the Minister of State the facts again. Six Israeli teams currently play in occupied Palestinian territory in direct contradiction to FIFA and UEFA's own rules but, of course, FIFA and UEFA, being so corrupt, do absolutely nothing about it. Amnesty has noted that UEFA and FIFA are providing funding to the Israel Football Association, which is then giving it to clubs in the illegal settlements. Three of the biggest teams in Israeli football, namely, Beitar, Maccabi and Hapoel have a horrendous history of racism against Palestinians and a lot of the players playing on the

national team play for those clubs. A popular chant for Maccabi is, "Let the IDF win and fuck the Arabs". Another one is, "Why is school out in Gaza? There are no children left there." Does the Minister of State think that is appropriate? Does he think that is normal? Yet, the Government is insisting on normalising this team. It is going to give them visas. They do not even need visas - Palestinians need visas; they do not - to come to this country with their entourage, which is actively participating in a genocide in Palestine and now in Lebanon, and the Minister of State thinks that is okay and that is moral. It is absolutely despicable.

I also want to mention that Beitar, the team Netanyahu supports, has never signed an Arab. In the children's game, they separate Arab and Jew on the basis of apartheid. Members are in the IDF and one of the players is putting up videos about his participation in the attack on Lebanon as well. The women's team put their IDF jerseys on and so forth.

I do not want to run out of time; I just want to finish with a couple of things. The Palestine solidarity movement is one of the most positive things that has happened in this country and in the world because it is an antidote to the hate, racism and misogyny we have seen in society. I am appealing and have confidence in this regard but this movement and trade unions and grassroots clubs need to build a massive rank-and-file campaign to stop this match from happening. We need to organise meetings in areas. We need to organise meetings of clubs. It is unbelievable that we have to put Bertie Ahern up as an example. Bertie Ahern refused to issue visas to the Yugoslav team because of the Balkans war at the time. Charlie Haughey intervened about South Africa and apartheid. It is not that they are great; it is just that the Government is so pathetic in comparison and that is really saying a lot.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: First, I wish to say that I am personally very grateful to grassroots football and youth football in my area and to all the people - the managers, coaches and officials - who put in their time, as is the case in area after area in town, city and county across the country. These amazing people put their time and energy into me and my teammates on a voluntary basis. I played for nearly every club. Cabinteely Football Club was my first club. They were a tiny club then. Now, they are up in the League of Ireland. Then, St. Joseph's in Sallynoggin had a fantastic team in the schoolboy leagues. They were just wonderful people and it is still a really brilliant club. Both clubs have produced players for the English leagues and internationals. I played for Ballybrack Football Club, again, another great club. I have a great memories of them. I played for Dunedin football club and St. Joseph's, Glasthule, in the Leinster Senior League. I played for UCD. There were all of these amazing people and so many other clubs in the area. Joey's had a better clubhouse than most but in many cases, people were often getting changed in the rain under streetlights in pretty poor facilities or in containers in pretty awful situations. A shower was fairly unheard of when we were playing football. The thing about it is, that situation has not changed for lots of clubs, as has been said. I was playing 30 years ago. Sallynoggin Pearse, which was mentioned earlier, which was originally Pearse Rovers, was the first team that Paul McGrath - one of our greatest ever players - played for. It is a small club now with two senior teams. They have been fighting since 2007 for a new clubhouse because the old clubhouse is gone. It was a tin can. They have been fighting since 2007. They got planning permission but the council has basically not delivered for them. They are now in an arrangement with Granada, which was also mentioned earlier, which is primarily girls' football teams. It is an amazing success story for girls' football in our area. They have just two senior teams but they are twinned with Granada and they share the same pitches. I

was just talking to Richie, one of the main officials in the club, on the phone, who said the people in Sallynoggin are really angry and annoyed as are, obviously, the club officials, that the young women have to change in the open in the fields because there is no clubhouse.

As has been mentioned, the lack of all-weather pitches is totally unacceptable. Teams are not able to play for weeks because of the lack of all-weather pitches. Often, we will say things when the national teams do well and, absolutely, give plaudits to the women's national team and in respect of the renaissance we have seen with Troy Parrott and all that in Irish soccer. Let us hope it continues. However, these things do not spring out of nowhere. We have to put in the resources and support. All those volunteers and people are putting enormous work into our young people because it really matters to the young people. I was not an angel when I was when I was young - far from it, actually - but if it was not for football-----

A Deputy: He is still not.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: If it was not for football, it could have been a lot worse, let us put it that way. It is true that the team ethic, the discipline and all that kind of stuff people are taught by football really stands to them for the rest of their lives. It creates friendships and networks and does things for the community. We cannot measure the value of these things. They are so important. However, we need to put the resources into ensuring that clubs I mentioned like St. Joseph's, Dalkey United, Granada, Pearse and all these teams that are fighting for all-weather pitches have decent facilities. As we are building residential development all over the place, we need to provide the facilities and amenities.

In the last minute, I want to talk about the Israel-Ireland match. In 2016, a young man called Muhammad Khalifa visited Ireland. I was involved in it - Gaza Action Ireland organised the tour. He was then 12 years old. He was from Gaza.

Ballybrack Football Club hosted his team from Gaza, Al Helal FC. The young Gazans beat our team, Ballybrack FC, 2-1, but it was a great day and a great event. He went on to play for the Palestinian youth team. Last year, he was murdered by an Israeli air strike with his brother and seven members of his family. His life was destroyed.

I was talking to my friend Dr. Abdul Fattah Abu Srour. He works in Aida refugee camp and is involved in the football pitch that the Israelis are trying to destroy in that camp. It is just a small five-a-side or seven-a-side pitch. The UN experts have said that Israel should be boycotted at international level for its breaches of international law. Other teams are doing it. Russia was thrown out of international competition for what it was doing in Ukraine. How can our Government not demand that this game is boycotted, that Israel is thrown out of international competition and that this game does not go ahead?

Deputy John Clendennen: I welcome these statements. Football can be a cornerstone of our lives and memories. It can bring the goodwill to bring communities together. I think back as far as Italia 90 and the heartbreak caused by the likes of Schillaci and so on, and what they did to bring a nation to a stop and then break our hearts. More recently, in Prague, we thought we were on the cusp of achieving World Cup qualification. Some 1.6 million viewers tuned in for that game. That just shows how much interest there is in our national team.

Our ladies have been doing us very proud. They won last night and I wish them the best of luck at the weekend. Acording to the FAI figures for the numbers of players and volunteers, there are 250,000 players and 80,000 volunteers, yet only 34% of females have access to a toilet and 10% have access to indoor facilities. In my area, midlands soccer looked to come together to have a centre of excellence for schoolboys and schoolgirls to be able to play on multiple pitches but did not get planning permission. They are back to square one. They are already on the meter and are spending money that could have been put into lights, Astroturf or whatever the case may be. Instead, the money is going into bureaucracy. That should not be the case. We need to figure out how to work with such organisations to ensure their money is going directly to the sport rather than the bureaucracy along the journey. That is a matter we will have to address.

We also need to look at multi-use facilities. I know this is something that the Government is referencing in the context of sports capital funding and that it is considering how we can bring multiple sporting codes together. That would be very much welcomed. There is also an added layer in respect of community facilities. In my constituency, Moneygall has a state-of-the-art playing pitch and has applied to the Department of Community and Rural Development for funding to develop a community facility that could also be a changing room. We have to look at multiple layers of joined-up thinking at government level so there is not just a reliance on sports capital grants and we do not put on the blinkers and go down a tunnel. Let us try to expand it and see can we look across all aspects of government to bring funding together so that we can maximise that impact and make sure it has a real significance across all sporting codes.

I look at the facilities and see the impact. I then look at larger, high-appeal matches and see the prices for which tickets are going. We have done nothing to address ticket touting. Where there is crime and where we see communities that have been affected by crime, we are taking the funds of criminals identified by the Criminal Asset Bureau and putting them into those communities that need them the most. We should do something similar in respect of ticket touting. We should go after touts by applying additional resources and ensuring that where they are identified, any funds are used to improve local facilities. That would be a productive service in supporting the likes of football.

Where we are at in relation to facilities is that we have made an awful lot of progress but certainly need to do a lot more. I would welcome an announcement of sports capital funding. I look forward to working with groups right across my constituency to ensure we can maximise delivery for us on the ground.

Deputy Joe Neville: I pay tribute to Republic of Ireland captain, Nathan Collins, who, like me, is a native of Leixlip. We both went to the same school, Scoil Bhríde. That is where the similarities end. On the football pitch, we were very different. Nathan is a lovely fella. He has been around the town and is a brilliant role model.

I was also lucky enough to grow up on the same estate as Emma Byrne. I was across the green from her. She is another brilliant role model for Ireland. She was excellent with Arsenal. She was the year below me in school. I know the impact she made on women's sport, not only on the pitch but also off it. She has been transcendent and we have seen how the game of football has grown and developed for women in this country.

Andrew Omobamidele is also from my estate in Leixlip. We in Leixlip have been very successful when it comes to football in my lifetime.

When I think about football, I think about people such as Larry Kenny and Ray McCauley, the men who were there for me when I was six, seven and eight and went along with my brothers to the local football pitch at Leixlip United. Those were the lads who coached and inspired us, and inspired a generation of people. I also think of my other coaches and have the opportunity to think of them today. People such as Colm Harper, Liam L'Estrange and Tony Ryan are no longer with us but also made a huge contribution. That is where I want to think about the volunteers and how we can support them here today.

North Kildare is a growing area with a need for growing infrastructure across all our football clubs. I look at Leixlip United, with Paul Martin in charge. I look at Liffeybank FC, with Jim Keating, who was in my office recently looking for facilities. There are also Fiachra Kirwan at Maynooth FC, Debbie Morone at Ballyoulster United AFC and Derek Meaney at Celbridge Town AFC, which recently launched a new campaign for Astroturf in Celbridge. Those are the football clubs that are closest to me. I know there are other football clubs looking for even more, and we need to support them. I look forward to supporting them through the capital grants, which I know will be coming soon.

We can see in the areas where we are building houses - and in north Kildare we have been fortunate to have built houses and apartments - that we have been slow to develop the social infrastructure behind them. We have been completely reliant on volunteers in the area. We must ensure that we have the facilities for the pitches.

Liffeybank was sharing with Confey Celtic. It does not even have toilets that children or the ladies' team can use in close proximity. I am consistently having discussions with Kildare County Council to get that resolved. It is a basic facility. Deputy Boyd Barrett referred to the issue in the clubs in his area.

While we are building the houses, we have other sports and facilities. As Deputy Clendennan alluded to, we must ensure we have multi-use facilities. Kerdiffstown has been a model. There are football pitches laid out and AstroTurf. With development levies in councils, that should be the place to which we are going. Deputy Quinlivan is in the Chamber. In Limerick city, there is not necessarily space to develop but we need to have pitches for hurling, soccer and rugby in a multi-use facility. That is key, as we look towards the sports capital grants and, indeed, how we run things in the future. Ultimately, we need to have facilities for future generations. We need to have the places from which the next Nathan Collins will come. Just as important as the next Nathan Collins, we need to think about the children who might not necessarily have that talent but who want to be able to play with their friends. They want to turn up, whether for the first team, the second team, the blue team, the red team, the yellow team or the fifth team. We need to ensure there is space for them and their parents. All that most of us are trying to do is to make sure we have the best community possible. Football has helped to shape many of those communities, including, as I have laid out, my own. I want to be part of that and I welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: I welcome this discussion with the Minister of State. The comments by Deputy Clendennen brought me reminders of years ago. The World Cup in 1990 was after my first year in college. I flew to Germany to work for the summer. We arrived

where we were due to work for the summer and the first thing we looked for was a place to watch the match before we even went to where we were staying. I recall the quarter-final game against Italy going to extra time. I was meant to go back to work at the hotel. I was doing a split shift. I remember ringing, trying to talk in German and explain to them that I could not come back because I had to watch the penalty shoot-out. Luckily enough, I kept my job for the rest of the summer.

9 o'clock

I am delighted to have an opportunity to speak. Football, like all sports, gives us great memories and we need to praise the work being done by the FAI, in recent years in particular, in bringing footfall. I think of Longford Town FC. I had not realised I could not wear a jersey here, but I am a proud supporter of Longford Town Football Club, which has strived in difficult times in a small county to make sure we stay in the League of Ireland. We have had our successes down the years of winning cups and getting into the premier division. I pay tribute to Jim, Caroline and everyone involved in the club for the work they do to keep the fantastic facilities. A wall was blown down in a storm last year. The club came together with some funding from the FAI and made sure the wall was built. It was great that supporters got involved to make sure that facility got back up and running.

We have seen the significant investment by the Government in the academies. If we want a strong future for Irish soccer at an international level, we need to continue to invest more. I am supportive of us increasing that investment over a number of years to bring it up to a level equal to that in other countries to make sure we have success. We need more 5G pitches to be available for the clubs that feed into our league clubs. It is important we identify areas where there is a lack of facilities and make sure we have enough facilities to play underage games.

We got information from the FAI about our stadiums. Some of the infrastructure in some areas is probably some of the worst in Europe. We are coming up to Euro 2028 and we are talking about a legacy from that, which has to be proper infrastructure, academies and proper facilities, particularly for ladies'. There are limited facilities for ladies' football. That legacy also has to be making sure that men and women have the facilities and opportunities to maximise their potential on the football field and give us far more memories in the future.

Deputy Brian Brennan: I congratulate the Irish team on last night. It was a wonderful success and I wish it well at the weekend. More important to me on a local level, Ferns United is in the Leinster Football Association, LFA, final this Sunday and I wish them well - Tiny, Terry, Paul and the girls. I went to see them a few weeks ago and I was taken aback by the family and community spirit there. The club is not even in the town of Ferns - it is on a crossroads - but the level of engagement of the team on and off the field with the people who were there after the game and what they are giving back to the community has to be commended.

Regarding football as a whole, when Ireland are doing well, the whole nation is lifted. It really is. I come from a hospitality background. I was working in 1990 and for all the world cups and it brings so much business and prosperity. People are in good form. I remember visiting some people in hospital at the time in 1990 and it did not matter how sick they were. They were glued to the television when the Irish lads had the jersey on. We should never underestimate that. What happens on the pitch is important, but that shows a need for more

support on the pitch and funding. Let us start at grassroots. We need to continue. The sports capital fund is incredible. It gets to the little clubs like Ferns United, which are heavily reliant on fundraising. I see them shaking buckets on the street in Bunclody. It is still going on. They still sell lotto tickets every Sunday night, but we need to continue a bit of both, with support from the Government, including local councils, and the clubs will do their fundraising.

On facilities and infrastructure, I was interested to listen to James McClean talking recently about how he felt and what a product we have now. We are right there. We are climbing up, but do we have the infrastructure? Do we have the pitches to match it? Not yet. We are definitely not yet there. If we want the new Katie McCabes or Troy Parrotts, we will have to continue this investment.

I will make a point about investment and large foreign investors coming in and buying clubs. I have seen my colleague Deputy Joanna Byrne up front in operation and I have to commend her on the work she has done. I have met friends of hers she does not realise I have spoken to and they could not speak more highly of the work she has done for the club. We might not agree on everything, but I have been up there and involved in matches with her and I know her heart and soul are in the club. If people like her are being removed from the FAI and the club scene, it will be our loss.

Volunteers are the backbone. We can talk about money all we like. I remember in my youth jumping over the wall in Gorey and going to the pitch. There is a guy there now, Joe Cullen, from Gorey Rangers. He is not in great health. He was my first manager and I will never forget the joy I got. I was a sub for the first seven games, but at my eighth game he gave me the jersey and it was a great lift. There is also the likes of Dano Kinsella, the current chair of the club, who is not in good health.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Brian Brennan: Those people have to be recognised and we wish them well.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: We all hoped to be making these statements while looking forward to Ireland being in the upcoming 2026 World Cup. Unfortunately, despite the heroics of the boys in green, they fell just short. However, to give credit to them, their coaches and especially their fans, the journey gripped the nation and has enthused thousands, especially young boys and girls. I am hopeful that their efforts will be the catalyst for another rejuvenation of Irish football.

In recent years, there has been tremendous growth in the number of women and girls participating in football. A lot of credit for this has to go to the women's national team. In recent years, they have given us tremendous highs with their World Cup journey and while the current European qualifiers may not be going as well as they or we had hoped, they remain incredible role models for aspiring young athletes across the island. The fact they have performed so well is even more impressive considering how underfunded and neglected football has been in the State for years. The biggest problem we face is the lack of infrastructure and facilities and until we address this, we will be on a hiding to nothing. Many sports grounds are not fit for purpose. For instance, many still do not have changing rooms for women players, basic stuff.

Supporting grassroots football is important for integration and cohesion. In working class areas I represent across Limerick, clubs such as Ballynanty Rovers, of which I am a lifetime member, Geraldines AFC, Star Rovers, Moyross United and many others offer a hub of community activity. It is the volunteer men and women coaches, groundspeople and unsung committee members who keep our local leagues thriving. However, if local clubs are to continue to develop the champions of tomorrow, they need support today. If we want to develop our homegrown talent, we must invest more in football academies. The Government has left football academies short by allocating €3 million instead of the €4.5 million requested. More investment is needed. Government party manifestos and that of Sinn Féin commit to increasing betting tax by 1% and this should be put into large-scale sports infrastructure.

Before I conclude, in the short time available to me, it would be remiss of me not to mention my local team, Treaty United. It has done incredible work over the years promoting the sport in Limerick. The women's and men's academies continue to attract promising talent. Many have ended up in the Irish team. While the results for the men's team have not gone our way yet this year, I have no doubt that under the leadership of Tommy Barrett, the boys can turn it around. The women's team have started well this year and their 3-2 win over Cliftonville has pushed them right up the table.

Irish football has solid foundations. Our national team have reignited our passion for the game-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: -----but we must do much better and that improvement will require investment and State support.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I will repeat what everyone else has said, that if we are to get serious about soccer - we have seen the absolute success of the League of Ireland lately - we need to put the money required into academies. We all know about the deficit in infrastructure. Many of us see it on a weekly or bi-weekly basis and it is not good enough. It is not good enough for all those who attend.

The Minister of State and I had an interaction recently about what the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, said about a plague on all your houses. While an issue needed to be dealt with, particularly what happened in Oriel Park and flares in general, that was an absolute slap in the face of all those who put the time in and volunteer for clubs, everything from grassroots up to senior clubs in the League of Ireland.

If we are going to talk about that element of volunteerism, recently, Muirhevna Mór Football Club was awarded a Louth County Council civic award on the basis of 50 years of real work. As much as the club is having success at the moment, it has had some recent tragedies. We remember Martin "Gilser" Gill and Ciarán "Skinny" Bond, people who put in a huge effort over a long time and will be badly missed.

We all welcome what we saw with Heimir Hallgrímsson and Troy Parrott and we almost thought we were back to Jack Charlton and Ray Houghton - not this time. Obviously, it is different for the women's senior team who are absolutely flying. Long may it last. We will

need to see large scale sports infrastructure funding and Oriel Park will need to see it more than anywhere else. We are finally some good days, having had our recent problems. I thank and commend the club and I hope it continues with Ciarán Kilduff, Daryl Horgan and all of the rest of the team.

I could talk about multiple teams. I could talk about everybody from Glenmuir FC to Bellurgan, and I have to mention Castletown Belles or I will not be forgiven by Mackers and Erin. I could talk about Bay FC, Quay Celtic and Woodview Celtic. I even played in Rock Celtic the other week and Bellurgan FC. Bellurgan actually allowed me play on a proper team.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I know that. Everyone here has properly commended Joanna Byrne-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy must do it in his time.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: -----for standing by the Palestinian people and the Lebanese people-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Gogarty.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: -----and it is a disgrace what has been done.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Murchú, please.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: She has paid a price but we have to commend her volunteerism and her commitment to justice.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Murchú, you divil. I call Deputy Gogarty.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Deputy Ó Murchú is out of time.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I am a great sports fan. I play GAA. I play five-a-side, six-a-side and eight-a-side in Celbridge and Leixlip. Some might have seen me with a crutch in here which I lent to another Deputy. Of course, some rag put it all over social media. The reason I had the crutch in the first place is because my knee is damaged from playing eight-a-side last Friday when I went in full belt in a tackle and someone's knee went through the side of my knee. I would do it 100 times over to be able to play football. That is what so many men, women, boys and girls get so much enjoyment out of. Long may it continue.

I was playing on an AstroTurf pitch and that is the first point I want to get to: the shortage of AstroTurf facilities around the country. You could compare it with Iceland, which has top class indoor and outdoor facilities. You might say it is snowy or icy in Iceland but it rains incessantly in Ireland. With climate change, we need to revisit our policy towards grade 3 and 4 AstroTurf pitches and the elite level ones.

There are quite a number of clubs in my constituency. I will not try to mention them all, but on the men's side the biggest one is Lucan United and on the women's side it is Peamount United. They are both fantastic clubs and Lucan United will be playing in the new FAI national league shortly and I wish them all the best. One thing Lucan United mentioned directly to me as an elected representative is the shortage of all-weather pitches for youngsters coming up. It is impacting the GAA as well. During the Clonburris SDZ debate, I pointed that out. Unfortunately, for various reasons I will not get into, Sinn Féin, People Before Profit, the Labour Party and the Social Democrats voted down motions to move housing towards the train station, go up a level or two and create space for all-weather pitches. That did not happen. It was appealed to An Coimisiún Pleanála which said not to worry, all of these things will come. Through successive governments, these things have not come and they are not going to come. South Dublin County Council has one shared GAA, rugby and soccer AstroTurf pitch in the Clonburris SDZ and a couple of smaller, across the pitch facilities for a population that could be in excess of 25,000. That is not sufficient. We have to start looking at all-weather pitches or properly drained grass pitches. There will have to be multi-use for different sports. There is one in Adamstown where there are two soccer pitches and a GAA pitch across and so many people get great use out of that. Japan is one of the world leaders in pitches that are for the more casual type of sport.

We need to encourage people to get involved in sport at all levels, especially promoting sport for women. Women have lacked basic toilets in so many clubs, even at elite level, for many years. That type of investment needs to be redoubled. I note the FAI has a new 2026-2029 strategy and it is to be hoped the old days of financial mismanagement have passed by. We need a combination of national funding for the elite side of things and I pay tribute to the women's team. I hope they repeat the double against Poland this weekend and in relation to the men's team, but we need to keep investing in sport.

Deputy Michael Collins: We are talking about something I am very passionate about myself, being a soccer fan since I was four or five years of age. I have the luck or misfortune, whichever way you look at it, of following Arsenal Football Club.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Likewise.

Deputy Michael Collins: It started when Liam Brady, David O'Leary, Frank Stapleton and Pat Jennings played there. There were I think seven Irishmen playing with at the time so it was like watching Ireland play instead of watching Arsenal play. We are suffering at the moment but I think we are holding out Sporting CP at the moment. It is 0-0 and we are 1-0 up on aggregate so it looks like we are heading to a semi-final, but at the same time, we were suffering a bit the previous weekend.

I listened to a lot of the debate. As I have said, I have a serious interest in this all of my life. We are always talking about separating church from State but we should certainly separate sports from politics to a degree. Obviously, there is funding needed or whatever. I have very serious concerns about that upcoming game people do not want the Republic of Ireland to play. We obviously know what would happen if that was the case. We would be kicked out of every tournament that is coming up. That would have to be a decision made by UEFA, not a decision made by the FAI. If it did, it would probably be the end of Irish soccer as we know it for the

next ten years. We cannot let that happen. I will not go into the details of the shocking wars that are out there. We know where they are but I would certainly never agree with anyone saying we should sideline our international team from playing with anyone. That is not a decision the FAI can make, it is a decision that UEFA has to make. If UEFA make it then, we know that, going forward, our football teams can take part in other competitions and not be thrown out of them. I respect other people and some people here in the Dáil have been treated poorly because of their honest opinion. I am certainly not having a personal go at anyone but that is my view. I am just looking at the bigger picture of soccer in general.

I look at the League of Ireland. I watch it and have an interest in it. I do not get a chance to go to games. Coming back to local level, I worry about how we develop. If you look at Max Dowman playing for Arsenal. He is 16 years of age and the youngest kid who had ever scored a goal in the English premiership. How does the club mature that guy? It has had him since he was he was 13 or 14. I look at people in west Cork like David Hall and others who put every human effort they can to promote young people - I would say literally out of their own pocket - to try to get them from where they are to where they could be. Some of these people can be superstars if they get the right supports, training and funding. I know there is a lot of money spent on sports capital projects. I am not here to criticise anybody about sports capital projects. The money is out there but I just wonder are we really looking at huge talents out there, promoting those talents and taking them from where they are to where they could be? Can we get another Max Dowman? Can we get another Katie McCabe? I know I keep thinking of Arsenal players here, but anyway. Katie is an incredible soccer player for the Irish women's team and she is really passionate and has drive, along with other great soccer women out there. Last night was proof of that with our 3-2 victory. I always throw my eye on a match and it is a bad habit. If I am with somebody, it goes out the window because I keep looking at the television if there is a soccer match on. I was watching, with a bit of delight, Leeds United beat Manchester United the other night but we will not go too strong on smiling at other teams because I might be in a bit of bother myself with my own.

It is a good debate. People ask why are we talking about football here? It has given people a lot of enjoyment. I myself try everything, no matter what is on, to try get home to watch Match of the Day. I do not have Sky because there is no point, I am never at home. I get a chance to watch Match of the Day every Saturday night. It is a religion for me to watch the matches.

There is a lot of discussion here about sports and sportspeople. Deputy Paul Lawless is not here so I will keep talking away. There are sportspeople out there. We saw what happened at the weekend with Rory McIlroy's fantastic victory. At the bottom of our hearts, it gives us great pride. We saw what Troy Parrott and the Irish team did a number of weeks or months ago. It lifted the spirits of a nation. Sometimes when the nation is down, it needs that kick. We saw it before with Jack Charlton's team. We can remember Ronnie Whelan's volley against the Russians. It was probably one of the finest goals that was ever seen. He never got much praise for it. Ray Houghton got great goals as well. They seem to give a lot of praise to certain people but I just remember Ronnie's volley from well outside in the field and lifted straight into the top of the net. That lifted the nation. I was there at that time. I was there as part of the celebrations. We nearly got there again. Unfortunately, it did not work out for us this time but we needed that. The country needs that bit of a boost. No matter how good the country is going it still needs that bit of a boost.

My own local team, Bunratty United, has been very successful down through the years and given passionately. So many volunteers in that Schull club took it to the top level for many years. Then you look down at Drinagh Rangers. They have new facilities put in there and I commend the Government on funding that. That is what it is all about. That is where we can get the talent. I see Liverpool stars have gone down and played there through the years. Even if they are retired, if the Ray Houghtons - or back to the Ronnie Whelans again - and others turn up, people will travel to see them. It gives them a bit of happiness.

I heard somebody mentioning community facilities here a while ago. I live myself in a community and I am on the community council in the last parish in Ireland, a place called Goleen on the Mizen Head Peninsula. We built a community facility where both soccer and GAA are played. That is a focus that we need in this country. When funds are spent, everyone in the community should be able to use the same facility. Let the GAA and the soccer work together because the GAA is doing so much huge voluntary work in this country and probably do not get commended on a lot of it.

We need to invest more. We need to invest in academies and in bringing the youth soccer players, whether they are women or young men, to their potential. They have potential and that is where we have slipped up in this country. We have not followed it up. Players need money. Parents cannot just fork it out all the time. If you really have a committed parent, they are talking about driving their kid around to all sorts of clubs, training and games all over the place and it is all coming out of the same pocket. We have a young lad in west Cork, a kickboxer, Evan Collins, and he is trying to do the same. He is trying to travel around the world but the funds are not there. We have talented young people who can take it a step further and maybe represent us at the Olympics or whatever but the parents are trying to find the money and they are fundraising. We need to look deeper into where moneys can be put to see how we can bring the very best out in these young people. It is the greatest thing ever. If kids up here in Dublin or wherever are focusing on a bit of sport, they are focused away from the bad things that are going on in the world, whether it is the drugs or the drink. That is where we need to spend our money. I support that any time going forward.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): It is a great honour to speak here as somebody who is enthusiastic about Gaelic games and soccer and played those games all my life. We have come an awful long way.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Just to interrupt for a second, can I say it was great to play against the Minister of State in Boyle?

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank Deputy Gogarty very much. We also played in Old Trafford for Ireland against England.

I grew up in Boyle and I was treasurer of that club. Many years ago we played on pitches with wooden goalposts, dry lime, long grass, bushes you togged out in, nets made of rope and cow dung. Things have come on an awful long way. I remember coming up here in 1987 with the then Fianna Fáil Deputy, Seán Doherty, to meet Frank Fahey who was the new Minister for sport. I remember we got £20,000. It was worth nearly £200,000. That built our clubhouse

and we have come a long way since that. I thank the lotto but also the Department of sport for the amount of great work that has been done to provide facilities not just for soccer and Gaelic games but for all sports around the country. It has made a huge difference and it is great to see.

It is great to see Deputies in the St. Pats, Waterford, Limerick, Dundalk and Drogheda jerseys. I will hop a few balls here; I am a big Rovers supporter. There is only one "Rovers" and that is Sligo Rovers. I understand there is a team in Dublin called Shamrocks. I will get in trouble for this. We got €16.4 million through the sports capital grant for Sligo Rovers. It is a community club. Money went to Bohemians as well. That is what it is about. If you want to get funding in this sports capital grant, you have to have good data and good governance. That is when the money will come out. Again, I thank Tommy Higgins and all in Sligo Rovers. They have a really professional group.

I ran a double-decker bus to Germany in 1988. We beat England 1-0. It cost us €295 for two weeks, food kitty and drink kitty, but beating England was priceless. We went 32 years before England beat us again in Wembley in 2020. The victory in 1988 brought on the Celtic tiger because of the amount of pride it gave to Irish people, especially those living in London, Birmingham and around the world, as well as in Ireland. We beat England at their game and no blood was spilt. That is what sport is about. That is what it is really about.

The only shareholding I have is 1,000 shares I bought when Fergus McCann was rebuilding Parkhead for Celtic F.C. in Glasgow. They are worth about €2,000 but I am very proud of that club, which has huge Irish connections. I put on record that Ray Houghton, the man who put the ball in the English net, is probably one of the greatest ambassadors we have for soccer. He is a lovely guy and he represents himself really well around the world.

A lot of great work has been done and I thank the Minister of State. I thank the then Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, for the €16.4 million that came. I particularly thank Catherine Martin who was the Green Party Minister at the time because she ensured that got over the line. That has made a huge difference. Sligo Rovers will be celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2028 and the Minister of State who is very close to us will come down and visit that day. Again, it is great to see everyone here. It is good to see Joanna Byrne as well.

Deputy Barry Ward: I join with other Members who have talked about the value of football and what it does for communities and for the nation. I congratulate both our men's and women's teams for their successes on the one hand and their disappointments on the other but their effort in both cases. Beidh lá eile acu. We have a great foundation to build on despite the disappointment in Czechia recently.

I will focus on football at a local level. In Dún Laoghaire, we are blessed to have more than a couple of really excellent local football teams and clubs. I think of places like Joey's in Sallynoggin, St. Joseph's AFC, which is not just the place where I cast my vote at the general election but also an enormous community organisation. People like Ollie Crilly who are involved in running the club there are part and parcel of the community providing a facility particularly for young kids and a feeder than to more serious soccer at older level. Within Sallynoggin, the club is a huge outlet for kids in the area. It is a huge source of competition but also an opportunity for them to build skills and community and become part of teams, which is so important.

I understand that Granada F.C. in Blackrock - its name is a portmanteau of Granville and Ardagh, the two housing estates either side of Newtownpark Avenue that originally put together the team - is the largest youth club in the country. It is so active. I am privileged to have been at many of its matches but also to praise it. Its chair, Ciaran Kane, and all the people involved in running the club have taken up opportunities that have been presented to them. For example, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, and specifically Blackrock, created a friendship agreement with Vincennes, which is a suburb of Paris, and now every year a junior team from Granada will go to Vincennes to play in a tournament there and they will often win. I think they surprised people a couple of years ago when they did as well as they did. They are competing with teams from all over Europe in some instances and from all over Paris and all over France. That is an indication of something that soccer, football, can use to build bridges between people.

TEK United is another hugely important club with an interesting history. It is named after Sutton's T.E.K., which was a dairy in that area.

The founder of that dairy had fought in the battle of Tell El Kebir in Egypt in 1882 and on the crest of the football club there is the sphinx, the year of the battle and the word "Egypt". It is a hugely historic name. It was founded in 1946. It is a hugely important club just next to Stradbrook. In fact, Emily Bolger in my office plays for them as well. We have a great connection to TEK United. There are also Cabinteely FC and Dalkey United FC who colocate with Cuala GAA club. I attended Cuala this morning as it announced an new sponsorship deal with Amgen. Both of those teams have huge community involvement and the local area is so lucky to have so many people who give their time, effort, blood, sweat and tears for the club, as well as the players who commit so much. That is also the case with clubs like Ballybrack FC and Seaford Rock United.

There are so many of these teams. They contribute so much. There is no amount of money that would actually supplant what they do for a community. The value they add for a community is enormous in terms of the networks, the comradery, experience, sportsmanship and team-building. All of these things are vital aspects of it.

I want to comment specifically on women's involvement because among all of the clubs I have mentioned some are very strong in youth, some are very strong in terms of their success and where their players go on to play but all of them have also committed to women's sport. One of the things that has really blossomed in the past few years is not just women's sport, because it was always there, but our understanding and recognition of women's sport, which was not always there. I attended the club final last year in Tallaght. The feeling at a club match with women is much better than it is with men. There is a much greater family atmosphere and the competition is more fierce.

Deputy John Connolly: Ar an ábhar sin, ba mhaith liom tús a chur le mo chuid focail le buíochas a ghabhadh leis na daoine atá ag obair go deonach sna clubanna ar fad sa tír agus atá ag déanamh an-obair le daoine óga agus ag cur spraoi ar fáil do na daoine. Is dóigh go bhfuil siad ag obair chomh maith ar son ár gcóras sláinte toisc go bhfuil siad ag tabhairt aire do na páistí agus ag tabhairt deis dóibh a bheith aclaí ina bpobail féin.

I commend all those who volunteer in our clubs throughout the country in whatever sport. Tonight we are talking about soccer. My first sport of preference is GAA - Gaelic football and hurling- but I am a big soccer follower as well. If I am not wrong, it is the game that is most

played across the country throughout communities. Tonight, when we are talking about the game we should think of all those volunteers who put their time into the coaching and administration of clubs and who keep the show on the road.

It is fantastic to see the revival of our national team. That has been noted by many Members. Both national ladies teams and our gents teams are doing well. That has had an impact on attendances at League of Ireland games. I have gone to a number of Galway United games recently and attendances are high. The club is making great efforts to try to generate further interest. It recently had a night where they invited all the juvenile soccer clubs in the community to attend a game and it was very well attended. Unfortunately, Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, is gone. One of the games I recently attended, Galway United beat Sligo Rovers 1-0. That was a Connacht derby so it was a very well received result in Galway.

One of the issues I am concerned about in terms of the League of Ireland is that there does seem to be a significant gap between the resources available to clubs in Dublin compared to provincial clubs. Most of the provincial clubs are in the lower division - the first division - be they Treaty United in Limerick, Cork City, etc. Cork is a big city. There are a certain number of clubs that go between both leagues but it seems to be dominated by the Dublin clubs and that might be because they have greater resources.

Unfortunately, Galway United does not have its own training facilities and it has been a League of Ireland club since the late 1970s. It relies on the junior clubs like Salthill Devon FC, Mervue United AFC and others throughout the city to provide it with training facilities. That is a great concern in terms of the future of the club and how it continues to operate. Similarly, it does not own Terryland Park, even though there might be a change in that. It has a long-term lease and use of the facility. We might need to look at how we support League of Ireland clubs in provincial towns more. I say that in the full knowledge that in the latest budget the Minister of State secured significant investment in League of Ireland academies, which was welcomed by all the clubs.

We possibly have not utilised soccer to the full degree as a mechanism or tool for inclusion and integration of new people who have come to the country. It is a universal game. It is played internationally. It does not recognise boundaries. Everyone is familiar with the rules. Maybe we should look at soccer as a vehicle for the enhancement and further integration of different nationalities of people who come to make Ireland their home. There is a great opportunity for us to do that in soccer.

In the programme for Government we have committed ourselves to an audit of all urban areas in the country to see the availability of playing space for all sports in those urban areas. It is crucial we do that as soon as possible. One of the communications I receive most frequently from soccer clubs is a lack of playing facilities. That is particularly the case in the west where it rains much more significantly that in the east of the country. It is a winter sport. A lot of the playing facilities that the local authority has must be closed on regular occasions during the winter. That limits the opportunity for games and for children and adults to play.

We need to work closer with local authorities. In my local authority there is a soccer club, Knocknacarra FC. It uses the local authority facility. The facility was upgraded around eight or nine years ago. It was a fantastic new facility. It was an all-weather facility and floodlit. There was a significant investment. However, the club is paying for that investment. It was

supported by the Department but the club is paying in the region of €40,000 a year to the local authority to use that facility. For the type of relationship that should exist between a club and a local authority, that amount is excessive.

That is an objective for the programme for Government. We need to do it. We need to look at where in the country we are limited in terms of sporting facilities, particularly in urban areas, and see where we can access land because there is not a wide availability of land in those urban areas. We all know that it is difficult for a voluntary club to try to get the necessary finances to purchase land. We need to look at more municipal facilities. We need to look at the local authorities and we need to encourage local authorities to provide more facilities in the areas where there is high demand.

The performance of the national teams has led to an increased interest in the game and that can only be good for our communities.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá sé go hiontach go bhfuil an díospóireacht seo ar siúl. Is sórt ráitis atá i gceist agus caint faoi rudaí seachas díospóireacht. Is trua nach bhfuil rún os ár gcomhar gur féidir linn ar fad tacú leis, mar shampla go dtacaíonn Tithe an Oireachtais le gach uile iarracht chun an spórt seo a chur chun cinn le cinntiú go bhfuil infheistiú ceart ann ar gach leibhéal. Mar atá cloiste agam ó tháinig mé isteach sa Seomra agus fiú roimhe sin, táimid ag tabhairt aitheantais don obair leanúnach atá ar siúl acu siúd atá gafa le clubanna sacair, clubanna peile agus gach uile sórt clubanna timpeall na tíre. Mar Pharlaimint, táimid ag tabhairt an aitheantais sin dóibh agus cloisimid iad nuair atá siad ag lorg cabhrach agus cúnaimh. Tá an oiread sin rudaí gur féidir linn a dhéanamh chun cuidiú leo ach go háirithe sna spóirt áit a bhfuil mná ag teacht chun cinn i bhfad Éireann níos mó ná mar a bhí agus ag ráta níos tapúla. Níl na seomraí feistis acu, ní féidir leo gléasadh agus tá easpa leithris agus sin ann. Is jab mór é sin le déanamh nuair atáimid ag cur leis na háiseanna atá ag na clubanna seo.

Tá ceantair timpeall na tíre nach bhfuil aon pháirceanna féir acu cosúil leo siúd atá bainteach le Sporting Liberties. Chuala mé Teachtaí ó thuaisceart na cathrach ag caint faoi seo chomh maith. Caithfimid cinnte a dhéanamh de nach bhfuil ceantair ann nach bhfuil páirceanna peile - páirceanna féir nó AstroTurf - cearta acu. Tá fadhb agam leis an astro agus bhí orm labhairt leis an Aire faoi sin cheana gur chóir go ndéanfaimid cinnte de go bhfuil an stuif ceart á chur isteach ann seachas an stuif a thugann ailse do dhaoine.

Tapóidh mé an deis seo chomh maith chun cáineadh beag tapa a dhéanamh ar FIFA. B'fhéidir gur chóir don FAI glaoch ar FIFA anois agus gur chóir an duais don tsíocháin a thug sé don demi-God nua sin atá ann, Trump, a tharraingt siar de bharr an chogaidh atá á fhógairt timpeall an domhain; ní síocháin atá sé ag cur chun cinn. Tapóidh mé an deis chomh maith tacú go huile is go hiomlán le mo chomrádaí an Teachta Joanna Byrne as an seasamh a ghlac sí ar son na Palaistíne. Níor chóir go mbeadh muid ag imirt an chluiche sin agus ba chóir don Stáit tacaíocht a thabhairt don fhoireann náisiúnta agus seasamh ceart a ghlacadh seachas an seasamh atá á ghlacadh go dtí seo.

Níor chóir go mbeadh Iosrael ag glacadh páirt in aon spóirt idirnáisiúnta ag an stad seo tar éis an áir a dhein sé.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I join my colleague an Teachta Ó Snodaigh in paying tribute to our comrade and friend, Deputy Joanna Byrne, who stood up not just for the grassroots of football, as she does every single day of her life, but also stood up for Palestine and paid a heavy price for it. We thank her for her advocacy.

I would not claim to be the biggest soccer fan. I would not dare to. I am here in my Bohs jersey in honour of my grandad who played for the team, although I am reliably informed that I live in a Rovers house, apparently, so good luck to me going home this evening. My grandson, who is also a massive Rovers fan, plays for Corinthians down in Cork. I have seen at first hand with him the benefits that come from soccer and football. He plays soccer, Gaelic football, hurling and everything. I have seen the benefits of sport and specifically the benefits of soccer. I often wonder to myself why it is that it does not get the attention it deserves.

I would like to give my own local clubs a shout out: Glebe North, Balbriggan FC, Rush Athletic, Lusk United and Skerries Town. They are never ever done fundraising - Skerries Town has just launched a buy-a-brick fundraiser - and the volunteers are busy, busy. We see millions of euro raised by the betting tax, but this seems to find its way in big numbers into horse racing and big golf tournaments. It does not, though, seem to get down to the grassroots. The danger in this is that the grassroots will not thrive. We all want to see the grassroots game thrive because from our grassroots come the men and women who will grow up to play for their country and do us all proud. They will play for the local team and they will play for the country. That is really important and will be lost unless the Government changes the way it funds soccer and sport in general and actually put the funds where they are needed, that is, into the grassroots and into the academies to get our young people out and playing sport and ensuring they stay and stick with the game through their teenage years.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Aontaím le go leor rudaí a bhí daoine sa Teach ag rá. While I fundamentally disagree with the policies of Sinn Féin, I commend two of their Deputies on record. First, I commend Deputy Pa Daly on his invitation to the football match in Mountjoy. It was a very good match. Now, I could not hit snow off a rope and we did lose the match. I am more of a rugby player by build. I would also like to acknowledge Deputy Joanna Byrne. I saw what she went through and I think it is important that we recognise the principle at stake. It took courage when she spoke out with passion and conviction on Palestine, especially given the repercussions. Anyone, particularly those standing for something they believe in, should be able to stand over their views without facing pressure from external forces out of their roles. I place on record my support for Deputy Byrne and I commend her on standing by her principles on such an important issue.

At the same time, I would like to say we did have a good match in Shelbourne FC when her team was visiting. We were sitting beside each other. Thankfully, we won that game. I am a Shels fan. Football would not be the sport of choice but it is definitely a club I have so much admiration for, including the men, the women and the dedicated staff volunteering at a youth level and throughout the club. Progress is being made. A lot of the clubs feeding into Shels, which I represent, are facing challenges around facilities and funding. As for the work being done in Shels on and off the pitch, the additional needs team established by Finian McGrath and Ann Murray is a brilliant example of what football should be about, namely, inclusion, community and opportunity for every child. I look forward to welcoming them to the House in two weeks' time. I commend Ann Murray on all she has done. It does not get enough

recognition. She recently invited me to a briefing on attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, ADHD, in sports and how we should encourage young people and change our coaching methods for them. One of the best things I took from that was that when coaches across the north Dublin area asked how they could better teach children, the response was to just let them play, not make them be doing something that puts too much on them and let them enjoy the sport. It was very much taken on board by everyone. That is what grassroots football at its best is about.

Going back to what multiple Deputies said, we need to get serious about academies. If we are going to get serious about the grassroots, we need to do so for our men's and women's teams. I commend them both on how they are getting on. Obviously, we did not get on as well in Prague as we would have liked, but we definitely believed for a good few minutes anyway. The truth, if we are being honest and we have been saying this for years, is that we are not delivering. I welcome that the Minister of State held a meeting with me and other Deputies on this issue. Right now, football in Ireland is upside down. I reached out to the chairs of multiple clubs in my constituency over the past three days. One text I got back said that exceptional weather pitches of clubs that do not have the same form of ownership should be prioritised by Dublin City Council. AstroTurf pitches are closed consistently. The recent success of the men's and women's national team started at the grassroots level. It is important to provide facilities that will develop boys and girls at the grassroots level and that will lead to them representing our country with pride. Very simply, that is what everyone has been saying across the board. Grassroots football is the largest participative sport in the country and yet receives nowhere near the capital investment it deserves. This is the reality on the ground.

I am blue in the face talking in here about Kilmore Celtic and how its pitches were taken over by another professional club. I have asked the Minister of State to look into this and I would love to see if anything was coming back. There is not only Kilmore Celtic, but also Clontarf, St. Kevin's, and, on the edge of my constituency, Belvedere, Raheny United, Bayside, St. Malachy's and Ayrfield United FC. Many parents are dedicating their mornings but the facilities are not good enough. If we improve the facilities and get in the toilets in order that young men and young women are not discouraged from playing football, that would really help to keep young people active, build their discipline and provide structure. Níl siad ag lorg go leor rudaí nach bhfuilimid in ann a dhéanamh. Tá sé an-éasca leithreas a chur in áiteanna a bhfuil páistí ag iarraidh peil a imirt. Facilities across the board are inadequate and inconsistent.

With regards to AstroTurf pitches, sometimes I think Brent geese have more rights than young kids in this country. We have a huge problem with mental health and with obesity but the majority of the pitches in north Dublin have been waterlogged, especially at the start of this year. I understand that we need to protect nature, but sometimes we need to work together, collaboratively and in parallel to both allow young people to have access to playable pitches and protect nature.

The strategic decisions are made from the top down. I am going to do something here I do not do regularly. I am going to mention a club outside of Dublin Bay North, and actually outside of Leinster. Moyne Villa has shown how investment in artificial surfaces can transform participation. Since 2022, there has been more training and more sessions and more players staying involved. Recently, I visited the club's facilities. I thank PJ Walsh for the invitation. We need to follow up on this and bring this model into place across the board.

Bringing back what I saw in Moyne Villa to the context of the clubs in the constituency I represent, and I have said this before in respect of Kilmore Celtic, the toilet facilities on the Oscar Traynor Road need to be properly addressed. Hundreds of kids do not have a toilet. They have to cross the road and knock on someone's door to go to the jacks. There is a long-standing need for all-weather facilities in the Coolock area. The youth club there should be opened immediately and not delayed and not discussed. An all-weather pitch in Memorial Park has not been touched for five and a half months. That is not a delay. It is a loss of time for young people. They missed training. We had the highest levels of rain in the first three months of this year than we have ever had before. We are all asking about this issue. When we ask clubs to navigate complex grant systems on top of all that, we have to be honest. The grassroots clubs do not have the administrative capacity in some cases to chase these funding streams. I welcome that the Department is bringing the sports capital grant forward. I ask that the clubs get a clear demonstration from the council on how to apply. The bottom line here is that I represent north Dublin and I will always stand for what is right but these clubs are not asking for much. Tá siad ag lorg gnáth rudaí agus tá sé an-éasca dúinn na rudaí atá siad ag lorg a dhéanamh.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I start by acknowledging and thanking Deputy Duncan Smith for requesting these statements.

We have seen three and a half hours of statements and a really good, positive debate. The spirit in which the contributions have been made stand in very stark contrast to many of the other debates we have on the floor of the House. That reflects the fact that sport and football in particular brings out the best in everyone and brings people together. We have seen that here today.

Through many of the contributions from TDs across the House we have also seen the impact that taking part in sport has had on their lives. It has played such a fond part in their lives and has had a positive impact. One of the contributions that struck me most was that of Deputy Farrelly. He outlined the role he has played with other people in his community, working with a group of young people from the age of seven years old right through as they grew up, in the capacity of coaching them. He spoke not only about the impact it made on him and the people who coached them, but on those kids from a sporting point of view, and also the opportunity it provided for those kids to grow and have leadership provided through sport and the positive impact on their lives. That was my experience as well as I grew up. Like everyone here, I am grateful to the people who played and contributed over the years through volunteering their time to giving me an opportunity in sport. I think back to my time at Scoil Naomh Buadáin and the work that Brian Harris, for example, would have done, giving his time as I played underage with Culdaff Football Club. I think of the role Hugh Diver played and the great example of volunteers.

I think back to how football brought together our local community and parish. While we might have had European Championships and World Cups as tournaments which everyone followed, the most important tournament in our parish every year was the parish cup, where each townland would have put in teams. That seven-a-side competition was the highlight of the summer season. The local town land of Cashel even managed to put in two teams, Cashel

A and Cashel B. I was glad to be able to make the Cashel B team, which was the highlight of my football career.

That tournament was played on a pitch which had a slant on it in Glenealy. There were no dressing rooms at that stage but there was great participation and enjoyment. As an example of how we have seen football grow and develop over that period of time, this past Saturday in Glenview Park, which is now the football pitch in Glenealy and which does have a dressing room and a clubhouse, the under-16 girls won the SFAI under-16 semi-final against Granada, a team from Dublin, in a 1-0 victory, getting to the SFAI under-16 cup final. That speaks not only to the development of the facilities but also the wonderful journey we have seen in relation to female participation and how that has significantly grown and continues to grow in a really exciting way.

It also speaks to the fact that we are on a journey that continues, and one that we as public representatives and particularly as a Government must make sure we are supporting ever more strongly, because while our clubs are very much based on the commitment and dedication of volunteers who make such an impact on the lives of those they support and train and the communities in which they are involved, it is really important that we, from a Government and State point of view, support that through investment in facilities and equipment. We have seen a very significant increase in investment in facilities over the years and decades, and we see it in our local communities. That is something we have continued to prioritise and develop very strongly in recent years. A few contributors outlined how over the past six years, in the previous three rounds of sports capital, that six years ago we invested €70 million in the community sports facilities round, four years ago it was €170 million and in the most recent round in 2024, it was €270 million, seeing more than 3,000 clubs and projects being supported through grants. That is something we now need to continue, and we will continue through the community sports facilities fund which we will be launching this year. That is something that can make a real impact and continue the journey that we are seeing at grassroots level in terms of providing the facilities and supporting the work of volunteers. We all know there is pressure because the increase in participation we are seeing across all sports and indeed, in relation to football, is putting pressure on facilities. Where we build those extra facilities, they will be used. They will not be idle; they are very much needed.

I very much take the feedback from many across the floor tonight on the importance of all-weather surfaces and prioritising them within the community sports facilities fund. The past three and a half hours, and I have listened very carefully to everyone, has been a really good opportunity to get a sense from people who are very much involved in their local communities and clubs of what the key priorities are, and how best we as a Government can work to support their needs through Government investment.

We are seeing a renaissance and real momentum behind football within the country. We have all spoken about how that has been very much led by, and the great energy we get from, our national teams and the escapades and achievements recently. We are also seeing that come through in the League of Ireland, and that is something we want to support and underpin and which we are underpinning through the development and investment we are putting into the academies. That is something we are seeing real progress in over the course of this year. It is something we want to continue to invest in and develop, because it is going to give our young people the capacity to be able to be the best and develop into the best players they can be, and

also to see our national league be very much strengthened through those players coming through.

A really good development and something we look to support is the development of a third tier in the League of Ireland. I am glad to see three clubs from my own county, Cockhill Celtic in Buncrana and Letterkenny Rovers and Bonagee United in Letterkenny, two in Letterkenny, being among the 15 nationally. Many Deputies mentioned their own clubs which are going to be part of that third tier as well. It is an opportunity to see our league grow. It is all going to be underpinned by us working collectively to support the work at grassroots level and to make sure everyone at local level has that opportunity to participate in sport.

I assure Deputies I look forward to working with all of them here in relation to the next community sports facilities fund, which will be opening this summer and which we hope to have concluded by the end of this year to work to support clubs throughout the country in football, but also through all sports. We all appreciate the value of sport of all types in our lives, and wish to support that through that fund over the course of the year ahead. I thank all of the Deputies for taking time to participate in this debate. The fact it has been three and a half hours and so many have contributed shows the importance of sport to our national Parliament. This has been a very worthwhile and valuable use of our national Parliament's time. Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle and everyone in the House for their contributions and their work in communities to support clubs within their respective constituencies.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes, full participation. Thanks to all.

Arbitration (Amendment) Bill 2025: Report and Final Stages

An Ceann Comhairle: We move now immediately to the Arbitration (Amendment) Bill 2025: Report and Final Stages. Members need to indicate should they wish to speak. Amendment No. 1 in the name of Deputy Smith is out of order. Amendment No. 2 is ruled out of order.

Amendments Nos. 1 and 2 not moved.

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendment No. 3 arises out of committee proceedings.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I move amendment No. 3:

In page 3, to delete lines 11 to 13.

I will be pressing this amendment.

10 o'clock

Deputy Duncan Smith: This amendment will delete section 2. Section 2 inserts a number of references to the new section 25A which would be inserted into the Arbitration Act 2010 under section 4 of this Bill. A separate amendment to delete that subsection itself has, unfortunately, been ruled out of order. The new section 25A provides that awards made

pursuant to Canada-EU Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, CETA, and the Chile-EU Advanced Framework Agreement would be enforceable in Ireland in the same manner as a judgment or order of the High Court.

We in the Labour Party have been clear throughout the passage of this Bill through the Oireachtas, and indeed before, that we were opposed to trade agreements that include investor court systems, which have a massive potential to undermine social and environmental regulations. We recognise the importance of an outward-looking Ireland trading with the world, particularly in the midst of global uncertainty as we have seen in recent years in the face of tariffs, war and other major disruptions. Trade agreements with the wider world are, of course, important but we need to recognise that CETA has been successfully implemented on a provisional basis for years now without the investor court. It is worth noting at the outset, in the short time we have for the debate this evening, that Canada has agreed to remove the investor court system from the renegotiated North American Free Trade Agreement with the United States and Mexico. Investor courts are an outdated system and are not needed between modern trading blocs and modern states. It is a one-way system. States cannot sue companies in investor state arbitrations.

The first question that needs to be answered is why EU and Canadian investors would not trust their own local court system. This was well aired on Committee Stage and has had huge interest from academics, politicians and civil society questioning, without a proper answer, why the investor court system remains so implacably defended by this Government. We have discussed this at length during the Bill's passage but we know from experience that investor court state claims have the effect of inhibiting the ability of domestic governments to pass legislation addressing public concerns such as health, environmental protection, labour rights and human rights. Examples like this were seen in Canada in 2013 when Lone Pine Resources Inc. filed a $250 million Canadian dollar damages claim against Canada under the North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA, over Quebec's moratorium on fracking. These claims have a regulatory chilling effect on governments, leaving them hamstrung. That is what a Canadian mining company has done under the previous NAFTA agreement when an investor court system has been in place. Now we are going to walk headlong into the same system, putting our State's economic, social and environmental security at risk. This is at the heart of our opposition to this and at the heart of our opposition to the amendment.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I want to put on record my disappointment and frustration at the fact that this debate is being guillotined. This has to be taken in the context of the Government and the Government members of the committee having moved to avoid pre-legislative scrutiny of this legislation, which was crucial. We in the committee have all cited international authorities, and will likely do so here tonight again, outlining the manner in which the investor courts have huge potential implications for the environment, for workers' rights and for sovereignty fundamentally. This is about sovereignty, to some extent, and how that is undermined. The fact is that there was no pre-legislative scrutiny and there was no opportunity. There was no scope for the public, public representatives or the media to hear that kind of evidence. I want to pay tribute to my party colleague Lynn Boylan MEP and my colleagues here from across the political spectrum who attended the alternative pre-legislative scrutiny session that was held in the European Commission building. Ultimately, it was a huge failure that the pre-legislative scrutiny did not proceed, and that is compounded by the fact the

Government is restricting the debate tonight to a single hour. This is despite the fact we have dozens upon dozens of amendments and that this is very significant legislation that has huge ramifications. We should remind ourselves that this was the subject of constitutional challenge. The Supreme Court recognised there was a clear issue here in ensuring Irish courts had clarity around when they could set aside the decisions of investor courts. That is the fundamental point here.

Similar to what my colleague Deputy Smith has outlined, momentum internationally is moving away from these courts. UN-appointed experts are saying that the investor-state dispute settlement mechanism, ISDS, is beyond reform. It is being removed from the North American Free Trade Agreement. Ireland and other countries are looking to resile from the Energy Charter Treaty because it is recognised that it is asymmetrical and it gives huge advantages to courts that states, legislatures and governments simply do not enjoy. I have no problem with - in fact, I think it is right - a decision about a company being upended if it is arbitrary, if it undermines its reasonable and legitimate expectations or if a government is interfering with how the company might conduct itself. However, we have more than ample legislation on our own Statute Book for our courts if there is a decision that is unfair to a company, an individual or a trade union or anything like that. Our courts absolutely have the legislation to ensure they have a remedy, and the Government should be satisfied with that as well.

This Bill is not necessary to ensure that trade between Ireland and Canada can continue to grow. It has grown and that is important. It does not mean, by any stretch of the imagination, that we do not respect the fact that Canada is clearly a democracy. It is clearly a country we want to have good relationships with but this legislation goes much further than simply Canada. This is opening the door to this system potentially being used for trade deals with any number of countries around the world, and trade deals that are not even anticipated. It clearly opens the door for that and undermines our own domestic court system. That is very serious and dangerous. It could potentially lead to the State being significantly liable. We have amendments later on asking the Government to publish annually any costs that might be incurred by the State through this court system into the future. We are rushing the legislation and that is profoundly wrong.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Sadly, I too would like to start by expressing my absolute disgust that this debate will be guillotined after just an hour. It railroads any meaningful analysis of the Bill. I am under no impression that most of our amendments are going to go undebated tonight and undiscussed. That a mere hour has been dedicated to discuss what will ultimately be a transformative agreement for this economy and for our future trading partnerships is deeply disturbing. From the beginning, this Government has demonstrated carelessness in the oversight of the ratification of CETA. We have seen that through the constitutional challenges. The lack of pre-legislative scrutiny for this Bill is scandalous. The Dáil select committee and the joint committee have heard no independent expert advice as part of the legislative process for this Bill. The Government continues to rush ahead despite expressions of concern from two Supreme Court justices, one sitting and one former, Mr. Justice Charleton and Mr. Justice Hogan, respectively. Indeed, Mr. Justice Charleton has said that CETA has "...unlimited powers of interpretation of a vague set of principles within the treaty." This is a pretty concerning statement, but this Government does not seem to care and is instead ploughing ahead with a

Bill that could have extreme consequences for us all. We should not be surprised, however, because it is an action befitting of this Government. It is trade at any cost, which leads to deregulation and rash decisions made in the pursuit of wealth, with no thought given to the long-term economic health of this country. Ifthese concerns alone do not demonstrate that this agreement requires far more intense Government scrutiny than a discussion tucked away for an hour before home time, I do not know what does.

This amendment, and many of the amendments we are looking at this evening, seek to strengthen the safeguards and the obligations of due diligence on any Minister in the handling of treaty negotiations and trade negotiations. All we are trying to do is bulwark against what I see as handing over our sovereignty willingly to arbitrary investor courts that will haul us over the coals. It will have a chilling effect on this House, on the parliamentary procedures of this country and on our ability to build any sort of just transition or build into our policymaking any social or ethical concerns. I was at a round table today discussing AI and the regulatory gap because I see this same deregulation under the banner of simplification and harmonisation across all Government policy right now.

I heard a European expert describe the EPP, the Minister of State's European grouping, as uncritically pro-business

Deputy Thomas Byrne: That is not my group.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: For me, that is exactly what is happening here, so I support this amendment and look forward to debating further.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I will say that I am not an EPP member.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is a point of clarity.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Thomas Byrne): As a point of clarity I am in Renew Europe, and I am proud to be part of Renew Europe.

At the outset I return briefly to first principles and set out the reasons behind this legislation. The Arbitration (Amendment) Bill 2025 seeks to put Ireland, which is a country that greatly benefits from international trade, in a position where it can decide to ratify the range of EU trade and investment agreements we massively benefit from as EU member states. There is a bit of a misconception in what Deputy Ó Laoghaire says because he says there are so many ramifications from this Bill. There are no ramifications from this Bill if we do not ratify the treaties to which it refers. It is important to remember there is a separate ratification process under the Constitution if we are to ratify CETA. This Bill guides us from the Costello case as to how we do so in a constitutional way. However, this Bill does not ratify CETA. That is a separate constitutional procedure in this House. There has been no shortage of debate on the issue and this is a debate, which is not rushed. The EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, CETA, has been scrutinised rigorously and at length in a number of forums, including in the Oireachtas, the courts and at national, international and European level over the past ten years. I think this is my third time to debate the Bill in the Oireachtas and many

amendments have been considered and discussed to date. They are all important amendments, but many are on the same issues and are variations on the same theme.

Free trade benefits the Irish economy. At a time of global turbulence, it is an important signal for Ireland to seek to ratify these agreements with Canada and Chile, which provide Irish companies and exporters with new opportunities to expand and grow trade overseas. Our trade and investment relationship with the friendly, democratic state of Canada is deep and growing, with over €12 billion in trade in 2024 and direct employment in each other's economies of approximately 20,000 people. Our trade with Chile is more modest but it is growing, and I am convinced that a fully ratified agreement can support more trade and more jobs, most importantly of all. I am conscious of claims that we should not be concerned with ratifying CETA, as has been said at committee, because the parts which provide for more open trading are already provisionally applied. Provisional application is an important mechanism that allows companies, consumers and the State to benefit from the trade agreement at an early stage, but it is not the same as ratification.

On the subject of investment dispute resolution, there is again a misconception. We keep hearing in the Dáil and the public media about the ISDS system, the investor-state dispute settlement system. This is not the same as that. This is the investor court system, which has been developed in response to concerns that many people raised about the previous system, which Members keep referring to.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It is effectively the same.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It is not the same. It is a different system and people keep quoting the previous system, which the Canada trade agreement has actually worked to improve and to make it more transparent. That is important. Irish companies need access to effective international remedies abroad and companies investing in Ireland want similar reassurance. The Irish Government is working to make the economy more competitive and resilient to economic shocks, and the Government's approach in bringing forward the legislation has been questioned as to why we are doing this. The reality is that this legislation stems from the decision of the Supreme Court in the Costello case. It identified concerns, but the judgment of the Supreme Court identified the legislative path for us. That is what we are doing in bringing forward this Bill. We are following the judgment of the Supreme Court and that is all this legislation is doing. We acknowledge the Costello case. It happened, but the court gave a path for us to be able to ratify CETA in a constructional way.

Again, we keep hearing, and Deputy Gibney spoke, about how we will not be able to do the just transition, we cannot regulate anymore, and we cannot do anything now because these companies decide. None of that is true. It absolutely does not prevent us from regulating on public policy, protecting public health, workers, the environment and the rental market. This type of talk about the Canada trade agreement is scaremongering, it really is. It is not believable scaremongering either. It is scarcely believable. These agreements include articles, which affirm that the parties preserve their right to regulate for public policy purposes. This is stitched into the CETA agreement, which again we will have another debate about after we pass this legislation because we will have to have a Dáil resolution about it. The trade agreement also provides that the investment protection provisions shall not be interpreted as a commitment from governments that their legal frameworks will remain unchanged. The Dáil and the

European Union can change legislation. The agreements further clarify that the fact a measure may negatively affect an investment or an investor's expectations of profits is not sufficient to say the measure is inconsistent with the agreement. I draw the Deputies' attention to the commitment to preserving the right to regulate as reflected not only in the substantive articles addressing this issue but also in the preambles to the agreement, the general treaty structure and, in the case of CETA - again to address concerns that have been raised - the joint interpretive instrument.

The negotiators, the member states of the European Union and Canada, have gone far to address any concerns on this. The joint interpretive instrument says that CETA preserves the ability of the European Union and its member states and Canada to adopt and apply their own laws and regulations that regulate economic activity in the public interest to achieve legitimate public policy objectives such as the protection and promotion of public health, social services, public education, safety, the environment, public morals, social and consumer protection, privacy and data protection and the promotion and protection of cultural diversity. Yet, Deputies from across the floor of the House come in to tell me that black is white and that it is not the case even though that is what the member states have agreed in the joint interpretive instrument. I think that is wrong and that is misinformation and fearmongering that does not stand up to any scrutiny.

CETA also clearly defines indirect expropriation. It specifies that non-discriminatory measures to attain legitimate policy goals, for example, regarding labour, health and the environment, are not deemed to be indirect expropriation unless they are manifestly disproportionate. Concerns have been raised that despite all of this, the affirmation of the right to regulate would not be effective in practice. Just to reassure everyone, these agreements include provisions which provide guidance to investment dispute resolution tribunals, including in relation to the application of the right to regulate. For example, Article 8.9(2) of CETA provides that "the mere fact that a Party regulates, including through a modification to its laws, in a manner which negatively affects an investment or interferes with an investor's expectations, including its expectations of profits, does not amount to a breach of an obligation". These agreements include clearly defined investment protection standards, including fair and equitable treatment on expropriation, and provide clear guidance to tribunals on how these should be applied. There is no danger to the State's right to regulate. We have crossed the t's, dotted the i's and done absolutely everything and it is still the case that Deputies opposite do not believe what is written in front of them in the treaties and in the guidance to it.

Deputy Duncan Smith: It is worth clarifying that we know the difference between an ISDS system and an investor court system. There is not much of a difference. The investor court system really formalises the previous ISDS system, but in effect they do the same thing. We have had this at committee. It was an absolute disgrace that we did not have pre-legislative scrutiny on this. It was remiss of me to not commend Lynn Boylan on the briefing she arranged a couple of months ago, as referred to by Deputy Ó Laoghaire, which Deputy Gibney and others were present at. That should have taken place in a committee room as part of pre-legislative scrutiny of this Bill. The Minister of State keeps saying that we are scaremongering when we can point to examples of where Canadian companies have sued states. We can point to examples within Europe where a German energy company sued the Netherlands for its decarbonisation policy and the impact that was having on its business. We can also point to

the fact that there is a threat here because Canadian pensions funds are heavily in the Irish energy system, not just in renewables but in oil and gas in Corrib and Whitegate. The Canadians are heavily invested in the Irish energy sector in fossil fuels. That is not to take into account hypotheticals that could come with regard to our housing system if that changed towards a more public system and Canadian pension funds had investments in private housing, which some of them do.

The Minister of State accuses us of scaremongering even though we have seen the investor court system in action being used by Canadian mining companies and others.

He is saying we are saying black is white but we can throw that right back at him because we have the examples and we are highlighting a valid threat from what is an outdated, outmoded system that is not needed between two modern trading blocs. It is absolutely unbelievable.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: There is a difference between the ISDS and the investor courts system but it is in form rather than substance. Ultimately, the Irish courts or the Irish government will have the same difficulty, potentially. It is true there are permanent judges and more transparency in the sense of openness and so on but in terms of the power they have when they make a decision against an Irish government because of some policy decision it takes we will still be in the same position. Again, I ask for the Minister of State's opinion on why the world is moving away from this. Why are the Canadians and the Americans moving away from NAFTA? Why is this Government proposing to move away from it in the form of the Energy Charter Treaty? A number of difficulties have been raised with the current system. It does not require claimants to exhaust domestic remedies and there is still the issue of the sovereignty of our courts. There are multiple examples. Deputy Smith gave some. The Antin case is a significant example as well. I would be very surprised if this managed to sustain itself through the courts because it does not make it sufficiently clear. What the Costello judgment called on the Government to do is to make it very clear in what circumstances Irish courts could set aside decisions of an investor court - ISDS, ICS or whatever you want to call it. It must be clear in what circumstances it can set those aside but that is not at all clear and consequently I am concerned about the implications of that for the sovereignty of our courts and their ability to make decisions. We have more than adequate remedies for companies, individuals, trade unions and representative organisations that feel a decision that has been arrived at that is unfair.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: In response to the Minister of State's comments on Deputy Ó Laoghaire's remarks, a single vote under Article 29.5.2° is sufficient to ratify and the Government planned to do that on CETA after less than two hours of debate in a situation where such a ratification would have had multiple breaches of our Constitution. The Supreme Court, in response, identified a potential but unvalidated path to ratify, but not to protect Ireland. I agree with others that the Minister of State's allegations of fearmongering are completely unfounded because we have seen time and again and have detailed examples of where these investor courts have been problematic. He should consider instances like France and the Canadian oil and gas company Vermillion. In 2017, Vermillion produced 75% of France's oil and lobbied alongside several other companies against the Hulot law, which was a progressive French policy that sought the end of fossil fuel extraction and banned the renewal of exploitation permits. The mere threat of awards was enough to make the French Government

backtrack on its policy and instead it allowed all current exploration and exploitation projects by oil companies to continue being developed without any constraints for more than 20 years. I could go on listing the many human rights abuses ISDS schemes have caused or the moments big corporations took money from taxpayers like with Lone Pine Resources versus Canada, a case that has been unresolved since 2013 that could see Canada lose more than €100 million. The ICS, which is the body through which companies will seek award from this State via CETA represents a mere repackaging of the ISDS systems that have been denounced across the world by human rights groups and academics alike. As such, there is plenty of evidence and we are not misinterpreting what the ICS is. We know full well the difference between the ISDS and the ICS and we are not fearmongering.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: With the malevolent Trump Administration, we need to closer links with Canada through the EU and this legislation is clearly facilitating what is essentially a trade-off with pluses and minuses. The question is not about whether we are losing sovereignty but whether sovereignty is worth giving up in certain situations, and I believe it is. We have agreed to pool sovereignty at EU level in multiple areas. The Supreme Court decision stated CETA created a parallel system of justice but it did not say the ICS was unconstitutional and required a referendum. Instead it suggested amending legislation would be needed to meet the threshold and that is the Bill before us. I said on Second Stage it struck a reasonable balance to meet the threshold so I do not have a problem with it. The old-style ISDS system has been improved in the ICS. The ICS will have open hearings, independent decision-making processes, judges appointed who cannot engage in outside activities and some, admittedly limited, facility for NGOs, civil society, trade unions, etc. It is a trade-off some will hate and others will reluctantly see as necessary. EU companies, as has been mentioned, can sue Canadian companies and Canadian companies can sue EU companies so while Ireland can be sued without recourse to Irish courts, the action cannot be spurious and must show a company has been affected detrimentally in some way because of a breach of the agreement. We might not like it but companies have a right to be compensated for loss of expected earnings and the threat is overemphasised because making such amendments would not in itself be in breach of the agreement. States still have the right to amend policy on environmental matters, consumer protection, public health and labour laws. Threats will happen and there is always the risk of a chilling effect but the EU is starting to take on the IT companies and it is through the EU we shout down these threats.

However, I am concerned about the lack of proper Oireachtas scrutiny on Committee and Report Stages. We had the confidence motion on Tuesday where the anger of ordinary people was expressed in a robust way by Deputies on this side of the House. The Government was accused of being out of touch and not listening to the people. A day later, after having a good Second Stage debate on CETA, we scheduled statements on football. I am a football fan and it was a great debate, which I welcomed, but it could have been deferred for another week. We could have had several more hours of discussion and proper amendments debated. The Government has the numbers anyway and, like I said, there is a trade-off here, but I will not be voting for this as is because it has not been given the proper scrutiny it deserves by this House.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The Minister of State is saying we should just trust this Government on the basis the investor court system is now better than ISDS and all we know that is wrong there. The Energy Charter Treaty and the fact that everyone with any element of

sense is moving away from it has been mentioned by many. The Antin versus Spain case relates to giving big business the ability to take a state to the cleaners. That is the reality. The Australian case is the always the first one brought to people's attention and while I accept Australia eventually won, it is about the idea of big tobacco in the form of Phillip Morris even taking that case. Even though Australia won, it did so at a huge cost and the case ran from 2011 to 2015. Let us not pretend that did not impact on other countries, and even on Australia, by chilling it from taking necessary action be it on environmental, health, workers' rights or human rights grounds. That is the problem.

What are we getting? What is the advantage of this investor courts system? Am I wrong in thinking CETA is already in operation with respect to the trade elements, which are the parts the Government keeps saying are wonderful? We are all in favour of free trade and of building up those necessary relationships and ensuring we facilitate business across the board but what is the advantage of the investor court system? Most people would ask why we should take a chance on this. I do not see any advantage in any way, shape or form. If any company is found to be in a circumstance where it has been wronged by rule changes and there has been an element of unfairness is the Minister of State telling me Irish or European law does not have the capacity to deal with that? Is he saying a company from here would not be able to deal with that through the Canadian courts? Is that what we are talking about? From what I see the Government is literally giving the power to big business and big corporations and not even from a point of view of screwing over the small guy but from screwing over us as a State. We are talking about the fact the Government could literally have its lights put out, or have the absolute fear of having its lights put out.

We know for sure that many governments, and we could even possibly say it about this Government, have obviously been impacted by the fear of taking action on particular legislation and how it would go down in Washington or anywhere else. I am certainly not talking about the occupied territories Bill.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, unless it relates to the amendment.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: That is the reality. What I am saying is that the one thing we have seen, and whether we call it ISDS or the investor court system, with all the nuances, changes and added bells, it is still a rose or a briar by another name. That is all we are talking about here. I am asking the Minister of State whether he can ensure us that all the worries on this side of the of the House will not happen. Can he tell me the advantage to us in passing this legislation and in relation to the investor court system? Can he assure us in respect of all the worries he says we are over-egging? Everyone would trust anything this Government told them anyway, and you could see that over the past period of time. This was the Government that said it was not going to provide any sort of supports or mitigations at the start of the week but by the end of the week, having dealt with its backbenchers, some of the Independents and the pressure put on by people, it moved.

An Ceann Comhairle: Speak to the amendment.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: That is all I am saying. I suppose it had a chilling effect of sorts.

I want to know from this Minister of State what advantage there is to us, the Irish people, to this Government or to any future Irish Government of having the investor court system in play. With other treaties, we have seen states walking away. Do we intend to do it ourselves in relation to not being shackled by what you can only say is corporations being facilitated to "chill"? I was going to use a term that I probably should not use in the House. I refer to forcing a government into a situation where it may not go ahead with legislation that may be beneficial to the people out of fear that a major corporation using this leverage of the ICS will put its lights out from a financial point of view. This is the first time the Ceann Comhairle will have seen me do this. I am handing my speaking time back with a minute and 44 seconds on the clock.

An Ceann Comhairle: There is a God.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I do believe.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Minister to speak.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Deputies have raised a number of cases, none involving Ireland. In fact, there was a letter in the newspaper today which criticised me for describing these cases as relatively rare and then it went on to give the reason in the same letter why we have relatively low numbers of cases involving Ireland. We have very few. The cases that have been talked about are not related to CETA. Even the example used of the Canadian company is not under the CETA agreement.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: How could there be?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: Exactly. That is my point.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It has not been established yet.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputies, please.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: That is my point. These examples have been given as if they are directly related to the ratification of CETA or the passage of this legislation. The cases the Deputies mentioned have not been decided under the investor court system. They have been decided under the old, long-standing system of investor state dispute settlement, ISDS. I have already outlined the difficulties with that. We felt there was a lack of consistency and predictability, a lack of transparency and the issue of the right to regulate, which I have spoken about at length already, was not there. In the Vermillion case Deputy Gibney spoke about, none of the provisions I am talking about that apply under CETA were there and it was not under an investor court system but under the ISDS system. It was not under CETA. There was no provision allowing for the right to regulate under that particular treaty that the Vermillion case was concerned with in France. Because of those concerns were raised, we have

collectively, as a European Union of member states and Canada, decided to change the way we do things, which is to ensure we have a right to regulate and ensure we have an investor court system that works and recognises the role of the sate in regulating and doing social good, but also gives predictability, certainty and transparency to business in order that we can develop important trade ties. I know that many people in the development sector are concerned about trade agreements in general but this is between Canada and the European Union. It is a totally different circumstance.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Murchú has two minutes left.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I get what the Minister of State says about the right to regulate and having certain protections. He has already stated that he believes the investor court system is an improvement on the old ISDS but I still have not heard anything that settles me in regard to the fact that there is any advantage to us signing up to this and that it does not leave this State open to the possibility of big corporations being able to put its lights out from a financial point of view and to have a detrimental impact on everything from regulation to legislating from a point of view of improving people's lives, whether we are talking about everything from housing to the environment to health. It is basically encompassing the entirety of the work done in a Chamber like this and beyond. That is my problem.

My particular issue is that I do not see any advantage to it. My understanding is that those trade elements that we are all benefitting from are in operation at this point and there is nothing negatively impacting on them. Look at where we are talking about. We are talking about Canada and this State within the European Union. Somebody is going to tell me that there is not a sufficient amount of legislation or a sufficient number of frameworks to deal with issues that may exist if a company feels it is wronged. I do not believe, however, we need to give them a battering ram from the point of view that it can put its lights out and make us think twice or three times about not going ahead with necessary legislation or regulation.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I move amendment No. 4:

In page 3, to delete lines 14 to 18.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 5 to 10, inclusive, have been ruled out of order.

Amendments Nos. 5 to 10, inclusive, not moved.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I move amendment No. 11:

In page 4, to delete lines 3 to 13.

This amendment would delete subsection (2) of the new section 25A, to be inserted to the Arbitration Act 2010 under section 4 of the Bill. The purpose of the amendment is to allow us time to consider whether subsection (4)(2) of the new section 25A is compatible with agreements such as CETA. If CETA or any other international agreement like it was to be

ratified by Ireland and all other member states, it would then become EU law. We cannot then rely on our own constitutional protections as Article 29.4 makes clear. This subsection therefore does not make sense. It is asking us to rely on a constitutional protection that ultimately will not be there. What is more is that investors will be able to simply step outside of the jurisdiction without going to the lengths of arguing whether there are any legitimate limitations as the enforceability of their claims and that is why we are proposing the deletion of subsection 4(2) with this amendment.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I will pick up on a couple of the comments from the previous debate which apply to this amendment as well. I am still dumbstruck that we had no pre-legislative scrutiny. There is virtually no debate tonight, or not enough. I agree with Deputy Gogarty in that as much as I value the debate on football, it could have been pushed back for a week and we could have had more opportunity to properly analyse this. We should have had experts giving their opinions on this. We have had so many expressions of concern regarding all of this.

Putting aside the fact CETA will expose the State to investor state dispute claims and awards with relatively little protection, the Government's proposed section 25A will allow the Minister to make trade details with barely any Government scrutiny, so with hardly any due diligence.

This is in particular when we consider that the new section 25A(1) is not limited to the ratification of CETA but also includes the advanced framework agreement between the European Union and its member states and the Republic of Chile and, alarmingly, any other international agreements. To be clear, this involves rewriting our entire approach to trade. These amendments are set out to build in those better safeguards and the due diligence we believe is appropriate for any such activity by any Government. It is in that spirit that these amendments are put forward.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I had nothing to do with the scheduling of the debate on football. I presume that is a matter for the Business Committee. As Deputies are aware, the Costello judgment prevented Ireland's ratification of CETA and other mixed EU trade agreements containing similar investment provisions. The Supreme Court in the Costello case not only identified constitutional concerns that prevented the ratification of CETA but the court then identified a legislative path to allow us to cure the concerns that had been raised. The Government, working with the Attorney General, has considered the findings of the Supreme Court. This legislation is the response, having looked at what the Supreme Court said and the guidance the Supreme Court gave us, which we are now implementing. The Bill before us amends the Arbitration Act, introduces a procedure into Irish law for the enforcement of awards rendered by tribunals established under CETA and similar international agreements, addresses the concerns of the Supreme Court and specifies the applicable grounds on which an award may not be enforced. The concerns the Supreme Court raised could not be met if amendment No. 11 were accepted. Therefore, we cannot accept it. I think it was said from across the floor that we are rewriting our whole approach to that trade and trade agreements can be brought in without scrutiny but that is not the case. There is a whole procedure involving the Commission, member states, the European Parliament and national parliaments, maybe, to do this. Trade agreements do not happen overnight. If the State were ever to rely on the provisions of this Bill, first of all we would have to ratify a trade agreement. Every signatory has to ratify it for

the investor courts force to come into force anyway. There then has to be an award against the State in the investor court. If the State does not like it, it then has the remedy under the legislation - let us remember this legislation is extremely short, on a very net point and is not directly related to CETA. The State is then essentially challenging the enforcement of the award in the State. That is what the Bill is about. The enforcement is prevented if enforcing the award would compromise the constitutional order of the State or the autonomy of the legal order of the European Union. That gives the Supreme Court and the High Court the ultimate say on any award an investor court might theoretically make. I stand over my assertion that this would be incredibly rare. The way this would work is the State says no, it will rely on the arbitration Bill to prevent this because it believes enforcing the award would compromise the constitutional order of the State or the autonomy of the legal order of the European Union and then the Irish courts would decide. That is what the Bill does. Setting it out in such simple terms is a challenge to all of the scare stories put forward by the Opposition. Our task is to ratify CETA in a way that passes constitutional muster. Fortunately in this case we have guidance from the Supreme Court. That is all the Bill tries to do.

Deputy Duncan Smith: We did not have much time to debate this even on Committee Stage. The Minister of State accused us of putting forward hypotheticals to scaremonger even though we are basing them on a number of cases that have taken place internationally. He has constantly told us that X, Y and Z have to happen, ultimately this is really rare and probably will not happen anyway so what is the big worry but this is going to happen. The ICS will come in under this and we will be vulnerable. It is a risk we do not have to take because we have a modern, trusted Judiciary that is well capable of determining cases if a company feels the State has acted with a degree of malevolence to impact its ability to make profits. There is a system for a grievance to be taken against the State, should a company want to do so. That is the system in which we believe. We do not believe in an investor court system. We are not scaremongering; we are basing it on evidence of a system that is rooted in a mid-20th century system where the rich global north was exploiting the poor global south and did not trust their judiciary systems so they set up the ISDS system, which ultimately became the ICS. The corporates have codified and formalised that and have put enough pressure on the EU, Canada and everyone else to ensure that this system must be included in trade deals. It is a system that is fundamentally wrong especially when we have modern, trusted, transparent judiciaries like we have in this country. That is where we are coming from.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Does the Minister of State understand the ability of the CETA joint committee to amend the text of CETA, which is effectively what Mr. Justice Hogan described as "quasi-legislative" capacity bypassing the Oireachtas? If the Minister of State is wrong, we will be exposed for 20 years even after we signal withdrawal and possibly more given that the whole EU may need to withdraw. The CETA joint committee can amend elements of the text, adding to interpretations on areas where we will be exposed. I will read from paragraph 17 of Mr. Justice Hogan's judgment in the Costello case:

> Would the ratification of CETA be unconstitutional inasmuch as Article 25 CETA allows for the Joint Committee to give interpretative decisions which bind the CETA Tribunals, thus compromising the democracy guarantee in Article 5 of the Constitution? Answer: Yes. An interpretative ruling of this kind is really a form of quasi-legislation which in practice amounts to a de facto amendment of CETA. Even though such an interpretative decision

might well – and probably would — involve a (potential) charge on public funds in the course of what might well amount to the de facto amendment of an international agreement, there would be no procedure whereby the prior consent of Dáil Éireann could be obtained in the manner required by Article 29.5.2.

That is Article 29.5.2° of our Constitution. The killer point is that the defence provided in section 25A of the Bill only works if the claim comes before our courts. This is a false protection the Government is putting forward under section 25A. It is a scurrilous vehicle to bypass the constitutional protection we all treasure. It leaves our State exposed.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Minister of State he had nothing to do with the scheduling of the football debate. I am sure that is true albeit it is an important debate. It is a pastime enjoyed by hundreds of thousands of people. Perhaps he can tell us if he had anything to do with the decision to propose a guillotine or did he encourage it?

An Ceann Comhairle: You might wait to answer.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I will answer.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I can take a nod or something like that either. I suspect the Minister of State and certainly the Government very much supported the clear party line vote of Government TDs to not proceed with pre-legislative scrutiny within the committee. He might not have had much to do with the football decision but I think he has something to do with the decision to rush this and not allow pre-legislative scrutiny, which is probably a bigger issue than the guillotine but that is profoundly wrong as well. We are getting to three or four amendments out of dozens; it is utterly unacceptable. The Minister of State talked about the fact that there were no decisions concerning CETA and Ireland. There could not be because the court system is not in place in any event but there are cases against Ireland currently under the Energy Charter Treaty with potential amounts, if found against the State, of hundreds of millions of euro. They are significant cases. I do not understand the logic when the world is turning against this, the expert adviser to the UN is talking about how the ISDS cannot be reformed, in other words, no reform is adequate for the investor court system with the North American Free Trade Agreement moving away from it and the Irish Government moving away from it. What makes the Irish Government think somehow this would be different? The point made by Deputy Gibney is crucial. There is no protection under this legislation for an award made against Ireland in the investor courts when an attempt is made to enforce it in another court.

I would also make the point that in our estimation the Bill does not do even the minimum required by the Supreme Court and, potentially, we have concerns, which we address in a later amendment that we probably will not reach, that CETA tribunals could undermine decisions taken by the people in referendums. Mr. Justice Charleton, in his description of it, said the proposed changes would breach EU law and so are likely to be undone by the EU courts, leaving us with no protection.

To come back to the fundamental point because we do not have a lot of time left, ultimately one of the most interesting parts of the Constitution comprises the guiding principles on social

policy. They are non-justiciable but they give a very high-minded and ambitious sense of the importance of the ability of the State to intervene in terms of the social good. They talk about the manner in which private property ultimately must be balanced with the need to recognise the public good. The ambition in this recognises the fact that the State has to be able to intervene, make policy and make decisions to ensure the good of the Irish people. We are outsourcing the ability to make decisions or at least undermining our ability or the ability of our courts to have the final say on this kind of thing.

Where a public policy decision is arrived at by an Irish Government and is challenged by a company, and a decision is made against it at an investor court, in our view there is nothing in the legislation that makes it clear in what circumstances this can be set aside. It talks very clearly about the enforcement, but it is the non-enforcement that is the issue we are most concerned about and in what circumstances it can be set aside. The legislation is far too vague in this regard and, as I have said, I would be very surprised if it does not end up before the courts again.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I will not take very long. There is an element of repetition at this stage. I would ask, as Deputy Ó Laoghaire has, that there would be an answer on how we ended up with a guillotine at the close of business. A lot of us enjoy playing soccer and wanted to talk about volunteerism and the need to invest in football but we could have done that at any other time. This is legislation with incredibly worrying aspects. The Minister of State is going to talk about protections that were put in place on the basis that the ISDS and investor court systems leave us open and susceptible to corporations that will be able to take action against the State and may have a chilling effect on governments from the point of view of acting in pursuit of what is the social good, or any sort of good, in a wide range of particular issues. We all accept that we are not in an age of absolute national sovereignty but we would like to think that we would maintain as much power as we could from the point of view of being able to regulate, legislate and do the best for our people. In saying this, I do not think governments have always done this but they should have the capacity and the ability to do it. I do not see the advantage and I do not see what gain we get. When we are talking about trade, as far as I can see all of the positives of CETA are in operation as we speak. The framework exists for corporations to get their absolute rights vindicated in the court systems that exist here, in Canada and throughout the EU.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: The nub of the issue is that the Bill is before the House because of a Supreme Court decision and the Costello judgment. We are going to have differences of opinion on it. There was a 4:3 split in the judgment but a 6:1 majority said that while it is unconstitutional, it does not require a referendum because the State can change Irish law to put in place strict safeguards to make sure Irish sovereignty and EU sovereignty are protected in the context of the Bill. This is why we have the arbitration amendment in section 25.

The fundamental point, as I said earlier, is that it is a trade-off. On balance, following Mark Carney's speech a few months ago, and I reiterated it when the Canadian ambassador was here when we gave our commiserations for the tragedy that had recently happened there, we have to collectively get together in this new type of world where alliances are what will help small- and medium-sized countries. Ireland is only strong as part of its EU membership. Canada and

the EU collectively are only strong by working together in a world where we cannot rely on historic partners. In this context, maybe five years ago the risk might have been judged to have been greater but now there is a trade-off. There is a certain level of risk. The Minister of State is doing his best to go through why these risks are overstated by members of the Opposition and civic groups, and maybe they are.

I agree with the Minister of State on a lot of aspects but I want a response tonight as to why, given that the Supreme Court put it in the Minister of State's hands to go through this legislation with a fine-tooth comb so the concerns of the courts were reflected through the legislation, the legislation is not being allowed to have as long as is possible. We have had much longer debates on other legislation. As an Independent I will not say I have specific expertise because I cover a wide range of areas, but there are spokespersons here who are particularly focused on tabling amendments and want to have those amendments discussed. I wanted to see them discussed because I was listening to debate all night before I came down here. It is totally unfair to the people of Ireland not to be seen to have this scrutiny. It might be laborious for the Minister of State's advisers and for him but we should go through everything step by step and amendment by amendment over a period of hours and then come to the vote. At least we could say the House went through it the way it should have. I do not believe that it has gone through it the way it should have.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: To be clear, as one Deputy said, there is an element of repetition. That is what happened on Committee Stage when there was no time limit whatsoever and yet, quite frankly, the debate ran out of steam. This is a Bill that is not even two pages long in total. It is a very short piece of legislation. It is a very net point. We have not seen much debate on the individual amendments tonight to get through them. We have heard the overall points that have been made time and time again.

I want to be clear about one thing. We have heard about 6:1 and 4:3 majorities but we do not have an American-style Supreme Court. We have decisions of the Supreme Court and the Government has to go with the decisions of the Supreme Court. I want to be clear, to counteract some more misinformation, that the Supreme Court found the joint committee system in CETA does not breach the Constitution. This is what the Supreme Court found. In fact, the joint committee system is a procedure that is designed to preclude the possibility of the development of jurisprudence beyond the scope anticipated by the parties. This is another protection. The joint committee system is another protection. These investor courts are not for big business only. Small and medium enterprises have very much been a focus of trade agreements in recent times in particular, and there is specific provision for them here.

Here we are developing trade relationships with Canada. It is not to do with the Third World and it is not to do with development of poor countries. It involves two large powers trying to engage with each other in a fair way that benefits people. To be clear, the Bill seeks to follow the Supreme Court decision to allow us on another day to ratify the CETA agreement.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time permitted for the debate having expired, I am required to put the following question in accordance with an order of the Dáil of 14 April: "That Fourth Stage is hereby completed and the Bill is hereby passed."

11 o'clock

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 83; Níl, 64; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Peter.	Collins, Michael.	
Butler, Mary.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butterly, Paula.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Crowe, Seán.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Cullinane, David.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cummins, Jen.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Devine, Máire.	
Calleary, Dara.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Canney, Seán.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Connolly, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gould, Thomas.	
Cummins, John.	Graves, Ann.	
Currie, Emer.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Daly, Martin.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Healy, Seamus.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kenny, Martin.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Fleming, Sean.	Lawless, Paul.	
Foley, Norma.	Lawlor, George.	
Geoghegan, James.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Harris, Simon.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Heydon, Martin.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Higgins, Emer.	Nolan, Carol.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	

Lahart, John.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Lawless, James.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McCarthy, Noel.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McEntee, Helen.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Smith, Duncan.	
Murphy, Michael.	Stanley, Brian.	
Naughton, Hildegarde.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Neville, Joe.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Duncan Smith and Sinéad Gibney.

Question declared carried.

Organisation of Working Time (Leave for Health Screening Purposes) Bill 2025: Second Stage (Resumed) [Private Members]

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to Second Stage of the Organisation of Working Time (Leave for Health Screening Purposes) Bill 2025, taken on Thursday, 26 March 2026. On the question, "That the Bill be now read a Second Time", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 65; Níl, 83; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Boland, Grace.	
Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Brady, John.	Brennan, Brian.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Shay.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brophy, Colm.	
Carthy, Matt.	Browne, James.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Burke, Colm.	
Collins, Michael.	Burke, Peter.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Butler, Mary.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Butterly, Paula.	
Cronin, Réada.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Crowe, Seán.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Cullinane, David.	Byrne, Thomas.	
Cummins, Jen.	Cahill, Michael.	
Devine, Máire.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Calleary, Dara.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Canney, Seán.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Chambers, Jack.	
Fitzmaurice, Michael.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Connolly, John.	
Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	Cooney, Joe.	
Gould, Thomas.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Graves, Ann.	Cummins, John.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Currie, Emer.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Daly, Martin.	
Healy, Seamus.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Hearne, Rory.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Kelly, Alan.	Dillon, Alan.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Dolan, Albert.	
Kenny, Martin.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Kerrane, Claire.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Lawless, Paul.	Fleming, Sean.	
Lawlor, George.	Foley, Norma.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Geoghegan, James.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Grealish, Noel.	

Mitchell, Denise.	Harkin, Marian.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Harris, Simon.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Heneghan, Barry.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Heydon, Martin.	
Nolan, Carol.	Higgins, Emer.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Keogh, Keira.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	Lahart, John.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	Lawless, James.	
O'Gorman, Roderic.	Lowry, Michael.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Martin, Micheál.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Maxwell, David.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	McCarthy, Noel.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	McCormack, Tony.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	McEntee, Helen.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Quaide, Liam.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Moynihan, Michael.	
Sheehan, Conor.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
Smith, Duncan.	Murphy, Michael.	
Stanley, Brian.	Naughton, Hildegarde.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	Neville, Joe.	
Wall, Mark.	O'Brien, Darragh.	
Ward, Mark.	O'Callaghan, Jim.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Ward, Barry.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Duncan Smith and Conor Sheehan; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie.

Question declared lost.

Fuel Prices: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Pearse Doherty on Tuesday, 14 April 2026:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that:

— unsustainably high energy and fuel prices in this state further compounded a pre-existing cost of living crisis;

— the duty of the Government is to protect people from severe energy shocks to the greatest extent possible; and

— the Government has the ability to cut the cost of fuel;

notes that:

— home heating oil has hit the highest price on record going back 30 years;

— petrol and diesel are on course to exceed their highest price on record this month; and

— the price of green diesel and other fuels are at unsustainably high levels;

condemns the Government for:

— not reconvening the Dáil last week and not introducing emergency supports;

— delays and half measures that abandoned many households and left sectors of the economy badly exposed; and

— not engaging directly with the protestors that has made the situation worse; and

calls on the Government to:

— take the maximum action necessary to cut fuel prices so they are affordable for the workers, families and sectors that rely on them.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:

"notes that the Government:

— remains deeply concerned about the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and Gulf;

— continues to seek de-escalation through dialogue and diplomacy so that these issues can be resolved;

— recognises and understands the pressures that have arisen due to rising fuel costs as a result of war in Ukraine and the Middle East, on all families and businesses;

— affirms that energy affordability is a priority for this Government, and highlights that successive Budgets have provided targeted support to help households with cost-of-living pressures;

— remains committed to decarbonising our society, increasing investment in renewable energy sources, and using revenues raised to protect those most vulnerable to fuel poverty through targeted welfare interventions;

recognises that:

— carbon tax is a key pillar underpinning the Government's Climate Action Plan to halve emissions by 2030, and reach net zero no later than 2050;

— analysis undertaken using SWITCH, the ESRI tax and benefit model, to simulate the impact of the carbon tax increase, and the compensatory welfare package estimates that the net impact of the combined measures is progressive and that half of households are better off due to the measures part-funded by additional carbon tax funds, with households in the bottom four income deciles benefitting the most; and

— in the long run the best way to protect Ireland from the impact of international fossil fuel prices is to reduce our dependence on them, which will be achieved through the progressive decarbonisation of the Irish economy and society, and through the steps that will be taken to meet the Government's commitment to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050;

further notes that the previous package of supports announced by Government on 24th March, included measures that:

— reduced the Mineral Oil Tax applying to petrol, diesel and Marked Gas Oil (MGO) by 15, 20 and 3 cents, respectively, on a Value-Added Tax (VAT) inclusive basis, until 31st May, at a cost of €150 million;

— reduced the National Oil Reserves Agency (NORA) levy by nearly 2 cents, at a cost of €20 million in income forgone to NORA;

— reduced the cost of petrol, diesel and MGO at the pump by 17, 22 and 5 cents in total, on a VAT inclusive basis;

— provided targeted relief to haulage and bus passenger operators, by increasing the maximum repayment allowable under the Diesel Rebate Scheme from 7.5 cent up to 12 cent per litre of diesel, for the first two quarters of 2026, at a cost of €10 million; and

— extended the fuel allowance season by four weeks, to provide essential support to those most vulnerable to fuel poverty, at a cost of €70 million;

highlights that newly introduced measures will extend the duration of the reduced mineral oil tax rates from the end of May until the end of July, and apply further reductions to these rates by, on a VAT inclusive basis, 10 cent per litre on petrol, 10 cent per litre on diesel and 2.4 cent per litre on MGO, at an estimated cost of €260 million; and

furthermore, notes that the combined effect of the measures announced on 24th March, and on 12th April, are to:

— reduce the cost of diesel by 32 cent;

— reduce the cost of petrol by 27 cent;

— reduce the cost of MGO by 7.4 cent;

— postpone the increase in carbon tax scheduled for 1st May, until the Budget in October, at an estimated cost of €22 million;

— enhance the Transport Support Schemes for all haulage operators, local link and school transport providers, and some commercial operators, at a monthly cost of €40 million;

— introduce a Fuel Subsidy Support Scheme for farming and fisheries, at a cost of €100 million, to ensure that those most exposed to fuel price increases will receive meaningful assistance at the most critical time of year;

— be a significant response to real pressures being felt here, and globally;

— be one of the most comprehensive support packages in the European Union; and

— directly help people impacted by this unprecedented global crisis in energy supply resulting from the war in the Middle East.".

(Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, Deputy Alan Dillon)

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding fuel prices. On Tuesday, 14 April 2026, on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 84; Níl, 65; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Peter.	Collins, Michael.	
Butler, Mary.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butterly, Paula.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Crowe, Seán.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Cullinane, David.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cummins, Jen.	

Callaghan, Catherine.	Devine, Máire.	
Calleary, Dara.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Canney, Seán.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Connolly, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gould, Thomas.	
Cummins, John.	Graves, Ann.	
Currie, Emer.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Daly, Martin.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Healy, Seamus.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kenny, Martin.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Fleming, Sean.	Lawless, Paul.	
Foley, Norma.	Lawlor, George.	
Geoghegan, James.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Harris, Simon.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Heydon, Martin.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Higgins, Emer.	Nolan, Carol.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lahart, John.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Lawless, James.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McCarthy, Noel.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McEntee, Helen.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Smith, Duncan.	
Murphy, Michael.	Stanley, Brian.	
Naughton, Hildegarde.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Neville, Joe.	Wall, Mark.	

O'Brien, Darragh.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

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

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 84; Níl, 65; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Peter.	Collins, Michael.	
Butler, Mary.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butterly, Paula.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Crowe, Seán.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Cullinane, David.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cummins, Jen.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Devine, Máire.	
Calleary, Dara.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Canney, Seán.	Donnelly, Paul.	

Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Connolly, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gould, Thomas.	
Cummins, John.	Graves, Ann.	
Currie, Emer.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Daly, Martin.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Healy, Seamus.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kenny, Martin.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Fleming, Sean.	Lawless, Paul.	
Foley, Norma.	Lawlor, George.	
Geoghegan, James.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Harris, Simon.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Heydon, Martin.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Higgins, Emer.	Nolan, Carol.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lahart, John.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Lawless, James.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McCarthy, Noel.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McEntee, Helen.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Smith, Duncan.	
Murphy, Michael.	Stanley, Brian.	
Naughton, Hildegarde.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Neville, Joe.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		

O'Connor, James.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

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

Question declared carried.

Tackling Soaring Energy Costs: Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]

The following motion was moved by Deputy Gary Gannon on Wednesday, 15 April 2026:

That Dáil Éireann;

notes that:

— energy prices in Ireland are already among the highest in Europe and prices are continuing to rise rapidly;

— the cost of home heating oil rose by nearly 70 per cent last month alone, the largest month-on-month increase ever recorded;

— kerosene is the main heating fuel for 700,000 households across the country;

— the prices of petrol and diesel have exponentially increased in recent weeks, putting huge pressure on commuters as well as the transport and agricultural sectors;

— households in Ireland pay €360 more a year for electricity than the European Union average;

— gas prices in Ireland are now double what they were in 2021;

— there are 315,000 households in arrears on their electricity bills, up 20 per cent in just 12 months, and 180,000 households are in arrears on gas bills; and

— prices are also soaring across the economy, for groceries, housing, transport and insurance costs;

further notes that:

— sky-rocketing energy prices have been coupled with huge increases in other household costs, like groceries and rent, and are putting a huge strain on low-and-middle-income families;

— according to a 2025 Credit Union Consumer Sentiment survey, 15 per cent of Irish consumers would be unable to cope with a financial emergency costing €1,000;

— a Barnardos report last year found 75 per cent of parents had to cut back or go without essential items because of cost-of-living increases;

— a Child Poverty Monitor last year found the number of children living in consistent poverty nearly doubled, to more than 100,000; and

— Children's Rights Alliance Chief Executive Officer Tanya Ward has described the cumulative impact of continued soaring costs as "a landslide effect" for low-income families, meaning providing basic necessities like nutritious food or a warm home has become increasingly difficult;

agrees that:

— wholesale electricity prices have fallen by more than 70 per cent since their 2022 peak, but retail prices have only fallen by approximately 20 per cent during the same period;

— in fact, as electricity wholesale prices continued to fall last year, all but one commercial provider hiked their prices, most by double digit figures; and

— wholesale prices have continued to fall this year, but retail prices have not been cut;

further notes that:

— the Government consistently says it wants to target supports where they are needed most, but there is a huge gap between what they say and what they do;

— according to the Parliamentary Budget Office, the Government's recent budget reduced the incomes of the poorest households by over four per cent and massively increased poverty rates among elderly people from 13 per cent to 19 per cent;

— according to the Disability Federation of Ireland, Budget 2026 also cut the incomes of disabled people, among those most at risk of poverty, by up to €1,400 per annum; and

— the inadequate support measures the Government announced in March 2026 provided no support for households that rely on home heating oil and do not receive the Fuel Allowance; and

calls on the Government to:

— provide emergency relief to struggling individuals and families by immediately introducing a €400 energy credit, targeted at families earning up to €70,000;

— adopt the Social Democrats "Solar for All" plan which includes a doubling of grants for solar installation to €3,600, and the inclusion of solar panels in the "Warmer Homes Scheme" to help families cut electricity costs by an average of €450 a year;

— introduce a supplementary mileage scheme for essential workers like nurses and carers, who depend on their cars to travel for work; and

— increase the rebate scheme for the transport sector, to cover unsustainable increases in fuel costs, and introduce a rebate scheme for green diesel that can be availed of by agricultural contractors and others who use that fuel.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:

"notes that, the Government:

— remains deeply concerned about the conflict in the Middle East and Gulf;

— affirms Ireland's long track-record of support for international law and the United Nations;

— continues to seek de-escalation through dialogue and diplomacy so that these issues can be resolved;

— is acutely aware of the impact on households and businesses of the recent increases in fuel prices, and is actively monitoring the current geopolitical situation and developments in energy markets;

— affirms that energy affordability is a priority for this Government; and

— highlights that action has been taken to help households and businesses with the cost of fuel and energy by introducing one of the most comprehensive support packages in the European Union;

affirms that:

— the practical measures introduced by Government on 12th April include:

— a reduction in excise on diesel by a further 10 cent (including Value-Added Tax (VAT)) bringing the total reduction on diesel to 32 cent;

— a reduction in excise on petrol by a further 10 cent (including VAT) bringing the total reduction to 27 cent (including VAT);

— a reduction in excise on marked gas oil (green diesel) by a further 2.4 cent bringing the total to 7.4 cent (including VAT);

— a deferral of the planned increase in carbon tax, scheduled for 1st May until October 2026; and

— the reductions in excise include the National Oil Reserves Agency levy reduction (announced in March) and will take effect from midnight on 14th April and run until 31st July, 2026;

— Government will also be establishing a new Road Transporters Support Scheme as well as supports for coach operators providing local link services, at a cost of €40 million per month for three months;

— a comprehensive €100 million Fuel Subsidy Support Scheme to assist farmers, agricultural contractors and fishers will be put in place;

— this package of supports is in addition to the measures announced in March, which included:

— an expansion of the diesel rebate scheme, backdating it to January, to help sectors of the economy most impacted by the rise of fuel costs; and

— an extension of the fuel allowance season to help the most vulnerable with the cost of home heating;

— a range of protections are in place for customers experiencing difficulties in paying their bills, anyone who is struggling with their bill is strongly encouraged to engage with their supplier and suppliers will not disconnect customers that engage with them;

— the four biggest energy retailers have confirmed that hardship funds and focused measures are in place for any customers in difficulty;

— switching supplier or plan could save the average electricity customer up to €500 annually; and

— the Department of Social Protection can also provide support through the Additional Needs Payment to help households meet expenses, including those who face difficulties with fuel bills; and

further notes that:

— successive Budgets have provided targeted support to help households with cost-of-living pressures;

— on 11th March, Ireland agreed to participate in an International Energy Agency (IEA) release of international strategic oil reserves to address supply issues resulting from the conflict, Ireland's contribution to the IEA 400-million-barrel release is 1.6 million barrels (equating to approximately 10.5 days of supply);

— in Budget 2026, key measures included the largest ever increases to Child Support Payments, higher income thresholds for the Working Family Payment, and expanded access to the Fuel Allowance and Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance;

— recent data from the Central Statistics Office's Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2025, published on 11th March, shows a welcome reduction in the child Consistent Poverty rate in 2025 from 8.5 per cent to 7.8 per cent, demonstrating the impact of Government measures to date;

— Government has also established the National Energy Affordability Taskforce (NEAT) to identify, assess and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses while delivering key renewable commitments and protecting security of supply and economic stability;

— a dedicated NEAT subgroup is being established to monitor global and national energy supply, with a separate subgroup to advise on appropriate demand-side responses;

— the Solar PV Scheme operated by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland has gone from strength to strength in recent years, with increased budget allocations from carbon tax revenues year on year allowing for more households to avail of the support available;

— the Government remains committed to ensuring that low-income households benefit from Ireland's renewable energy transition and will continue to explore how best to integrate solar and other technologies into our energy poverty retrofit programmes;

— in the long run, the best way to protect Ireland from the impact of international fossil fuel prices is to reduce our dependence on them;

— Ireland is undergoing a renewables-led energy transformation, electricity generation from renewables has increased fivefold since 2005, the milestone of over 2GW (gigawatts) of installed solar capacity was achieved in November;

— offshore wind capacity is also being prioritised, with the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment, announcing the acceleration of the National Designated Maritime Area Plan (DMAP) for offshore renewable energy, which will identify sites for additional renewable energy development; and

— €3.15 billion of the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund is being provided to help achieve carbon reductions and environmental and nature objectives, this includes funding to the Department of Transport to support low-carbon transportation, and €500 million to the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment to support climate mitigation and renewable energy development.".

(Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment)

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding soaring energy costs. Earlier today, on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 84; Níl, 65; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Peter.	Collins, Michael.	

Butler, Mary.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butterly, Paula.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Crowe, Seán.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Cullinane, David.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cummins, Jen.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Devine, Máire.	
Calleary, Dara.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Canney, Seán.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Connolly, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gould, Thomas.	
Cummins, John.	Graves, Ann.	
Currie, Emer.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Daly, Martin.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Healy, Seamus.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kenny, Martin.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Fleming, Sean.	Lawless, Paul.	
Foley, Norma.	Lawlor, George.	
Geoghegan, James.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Harris, Simon.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Heydon, Martin.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Higgins, Emer.	Nolan, Carol.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lahart, John.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Lawless, James.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McCarthy, Noel.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McEntee, Helen.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	

Moynihan, Michael.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Smith, Duncan.	
Murphy, Michael.	Stanley, Brian.	
Naughton, Hildegarde.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Neville, Joe.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Cian O'Callaghan and Sinéad Gibney.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 84; Níl, 65; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Colm.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Burke, Peter.	Collins, Michael.	
Butler, Mary.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Butterly, Paula.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cronin, Réada.	

Byrne, Malcolm.	Crowe, Seán.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Cullinane, David.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cummins, Jen.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Devine, Máire.	
Calleary, Dara.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Canney, Seán.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Connolly, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gogarty, Paul Nicholas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gould, Thomas.	
Cummins, John.	Graves, Ann.	
Currie, Emer.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Daly, Martin.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Healy, Seamus.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Kenny, Martin.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Fleming, Sean.	Lawless, Paul.	
Foley, Norma.	Lawlor, George.	
Geoghegan, James.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Harris, Simon.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Heydon, Martin.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Higgins, Emer.	Nolan, Carol.	
Keogh, Keira.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lahart, John.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Lawless, James.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McCarthy, Noel.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McCormack, Tony.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McEntee, Helen.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Smith, Duncan.	

Murphy, Michael.	Stanley, Brian.	
Naughton, Hildegarde.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
Neville, Joe.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Cian O'Callaghan and Sinéad Gibney.

Question declared carried.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 11.43 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 16 Aibreán 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 11.43 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 16 April 2026.