



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoín, 16 Aibreán 2026

Thursday, 16 April 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Departmental Expenditure

1. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to give an update on the projected overspends of Government Departments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27579/26]

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: As the Aire would be aware, there was an overspend in the Department of education. I wonder if he can give us an update on that. As he will know, the Department of education has projected a €600 million overspend that will be paid for by cuts to the Department of education and other departmental budgets. To be honest, it is further evidence that the Government cannot be trusted with public finances. I ask the Minister to give us an update.

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): Budget 2026 set out an expenditure ceiling of €117.8 billion. This reflects a significant uplift in expenditure to support the delivery of our programme for Government commitments. Expenditure figures from March were published on 7 April as part of the fiscal monitor. This is published monthly and sets out the spending position for each ministerial Vote group. It compares expenditure to the profile set out by Departments and to the previous year. Quarter 1 showed total gross expenditure was €26.4 billion. This was €1.6 billion, or 6.4%, higher than the same period last year.

At an overall level, end-of-March spending is broadly in line with the plans submitted by Departments, with the aggregate variance from profile showing an underspend of 1.6%. Budget 2026 provided total capital spending of €19.1 billion, a record level of investment. This will work in tandem with reforms to support the delivery of critical infrastructure in electricity, transport, housing and energy.

Capital spending at the end of March was €2.7 billion, showing an increase of 8% on the same period last year.

The largest year-on-year increases were in the Department of Education and Youth, which was up €89 million; the Department of Transport, which was up €57 million; and the Department of housing, which was up €56 million. Capital spending, as the Deputy knows, tends to ramp up as the year progresses, with the highest spending levels in quarter 4.

Budget 2026 also provided for a significant increase in the level of current expenditure, advancing key priorities in health, social protection and public services. End-of-quarter 1 spending was at €23.7 billion, or an increase of 6.2% on the end of March last year. This reflects budget 2026 measures such as social protection rate increases and front-line health and disability services. The Vote groups with the largest year-on-year increases were the Departments of Social Protection and Health.

Current spending is €0.2 billion or 0.9% behind the plans set out by Departments. The majority of Vote groups are under profile. My Department actively monitors spending developments and is in ongoing engagement with all Departments to identify any spending risks and mitigations. There are other areas. I will continue on them in my next contribution.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: My question is where exactly the cuts will be. The reality is that these cuts are the direct result of the Government's decisions. Anybody who read the budget book at the last budget will know that the sums do not add up. We know that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments have underbudgeted and overspent for years and this Government is the exact same. Budget after budget, the Government failed to allocate the necessary funding for essential public services and relied upon Supplementary Estimates to cover its back. This overspend is not exceptional; these things seem to happen every year under the Minister's watch. Yet, the Minister has decided to scrap the practice of using Supplementary Estimates to cover overspends. To be honest, I think that is quite shortsighted. It also shows the poor budgeting that we have seen. I have never seen anything like the last budget, to be perfectly honest. The public deserves to know exactly where those cuts are going to come into effect.

Deputy Jack Chambers: To be clear, the expenditure ceiling increased to €117.8 billion, a significant expansion of public services and investment infrastructure in the economy. All I hear from the Deputy is to massively increase spending, which would significantly undermine the public finances. What we are seeking to do is moderate the overall growth in expenditure.

In regard to the Department of education, in fact, there was a significant expansion year on year. It increased funding compared to the 2025 Revised Estimates Volume, REV, allocation funding increase, by 10%, reflecting a clear expansion for the Department of education specifically. My Department is in ongoing discussions on funding for the Department of Education and Youth. That discussion and engagement is ongoing across Government relating to any further allocation for 2026.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The issue here is the question in relation to the €600 million. That is just a simple question; I do not think it is any more difficult than that. It is in relation to that €600 million. I have to be honest; I have never seen a budget like I saw this year. The sums do not add up. Anybody who can take out a calculator and take a look at the budget book will

see that. If the Minister wants to publish something where the figures do not add up, that is fair enough but it causes huge confusion. I do not really know exactly what is happening in regard to budgets in this Government but, obviously, there are issues there. Perhaps it is something the Government could look at for next year but the question on the €600 million remains.

Deputy Jack Chambers: There is ongoing engagement with the Department of education. No decision has been made within Government on any additional funding at this point. There is a specific demand, particularly around special education, the demand of which was bigger than the budget forecasted and allocated. We are working constructively with the Department of education on that. When that concludes, I will be able to set out the broader context from a budgetary perspective.

Some of the statements the Deputy has made are unfair. If she takes the quarter 1 position, as I have said, the aggregate variance from profile on spending shows an underspend of 1.6%. In fact, we are on profile or below profile across many Government Departments, which shows there is a much closer relationship between what was budgeted for and how Departments are spending, notwithstanding the challenge that exists within the Department of education and we are working with it on that. I will provide full, detailed information to the Dáil when that matter concludes within Government.

Legislative Process

2. **Deputy Conor Sheehan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation when the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026 will be enacted; the way in which it will comply with Ireland's obligations under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 given the limitations that will be imposed on legal challenges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27880/26]

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I ask the Minister to outline when the Critical Infrastructure Bill will be enacted and how it is going to comply with our obligations, as they currently stand, under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act, given that section 15 of this Act is going to be disapplied under section 7 of the new Bill.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Critical Infrastructure Bill is a central pillar of the Government's broader infrastructure acceleration agenda. The need for a Bill to fast-track a limited number of strategically important projects through approval processes was identified in the Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan published last December.

This Bill has been drafted and introduced. It passed Second Stage only this week. Its primary aim is to allow Government to designate certain projects or programmes as critical. This then requires all public bodies that may have an authorisation function for these projects or programmes to prioritise consideration of them within their approval processes. In practical terms, this means that relevant bodies will be required to prioritise, avoid delay, reduce timelines, parallel processes and co-operate to fast-track designated infrastructure but, other than modifying the application of section 15, the draft does not undermine or change any existing statutory processes or rights.

The Bill and associated explanatory memorandum were published and, as I said, Second Stage progressed on 14 April. It is my intention to bring the Bill through both Houses of the Oireachtas before the summer recess and then commence the Act without delay. I propose to disapply section 15 of the climate Act to designated projects because of the delays this section may give rise to. It has opened up and risks a new channel for judicial reviews of the decisions of public bodies. The impact or risk of this is that it could slow the pace of infrastructure development and introduce additional uncertainty.

Delays to infrastructure roll-out are, in my view, a key reason, in many instances, why we are not building the low-carbon economy we all want to build, particularly in the climate and renewable space. The report by Mario Draghi on EU competitiveness, for example, specifically identified Ireland as having the slowest approval process across the entire EU for renewable electricity.

Designated projects or programmes will still have relevant climate considerations built into their development. Every Exchequer-funded project, for example, is already required to measure and price its greenhouse gas emissions under infrastructure guidelines. Under this Bill, climate and environmental obligations will still apply, such as the use of low-carbon cement in construction and many other areas. Disapplication simply removes an unnecessary layer that could drive further judicial reviews that undermines the development of critical infrastructure.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: First, I will go back to what I said on Second Stage. I am disappointed that we could not do even some limited, quick pre-legislative scrutiny on this Bill. I think we could have teased through some of these things.

I want to go back to a point the Minister made there. He was talking about building the low-carbon economy but in his concluding remarks on Second Stage he referenced, for example, the ring road in Galway which, in my view - and I know there are many views on it - is hardly the best example of climate-sustainable development. In particular, could the removal of section 15 stop a piece of critical infrastructure from being prioritised because it could have, for example, positive climate benefits? I am talking about a new train line and potentially a new Luas line. Could that apply to data centres under the Minister's definition of "critical infrastructure"?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I do not have the legislation in front of me right now but if the Deputy looks at the Bill itself, the infrastructure definition refers to State-funded projects, for example. The designation is clearly around State-funded or supported infrastructure. I hope that clarifies that point. I know it was raised; I referenced that in my closing remarks on Second Stage as well.

What we are trying to do here is remove this ambiguity and broad statutory interpretation that could emerge from section 15 relating to critical infrastructure projects. I used the example of the ring road simply because in the aftermath of it receiving permission, we already had NGOs saying they were going to use section 15 to try to get it caught up in more knots in the courts.

9 o'clock

It is my point that this has gone through all the approval stages and has been going on for decades, and we should get it done and built. We should not have further legislative ambiguity in a piece of legislation which potentially undermines a critical piece of infrastructure. Most of the infrastructure that we are seeking to build out is in public transport and our grid development, all to build a low-carbon future. For regions in the west of Ireland and elsewhere, we do need to build out important strategic road projects which also enhance connectivity and growth.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I do support in principle what the Minister is trying to do here, even though I may have some issues with the way he is trying to do it. There is a piece in the infrastructure task force report on the Minister for justice seeking to put the judicial review process on a statutory basis. Surely that would address the issue the Minister is talking about in terms of judicial review. I have concerns here, which the Minister did not address when he responded to me, on what exactly could be defined as critical infrastructure and whether the State could define something. We have seen a worrying precedent in the Dublin Airport passenger cap and the LNG terminal. I am just concerned at this proposal to give the Executive power to disapply a public body duty under the State's climate Act to perform actions that are consistent with our climate goals.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We want to lift the passenger cap. I do not believe it is a matter for broad deference to the courts to decide on that matter. We are very clear in our objective within Government to lift the passenger cap and to grow passenger numbers at Dublin Airport. I do not believe the climate legislation should be used to undermine that. It is an economic necessity for Ireland to do that. Similarly, we have critical infrastructure which should not be undermined because certain NGOs can take cases in respect of it, or anybody can bring uncertainty. People have a right to take judicial reviews but we as legislators should seek to remove ambiguity within our legislative framework. This presents risk within our legislative framework. That is the context around critical infrastructure. When it comes to what the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, is doing on LNG, there are also energy security concerns which have been brought to light in recent weeks which we have to respond to and be honest about. He is working on that separately. We are very clear that the definition in respect of infrastructure relates to State-funded projects or programmes. Obviously there would be a limited number which are designated in that context, which we brought to the Dáil as well. We have to get momentum in this. If we continue to be deferential, provide ambiguity and have multiple legal avenues and judicial reviews, no matter how much spending we put aside for infrastructure, we will not improve delivery.

Strategic Infrastructure

3. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to provide an update on the impact of current global fuel price increases on the delivery of infrastructure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27580/26]

Deputy Jack Chambers: The programme for Government set out the clear prioritisation for the NDP review to ensure that investment can be maximised in the coming five years for

strategic infrastructure. This includes the key energy, water and transport networks on which all future development relies. This is critical to allow Government to meet the additional targets in terms of building more homes and also to support our competitiveness.

My Department's Build Report 2025 identified cost volatility and capacity constraints as key risks to NDP delivery and the recent fuel price developments accentuate these risks. While construction inflation in Ireland moderated through 2024 and 2025, recent fuel price increases are reintroducing cost volatility and will impact in a number of ways, including on direct construction costs, materials manufacture and the wider supply chain.

Global fuel prices have increased sharply, driven primarily by geopolitical conflict in the Middle East and disruption to oil and gas supply chains, particularly through the Strait of Hormuz. International Energy Agency analysis indicates that this represents the most significant oil supply disruption in decades, with severe short-term volatility in crude and refined product prices. The OECD and IMF have both warned that sustained high prices will place upward pressure on inflation and weaken growth prospects across energy-importing economies, including Ireland. That is why, over the last number of weeks, we implemented a significant cut in excise duties, reducing the price per litre of both diesel and petrol. We have also extended the fuel allowance. That package was €250 million, and a new package of measures on fuel costs has been introduced in support of particular sectors. This is all about keeping supply chains moving, supporting jobs and making sure our economy continues to function.

In 2023, my Department introduced a suite of amendments to the public works contracts to address the risks. I will return to that when I come back in.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The Minister and Deputy Sheehan were just talking about the approval of the ring road. In Galway we have been waiting decades for the approval of the Galway ring road. We also have a chronic infrastructural deficit across Galway city and county. People in Galway have been waiting decades for the approval of the ring road. This is the kind of infrastructure that has been desperately needed to reduce congestion within the city, particularly for those who may be travelling to hospital appointments from Connemara. That is always the way I see it. Similarly, the Galway harbour development has just been approved after 12 years of planning delays. We want to see this happen but there is a real fear now of the impact of global fuel prices delaying these projects further. Can the Minister reassure the people of Galway that the current increase in fuel prices will not slow down the delivery of infrastructure projects across Galway city and county?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I was about to say that we introduced a suite of amendments to the public works contracts to address risks relating to the price inflation of materials, fuel and energy in public works contracts. These amendments introduced a risk-share approach to price inflation of materials, fuel and energy prices. We utilise specific indices published by the Central Statistics Office which address the main input cost categories that are common to most construction projects. Price movements in the specified indices above a predetermined threshold result in an adjustment to each interim payment to reflect inflation, taking into account the weightings applied to the different materials and fuel categories. The amended price variation provision represents a proportionate and balanced approach to the risk posed by inflation to the delivery of critical public works projects. Like the Deputy, I want to see that

project move quickly. It has been going on for decades. It is hugely important for housing supply in Galway and also for wider industrial development, in addition to other public transport objectives which we want to achieve in the west of Ireland. I know all of us want to see it move quickly now over the period ahead.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: It really has been decades that we have been waiting. I do not remember a time when we were not talking about the Galway ring road. It is also about people being able to access services through a gridlocked city, which is incredibly difficult. I was talking to one mother who said that to get to a 9 a.m. appointment in Merlin Park hospital from Connemara, really she would have to stay the night before but the prices are expensive, so she was leaving the house at 6 a.m. That is the reality of it. The Minister mentioned public infrastructure and public transport as well. We have had some delays on that as a result of waiting on the decision on this. It should have always been done in tandem, from the 1990s onwards. It was always a matter of waiting for that decision to be made. Do the Government's cost estimates for infrastructure projects such as the Galway ring road provide leeway for the type of cost increases that are currently happening?

Deputy Jack Chambers: We have significant immediate volatility in pricing but the inflationary context is something that takes a more sustained impact. There is still wider uncertainty on that. Next week we will publish the annual progress report, where the Department of Finance will set out updated forecasts on the inflationary environment and the predictions around that, and will also provide a scenario analysis depending on how this evolves. We have good flexibility within the public works contracts, which are important.

We want to proceed with our national development plan and with a lot of the priorities we have. Transport, in particular, has one of the biggest allocations for the next five years, with over €24 billion or just under one in four euro going to transport. Notwithstanding what was raised earlier, and earlier in the week, many of the projects from a transport perspective are in public transport, in low-carbon projects in terms of bus, rail and others that we want to see advanced over the next five years.

Public Procurement Contracts

4. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if he will take action to address the issue of special purpose vehicles being used to avoid future liability in public construction contracts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27625/26]

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Ba mhaith liom ceist a chur ar an Aire faoi thionscadal tógála poiblí. When multiple parties contribute to a project but only one still exists years later and when something goes wrong, that party can be held liable for 100% of the cost even if it is only 1% responsible. Developers nearly always use special purpose vehicles and then wind them up, which means they are let off the hook, meaning architects and engineers are sometimes left to pick up the bill that could put them out of business. Has the Minister looked into this structural issue? Does he have any plans to address it?

Deputy Jack Chambers: A special purpose vehicle is a separate legal entity established for a specific, predefined financial objective. From a public sector perspective, there can be risks with regard to long-term liabilities for defects, maintenance failures or operational issues. The Government has already taken action to address some of these risks. With respect to public works projects, SPVs are extensively used in the area of public private partnerships. They occasionally arise in conventional delivery models in the form of subsidiaries or joint ventures. They may also feature in housing delivery models such as turnkey or development agreements where private developers establish SPVs for specific developments. However, these agreements are contracts to purchase, rather than what would be considered a traditional construction contract.

While SPVs are a legitimate means to limit a business's liability, careful scrutiny is required in the procurement process so as to ensure that the successful tenderer has the capacity to undertake the contract to completion and to bear the liability that is placed upon them under the contract. Where public private partnerships are concerned that liability can extend to 20 years or more beyond construction of the asset. The PPP company is liable for the maintenance and operation of the asset as well as its handover upon completion to a predetermined standard.

The financial standing of the PPP company and individual members of any joint venture are assessed and minimum financial thresholds for individual members of a joint venture may be specified. In the case of a member of a joint venture or a tenderer who is a subsidiary, if they are unable to meet the financial requirements of the tender, they would normally be required to provide a parent company guarantee. The terms of the contract define the extent of liability that the successful tenderer is required to bear. Under the standard public works contract, that liability may extend to a period of six to 12 years after completion of the asset. The choice will normally be predetermined by the level of complexity associated with the project. The terms of the contract also specify the levels of insurance that the successful tenderer is required to maintain for the duration of the contract.

The standard form of public works contract requires the contracting authority to set a financial cap on liability. Contracting authorities may specify a lesser or greater amount depending on the risk or complexity of the project.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I know this issue has been looked at and some work has been done on it, but it has not been addressed to the degree that is necessary for architects, engineers and small firms. They are still being caught by this. They are still not able to go in for projects, cannot get insurance and insurance costs are prohibitive. I recently met with representatives of the Association of Consulting Engineers of Ireland who told me how this is driving up costs and driving small firms away from public projects. As the Minister knows architects and engineers do not operate using special purpose vehicles to avoid accountability. They are usually small to medium-sized businesses and are being pushed to the brink because of crippling costs. These costs are ultimately passed on to the taxpayer when it comes to these big public projects if they are not able to bid or if their costs have increased.

Insurers already exit the Irish market because of this exposure. The insurer AIG told an Oireachtas committee that the 1% rule was the key reason it withdrew from engineering professional indemnity cover. The result is higher premiums, reduced competition and engineering firms avoiding these public contracts. I urge the Minister to act on this.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I might conclude what I was about to say. I appreciate the points the Deputy has raised. The standard form of public works contract requires the contracting authority to set a financial cap on liability. That depends on the complexity of the project. There are also number of other requirements that are designed to mitigate the risk of non-performance, including holding back a specified percentage of each interim payment - half the total retention sum held is released upon completion with half retained over the defects liability period. It is only released if all the recorded defects are addressed or it may be paid to a different contractor where the original one fails to address the defects.

On most public works contracts, there is also a requirement for a performance bond, normally 10% of the contract sum. This is also reduced in half upon completion with the remaining portion held in place for 15 months post completion.

We have a government contracts committee for construction, ensuring we develop the model with construction and manufacturing expertise so that there is a collaborative approach at the design phase in terms of the projects which are advanced. This issue has been related to me and particular sectors have raised it. It is about striking a balance and ensuring that there is respective liability. We also need to ensure we do not crowd out competition in the wider sector.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I think, based on the Minister's comment, that he accepts there is a problem here and I ask him to look into it further. The engineers are not raising this for no reason; it is because they are experiencing a very real problem. There is a solution to this which is to insert net contribution clauses into public contracts. That would not increase risk for the State and would simply prevent smaller contributors from being forced to absorb the full cost of defects caused by others. It would not remove any liability but it would ensure fairness in how liability works.

England, Scotland and Northern Ireland use these clauses routinely. The Civil Liability Act already allows for it. Section 35(1) explicitly recognises that parties may enter contracts limiting liability to their just share. The legislative basis is there but we need the Government to put it into action. Net contribution clauses would make public contracts more attractive, stabilise insurance costs and help ensure that engineering firms remain willing to tender. It would really help us to deliver the housing and infrastructure that we need. Will the Minister look further into this? Does he accept that there is a problem here?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I have had this relayed to me and we have integrated some of the OGP procurement team into the infrastructure division so that there is wider industry engagement in terms of delivery. However, it is about the balance. There is a need for a framework which attaches liability and responsibility to how contracts are delivered, while ensuring we drive competition. The Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, will be publishing a national procurement strategy in the coming weeks to drive more SME involvement in the broader procurement process for the delivery of infrastructure but also in the wider economy for public contracts. I have had that relayed to me by engineers and others in the community. There is always ongoing engagement with my Department relating to this matter.

Proposed Legislation

5. Deputy Mairéad Farrell asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to provide clarity on what can be designated as critical infrastructure within the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27581/26]

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The Critical Infrastructure Bill is currently going through the Oireachtas, but it does not provide a full definition of critical infrastructure and seems to leave it up to the Minister of the day as to what is and what is not critical infrastructure. I ask the Minister to provide some clarity on what he means by critical infrastructure.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Allowing the Government to designate certain projects or programmes as critical infrastructure is the core of the Critical Infrastructure Bill. In response to a designation, all public bodies involved at any stage in the authorisation process must prioritise and accelerate the authorisation process applied to the maximum extent possible. By establishing a clear legal basis for prioritisation, the legislation will reduce ambiguity and ensure that critical projects and programmes receive focused and co-ordinated attention across Departments, regulators and agencies. It will address the unacceptable delays in our infrastructure-approval processes by mandating whole-of-State co-operation and create a fast-track pathway for critical projects and programmes to drive delivery.

Section 3 of the Bill deals with the designation process. The text of the Bill has been published in full along with an explanatory memorandum. This section of the Bill allows the Minister for public expenditure to make a recommendation to Government that a designation order be made in respect of a project or programme. There are a number of matters that I may have regard to in making a recommendation. They are set out in section 3 of the Bill. They include: the need to ensure effective and efficient delivery of a project or programme; whether delay or failure to deliver a project or programme may have adverse economic or social consequences for the State; whether a project or programme may impact in a positive or negative manner on the delivery of any other project or programme; the national development plan; and such other matters in relation to infrastructure as I may consider appropriate.

Project and programme are defined in section 1 of the Bill. A project means a project, the purpose of which is the delivery of infrastructure and that is funded by capital investment, by or on behalf of the State or by or on behalf of a public body.

Infrastructure is also defined in the section. The definition refers to any infrastructure that enables essential facilities and systems of the State to function effectively and includes, but is not limited to, energy, transport and water systems.

Following a recommendation from the Minister for public expenditure, the Government will, by order, designate projects or programmes as critical infrastructure. Every designation order will be laid before Dáil Éireann, which may nullify the order within 21 days.

The process of considering which programmes or projects I may recommend to the Government will commence after the Oireachtas has passed the-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Thank you, Minister. I call Deputy Farrell.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I understand that the Minister is giving me the layout of the Bill and exactly how it will work. My interest is in what he would deem to be critical infrastructure. Obviously, we have serious issues when it comes to the delivery of critical infrastructure. I think of the likes of homes and houses, hospitals, public transport and infrastructure of scale. At the moment, what is being built an awful lot of the time is private student accommodation which is then rented at extraordinarily high prices. We see empty office buildings and that type of construction happening. I understand that the Minister is saying it is through the public system and not private, but it would be interesting to hear what he considers and deems to be critical infrastructure.

Deputy Jack Chambers: As to what we have tried to do, the Deputy and others will appreciate that if we were to list a load of projects in primary legislation, there may be another project which will emerge and which is of a critical nature. The other challenge is that this particular list then gets caught in 2026. In four years, or when a future government wishes to update the national development plan, there needs to be an ability to utilise this legislative framework to continue to designate projects appropriately. That is why we have established the statutory framework around how projects will be designated. Obviously, they are connected to the national development plan. It relates to State-funded projects, and I have set out the broad legislative framework as to how the decision will be made. It is important to have flexibility around it being an enabling framework to allow future governments to drive delivery. That is why we have not specified the particular projects or programmes in the Bill. I have set out the broad definition, as the Deputy mentioned, regarding how the designation process will work and what is defined as infrastructure within----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Thank you, Minister. I call Deputy Farrell.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: My party colleagues and I want to work constructively with the Minister on this Bill. We understand that our people and our communities need critical infrastructure to be delivered with urgency. We want to engage with this legislation and scrutinise it in order that it is fit for purpose because, as the Minister says, the critical infrastructure that is built by this Government will be in use for decades. Therefore, it is essential that this Government gets critical infrastructure delivery right. It has been incredibly disappointing that this Government has so far tried to evade scrutiny and limit the opportunity for TDs, relevant experts and stakeholders to look at and improve this Bill. Conversation is always better when we are looking at legislation. Will the Minister make a commitment that this Bill will get a full hearing on Committee Stage? That would be incredibly important. I do not sit on that committee. I understand Deputy Sheehan does. I have party colleagues who do. Giving it that time would be incredibly important.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Absolutely. What we have tried to do in the first instance is build the evidence base as to where the issues were, which we did last year. There has been strong stakeholder engagement. The report was published last July. There has been engagement with

the Oireachtas committee on the challenges and the delivery gaps which exist. There has been a co-ordinated response from the stakeholder community and others in what has informed the drafting process around this Bill. The issue with doing pre-legislative scrutiny is that there is a risk this would lapse into the autumn, and we want to use the Bill to get projects done. Nearly everybody in the Opposition would share the objective of getting them delivered, whether it is critical grid infrastructure, which we need to build our low-carbon, renewable future, whether it is some of the public transport projects that have been referred to, or I can list some of the other areas as well. The Bill is a very clear enabling framework, and I want to be able to enact it quickly. Again, I want to work with everyone to get it right as well.

Public Procurement Contracts

6. Deputy Grace Boland asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the reforms planned or under consideration to improve value for money, risk allocation and cost control in public procurement for State-funded projects; whether changes to tender evaluation criteria, including the weighting applied to price versus quality and delivery capacity, are being examined; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27862/26]

Deputy Grace Boland: Public procurement is one of the State's most powerful levers for delivering quality infrastructure and services, yet it is also where we see repeated cost overruns, delays and failed delivery. Good procurement is not about spending more money; it is about spending it wisely. We have to have robust processes in place. The Minister might update us as to what reforms are planned or under consideration to strengthen value-for-money considerations, risk allocation and cost control in the State.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): Reform of procurement is specifically called out under action 25 of Accelerating Infrastructure: Report and Action Plan. There are also a number of actions focused on improving the visibility of the pipeline and providing greater certainty around the timing of the delivery stage of critical infrastructure.

Government policy with regard to public works procurement continues to require comprehensive definition of the brief and detailed description of the scope as this represents the most efficient means of delivery. There has been a significant move to rebalance the level of risk that consultants and contractors are expected to bear when engaged on public works projects. Liability caps and index-based price adjustment mechanisms have been introduced in the consultancy and construction contracts. Further reforms that are highlighted in the action plan include formalising dispute avoidance and early warning provisions; the development of an early engagement model to enable collaboration at the earliest point to drive efficiencies; the introduction of lean principles; and further adoption and promotion of digital technologies.

There is also a focus on training and supports for contracting authorities engaged in works delivery through the commercial skills programme. Through the construction sector group, there is ongoing engagement between the Government and industry on building the capacity of the sector itself through a range of supports and productivity measures.

Deputy Grace Boland: I very much welcome the references to frameworks, guidance and training. That is all very important. We repeatedly see at the public accounts committee systemic failures in procurement processes. I have worked in this space. I am a lawyer. I have advised in this space. Unless we have people who understand the business case and who put in place appropriate milestones, and unless we have appropriate legal protections in place to mitigate the risks and make sure that delivery is pegged to payment, we are setting ourselves up for failure. We see it time and time again. We have a SUSI grant project with €6.4 million paid that is at pre-project phase. The national train control centre will see a €40 million overrun and more. We have to have the confidence and capability, and the Department has to assess budget versus delivery. We need to make sure with the projects for which we are awarding contracts that we award them on the basis that they have the competence to deliver them on time and on budget. I very much hope the Department will request that all Departments and agencies will provide annual reports on budget versus outturn.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: There are ongoing reforms, as the Deputy knows, on the capital works management framework. It is an integrated set of contractual provisions, guidance material and technical procedure. It covers all aspects of the delivery process of a public works project, from inception to final project delivery or review. The structure of this strategic framework is closely aligned with and complements the infrastructure guidelines developed by the Department of public expenditure and reform. A key theme of the review of the capital works management framework, CWMF, is the development of high-quality information to enable better informed decisions, reducing risk on construction projects. We need to secure value for money. It is an ongoing priority for the Government. It is at the heart of all decision-making at every stage of policy or programme life. There is a lot of good work going on. I thank the Deputy for her question.

Deputy Grace Boland: I appreciate that. The Minister of State is right to say that we absolutely have to have the data to ensure that our procurement process is robust and is delivering value for money. It is essential. We are here representing the taxpayers and we have to make sure that the taxpayers are getting value for money for services, not only capital projects but also IT projects.

This is where we are seeing systemic failures right across the board. I hope the Minister of State will be able to provide an update as to what evaluation processes the Department has been undertaking in recent months across all Departments and agencies.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: Building information modelling, BIM, provides a structure for information generated in respect of a construction project. There is now a high-level implementation plan for phased adoption of the BIM on public works projects. In three years' time, all public works projects will have BIM requirements incorporated. As of 1 January last, milestone 6 of the Irish BIM mandate for CWMF has been reached. These requirements now include the contractor and supply chain on applicable projects up to €10 million. The Government continues to provide support to the industry to adopt all these areas through the Build Digital Project. There is a lot of good work going on, and we need to continue it.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

National Development Plan

7. **Deputy Shay Brennan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation for an overview of the progress made to date under national strategic outcome, NSO, 5 of the National Development Plan 2021-2030; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27477/26]

Deputy Tony McCormack: I would like an overview of the progress made to date under NSO 5 of the National Development Plan 2021-2030.

Deputy Jack Chambers: As Minister for public expenditure I am responsible for setting the overall capital allocations across Departments and for monitoring monthly expenditure at departmental level. Responsibility for the management and delivery of the wider investment and sectoral policies within the allocations agreed under the national development plan involves working with Ministers and other colleagues across Departments. Each Minister is responsible for deciding which programmes and projects will be delivered under the national development plan. The latter contains expenditure commitments for a range of strategic investment priorities which will contribute towards the achievement of national strategic outcomes, including NSO 5, which relates to a strong economy supported by enterprise, innovation and skills. This aims to maintain and enhance Ireland's status as a competitive, innovative and resilient enterprise base, providing high quality jobs and employment opportunities for people to live and prosper in all regions.

Under the plan, €3.68 billion was allocated in respect of enterprise and skills, including €400 million of additional funding to Irish start-up enterprises. Over 15,300 new jobs were created from the 323 investments in IDA Ireland-supported client companies in 2005. The numbers directly employed in the multinational sector in Ireland in 2025 were 312,400. The existing base of FDI has shown continued resilience, and more than half the investments went into regional locations. Employment in client companies of Enterprise Ireland increased to a total of over 234,000 in 2025, which is the highest number ever reported. The total number of jobs created was over 12,600. Some 69% of new jobs created in 2025 in companies supported by Enterprise Ireland were located outside the Dublin region.

In the higher education sector, €4.5 billion in capital funding was allocated to the Department of further and higher education as the number of projects and programmes continued to be advanced and deliver on the ambitions of Ireland's higher education sector. These projects will expand capacity in higher education institutions and support a pipeline of talents and skills aligned with national and regional needs.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I welcome the update on the progress made under NSO 5. The key issues for communities across the midlands is whether this is translating into real delivery on the ground. For counties like Offaly and towns such as Tullamore, Birr, Edenderry and the surrounding rural areas, balanced regional development must mean more than policy commitments. It must mean visible investment, meaningful jobs, improved infrastructure and

stronger public services. People want to see tangible progress in areas such as transport connectivity, housing delivery, enterprise investment and town centre regeneration. They want to know that regional Ireland is genuinely being prioritised. Will the Minister outline the specific progress that has been delivered under NSO 5 for the midlands region to date and what future investment is planned to ensure that counties like Offaly continue to grow and will retain vibrant communities in which people can live and work?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I do not have a specific breakdown for the enterprise sector. All I say is that if we look at wider job creation, the prioritisation that has emerged on the part of both IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland and the facts that have emerged in 2025, we can see that there has been significant growth in job creation outside of Dublin. This reflects our broad strategy and shows the huge resilience in the Irish economy, notwithstanding global conflict and major geopolitical pressures. There is continued investment and positivity around Ireland's economic proposition for many companies that want to build their base in Ireland, many of them are SMEs but there are also FDI companies.

I have been with the Deputy in Offaly. He knows the huge importance of regional connectivity from a roads' perspective, which the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has restored in the context of the national development plan. There are also objectives around other capital investment projects for the midlands region, and that is a continued focus of Government. We want not only to match the capital investment which we have set aside but also to get things done and accelerate delivery across the board.

Deputy Tony McCormack: One of the most important tests of NSO 5 is whether it helps regional towns to retain populations and attract sustainable employment. For areas in the midlands, keeping our communities vibrant depends on meaningful local jobs, strong services and infrastructure that supports family life and business growth. Will the Minister outline how progress under NSO 5 is being measured in terms of employment creation, population retention and local service provision in regional towns? How will the Government ensure that counties like Offaly receive their fair share of future national development plan investment?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The critical foundation of employment growth, house construction and industrial development is what we have sought to prioritise in the national development plan in terms of building out our energy system - where there will be opportunities for the midlands - ensuring that transport connectivity is enhanced, which is reflected in the national development plan, and that water and wastewater infrastructure is also advanced. These are the key enablers of wider social and economic development in the context of the infrastructure deficit we have in our economy. I am confident that with what has been set aside in the national development plan, we will see increased house construction in the Deputy's part of the midlands and also upside benefits in terms of job creation by SMEs and FDI companies. When that infrastructure gap starts to close, it should yield further opportunities across the Deputy's region. I am confident that will occur.

National Development Plan

8. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation for an overview of the progress made to date under National Strategic Outcome (NSO) 10 of the National Development Plan 2021-2030; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27479/26]

Deputy Brendan Smith: As the Minister knows, chapter 15 of the national development plan is titled "Access to Quality Childcare, Education and Health Services". With an increasing demand for places across those three sectors, it is absolutely essential that we have that increased investment put to use as quickly as possible. We need increased facilities in rural and urban Ireland. I sincerely hope that the money allocated can be spent as quickly as possible and that we do not have the type of interminable delays which have occurred over the years in respect of so many worthwhile projects.

Deputy Jack Chambers: In the 2021 review of the national development plan, the Government originally committed to €165 billion of investment out to 2030. Subsequently, in March 2024, it agreed to an additional €2.25 billion out to 2026. The revised development plan sets out over €275 billion of public capital investment out to 2035, the largest and most significant capital injection into the economy in the history of the State. Following the agreement in July 2025, gross capital expenditure ceilings have now been set out. While we have prioritised investment towards critical growth-enabling sectors of housing, energy, water and transport, all Departments have prepared sectoral plans for the five years out to 2030. They have set out detail around projects to be progressed.

NSO 10, as the Deputy mentioned, refers to quality childcare, education and health services. The Government has allocated over €7.55 billion to education projects over the next number of years, with €795 million to the Department of children and €9.25 billion to the Department of Health over the next five years. This will be hugely important to build the social infrastructure the Deputy mentioned, which is so important to communities across our country. We have set out the detail around that in the context of the health service, building out many of the education projects, particularly in the special education area, and also the Department of children, which the Minister, Deputy Foley, is advancing. NSO 10 is reflected in the capital investment tracker, which provides a comprehensive update of the progress of all major investments with an estimated cost of greater than €20 million. It sets out the county-specific basis, specifically for investments in schools and health facilities relating to NSO 10.

It is not only about what we allocate, but also about what we deliver and how quickly we can deliver it. That is why I am putting as much focus on reforming how we deliver infrastructure as I am on what to allocate to where.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister for his reply. I heard him speak at the recent meeting of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. He said that in far too many instances over the years process won out over delivery with regard to the capital programmes for different Departments. I refer to the childcare sector in particular. With the Minister's approval, the Minister, Deputy Foley, recently introduced the building blocks grant scheme towards the provision of new childcare places and the upgrading of existing facilities. That is a very worthwhile programme. The Minister, Deputy Foley, recently visited my constituency, where she met some of the providers who have availed of the building blocks grant scheme and others

who urgently need to increase capacity or to upgrade existing capacity. That scheme needs additional investment. The Minister may recall that, between 2004 and 2008, his predecessor in Dublin West, our colleague the late Brian Lenihan and I were both Ministers of State with responsibility for children. At that time, we were providing grant aid in excess of €1 million for new childcare facilities. During that four- to five-year period, massive and necessary development took place in the country to build a whole new infrastructure of childcare facilities, both through the community sector and private providers. We need a repeat of that today.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I know about the significant work undertaken by that Government. Even in more difficult economic times, the then Minister of State, Barry Andrews, introduced an important initiative on the affordability of childcare, which has been built on in recent years. That was a central part of the work undertaken with the Minister, Deputy Foley, as part of the revised national development plan. The €750 million allocated to the Department of children is aimed at enabling the Minister to do more in the context of capital investment in childcare. There is a need to work with childcare and education settings. In light of the demographic shift that is happening in Ireland in the medium to long term, there is an important opportunity to use our school facilities. That is happening in many communities. We need to co-ordinate capital investment from the Department of children for separate community childcare facilities and to work with schools to utilise existing facilities. That co-ordination is ongoing. I share the Deputy's objective of doing more. That is why the Minister for children, Deputy Foley, received a significant allocation under the national development plan.

Deputy Brendan Smith: The need for additional childcare places is replicated in small areas. I am working with groups in small parishes and villages such as the Denn Toddlers Playgroup in Crosskeys, County Cavan, and Happy Days Childcare in Belturbet, County Cavan. Crosskeys is a small village and Belturbet is a small town but they have huge demand for additional places, as the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach will know. It is therefore extremely important that the building blocks scheme be expanded, if at all possible.

There is a similar situation in disability services. There are two particular needs in my constituency. There is a need to considerably expand the Drumlin House Training Centre. I am very glad that substantial capital funding has been approved in respect of that development. In addition, there is the day activation unit in Cavan town, which provides day services for young adults with complex needs. At present, it is in totally unsuitable accommodation. Again, I am very glad that the HSE, in conjunction with the Department of children, is advancing that project. However, again and again, despite the best efforts of HSE officials at local level, it takes far too long to get projects to construction. I sincerely hope the Minister can get that message through to every Department and agency. Process must not win out over delivery.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I absolutely agree. That is central to what we are doing in reforming infrastructure delivery. We are aiming to cut out as much process as possible and to put delivery at the centre. That is why 34 of the 35 actions set out for implementation in the first quarter as part of our infrastructure reforms have been delivered. The other is to be delivered imminently. It is the same in the second quarter. We are working every day to drive improved delivery, to reduce process, to rebalance regulation and to ensure that delivery is at

the centre of everything we do in every area of social and economic infrastructure. That will yield improved delivery in childcare and in wider areas across the economy. I will work with the Minister, Deputy Foley, to ensure her sectoral investment plan in the Department of children is advanced quickly. I know she has worked extensively to ensure the €795 million allocated across the next five years yields that improved delivery of childcare across communities and across the country.

Question No. 9 taken with Written Answers.

An Garda Síochána

10. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation for an update on the proposed new Garda station at Northern Cross in Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27621/26]

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Is there an update on the provision of a much-needed new Garda station at Northern Cross in Dublin?

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran): The Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration published its sectoral investment plan on 4 December 2025. The second half of the sectoral investment plan will focus on bringing the projects for Dublin metropolitan region north to construction in 2028.

Given the commitment in the Department of justice's NDP sectoral plan, the Office of Public Works is now working with An Garda Síochána to confirm and refine specific requirements in north Dublin. An Garda Síochána is continuing to develop a detailed brief of requirements for Dublin metropolitan region north in collaboration with the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration. Once this process is complete, the Office of Public Works will engage with An Garda Síochána and the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to support them in identifying and appraising the most suitable site to support their objectives.

I sincerely acknowledge the persistent and constructive engagement of Deputy O'Callaghan and other Deputies. I assure them that the matter remains a priority for my Department and the wider Government. I recognise the frustration caused by the lack of visible progress, and I share the Deputy's concerns about the timeline.

The Office of Public Works is actively collaborating with An Garda Síochána and the Department to finalise requirements and conduct a thorough site identification and appraisal process in line with infrastructure guidelines. While an initial market trawl has been completed, the next steps involve refining requirements and selecting the most suitable site for all those requirements, with construction targeted for 2028.

I assure the Deputy that the funding is ring-fenced and the commitment is clear. The OPW, the Garda and the Department are working together to ensure momentum is maintained. The Deputy should have no doubt that I will keep him and all public representatives involved informed as the project advances. I welcome ongoing engagement to ensure the community's needs are fully met.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: It is welcome that we are making some progress in that there is a commitment that construction will start in 2028. Is the Minister of State confident that timeline will be adhered to? If construction begins in 2028, what is the timeline for finishing? I am concerned that we are still talking about identifying a suitable site for this new Garda station when it was announced not by the last Government, but by the Government before it in 2019, and when a site had been identified for it at that time. I do not really understand that part of it because a site was identified and even announced seven years ago. Why are we still talking about identifying a suitable site when one was identified seven years ago? Is the Minister of State confident that construction will start in 2028?

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I am not being critical when I note that the Deputy puts down this question every month. I wish the project would move at the same pace. I recently met with the Minister for justice and asked him for a meeting with him and his officials with a view to speeding up this process. Like the Deputy, I would like to see this delivered. It has been announced and has been going on for quite some time. As I have said in the past, politicians announce things but it takes time to deliver them. Just as a flood scheme takes 11 years, a Garda station normally takes ten, believe it or not. Since this was announced, things have changed in respect of An Garda Síochána. We have to get the development of this site right. It is a highly populated area. The Deputy knows that better than I do. He is there. I have been inundated with contact from Deputy Brabazon, from my colleague, Deputy Heneghan and from Deputy O'Callaghan himself. I assure the Deputy today that I will work with him and those other colleagues to try to deliver this on time.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I welcome his work on this, his commitment to it and his interest in it. That is very welcome. It is also welcome that genuine attempts to move this on are now being made. The Minister of State is right that this is a growing community with a huge population. That community was bitterly disappointed that this was announced in 2019 and that nothing then happened for seven years. The fact that we have the date of 2028 is positive, as is the fact that the Minister of State is engaging with the Department of justice on it. I welcome that. However, I urge that we all collectively keep at this and get this much-needed new Garda station delivered.

The area needs other facilities and community infrastructure as well but this is a key component of it.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I can assure the Deputy that I have put a lot of work and effort into this since I spoke to him and my colleagues since he raised this with me before. The commitment is there from the Government in terms of the money. It is about getting the site and the other parts right, and making sure we deliver, as the Deputy said, for the people in the area. They are waiting a long time for that, but I am working within the Departments to make sure we deliver this and get it to construction.

Legislative Measures

11. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to outline the rationale for section 7 of the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27626/26]

17. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the reason for the disapplication of section 15 of Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 to a relevant public body as part of the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27646/26]

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I want to ask the Minister, Deputy Chambers, about his intentions through the Critical Infrastructure Bill, particularly section 7, in terms of the removal of the climate duty, a duty on all public bodies to assess the climate impact of infrastructure projects they are advancing.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I propose to take Questions Nos. 11 and 17 together.

The Critical Infrastructure Bill is a central pillar of the Government's broader infrastructure acceleration agenda. The need for a Bill to fast track a limited number of strategically important projects through approval processes was identified in a report and action plan published last December.

The Bill has been drafted and introduced on a priority basis. Its primary aim is to allow the Government to designate certain projects or programmes as critical. This then requires all public bodies that may have an authorisation function for these projects or programmes to prioritise consideration of them within their approval processes. In practical terms, this means that relevant bodies will be required to prioritise, avoid delay, reduce timelines, parallel processes and co-operate to fast-track designated infrastructure.

I have proposed to disapply section 15 of the climate Act because of the risk of delays that this section gives rise to. The provisions in section 15 of the Act have opened up a new channel for the judicial review of the decisions of public bodies. The net effect is that it could slow the pace of infrastructural development. Delays to infrastructure roll-out are a key reason we are not reaching much of our climate and renewable energy targets. The report by Mario Draghi on EU competitiveness, for example, specifically identified Ireland as having the slowest approval process across the EU for renewable electricity.

Designated projects or programmes will still have all relevant climate considerations built into their development. Every Exchequer-funded project, for example, is already required to measure and price its greenhouse gas emissions under the infrastructure guidelines. Under the Bill as drafted, climate and environmental obligations will still fully apply. That is important to state because that is not being reflected in what the Deputy has said so far. Disapplication of section 15 simply removes an unnecessary layer that risks driving judicial reviews, and we need to remove all risks around judicial reviews in the legislative framework when it comes to infrastructure delivery.

Ireland will still be bound by climate and renewable energy targets. That is part of the Government's wider work to transition to a climate-resilient, biodiversity-rich and sustainable climate-neutral economy by 2050. All that will change in practical terms is the ability to

challenge decisions of public bodies as they relate to how they have considered the impact of an individual project or programme against that particular section of legislation.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Mario Draghi may have rightfully highlighted real challenges in our planning system but I do not think he placed the blame on the climate action Act or section 15. As I said in the Chamber on Tuesday, we are talking in a context where the previous Government signed up to legally binding international and European targets but the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, announced over Christmas that we would not reach those targets. The climate Act was central to our ability as a state to reach those targets and now the Government is systematically trying to take out one of the central elements, the climate duty under section 15. It has been systematic. It is seen in this legislation, it is seen in the airport cap and it is in the strategic gas Bill.

I asked the Minister to name the judicial review cases taken on the basis of section 15. Can he name cases that have been taken on the basis of section 15?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I have read judgments that relate to section 15 and some of them do have a chilling effect on infrastructure delivery. I am not going to set out the judgment here - I do not have it in front of me - but I have concern with how the interpretation of section 15 as it relates to the infrastructure system presents a risk in overall delivery. There have been a number of judgments relating to section 15 that present risks, and I need to be clear about that. The deference to creating a legal avenue and risk to infrastructure delivery relating to section 15 has to be addressed in the context of delivery.

To take the most recent example, last week we had a permission validly given by An Coimisiún Pleanála relating to the ring road in Galway and we already have a particular NGO saying it is considering a case under section 15 for that particular infrastructure project. It has already gone through all of the statutory processes and has already gone to An Coimisiún Pleanála. The growth, the deference and the risk of all of these projects ending up in the courts bring a risk to infrastructure delivery.

There is a whole other extensive area of reforms that we are doing and we are trying to make it more efficient, but a lot of what we are trying to do here relates to building a low-carbon economy in terms of our grid, which has to be developed, and many of our transport projects, which are actually in public transport. We want to derisk appeals that are taking through judicial reviews. This is one element of it. Others relate to the work that the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, is doing and the work that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is doing around environmental legal fees as well. The judgment that was set out and the test that is given around that judgment presents risk and that is why are seeking to disapply section 15.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The Minister continually puts the blame for judicial reviews on environmentalists and on people who are concerned about climate action but let me cite three actual judicial review cases. Not the hypothetical ones that the Minister continues to cite, but actual cases that took place on three major public transport projects. There was the judicial review on DART+ West in our constituency that was taken by a landowner. There was the judicial review on the BusConnects project to Blanchardstown in our constituency that was taken by a landowner. There was the judicial review taken against the Luas Finglas project

that was again taken by a landowner. In each of those cases, section 15 of the climate Act, which the Minister wants to disapply, would actually have strengthened the case of the National Transport Authority, NTA, the State agency looking to take the particular project, just as section 15 strengthened the case of An Bord Pleanála in the Coolglass case.

The Minister is getting this wrong. He is not looking at the implication of what he is going to do. The Minister should read the Coolglass judgment and understand that he is weakening the State's hand in defending judicial review cases on major projects that will actually help reduce our carbon emissions.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I am against all judicial reviews whether it is environmentalists, landowners or anybody in the economy. When a decision is made by An Coimisiún Pleanála, we need to allow it to be built and respected. We have seen the enormous deference to allowing this system and industry of judicial reviews to build up. It is undermining delivery systems right across the board. I am against landowners taking judicial reviews, I am against developers taking judicial reviews, I am against anybody taking judicial reviews, but I respect the statutory process and appeals systems that we have.

What we are trying to do is remove the risk of a particular legal avenue that is there. That is what I am saying. I have a similar view on anybody who wants to take a judicial review. I just gave last week's example because it happened to refer to section 15 and how it related to an infrastructure project that we wanted to deliver as a Government. I have read the judgment, and it sets out a particular test relating to individual projects, which present risks.

Public bodies should and do climate assess projects. That is set out in the infrastructure guidelines. We need ensure that continues and there is no change to that in the context of publicly funded projects. We should allow public bodies to do that and adhere to the infrastructure guidelines. They already set that out in a transparent way and do it properly. At the end of all that and when a particular project has received permission, we should not present a legal risk to that project being delayed for two or three years. That is something that all of us need to address in the context of reform.

10 o'clock

Section 15 brings that risk in terms of overall delivery.

On the Deputy's point, I get frustrated with anybody taking a judicial review on any project we want to deliver. The Deputy and I share the same views around ensuring DART+ West and many other public transport projects can advance.

Departmental Bodies

12. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if he will report on the new infrastructure regulatory simplification unit in his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27467/26]

Deputy Tony McCormack: Will the Minister report on the new infrastructure regulatory simplification unit in his Department and make a statement on it?

Deputy Jack Chambers: On 3 December 2025, the Government published the accelerating infrastructure action plan. The report sets out a comprehensive programme of actions designed to speed up the delivery of critical infrastructure across the State and includes 30 actions across four key areas. The second pillar is regulatory reform and simplification. This means identifying where regulation leads to excessive process rather than improved outcomes. It also means examining the structure of our regulatory environment, the practices applied by regulatory bodies and how they communicate with one another and applicants.

It is important to note that regulation also brings important benefits. It protects consumers and society as a whole through the application of safeguards, such as environmental protection. However, it also implies a cost and quicker and more simplified regulation can help balance this cost with the benefits.

The overarching objective of pillar 2 reforms is to reduce unnecessary regulatory burden, thereby minimising time and cost impacts on infrastructure delivery and speeding it up. The establishment of the infrastructure regulatory simplification unit, as I announced in February, marked the commencement of action 9 of the report.

The new unit is conducting a risk-based review of the current regulatory landscape, analysing and mapping existing processes and engaging with the bodies involved in consenting, permitting and licensing to identify and remove bottlenecks. The unit will also seek to identify opportunities to enhance co-operation and streamline processes for more effective delivery of the national development plan. It will focus on simplifying and improving the complex regulatory processes across critical infrastructure sectors, namely, housing, energy, transport and water infrastructure.

Progress on this has commenced at pace and a new circular issued on 26 March. It seeks to embed the principles for better regulation of critical infrastructure. It includes a series of regulatory process reforms that must be implemented by public sector bodies with statutory, regulatory, operational or delivery responsibilities for critical infrastructure. It outlines eight principles for better regulation that public sector bodies are required to implement in their own regulatory processes. These are necessity, effectiveness and proportionality. I will detail them more in a moment.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I thank the Minister. I welcome the establishment of the regulatory simplification unit and the clear focus on accelerating the delivery of critical infrastructure. For too long, overlapping consenting, permitting and licensing processes have delayed progress on vital infrastructure projects. This is particularly evident in key sectors such as transport, energy and water services, all of which are essential to housing delivery, economic growth and balanced regional development. Communities across Offaly and regional Ireland want projects to move more quickly from approval to delivery. Will the Minister outline what specific reforms will be prioritised by the unit to remove duplication, improve co-ordination across Departments and agencies and shorten the time it takes for critical projects to commence?

Deputy Jack Chambers: Some of the principles of better regulation are necessity, effectiveness, proportionality, coherence, efficiency, being time-bound, transparency and accountability. The reforms and principles outlined in the circular will drive better co-

ordination between bodies. We seek to simplify many of the overlapping and unduly complex regulatory frameworks. The unit will use these principles to drive reforms across many of the bodies involved in regulation for critical infrastructure to shorten timelines and simplify processes to ensure we better deliver across the infrastructure system.

The circular is a direction and agreement we brought to Government. Some agencies, which I will not name, have come before the infrastructure task force and are advancing some of the regulatory reforms, reducing timelines and being part of the solution. All agencies and bodies involved in infrastructure need to reduce timelines because they are, in many instances, resulting in slowing delivery across the board. We have had good, constructive and productive discussions with bodies and reforms are advancing. I can go into more detail on the specifics.

Deputy Tony McCormack: While the creation of the unit is welcome, what people want is delivery. We in the committee on infrastructure and the national development plan voted not to have pre-legislative scrutiny because we realised this needed to be done and we needed to set an example. We need to move this fast. Will the Minister provide a clear timeline for when these reforms will begin to have an impact? What measurable reductions in approval and commencement timelines does the Minister expect to see in the coming years?

Deputy Jack Chambers: One reform that has already happened is that of the infrastructure guidelines. We have removed the need, in many instances, for the external assurance process, which saves at least 20 weeks. We have cut the decision gates from three to two. A lot of process-related work goes into an additional decision gate where a matter is brought to Government. That process has been removed, which saves multiple weeks. The update from the joint utilities and transport clearing house is that there are about ten significant critical regulatory barriers across the utilities and infrastructure sector. The team in my Department is working to remove them.

We have a specific team doing specific work on removing barriers across the infrastructure system. It is also conducting a wider review of the regulatory landscape in our country. It is all about improved speed. We seek to apply the reforms on a Gantt chart so that we can try to truncate the project timelines that exist in transport, energy and water infrastructure and other areas to yield better delivery. The infrastructure guidelines were an initial reform. Other extensive work is ongoing in the Department and by the unit on changing the process and practice within regulators, which will make a significant difference in improving delivery. We will be able to set them out in the coming weeks.

Legislative Measures

13. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to outline the statutory safeguards, oversight mechanisms and independent review processes that will be put in place to ensure that the significant powers assigned to him under the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026 are exercised in a transparent, proportionate and accountable manner; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27624/26]

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: On the Critical Infrastructure Bill, it is good that there is a focus on trying to speed up these processes. We have heard from the Minister with responsibility for the OPW that it takes about ten years to deliver a Garda station. That is just one of many examples of how slow these processes are. It is not just about legislation, though. The Bill would give the Minister significant powers in terms of designation. What safeguards, oversight mechanisms or process would be in place to ensure that those significant powers the Minister is assigning to himself will be exercised in a transparent, proportionate and accountable manner?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. As I said, the Critical Infrastructure Bill is a central pillar of the Government's broader infrastructure acceleration agenda. The need for a Bill to fast-track a number of strategically important projects through approval processes was identified in the action published last December. The Bill has been drafted and introduced on a priority basis to respond to this need. Its primary aim is to allow the Government to designate certain projects or programmes as critical. This then requires all public bodies that may have an authorisation function to prioritise them within their approval processes. This will avoid delays, reduce timelines, parallel processes, and introduce a duty to co-operate across the board.

In terms of the safeguards, I will make a recommendation to the Government that a designation order may be made in respect of a project or programme. The decision as to whether to designate the project rests with the Government. Where the Government decides to exercise the order, it must be laid before Dáil Éireann and if a resolution annulling the order is passed by Dáil Éireann within the next 21 days on which Dáil Éireann has sat after the order is laid before it, the order shall be annulled. This ensures that the power to designate projects or programmes ultimately rests with the Oireachtas.

In addition, under section 5, I may request a relevant body to provide certain information. That is set out in terms of strengthening project performance across the board. Section 6 of the Bill provides that I may give directions to a particular body to improve performance anchored in its duties and functions. Again, that is to ensure it is on board with broader infrastructure delivery.

Many of these critical projects are known. Many are in the national development plan or relate to a State body. There is no mystery about which projects will be involved. Within that, we will have to prioritise to ensure that the projects that are of critical importance receive prioritisation in the infrastructure system. They then need to be fast-tracked through existing approval processes.

Separately, we are working on emergency powers to try to skip stages but that will have a much higher legal threshold because it would involve skipping potential stages. That is not in this particular piece of legislation.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I accept there is no mystery about these projects. They are all good projects. I cannot see why anyone would want to bring a motion to the Dáil to annul prioritisation of any of the projects under consideration. That is not really the issue. The issue is the bit of mystery about how the prioritisation will be carried out. What will and will not be prioritised? How will that be decided? That is the bit the Minister and the Cabinet will have information on but the Dáil, Oireachtas and public will not. That is the missing part. How will

prioritisation be carried out? Where is the transparency in that regard? The Bill is silent on this. It gives the power to the Minister, subject to Cabinet approval and laid before the Oireachtas but there is no information about how that decision will be made.

It does not work if everything worthwhile is prioritised. Decisions have to be made. I accept that but we will be in the dark as to why one good project was prioritised and another was not. If there is no transparency around this, it will lead to a situation where people will question why one project was picked over another important project.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We have a framework set out in the legislation detailing the factors the Minister in my position will consider when designating particular projects. Obviously, I will be accountable to the House as to why a particular project is picked and prioritised. I always respect my duties to the House in that regard. I can already see the political risk in how this will be managed in the House where Deputies will question why certain projects are not being prioritised over other projects. If this is how the Bill is used, it will undermine infrastructure delivery. The key element is that we have a limited number of strategically important projects we can seek to advance. If it becomes too big and if everything is prioritised, nothing will be prioritised.

I am very much anchored to many of the strategically important sectors that are critical to Ireland's future, such as the energy, water, transport sectors. All of those sectors are involved in building more homes and contribute to the wider social and economic development of our country. I take that national responsibility carefully, and it is grounded in how we make decisions around this. I hope, as an Oireachtas, we all get on board with that because, ultimately, if we bog it down with too many projects, the upside of this legislation gets undermined.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The point I always make about legislation is that it has to be drafted not just for this Government but the governments that come after. It has to be drafted for Ministers who will take these responsibilities in the absolute public interest but also for Ministers who may not do that. My concern is having that concentration of power without information around the process. If we have information as to how the decisions will be made on each project, at least we will be able to understand the rationale as to why a certain project was prioritised and another was not. Without that information provided to the Oireachtas, the Dáil and the public, it will lead to people questioning why a project in Cork, for example, was prioritised but one in Galway was not. It will create a problem. If people see how and why the decision was made, it provides a bit of protection to both the Minister and the Government, as well as proper accountability and transparency. We will obviously look at this on Committee Stage but I ask the Minister to consider what I am putting forward.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We have set out a framework on the factors the Minister can consider in the context of designating projects. Anchoring decisions around those are important. I assure the Deputy and anyone in this House that any decision I make on designation will be fully in the public and national interest, yielding overall delivery. I will be accountable to the House in that regard.

Prioritisation always creates winners and losers in any scenario, whether it is capital projects or in a budgetary context. Trade-offs happen. For example, we have referenced programmes or projects in the energy sector. We have a programme of investment with ESB Networks and EirGrid that must be carried out. It is fairly clear that it will be a necessary national programme. It is nationwide anyway. There are other well-documented projects that are critical for Ireland. That is what I will be grounded in and the basis on which I will make decisions. We have a framework in place. I will be accountable to the House and transparent about how we come to particular decisions.

Question No. 14 taken with Written Answers.

Strategic Infrastructure

15. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the action he is taking to overcome the key barriers to infrastructure delivery; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27468/26]

Deputy Tony McCormack: What action has the Minister taken to overcome the key barriers to infrastructure delivery?

Deputy Jack Chambers: As Minister, I am responsible for setting the overall capital allocations across Departments and monitoring monthly expenditure at departmental level. The programme for Government set out clear prioritisation for the national development plan review to ensure that investment can be maximised in the coming five years for strategic infrastructure.

Last year, my Department worked on the identification of barriers to infrastructure delivery. In December, it published the Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan, aimed at removing those barriers. This is critical to allow the Government to meet the increased supply of homes and support competitiveness.

The plan sets out 30 targeted actions grouped under four pillars, each addressing a key area of reform. A key achievement in the first quarter has been the publication of the Critical Infrastructure Bill. Core regulatory foundations have also been put in place through the establishment of the infrastructure regulatory simplification unit; the issuance of cross-Government circulars on better regulation and reaction to legal precedent; and strengthened engagement with regulators and EU institutions to support legislative simplification.

Progress has also been made on delivery and co-ordination with the completion of the national development plan review and sectoral investment plans; revised infrastructure guidelines approved and issued; enhanced National Development Finance Agency support arrangements for sponsors; and improved focus on priority projects. The removal of bottlenecks has been progressed through the joint utilities and transport clearing group. Capacity and productivity reforms within the construction sector have been advanced through publication of the workforce and skills plan and the restructuring of the construction sector group to drive procurement, innovation and digitalisation.

Engagement to support leadership and public acceptance has intensified, and that work is ongoing.

In quarter 2 of 2026, the focus will be on advancing priority legislation, progressing planning, regulatory and EU-related reforms, strengthening oversight of delivery risks and bottlenecks, embedding procurement and productivity initiatives and further improving co-ordination on utilities, land availability and public engagement to support timely delivery of critical infrastructure.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I thank the Minister for the response. One of the key issues facing communities is the length of time it takes for major projects to move through the system. At present, pre-planning stages for major road projects can exceed one year, while electricity, water and wastewater infrastructure can take three or four years before delivery even begins. These delays are having a direct impact on housing and enterprise development and the ability of communities to grow and remain vibrant. Will the Minister outline the immediate actions being taken to reduce these timelines, as well as the new target timeframes he expects for roads, energy and water infrastructure?

Deputy Jack Chambers: There are a few changes being made. I referenced the infrastructure guidelines earlier, and that is an important change. They will save significant time and they have already advanced. Separately, we are seeking to put in place a standardised template on business case development. We know a business case can take a short time with particular agencies and utilities but, in certain instances, it drifts into years. The wider public discussion often focuses on judicial reviews and reforms in that space - we need to advance that reform - but there is also a lot of time wasted at the early phase of a project around concept design. That is why the National Development Finance Agency is being stood up. It is broadening its remit to reduce the time at all elements of the project lifecycle.

The Critical Infrastructure Bill will also help fast-track projects through the respective permitting, licensing and approval processes. The infrastructure task force is already bringing about reforms and changes to some of the regulatory functions that exist within regulators in respect of how they deliver infrastructure and how their processes need to be reformed to better enable infrastructure delivery.

Deputy Tony McCormack: Communities want certainty that these delays are being tackled with urgency and that the providers of these utilities, especially in water, electricity and transport, are capable of doing the work that is needed. Will the Minister confirm when people can expect to see reduced timelines in practice, particularly for projects linked to housing and regional growth? How will the Department ensure that the acceleration of infrastructure delivery is felt across County Offaly, and indeed, across the whole island of Ireland?

Deputy Jack Chambers: To build homes, we have to have transport, energy and water systems in place. That is why the work with utilities to build that enabling infrastructure is absolutely critical. There will be wider co-ordination with the housing activation office, which is working on this at a local level, for example, in Offaly. What are the opportunities to advance housing supply and growth at a local level? Where is there particular road or water infrastructure or a need from an energy perspective to advance housing supply? That work is

happening with the housing activation office. What we are doing in my Department is with the utilities at a national level to remove the blockages, barriers and constraints to overall delivery, which they have. All of that will yield improved delivery, improved timelines and ultimately strengthen housing supply. We know from local authorities and developers that the infrastructure gap is something that constrains overall housing supply. All of this reform will help speed up the housing supply.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): We are moving to the last question.

Deputy Colm Burke: I indicated that I wanted to ask a supplementary question, which I am entitled to do.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): There are no supplementary questions. There is only six and a half minutes per question and there are no supplementary questions. That rule was made about three weeks ago. It was communicated to all TDs. Supplementary questions are out unless the TD asking the question gives time to the other TD.

We move now to the last question, and we only have two minutes. Deputy Burke can ask his question, but I can only allow him back in once.

Question No. 16 taken with Written Answers.

Question No. 17 taken with Question No. 11.

Question No. 18 taken with Written Answers.

Flood Relief Schemes

19. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the status of progress on the Blackpool River Bride flood relief scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27643/26]

28. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation for an update in relation to the Blackpool flood relief scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27251/26]

Deputy Colm Burke: My question is in relation to the Blackpool flood relief scheme. It has been going on for 13 years, going into 14 years. The OPW sent the report in to the Minister of State's Department nine or ten months ago. I do not understand why we still do not have a decision on this matter. Why is it taking so long? On the previous occasion, the Department sat on the report. By the time it came to a decision, the environmental report was out of date, so it had to go back to drawing board. When will this project proceed?

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I propose to take Questions Nos. 19 and 28 together.

I am not going to go and read it. The Deputy knows the story in relation to this. It is with the Department, but we are working together collectively. I am working with the Deputy as--

Deputy Colm Burke: It is here for 12 months.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I ask the Deputy to allow the Minister of State to answer.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: The Deputy comes in here and gives out the whole time, but he rarely engages in a proper manner to try to constructively deliver this for the people of the community. He comes in and says, "This is delayed. That is delayed." We have to work together for the betterment of those people and protect them. The Deputy knows the objection that was placed on this. He knows exactly the people who placed the objection. He knows what I am doing with him and the people trying to deliver on this. It is unfair of him to come in and accuse us of not working and trying to deliver on that. It is very unfair.

Deputy Colm Burke: The report is in for over 12 months. Why is there not a decision taken on it to proceed?

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: When the report comes out, we will constructively come back to the Deputy and we will work together to deliver it. I cannot interfere with the process. I can bring it to where it is today. If I could interfere, I would do it, but I cannot. The Deputy will just have to wait. While it is annoying for him, as it is for me and the people, I have to wait for that to come in.

Deputy Colm Burke: It is 12 months that we are waiting for the response from the report. The environmental impact study will again be out of date unless a decision is made on this matter.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I fully concur. I know the frustration that the Deputy has. I know people are on to him. I assure him that I am doing everything I can to deliver on that.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Energy Policy

84. **Deputy Ciarán Ahern** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment in light of the recently announced suspension of the carbon tax increase, the way in which he plans to make up the shortfall in funding allocated in budget 2026 to the SEAI for home energy upgrade schemes, and to just transition; and if he will make a statement on the matter.
[27884/26]

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I thank the Deputy for this timely question.

The allocation of the carbon tax is a matter for the Minister for public expenditure and reform, who took questions just before this. There has been no change because of the pause in the increase in the allocation for 2026. That was published as part of the Revised Estimates Volume, REV, last December and approved by the Dáil on 26 March 2026. Within my Department's 2026 allocation, there are three areas that received funding from the carbon tax. First, in the residential community retrofit programme, the budget allocation is a record €641 million this year, including €558 million from the carbon tax. We are planning for this to support the home energy upgrades of 73,000 homes this year, including solar PV. The target includes 11,500 fully funded home energy upgrades under the warmer homes scheme, which we discussed yesterday at some length, for households at risk of energy poverty. A record of over €340 million of the budget has been provided for this year. There has been a significant investment and year-on-year growth in home energy upgrades. From 2019 to December 2025, about €1.7 billion was provided in support for homeowners. We have done about 244,000 homes under that, including almost 33,000 fully funded upgrades, particularly focusing on homes at risk of energy poverty through the warmer homes scheme.

To answer the Deputy's question directly, the budget and allocation this year is not affected by not increasing the carbon tax this year. I will come back in on a couple of other areas that we are funding, such as the just transition fund and the green climate fund.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: There were any number of interventions that we felt that the Government could have made to alleviate and reduce the cost of fuel for hauliers, farmers and everyone else. It is very disappointing that the one climate-friendly measure here has been undermined, and that the Government has chosen to jettison this over other subsidies, direct payments and excise cuts. These are all measures that we want to support. Our fear here is that the Government has deferred this amount and it was scheduled to come on in May because, as it was put in the budget, the increase on home heating fuels will take place in May, after the winter heating season. It has now been deferred to the winter. The fear is over whether it will be deferred again. Is it realistic to think that the Government is going to implement it in October as people are filling up their tanks again?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is a good question. What we have tried to do regarding the support package of about €750 million is to make sure that it is balanced and targeted. We have done decreases in excise duty. We have also brought forward specific schemes of support for vital sectors. For example, the haulage sector has been provided €40 million per month for three months in targeted payments and there is €100 million for the agriculture scheme. That is to help with the fuel price spikes and increases we have seen because of the outbreak of the war in the Middle East.

Specifically on the Deputy's question, I will defend the carbon tax. To be fair to the Deputy, colleagues in the Labour Party and other parties in the Opposition, with the exception of the main Opposition party, support the carbon tax because it brings forward specific ring-fenced funding in order that we can protect households and businesses against future shocks. This is a deferral of this increase.

That is all it is. We will target resources in specific areas, reduce costs and certainly ensure there are no further increased costs because of Government tax in the middle of this year.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: It is a central plank of addressing climate change in this country. It is a crucial funding source if we are ever going to move away from our dependence on fossil fuels. I take the point that it is for the Department of Social Protection but the Minister was not able to give me any figures for how much this deferral will cost. I would appreciate if the Minister's Department or the Department of Social Protection could get back to me on exactly how much it will cost. On an ongoing basis, will this be made up from general taxation? Are we giving up on the polluter-pays principle or is the Minister determined to ensure the carbon tax increases that have been legislated for will happen?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: This is not a cancellation of an increase; it is a deferral. The cost is approximately €22 million in paused tax receipts. To put that in context, the overall investment from 2019 to now is over €2 billion. Our budget for this year, I assure the Deputy, is unaffected. We have also changed the retrofitting grants for households and seen a significant uptick in applications there. We want to bring forward a retrofit passport to make it more accessible, particularly to middle-income earners. We are seeing a significant increase in applications for heat pumps because we upped that grant to €12,500 - the cavity wall grants as well.

We had a good debate on solar yesterday. The Social Democrats brought forward some ideas around that. I want to accelerate solar further. We did 33,000 solar installations last year and can do more this year. We want to target those who are at energy security risk or energy poverty risk. We will protect the carbon tax because it is a clear mechanism for us to be able to protect households and businesses into the future.

Electricity Grid

83. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the steps he is taking to eliminate the risk of electricity blackouts due to risk to grid stability that is posed by data centres (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26187/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: EirGrid, the national grid operator, has issued a stark warning that blackouts are almost certainly on the cards because of the negligence of the Government. It is not the first time; it has been making these warnings for ten years and Governments have refused to listen. The red carpet is being rolled out for data centres, yet we cannot build houses or connect public transport. We are told the lights could go out. What steps is the Minister taking to eliminate any risk of blackouts due to the threat to grid stability posed by data centres?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That is not what EirGrid said. We have to put the facts on the floor of the House. EirGrid is the transmission system operator responsible for managing our power system at all times. It is independent of me as Minister but I meet and engage with its representatives regularly in the exercise of their functions. They are accountable to the regulator, CRU.

Fault ride through is what the Deputy is referring to. It is a growing grid stability and electricity security risk for energy system operators worldwide. We are not the only country looking to mitigate potential risks, regardless of how small they are. We saw what happened on the Iberian Peninsula and in Virginia in the United States. Every system operator is looking at its risks, regardless of how small. We are not in a situation whereby we are at risk of a blackout, I assure the Deputy.

In line with EirGrid's licence obligations, it has been proactively managing this issue but, similar to other jurisdictions, believes additional measures are needed to ensure grid stability is not compromised in the short term. That is being looked at right across Europe. EirGrid has submitted new timebound requirements for large energy users to CRU for assessment and a decision. I have engaged directly with the sector as well. There has been a good collaborative approach. It is just risk mitigation. It is not that there is a risk of blackouts, as the Deputy said. Systems operators always have to look at what could happen in the future and look to mitigate risk. That is the appropriate and sensible thing to do. The sector has been collaborative and constructive in its approach. This is a short-term measure to mitigate small potential risks. It is the right thing to do. CRU will determine how the fault ride through and the new grid operation pertains to the application from EirGrid.

Deputy Pa Daly: I see what the Minister is saying, but will there be a prioritisation framework so, for example, housing and public transport can be prioritised ahead of data centres? It is one third of our electricity and it is predicted to go much higher. It is already causing grid interventions and higher household bills. In the midlands in particular, it is preventing housing being built. Data centre demand has skyrocketed and gone out of control. It could not have been anticipated five or six years ago how high it would go - up by over 500%. EirGrid has been concerned about it and has introduced new emergency protocols. The risks to the economy are more than that. There are risks to economic stability and to societal trust, in that ordinary people see the percentage of the bills they are paying and see proportionally lesser charges being paid by data centres.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: That is not the case. Industrial and economic growth is not in conflict with growth in housing output. In the past five years, we have delivered 135,000 new homes; last year, over 36,000 new homes. That is good and is what we need to do. In PR6, the grid investment programme that has been published and that is there for everyone to see, there are about 520 capital projects. As part of that, it states what this investment will support. It supports large energy user growth, housing growth and other industrial and economic growth. That is right and proper.

In this discussion, data centres are treated by some as a negative. They underpin tens of thousands of jobs in this country. We are at the leading edge of new technologies and cloud technologies and should continue to be at the leading edge. That is why the grid investment programme and capital projects like the North-South interconnector are so critically important and we are going to get on and do those.

Deputy Pa Daly: The Construction Industry Federation has said housing delivery is being held back by significant delays in electricity connections. Last year, while 60,000 homes were commenced, completions remained far below what is needed. The Minister is saying housing

is a national priority but the energy policy allowed massive developments to absorb grid capacity first. We are not, contrary to what the Minister says, anti-tech or anti-business. It is about sequencing, fairness and priorities. The data centres can wait for their connections; housing and families cannot. Homes must come before hyper-scale electricity demand from the large energy users.

The bottom line is this. Housing is not failing because builders cannot build, but there is a threat to it. What specifically is the Minister doing to prevent that?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We need a plan-led approach to this and that is why we have published the large energy user action plan. The final decision has been given on that, which is very clear. It involves a planned approach to where and how we deploy electricity and energy resources to enable large energy users to grow and to enable us to continue to attract increases in domestic indigenous business and in foreign direct investment. That is critical. One is not in conflict with the other. The measures for which EirGrid has sought approval from CRU are appropriate and are risk-mitigation measures. Many other TSOs across Europe are doing the very same thing and it is right, proper and responsible that we do that. Housing growth and industrial growth are not in conflict. We need to continue to accelerate delivery of our grid investment programme, which we will do.

Energy Prices

85. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the steps he is taking to shield households from the energy crisis triggered by the US and Israeli attack on Iran; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26188/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: What steps is the Minister taking to shield households from the energy crisis, which has been triggered by the US and Israeli attacks on Iran? Will he make a statement about it? He will have seen that over the past couple of weeks, the Government lost the confidence of the people, even one of its own Ministers. The Government has not done enough, particularly for people whose home heating oil bills have effectively been doubled. There are 750,000 households affected, often in rural areas, often in single dwellings, and often with older people. What are they supposed to make of the Taoiseach saying he hopes they will have a good summer while the cost of filling their tank has nearly doubled?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: As Ministers and as TDs, we fully understand the pressures households and businesses are under due to the price increases because of the outbreak of the war in the Middle East. It is a global situation that every country is grappling with. By any fair assessment, the intervention that the Irish Government has made on behalf of its people amounts to multiples of the value of others made in the EU. It is about 7.5 times greater, *per capita*, than that of Germany. It is the largest one that any state has actually made to support businesses and households.

I refer to the reductions in excise on diesel, including agricultural and green diesel, and petrol, and also to the reduction to the National Oil Reserves Agency levy. All of these add up to a significant saving. People are still under pressure, absolutely. We get that, and that is why the measures we bring forward have to be targeted.

One quarter of Irish households, or about 470,000, receive direct supports through fuel allowance payments. We have extended these for a further month. We increased the payment per week in the budget. We have increased that further in a time-bound manner, effectively by extending it for a further month.

We are not going to be able to protect every sector from every price increase. Obviously, what we want to see is a de-escalation of the conflict and a return to normality. What it does speak to as well is the absolute need for us to continue to accelerate energy generation from renewable sources.

On a positive note, we saw last month, in March, that 49% of our electricity was generated through renewables. We are continuing to accelerate the deployment of renewables to reduce our dependence on fossil fuel, which is a risk for this State and many others. We are dependent on other countries for the energy that we use. This conflict, in particular, means we need to accelerate the deployment of renewables further. I assume I will receive the support of the Opposition in doing that.

Deputy Pa Daly: We saw yesterday the Taoiseach clapping himself on the back because, since 2022, the worst of the rises in electricity bills had been cushioned by supports given by the Government. In this regard, there were electricity credits promised in the run-up to the election. However, the supports have been stripped away, leaving ordinary householders even more exposed. Compounding matters was the dismissive attitude of the Taoiseach. The Minister may or may not wish to comment on the Taoiseach's comment that he hopes there is a good summer ahead for people.

Would the Minister consider removing the excise duty on home heating oil, decreasing it by €200 per tank, and introducing more concrete measures to deal with what is effectively a doubling in price, particularly for people in rural areas? We are already paying the highest electricity prices in the EU. There has been a failure by the Government to deal with this. Electricity credits have been stripped away and the response does not go far enough.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Taoiseach has not been dismissive in any way, nor has the Government as a whole. Maybe the Deputy could explain why his party was the only one on the Opposition benches to vote against every excise reduction when the first round of packages was introduced, on 25 March? It did that again this week. It voted against the measures introduced by the Government in the Dáil by way of financial resolutions to reduce costs for households and businesses. Sinn Féin was the only Opposition party on 25 March to vote against the initial package, worth €250 million. I do not understand that.

Sinn Féin is for abolishing the carbon tax. The carbon tax retrofits homes and businesses to protect them, reduce their energy use and make them more efficient. It is a good climate measure, but it is also a really good cost-saving measure. Sinn Féin has never explained where it would get the €660 million or so that we are going to invest this year to retrofit 73,000 homes, and also the carbon tax revenue that deals with the agri-climate environment scheme, other such schemes and business support grants. Where is that money coming from? Where would Sinn Féin get the money for a proposed further cut in excise to the tune of about €200 million?

Deputy Pa Daly: Unfortunately, last time I checked it was oral questions to the Minister and not questions for the Opposition. Unfortunately, the Minister has not dealt with my questions. That he answered a question with a question makes me wonder whether he is from Kerry, by any chance. He has not answered any of the questions we have asked. What specifically will he do to ease the burden on rural householders posed by the price of home heating oil?

The protests over the last week are the tipping point. They are the final straw for people who are already struggling from week to week, often in households with dual incomes. I have spoken to a lot of people who have been working in farming or in factories. Their partners might also be working, maybe in the HSE, but those people are struggling and unfortunately the measures have not been enough. The package the Minister spoke about was half baked and was not complete. It did nothing, and the people's response will show that it did nothing to address the matter.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: It is not a fair assessment to say we have done nothing. Ours was the largest intervention that has been made in the EU. I simply asked the question of Sinn Féin, as the main Opposition party and the one that presents itself as the potential alternative Government after the next election, in 2029, where it would get the money from? How would it pay for the retrofitting of houses and businesses? How would it pay for solar grants and heat pump grants? How would it pay for all the things that ensure the 244,000 homes already retrofitted are protected from aspects of price increases because they are using renewable sources? It has just never been explained to me. It is important that Sinn Féin do that.

I could go through all of the measures. Sinn Féin knows all the measures that we introduced, because it voted against them all. I really do not understand its position in this regard either. Sinn Féin was the only Opposition party to oppose decreases in costs to consumers, including households. It just does not stand up.

Energy Prices

86. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment for an update on the CRU price-gouging investigation with regard to energy prices; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27417/26]

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Could I have an update on the CRU price-gouging investigation that the Minister called for with regard to energy and electricity prices?

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I thank the Deputy for the question. I understand she wants clarification specifically on the review of the pass-through from wholesale electricity prices to retail electricity prices that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, requested the CRU to undertake. As the Deputy knows, retail electricity prices are influenced by several factors, including wholesale energy prices, system operation costs and supplier hedging. The latest data from Eurostat shows that, in nominal terms, Ireland ranked fifth for household electricity prices among European countries in the first half of 2025. When adjustments are made for purchasing power parity, Ireland is about mid-table in terms of affordability, with its electricity prices being the 12th highest among European countries.

In a report from last October, the International Energy Agency, IEA, observed that Irish retail prices had not adjusted at a pace comparable with that of the decline in wholesale prices, with the energy component of retail prices remaining up to three times that of wholesale prices. While the CRU has found no evidence of market failure or windfall profits in the retail sector in its market monitoring role, the IEA findings underline the importance of progressing the programme for Government commitment to commission an independent review into the speed and the level of pass-through from wholesale prices to retail prices.

The Minister wrote to the CRU to request that it commence the independent review, building on the work of the previous CRU investigations, reviewing the competitiveness of the Irish retail energy markets, examining supplier costs, including hedging and pricing practices, and providing price analyses to compare with other EU member states. This will also assess whether measures are warranted to enhance market responsiveness to wholesale price changes and make recommendations to ensure the benefits of lower wholesale prices are felt by the consumer.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: We are all aware that hundreds of thousands of households are finding it difficult to pay their energy bills and what we saw last week is a direct result of that. An estimated 315,000 people are in arrears on their electricity bills. Many of them have been in arrears for more than 19 months. These are people who are still not able to catch up with the incredible price shocks we experienced after the Ukraine invasion.

One of the roles of the CRU is to protect customers. The Minister has asked the CRU to look at the pass through of wholesale prices. Right now, wholesale prices are 72% cheaper than they were at the peak in August 2022. They are 72% cheaper, but our retail prices are not 72% lower. In fact, they are higher. We have not seen any reduction, and I do not think hedging can be used as an excuse. Will the Minister of State provide an update on what the CRU has done and when it will be publishing its report?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Minister and the officials in the Department have been engaging with the CRU to emphasise the importance of this. We all know the impacts that people are feeling. We know that the cost-of-living crisis is a result of significant increases in inflation in recent times. Of course, we all desire to try to resolve this. As the Deputy knows, the Minister commissioned a report on the national energy affordability task force. The first phase of that work came through prior to the budget last year. That is ongoing work to try, in so far as the Government can, to intervene to get that pass through on prices and to ensure that electricity is affordable to our citizens. We recognise where we are at in the international table. With the departmental officials working with the CRU, it is very much our desire to get to a point where we can get parity in that situation.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: It is clear that the Minister of State has had no update from the CRU on this. He provided no information or timeline on its examination of price gouging. It is incredible that six months after the IEA highlighted that wholesale electricity price reductions were not being passed on to Irish consumers at the same rate as other consumers across Europe and that five months after the Minister wrote to the CRU asking it to conduct an investigation into price gouging, the CRU cannot even give the Minister of State an update as to what it has done or when it will conclude that investigation.

What is the CRU doing? It is meant to be protecting consumers. Irish consumers are facing another energy shock when it comes to electricity prices. They are still trying to get over the incredible electricity prices that resulted from the Ukraine war. The CRU is asleep at the wheel here. I ask that the Minister of State meet with the CRU and direct it to immediately conduct this investigation into price gouging. We cannot wait any longer.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Deputy is aware that the CRU is independent entity. It is answerable to the Oireachtas through the Oireachtas committee, so there is an opportunity there for the Deputy. In fairness to her, Deputy Whitmore is a very vocal and hard-working member of that committee. The Minister has written to the CRU, and the officials are in contact. We want to bring this to a conclusion, but we must also recognise the independence of the CRU. As already stated, the commission is answerable to the Oireachtas. Price setting by energy companies is a commercial and operational matter for the companies concerned and not something that the Government or the Department could or would be able to interfere with or influence. My suggestion, as I said at the outset, would be to engage with the CRU through the committee.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Questions Nos. 88 and 89 taken with Written Answers.

Climate Change Policy

90. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the amount of carbon emitted in the State in each of the past ten years. [26603/26]

Deputy Paul Lawless: This Government has signed Ireland up to a number of binding carbon targets which carry enormous fines for the taxpayers of this country. Will the Minister and Ministers of State provide an update on where Ireland stands with regard to those targets and on the potential fines that this State will face in 2030?

Deputy Alan Dillon: The Government is committed to delivering on Ireland's responsibility to address the climate crisis. Work remains ongoing across Departments to carry out climate mitigation efforts every day. The roll-out of retrofitting, renewable energy and more affordable electric vehicles, EVs, continues at pace. Ireland now has the lowest level of greenhouse gas emissions in over 35 years, despite a population increase of more than 1.5 million, an additional 1 million new homes and 1 million extra vehicles on our roads.

The Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, compiles Ireland's national greenhouse gas emissions inventories. As the data requested by the Deputy covers a ten-year period, and given time constraints, I will provide him with a tabular statement setting out the exact emissions data for each year, as requested, and confine myself now to highlighting the most significant trends from the data.

The year 2024 marks the second successive year that our national emissions have fallen below the 1990 baseline. The 2024 figures follow a substantial 4 Mt CO₂ equivalent reduction

in 2023, the largest annual reduction since 2010 to 2011. This demonstrates that our climate policies are taking effect. The delivery mechanisms underpinning these emissions reductions include a fivefold increase in renewable capacity since 2005 and a rapid uptake in EVs and retrofits. Furthermore, the Government has approved an investment of €18.9 billion in our electricity grid which underpins our continued roll out of clean energy.

Deputy Paul Lawless: It is really important that the Government understands that the targets Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have signed the Irish taxpayer up to carry with them significant fines. According to the Climate Change Advisory Council, CCAC, and the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council, IFAC, the fines involved range from €3 billion to €28 billion. The Minister of State has responsibility for this. I am asking him about the fines. What are the factors that will determine whether we face fines of €3 billion or €28 billion? The Government is accountable for this. It signed the Irish taxpayer up to these incredible fines. Where are we in relation to this? What are we likely to pay in fines? What cost-benefit analysis has been done? What are the Department's current projections in relation to these fines?

Deputy Alan Dillon: As I said earlier, we are making significant progress and we need to continue that pace and ensure that we have full delivery of all planned measures in regard to our legally binding targets. That is exactly what we are intending to do. Let us be clear, we have the policies and the necessary funding in place and the governance is being strengthened. The Government has continued to remove blockages and accelerate projects. We have focused on the -impact actions. We have a climate action plan that is more focused, covering the carbon budget period. We will also have implementation oversight. We want to ensure that we continue to upgrade homes, bring more renewable generation on stream and have cleaner transport. That is our focus and that is responsible government. That is what we are trying to achieve together, and it is making a significant impact.

Deputy Paul Lawless: A responsible Government would be able to answer basic questions on the fines that we are going to face and that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael signed us up to. The Minister of State mentioned significant progress and stated that policies are in place. Policies should have been in place before the Government signed us up to these measures. We have been laggards in relation to this. In fact, when the Government signed us up to these targets in 2023, it accepted an increased target of 42%, when Ireland was already missing its original target of 30%. What was the basis for that decision? The Minister of State talks about responsibility. I am asking him basic questions. Can he outline the level of fines we will face? Is it going to be on the lower end, at €3 billion, or the higher end, at €26 billion? What are the factors that will determine that? What are the policies that the Government is implementing today? I ask the Minister of State to give an update in relation to this.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Just to address the rhetoric and some of the-----

Deputy Paul Lawless: No, the fines-----

Deputy Alan Dillon: ----- issues that the Deputy is raising.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Not the rhetoric, the fines.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Sit down.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Answer the question.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Allow the Minister of State to answer it.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Relax.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go ahead, Minister.

11 o'clock

Deputy Alan Dillon: We are trying to have a civil conversation on oral parliamentary questions. As I said earlier, we have reduced our CO2 emissions below 1990 baseline figures for the second consecutive year, and we are making significant progress on expanding home retrofits and bringing more renewable energy on stream. The best response we have made in recent years is that our emissions are falling. That is the reality. Our investment is unprecedented, and we want to do even more. Our policies are being implemented across all sectors, including energy, homes, transport and land use. Most importantly, in the here and now, we have not paid 1 cent in EU fines, absolutely not. Not €1 has been diverted away from public services. No cheques have been written by the Government in that regard. That is because we have chosen to act, not to delay or deny.

Deputy Paul Lawless: What about IFAC, the climate advisory council and the €26 billion? Has the Minister of State no idea? Come on.

Deputy Alan Dillon: We will not dismantle our climate policy. We have continued-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister of State should conclude.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Those warnings were calls for compliance. Check out the facts. They are the facts.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister should address his remarks through the Chair.

With the permission of the Members, we will go back to Priority Question No. 87 in the name of Deputy Byrne. He has brought a note and has apologised for being late.

Nuclear Plants

87. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if he will consider nuclear energy as a method to meet Ireland's future energy needs; if he will

facilitate the development of small modular nuclear reactors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26493/26]

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I know of the Deputy's interest in this area as he and I have discussed this on a number of occasions. Currently, the Department has no plans for the development of nuclear power, including small modular reactors, as part of Ireland's electricity system. As the Deputy is aware, there are two specific legislative prohibitions on nuclear power in place in Ireland. Both the electricity legislation, in section 18(6) of the Electricity Regulation Act 1999, and the planning legislation, in section 182 of the Planning and Development Act 2024, prohibit the development of nuclear fission for electricity generation. Those provisions would need to be replaced as a first step if we were to plan for the introduction of domestic nuclear fission energy generation.

The reality is that, as things stand today, it is not clear to us that public opinion is in favour of removing those legislative bans on the development of domestic nuclear power plants for electricity in Ireland. Building that majority would require an extensive conversation with the people of Ireland. There have been a lot of conversations about who represents the people of Ireland in recent days. Nonetheless, I think there is probably a consensus across the House that the notion of moving ahead with the introduction of the generation of electricity with a nuclear base to it, regardless of the system, would not gain a social licence in the current climate.

I am conscious, in my daily life as a representative of the people of Clare, of the pushback that is currently in existence regarding wind energy and the permissions for wind turbines. They are hotly contested, objected to in every possible way and then taken to judicial review. I do not think there would be too many at a public meeting in support of a nuclear reactor, regardless of the setback distance. I think we have a way to go in that regard.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: The reality is that we are already using nuclear energy in this country, as the Minister of State knows, because we have to import through the interconnector. The level of that import has grown in the past few years from 10% of our energy in 2023, to 15% in 2024, and to 17% in 2025. Of what we are taking already, a lot of the energy is provided through nuclear energy. I know the Minister of State is a strong supporter of the Celtic interconnector with France, and we know the majority of energy that is produced in France is produced through nuclear energy.

I do not believe we are going to see an overnight change. This is not something that is going to happen immediately but to completely rule out a discussion on using this form of energy is wrong. As part of the long-term strategy for the State, it is something we have to consider.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Nobody wants to rule out the discussion but from a Government perspective, for us right now, it is about action and about meeting our targets on the demand for energy. Our efforts are concentrated on capturing wind to bring the electrons ashore. Of course, we take electricity from France that has its source in nuclear energy. Nobody has a problem with that. The French have a lot of expertise in that area. I think we are better concentrating on an area where we have an abundance of electricity off our shoreline. We are developing expertise in that area, and we can bring that on relatively quickly.

I am conscious that many nuclear plants have been in production for decades at this stage, and they are still not generating electricity. Our targets are towards 2030 and 2040. We are heading in the right direction with the strategy that we have. As for a conversation about it, we are all open to that but at the moment, the Government is moving beyond just talking about stuff. We want to get things done, and we are getting it done in that regard.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: Our transition to renewables is critical. The Minister of State knows that I strongly support all of the investment that we are seeing in wind and solar, and I want it to happen much more quickly. The question is around future capacity, when we are looking to 2040 and beyond, and whether enough will be generated even at that stage by renewables. Given what we have seen with the types of models we are talking about, I specifically asked about small modular nuclear reactors with regard to being able to fuel our future digital infrastructure, for instance, data centres, in the context of this being a digital economy. I believe it is something that needs to be considered. I accept this is not something that is going to happen immediately, but when we are looking at Ireland's future energy needs going to 2040 and 2050, this green technology, which it is, has to be part of the discussion.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Absolutely. While the debate and discussion are somewhat academic at the moment, it is appropriate that we are looking that far ahead because we do not want to find ourselves in the situation that we currently do - reaching a point where there are constraints on our grid. The lesson we have learned from that is that we now have to get the generation piece right. I really believe in what we are doing on the renewables side, in solar, wind and offshore wind. There are opportunities for floating offshore wind as we move forward, which will bring an even greater quantum of electricity onshore. We are also looking at the smart use of the grid. With interconnection, I think we are in a good space with the plans, which will get us to 2040 and, I believe, 2050 and beyond in terms of the quantum of electricity that can be bought ashore. There is the potential for us to be net exporters, particularly in relation to green hydrogen and ammonia, which can form part of the storage component of that offshore wind electricity.

Nuclear Plants

91. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if he is considering building nuclear power plants in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26919/26]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: It is clear from the last priority question, and from the comments from TDs, MEPs and the Taoiseach himself, that Fianna Fáil has gone nuclear, probably in more ways than one, in the past 24 hours. I wonder if the Government is going nuclear.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Deputy. His sense of humour, as always, is timely and appreciated.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: We are also renewable.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: We can all be renewed.

The two questions were separate but we have the opportunity to follow one with the other. It is very clear that other countries have a considerable advancement in relation to the use of nuclear energy as a method of driving their economic activity and producing electricity. They have been doing it for decades and have made certain advances in that area. We have not been in that race due to decisions that went back to the early 1970s on Carnsore and other matters. It has been very clear that no social licence really exists among the general public for that.

What we have been doing in recent years is concentrating on capturing clean energy.

That is the one thing about wind and solar; they are absolutely clean. Nobody really talks about the storage of the by-product or the waste product from nuclear energy, which is, in most cases, dumped at sea, albeit, we believe, in a very safe environment. We would be better to concentrate on what we have and the fact that would not have to import all that much by way of equipment. We have the knowledge and experience, which we are developing, and there is a great opportunity for employment, particularly in coastal communities away from the centres, which would have had a greater level of employment in the past.

Pardon the pun - I do not like the phrase - but there is a double win or a win-win here as opposed to a "wind-wind". There is a win-win with the wind, and we need to continue to advance that. We are planning ahead with the designation of sites around our shoreline and offshore from now to 2040. We are also looking to 2050. We will have completed the programme of designation by the end of 2027. That will provide significant clarity to those investing from outside.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. I appreciate his response. I wonder about this new focus on nuclear energy. There has been a lot of commentary and priority questions in respect of it. I mentioned the newspaper headlines which state that the Cabinet is considering it. I am deeply concerned about this matter from a number of perspectives. The Minister of State touched on it when he referred to the waste involved, public support and, more importantly, the fact that Ireland's strength needs to be in the delivery and advancement of renewable technologies, particularly offshore wind. That is our great strength. Others have strength, well-developed for decades, in the area of nuclear energy, and we will use some of that. I do not see a contradiction in that regard. We need to play to our strengths. The real risk here is that we get distracted, go down a rabbit hole and continue to miss the really important milestones that we have to reach. That is where the focus needs to be.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I agree. From a departmental perspective, we are not losing focus. We are absolutely targeting this. We are looking at interconnection as well. As the Deputy knows - the North-South interconnector is kind of in his area as well - we will have the Celtic interconnector. We want to build a more complex grid right across the European Union, which will help to balance the load, the demand and the generation, and we can do that. However, there is nothing wrong with accepting an academic debate. I do not say that in a throwaway manner. Of course, it is always good to have checks and balances and if there is an academic debate going on, we will facilitate that and participate in it but our action-oriented plan is about capturing the wind, both onshore and offshore. It is about putting in place a structured grid that will allow electricity to be used without constraint across the State. We want to connect

North to South, which is an important one, and then there is the Celtic interconnector. We also need to look then to other storage opportunities, which we have at the moment in relation to battery, but we need to do more than just an academic conversation around hydrogen because there is demand for that and for ammonia right across Europe at the moment.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: On the opportunity to innovate, I had correspondence this week on how we are further developing and innovating in our existing offshore projects, and how they are coming back and refining their proposals in a really innovative, progressive and environmentally considerate way. Of course, we need to think of the potential implications of nuclear energy, particularly in terms of waste but also in the context of planning consent. We need to think about base-loading. We have renewables. We should have more and a lot more but we also need to look at battery technology.

On data centres, I am fundamentally opposed to the idea that we would bring nuclear power plants here in order to further expand our data centres. The opposite needs to be the case. Our data centres need to play a helpful role in advancing our renewables and balancing our grid, not the opposite.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I am in broad agreement with the Deputy, but I am a big supporter of data centres. They are like the advanced factories that were there in the seventies.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Not with nuclear power plants.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: In fact, I read a report recently which suggested that the use of data centres will reduce the use of electricity-----

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Not if you put a nuclear power plant beside one.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy O'Rourke, allow the Minister of State to answer.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: -----rather than having racks in isolated locations all over the place. You commingle and co-share a resource and, ultimately, you reduce the amount of electricity used. We have to be in control of our own data because there are other energy-rich countries that would be delighted to have the opportunity to store European data. If we do not get our act together, somebody will steal our clothes and that will be a loss. There are a lot of tech companies that want to be close to where the data centres are in the context of the resilience of the communications systems, etc. We have a job to do and, of course, we have to build houses, etc. I am all for advancing what we have to do in regard to offshore and wind. We must of course recognise that gas will be an important transition fuel as we move towards renewables, but we have got to do it at a pace and maintain the economic growth and control of our data at the same time.

Legislative Process

92. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the way in which he will ensure that the integrity and intention of the Climate Action and Low

Carbon Development Act 2015 is preserved in light of planned legislation such as the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026, which seeks to undermine it; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27440/26]

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Can the Minister outline how he is going to ensure that the integrity of and the intention behind the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 are preserved in light of planned legislation such as the Critical Infrastructure Bill, which seeks to undermine it, and will he make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Critical Infrastructure Bill is a central pillar of the Government's Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan and represents a significant step forward in strengthening delivery across all key sectors, including energy, which I will turn to in a moment. Accelerated delivery of infrastructure does not disapply our climate commitments or our targets at national level, but recognises an urgent need for the completion of major infrastructure projects in the State. Many new infrastructure projects, including critical electricity infrastructure and public transport projects, are themselves absolutely essential to supporting climate, environment and other social and economic objectives.

The Bill provides for the disapplication of section 15 of the amended Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, which the Deputy referred to, in very limited circumstances for designated critical infrastructure. Climate impact will still be one of the influencing factors when decisions are made and will continue to be accounted for through decision-making processes, particularly through the planning system where climate impact is already woven into the policy hierarchy, as confirmed recently by the Supreme Court in the Coolglass case.

I assure the Deputy that climate impact and considerations will remain absolutely central to the ambition of this Government, though they must be balanced against other critical factors like housing shortages and energy security particularly, and when it comes to these projects of national importance. I assure the Deputy that I will continue to work across government to ensure climate impacts of projects are well-evidenced and incorporated into proposals at the appropriate time.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: No one can argue that we do not need to speed up infrastructure in this country. We have had a huge infrastructure deficit for decades and there are major infrastructure projects that we need to move on very quickly. Many of them will have a climate-positive outcome. However, it is incredible that while the Government is saying that climate obligations will remain central to those projects and the assessment of them, the Minister and the Government are bringing in a Bill that will disapply the climate Act. It essentially sets it aside and says that it will not be part of the process in the designation and the assessment of it. What the Government is doing by doing this is completely eroding the strength of the climate Act and the need for it. The Minister knows how difficult it was to get that climate Act through in the last Dáil and how important it is. All the climate Act says in section 15 is that a relevant body "shall have regard to". It is not a large or high bar for this Government to meet when it comes to building infrastructure. Why is the Government trying to undermine it?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: If the Deputy takes our offshore wind projects that are in planning right now as an example, she will see that many of them are the subject of requests for further information. We have already had groups say to us that if and when they are granted, these projects will be subject to a judicial review, JR, and will be brought to the High Court or the Supreme Court. That is not acceptable either. We are talking here today, and rightly so, around energy security and the acceleration of renewables, which, thankfully, we are doing really well. If you even look at solar, just over ten years ago, we had 2 MW of solar in our grid; we have 2,400 MW now.

It shows what can be done. That does not even include over 1,000 MW of rooftop solar. The Deputy and I know that there are critical projects that need to be delivered, particularly on the energy side. Energy is really where a lot of this is going. If we can reduce our dependence on fossil fuel, it is good for the climate, for the economy and for people. In some instances, we have very small groups or individuals who have been holding up these projects and have been weaponising a good climate Act and its purpose to slow and stall development. We cannot have that any more.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Being able to object to developments is a core part of our democracy, it absolutely is. The projects need to be able to withstand those objections. The projects need to get those balances right. Oftentimes, the objectors are highlighting key flaws in the plans. It cannot be that we just throw them away because otherwise what is the point of the climate Act? Why bother bringing it in and why have it in legislation if the Government is just going to decide to set it aside whenever there is a project it wants to get through? Look at liquefied natural gas, LNG. This is exactly what the Government tried to do in relation to the strategic LNG legislation. It tried to disapply the climate Act there and essentially said that legislation would meet the obligations of the climate Act.

This is completely eroding the strength and the purpose of the climate Act at a time when we need to double down on climate action. It just beggars belief that the Minister is actually going to do this.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I do not think it does. I respect what the Deputy says but I disagree with it. Take the example of the floating gas reserve - the floating storage and regasification unit, FRSU - which we absolutely need. That is consistent with the climate Act in relation to the energy security of this country. That needs to happen. It will be debated in the Dáil and we will see whether it receives the support of the Dáil. It needs to happen. We are in no way setting aside the climate Act. What we are saying is, for critical infrastructure projects, what an acceptable length of time for objections to go on for is. I was the Minister responsible for planning in the last Government. I got rid of things like the fast-track planning system that went straight to what was An Bord Pleanála and brought it back to a two-stage planning process through the local authorities and the board. Decisions should be made by planning authorities, not by courts. That is my view and I have always said that very clearly. I fully respect and will defend the right of people to make observations, be they objections or observations in support of a project. What we cannot allow as a country is the continued use of methods by a very small number of people to delay critical infrastructure projects and the weaponisation of very good legislation, which is the climate Act.

Energy Policy

93. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if his attention has been drawn to the significant barriers being faced by small-scale renewable energy generation groups and communities; when the review of tariffs will be completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26175/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: All across Europe, community energy is thriving, in places like Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Scotland in particular. Communities are building wind and solar farms, district heating systems and energy co-operatives. They are lowering bills, keeping profits local and accelerating the transition, doing exactly what Irish communities want to do. Here, in respect of the small-scale renewable electricity support scheme, SRESS, we are told it is up and running but there are difficulties. I want the Minister of State to outline the problems it is having because only eight projects have qualified and not a single one has actually been built.

Deputy Alan Dillon: The programme for Government commits to promoting the SRESS to simplify market access for communities, SMEs and farmer-owned solar and wind projects. The SRESS export tariff is designed for community, SME and farmer export-only projects above 50 kW to 6 MW. SRESS offers a simpler route to market for those groups, with fixed tariffs for solar and wind. All export projects up to 1 MW can also apply to SRESS, and need not be community, SME or farmer-owned projects.

To further support communities, the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, provides a range of supports to develop renewable energy projects, including free access to specialist technical advisers and free comprehensive guides, available on the SEAI website. These guides cover various issues such as community groups and governance, stakeholder engagement, business planning and grid connection. The SEAI has also undertaken 13 county-level grid studies to help communities identify economically viable connection areas.

In 2025, my Department published an assessment of barriers and potential of development of renewable energy communities, as required by the renewable energy directive. My Department has also secured funding under the European Commission's technical support instrument to further assess barriers and propose recommendations to further support community energy development. This assessment is being carried out by the OECD, with initial policy recommendations due this year, which will help inform future policy approaches.

In February 2026, my Department commenced a review of the tariffs available under SRESS. This review is being undertaken to ensure the scheme continues to provide appropriate support. It is expected that the review will be completed later this year. In the meantime, the existing SRESS rates continue to be available and apply until the review process is complete.

Deputy Pa Daly: I know the review is taking place, but will the Minister of State tell me exactly when it is expected to give its findings? As I said earlier, and as the Minister of State acknowledged, there are barriers. Only eight projects have qualified and not one has been built. While it looks okay on paper, there are serious problems with the scheme in practice. There are massive delays in the enabling grant. There are huge ESB network connection costs. These

projects are made almost impossible financially. Having access to the SRESS tariff is another difficulty. It only matters when you are exporting electricity to the grid. It seems to be mired in bureaucratic difficulties and delays. What exactly has the Minister of State mandated the Department review to come up with? Is he trying to remove the barriers or what exactly is he trying to do to make sure that the progressive advances we have seen across Europe can be brought into play here?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I fully accept that the uptake must increase. I know there is one project in Kerry and there is also a project in my own constituency of Mayo. That is exactly what we are working to do, to unlock the barriers.

In terms of our commitment, we are reviewing whether 100% community ownership remains the right model. We are also examining options of partnership between communities and developers, and also aligning the tariffs and supports for projects, that they are deliverable, bankable and compliant. We have to do this within the parameters of getting state aid rules right, to ensure we are not putting communities at any financial risk. The Government is very much working to ensure that we can have more viable projects in the pipeline and that they can be delivered faster and with certainty, protect communities and are designed to be simple in nature while having maximum impact.

Deputy Pa Daly: The Minister of State has not really answered the question, though, as to when exactly the review will take place. Is there a deadline on it? Let us be honest, the problem is that in Ireland there is only one community-owned renewable energy project above the 50 kW level, that is, in Templederry, and that was built more than a decade ago. Since then, there has been a huge demand out there and a huge hunger for sharing the benefits of renewable energy properly within communities. I see it is in the programme for Government, but 18 months later, there seems to be serious stagnation about it. Maybe with a new leader there might be more impetus in getting these kinds of project over the line.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Is the Deputy trying to get rid of me?

Deputy Pa Daly: When will the review be completed so that things can be pushed forward and the bureaucracy and problems can be ended?

Deputy Alan Dillon: To answer the question, we met as recently as yesterday in regard to it. We hope to have the review published before the end of the year. I understand the urgency around it. We listen to the frustration from communities that are giving their time and energy in trying to get these projects off the ground. We are very much committed to the community-enabling grants.

That has not changed and we want to ensure that anything we implement is legally sound and can be delivered safely. That is why we have an independent technical review - the tariff review - under way. Once that is complete, processing enabling grants will be a priority. We will have clarity and certainty for the communities that want to deliver these projects because we know how beneficial they are and we know what impact they will have locally.

Climate Action Plan

94. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment to provide an update on the planned publication date for the 2026 climate action plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27598/26]

151. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the reason for the delay in the publication of the 2026 climate action plan, which was initially due to be published in December 2025; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27599/26]

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Today is 16 April and we are almost a third of the way through the year. When will the Department publish the climate action plan for 2026?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I propose to take Questions Nos. 94 and 151 together.

We are committed to delivering on Ireland's responsibility to address the climate crisis and work remains ongoing across Departments to carry out climate-mitigation efforts every day, as evidenced by the roll-out of retrofitting, renewable energy development and deployment, and more affordable electric vehicles. All that continues at pace and is progressing well. These ongoing efforts are supported by the Climate Action Plan 2025, in tandem with its predecessor, the 2024 plan, both of which remain in place and provide a strong framework for continued delivery of climate action across all sectors, given that many of the measures and actions in these plans are multi-annual in nature and effect. Work remains ongoing across Departments to deliver on these commitments and carry out climate-mitigation efforts every day, supported by recently enhanced governance and delivery arrangements.

Progress is being made. Ireland now has the lowest level of greenhouse gas emissions in 35 years, which is notable given concurrent demographic and economic growth, including a population increase of approximately 1.5 million people, more than 1 million new homes and over 1 million extra vehicles on our roads. Those are extraordinary growth figures, which we have been able to underpin by reducing emissions.

We are making very significant strides towards our target of 80% renewable energy by 2030. Last month significantly, nearly 50% of our electricity was delivered by renewables. We have reached a milestone of 8 GW of onshore renewable electricity generation. We have more than doubled our wind energy capacity in just ten years. I mentioned last month's record 50% of our renewable electricity generation. We are now also prioritising the development of our offshore wind capacity. We had another successful auction with Tonn Nua. Underpinning this is the investment of €18.9 billion in our electricity grid for the period from now to 2030, which is critical to the electrification of homes, businesses, transport and our society.

On the Zero Emission Vehicles Ireland, ZEVI, front, we reached our target for electrical vehicle sales of 195,000 in October 2025, with sales now at 212,000. I have recently announced an unprecedented package of new and enhanced grants for homeowners, which I am glad to say have been really well received and we are seeing a significant uptake in grants by bringing forward the retrofitting passport committed to in the programme for Government.

Work on the next climate action plan, CAP, 26, is under way. Following the extensive recommendations delivered by the Oireachtas joint committee on climate late last year, the Government is taking the necessary time to carefully finalise the carbon budget process. We will be doing that. I am of the view that the next climate action plan should reflect the outcome of that process. In that regard, my Department is working towards bringing a draft of the new climate action plan to the Government later this year. I also want to look at how we report on it.

The ongoing transition to a climate-neutral economy has profound implications for our economy and society. In formulating the next plan, the Government must carefully consider a wide range of factors to ensure the approach is ambitious, feasible and sustainable. It is vital that our climate policies and emissions-reduction pathways deliver the best possible value for money while maximising the net benefits to society. We must protect the long-term competitiveness of the economy, maintain the State's attractiveness for investment and maximise employment opportunities while ensuring a just transition that supports communities right across the country. That is central to it.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I specified the date today because last year the climate action plan for 2025 was published on 15 April. At least last year there was some excuse for delay - there was a general election followed by the formation of a new Government, and the Minister needed to get a sense of his new Department. This year, those excuses do not exist and it starts to look like a lack of interest, a lack of urgency. With the Minister saying, as he has just done, that the plan will be published later this year, that sense of urgency is not coming across to me. By his own admission, Ireland will not meet its 2030 targets. I know he has been trying to reverse what he said over Christmas since then.

The climate action plan for 2026 is vital not just for this year but also for the next five years. Beyond trying to convince me about the importance of these steps for the Government, how can the Minister convince the Irish people if the central policy document for what happens next is delayed? He has given me a list of what brought us to here. Where we are is that we are behind our targets. The next big steps we need to see have to be set out in the climate action plan. The 2026 one is particularly important because it is the start of the next carbon budget cycle. We know we are a long way off and it needs to see some really big ideas, really big policies and how they will be funded within it. We are a third of the way through the year. We are losing time and we are losing the opportunity to implement these policies. Can the Minister give me any better sense of when it will come in?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I fully accept the need to provide clarity on timeframes. I just want to explain what is happening on this. The last two climate action plans for 2024 and 2025 are still in place and the actions within them are still being worked through. I want to enable us to set climate priorities. The Deputy has previously asked me in the House about our climate targets. I have just said very clearly that while our projections and carbon emissions are going in the right direction, it does not look like we will hit our 2030 target. Having said that, we need to see how we can bridge that gap between the projected reduction and the target itself. That is why CAP 26 is so critical.

I want us to look at the most impactful measures that we can make and to get off an administrative hamster wheel on this whereby one plan is being produced while the actions of

the previous year's plan are still being worked through. I have had this discussion with the Climate Change Advisory Council, CCAC. I have met it in plenary. A new chair, Alex White, has been appointed to the CCAC. I meet the environmental pillar regularly, including just couple of weeks ago, and they understand that too. What are the most important measures we can take in CAP 26 to help us bridge the gap and continue the progress that has been made in many areas, no less so than on the energy generation piece? That is a genuine thing and I want people to understand what CAP 26 is and for it to be a readable document. Notwithstanding all the really good work across government on the publication of the plan, it is fair to say, as is acknowledged by the environment pillar as well, that what is really important is how many people actually know what is in the plan itself. I want to bring that down to a grassroots level. That is the level of work that we are doing.

We are not looking to delay it at all. I intend to bring options on climate priorities to the Government in the coming weeks and that will flow into CAP 26. That is the timeframe. We are talking a matter of weeks for the climate priorities and following from that will be the climate action plan.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I will not get into a back-and-forth over what was said at Christmas because I do not think it is useful at this stage. However, given how far off track we are at this current time, the climate action plan for this year, which sets out the priorities for the next five years within the carbon budget, is absolutely crucial. The Minister spoke about priorities. He will need to take some really big extra steps. It is not just about ticking the box and puttering along from where we are now.

I see the focus that the Government is putting on the Critical Infrastructure Bill, as this is going to be some big part of it. Deputy Whitmore made some points about it earlier and I have made some points to the Minister, Deputy Chambers.

I think what the Government is proposing there is actually counterproductive, but we will have that debate another time. In terms of the big step that was taken last week with a huge package of additional funding to deal with the emergency crisis to end the protest and the blockades, does the Minister believe the Department will get the financial backing across the Government to take some of these really big steps, steps beyond what have been budgeted for previously and steps that might make eyes water in the Department of public expenditure and in the fiscal council, but steps that are now necessary when we see for the second time in four years the vulnerability of our economy to its addiction to fossil fuels and the consequent impact on our emissions? If this climate action plan does not contain some big, bold and new ideas to decarbonise and does not provide greater energy security or affordability for Irish people, and if it does not have a clear financial commitment behind it, it will not be worth anything.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I will take a couple of examples of where the commitments are. I agree with the Deputy. The next plan has to question how we can look to bridge the gap. We need to recognise the progress that has been made by our people and by successive Governments in this regard. That is why, looking at our retrofit programme, we have made some very significant changes to the grants to make them more accessible. People are responding to that already, just short of two months since we made those changes. We can do a lot of things to improve our resilience, reduce our energy use and make our homes more climate friendly and healthier. We can also do the same for business. We are looking at a suite

of business grant measures to reduce energy use in business. Again, I agree with the Deputy on this. The reliance or over-reliance in certain areas on fossil fuels and our dependency on imported fossil fuels are a risk and a weakness, and we need to move away from that.

I will take two areas. I refer to grid investment and the €18.9 billion. PR6 is critical, and I know Deputy O'Gorman knows that. It is a matter of our taking more renewables into our grid. We are already the number one country in Europe in the integration of renewables into our grid, but it is a matter of our expanding that further and bringing more storage so that we can deploy and dispatch energy at the appropriate times. We have over a gigawatt in storage now. We can now trade in the electricity market, which is a good thing, too. We need to increase our storage and our renewable capacity. The projections in that regard to the end of the decade are good, while not hitting 80%. In the CAP 2026, for example, on energy, we will see how we can get to 80% without the offshore renewables because the offshore will not be electrified by 2030. The focus there is getting it into construction.

On transport, €2 billion of the climate and nature fund, as the Deputy knows, has already been deployed to MetroLink, which would be one of the biggest decarbonising projects from a transport perspective. That is backed with money. I want the CAP 2026 to be a real plan that people understand. It has to be ambitious and has to be backed financially, and I intend that it will be.

Electricity Transmission Network

95. **Deputy Catherine Ardagh** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment for an update on current interconnection projects. [27252/26]

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I know Deputy Byrne is taking this for Deputy Ardagh. As he may be aware, the Department and the Minister do not have a role in respect of the delivery of the offshore electricity grid. That is handled by EirGrid as the transmission system operator. I will endeavour, on Deputies Byrne and Ardagh's behalf, to ask EirGrid to communicate with both of them in relation to the projects and where they are at. I am very conscious that our interconnection projects and those that are envisaged will be an integral part of the stabilisation of our own electricity grid and will assist us in continuing our pathway towards removing the need for fossil fuels as part of our generation mix. We are very strongly in favour of that, as Deputy Byrne knows.

The Celtic interconnector with France is under way and significant works are already in place there. I think it was the Taoiseach, or perhaps it was the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, who recently signed a memorandum of understanding, MOU, with Spain. The Taoiseach certainly had been involved at a stage in the discussions on that. I think at one of the events last year, I had conversations with Spanish representatives. We really believe in the necessity to connect ourselves in an important way with the rest of the European Union. Of course, the North-South interconnector is such a fundamental part of that all-island electricity market so, of course, that is important. I will have EirGrid communicate with the Deputies on that, on those projects.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I am rather concerned. This has been described by EirGrid and others as the biggest infrastructure project this decade, which it is. The timeframe has already

slipped, with commissioning meant to happen in 2026 but now happening in 2028. I am kind of concerned that the Minister of State says that he does not know on the floor of the Dáil and that he will have to get EirGrid to let us know. This is a critical piece of infrastructure for the State, as he says. It is important that we know the timeframe as to when it will come on because one of our concerns in terms of energy demand for the State is about having the infrastructure in place. I am concerned, as the Minister knows, that we have been pushing out some of the deadlines with regard to some of our targets on offshore renewables to 2031 or 2032. It is critical that the commitment that was made that it would be in 2028 will actually be delivered, and the House is entitled to hear that.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: In reality, none of us is happy that there are potential delays. From a departmental perspective and from the Minister's perspective, we are very clear on the importance of getting it done. What I am saying to the Deputy is that EirGrid is independent of the Government. It is established in that way as a TSO and it is responsible through the CRU, which has the potential to be brought before the committee. We are very anxious to do that.

Just a slight correction: the Minister reminds me that, in fact, the MOU with Spain has yet to be signed and will be done next week.

I will ensure that EirGrid communicate with the Deputies. I will ask that it update me as well in that regard.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I am sorry but I have a problem with that. Yes, there is a reason EirGrid, in terms of operational activity, is independent, but EirGrid is responsible to the State. Deputy Dooley is a Minister of State responsible for energy with regard to a critical piece of infrastructure. We should know in this House about progress on this critical piece of infrastructure. I say respectfully that it is not good enough to say that EirGrid will tell us when it will have this critical piece of infrastructure finished. It is not for the benefit of EirGrid; it is for the benefit of every citizen, every business, every home in this State in order that we can have reliability of energy into the future. We should know and we are entitled to know in this House about progress on major infrastructural projects such as this. EirGrid is doing it on behalf of the State. I appreciate that the Minister of State will send me on the answer, but people are entitled to know if it will be finished in 2028, at the postponed date, as was originally committed.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I hope the Deputy does not think I am being evasive but I am just providing him with the information I have. I am aware that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, meets with EirGrid monthly. He seeks to get an update on projects and he is very anxious that in all those instances he communicates to EirGrid the Government's priorities in this regard, and the Government's priorities have not changed. We are accelerating the development of infrastructure. There are State agencies that are established with their own independence, their own governance and their own boards of directors, so there is a limit in those circumstances as to what the Government can do other than to set out what policy is. We must be mindful, too, that we must follow the democratic principles that are established. EirGrid is answerable to its board, to the CRU and, ultimately, to the Oireachtas through the committee.

We represent the citizens of the State. We recognise the importance of this and we will continue to pursue that. In fact, I am meeting with Errol Close and a number of other people from EirGrid today, albeit in relation to separate projects, but I will communicate again the discussion here, and rest assured, I will continue to drive that. It is a recognition, too, that the Taoiseach has even established a clearing house in relation to offshore wind, of which the grid becomes part as well as an action-oriented plan to get delivery on these projects.

Energy Policy

96. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the position communicated by Ireland at EU level regarding reducing dependency on imported fossil fuels from geopolitically unstable regions; the role of his Department in EU level discussions on responding to recent disruptions in global energy markets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22801/26]

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Go háirithe sna laethanta atá inniu ann, tá na rudaí atá ag tarlú timpeall an domhain thar a bheith suimiúil agus tá sé soiléir gur gá dúinn athrú an-mhór a dhéanamh ar ár gcuid fuinnimh. With the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and the risk to global security, particularly around the Strait of Hormuz, how are we positioning ourselves to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels? I have been pushing for, and I mentioned it yesterday, plug-in solar. Is there any update from the Department on allowing plug-in solar? I represent a large area of north Dublin with a lot of apartment dwellings and this will ease their energy costs.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as a smaointí ar an ábhar an-tábhachtach seo. Aontaím leis go bhfuil sé fíorthábhachtach agus go gcaithfidimid athruithe breise a dhéanamh ar son fuinnimh in Éirinn agus fud fad na hEorpa go háirithe. I agree with the Deputy. We need to accelerate the changes we are bringing in given the existing crisis. Ireland has been to the forefront of many of the renewable energy generation initiatives. The past ten years have been good. Last year was particularly good but we need to accelerate this further. If ever there was a reason we need to continue to reduce our dependence on the importation of fossil fuels from other states, it is now. With the Middle East crisis, we do not want to lose sight of the fact - and it know it is not lost on the Deputy, in particular - that, while we are feeling it as an economic crisis and are feeling price shocks, we also have to be very mindful that it is a humanitarian crisis. Thousands of people have been killed in this war, following on from the brutality we saw with Israel's actions, its attack on Gaza and its continued attacks on the West Bank and the whole Middle East. It is a very uncertain situation right now.

I attended a virtual meeting of EU energy Ministers on 31 March to discuss an EU-wide response to rising costs caused by the conflict in the Middle East. The European Commission is due to provide additional details on specific proposals. I do not mind saying that we expected to get them last week, so the EU needs to act as a bloc. We are bringing forward changes in Ireland. We have deployed resources of about €750 million. It is still really difficult for our people but the EU response needs to be immediate in terms of what can be done at an EU-wide level. I have fed into that and I will come back to it.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Aontaím go hiomlán leis an Aire. It is definitely unprecedented but the price shock is not limited to the oil markets. It is also spreading rapidly through global gas markets in Europe and Asia. That just proves the importance. Roughly one fifth of the global LNG trade normally passes through the Strait of Hormuz. Qatar remains one of the cornerstone suppliers to the world's markets, which means any disruption tightens gas balances. Energy shocks also ripple into agriculture, as we have seen, beyond higher diesel prices, because natural gas and hydrocarbon liquids are key inputs in the production of fertilisers. We obviously note that this is all coming from the Strait of Hormuz but it feeds into the price of fertilisers. Can that also be looked into at EU level?

Has there been any reply in relation to the plug-in solar development? I have a lot of apartment dwellers in my constituency. To install a small-scale system on balconies to reduce bills would be very welcome to the Irish people, go háirithe na laethanta seo.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Aontaím leis an Teachta arís. Next week the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, and I are meeting the EU transport Ministers. We have already taken measures in respect of our supply chains. There has been no direction or unified approach by the European Union, which is regrettable. It is also regrettable that we are still waiting for the details of the toolbox - as it is now referred to - of what the European Union can do on behalf of its citizens. That needs to be done now and I will be reflecting that.

On plug-in solar, I know the Deputy has another question. Solar has expanded greatly in Ireland. Already we have 2.4 GW of solar in our system, with over 1 GW of rooftop solar as well that is not grid connected. I am very open to plug-in solar. Some safety concerns were flagged at official level but Germany and other countries deploy it well. On foot of the question that was tabled in this regard, the team in the Department is looking at this. If we can deploy more solar, then we should.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Tá sé an-mhaith go bhfuil an tAire ag rá sin, go háirithe inniu. It is a very interesting concept. If something is not safe, the Germans would not be doing it. The government there has been definitely allowing it and there has been a huge uptake of it. North Dublin, which I represent, has apartments. These apartment dwellers cannot use their rooftop. The plug-in solar systems which can be bought and installed within 15 minutes are a simple fix that would reduce their energy costs. Right now we need faster delivery of grid infrastructure and a welcome the Minister's engagement regarding private wires but, ultimately, it is about national security and affordability. One of the solutions that I am continuously shouting for, and I will continue to do so until it is done, is plug-in solar. Obviously, we can go with the private wires, long-duration energy storage, gravity storage and green hydrogen. We have so much potential and I do welcome the fact the Department is moving as fast as it is on it. I look forward to working constructively with the Minister on this matter.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I will keep the Deputy informed of the progress. We are trying to make it easier to deploy renewables. That is why the critical infrastructure legislation on bigger projects will be really important. There are things that households and communities can do. We have seen the growth, with 33,000 solar grant applications granted last year. We will accelerate that further this year, with about 73,000 retrofits. Plug-in solar is not an extremely new technology but there might have been some concerns with it. However, it is not being

dismissed. I can assure the Deputy of that. We have a more detailed response on it in the written parliamentary question the Deputy has submitted. I will keep him directly informed on it. I made changes to the SEAI grants at the start of March in terms of making things more accessible for people to support. We have seen a really significant increase in applications for things like heat pumps, solar, wall cavity insulation and attic insulation as we have made it easier for people to do so. We also have to look at solar storage and battery storage in homes and at utilising our car batteries through EV and solar. I will come back to the Deputy.

Question No. 97 taken with Written Answers.

Energy Policy

98. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if consideration is being given by his Department to permitting the use of plug-in solar panels for residential properties in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27602/26]

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Over the last number of months, I have been asking the Minister about the issue of plug-in solar to ensure that more households in Ireland can benefit from cheap solar power. Will the Minister give me a timeline on when we will have a clear decision from him and the Department as to whether plug-in solar can be used in this country?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: Plug-in solar systems are very small PV energy systems, usually two or three modules, and less than 1 kW in total per installation. They are connected to a micro-inverter and plugged directly into the normal household socket. This then feeds the house's internal electricity system. These low-cost panels can be put on balconies and outdoor spaces. The use of plug-in mini-solar technology has grown in some EU countries in recent years as consumers search for ways to save on high energy bills. It has seen particular growth in Germany. Officials from our Department have engaged with stakeholders on the optional provisions in the 2024 electricity market design directive, including the provision relating to plug-in mini solar systems and through a consultation that ran from September to October in 2024. Respondents to that consultation raised potential safety issues, so it is important that the introduction of the technology is given appropriate consideration. Some form of regulation may be needed before plug-in mini solar is promoted. Officials are currently engaged with the relevant agencies and regulators, including ESB Networks in its role as the system operator. Our officials are also in contact with officials from the Department of Energy Security and Net Zero in the UK relating to the recently announced intention for the UK Government to regulate for the sale and use of plug-in mini solar systems. EU guidance on the matter is also being considered.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The issue here is a question of speed. One million households in Germany use plug-in solar right now. There has been an 18-month consultation on this issue here. I agree that safety issues have to be addressed but the Minister has suggested that there may be a need for some form of regulation. We need some speed on this. Look at what the UK Secretary of State, Ed Miliband, did. He brought in the manufacturers, providers and

installers to ask them about the specific issues and the regulatory challenges that needed to be addressed.

12 o'clock

What are the regulatory challenges we need to address? As I have said, this matter has been going on for 18 months. Irish people, particularly those living in apartments, are being denied the opportunity to benefit from free energy in the midst of the worst energy crisis we have seen in this country. An assurance was given to Deputy Heneghan. I ask that I also be kept informed about the timeline for the delivery of this measure. Action needs to be taken now.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Deputy very much. He is right. Both he and Deputy Heneghan have continued to raise this matter. The Department is actively engaged on it. It is not good enough to just continue to say there are potential safety issues. We have got to address them, recognising that others have found methods to address those safety concerns. As I have said, we are engaged with our UK counterparts and we are also discussing the regulatory issues in relation to safety with our German counterparts, recognising that they have had a very successful roll-out. There are some grid issues. I do not offer that by way of excuse but, with regard to distribution, our grid is managed and constructed somewhat differently. Notwithstanding that, it should not be beyond our capabilities to find a pathway forward that is safe and that gives capacity to those who have the opportunity or potential to use these small-scale pieces of equipment.

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Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Sula dtosaím, tabharfaidh mé aitheantas do bhás an-bhrónach bean as Gaoth Dobhair i mo chontae féin, Dún na nGall, Moya Brennan. Ba bhean iontach í Moya a raibh croí mór aici. Bhí sí ar dhuine de na daoine ba dhílse agus b'fhírinne a bhí ann riamh. Cara a bhí inti fosta. Ba dhuine de chairdiúlacht agus de chineáltas do gach duine a raibh aithne acu uirthi. Ar ndóigh, bhí glór a tháinig ó na haingil aici. Chuir an glór sin Dún na nGall ar an léarscáil dhomhanda. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a hanam dílis. Cuirim mo chomhbhrón ó chroí in iúl do Tim, Aisling agus Paul, do chlanna Jarvis agus Uí Bhraonáin uilig, dá teaghlach, dá cairde agus do gach duine atá faoi chian ina diaidh. Ní bheidh a leithéid arís ann.

After weeks of turmoil, protest and public anger over soaring fuel prices, what is most striking is that the Tánaiste's Government is still not listening. Right across the State, over 750,000 households rely on home heating oil to keep their homes warm. For them, this crisis is not abstract. It is immediate and it is punishing. It is the difference between heating their home or going without. Despite everything that has happened over the past number of weeks, the protests, the pressure and the clear message from workers and families right across this State, the Government still has not reduced excise on home heating oil by a single cent. There is nothing. The Tánaiste now expects a pat on the back for not increasing the carbon tax on home heating oil in a fortnight's time. Instead, he will impose that increase in the very depths of winter. For families already stretched to the brink, that is no relief at all.

What does it say about the Government that, after weeks of anger and hardship, it still does not get it? The Government still simply does not understand the lives people are living. It does not understand the fear of a bill landing that cannot be paid, the quiet dread of a cold home or the constant calculations required just to get through to the end of the week. There is a complete lack of urgency, of empathy and of basic understanding from the Government.

What we have seen is not just inaction, but a pattern of behaviour that poured fuel on this crisis. Last week, members of the Government chose to insult, demean and even threaten those who took to the streets. These are people who were left with no choice but to rise up out of desperation because their livelihoods are being decimated. That is the reality. They are seeing cut after cut and price rise after price rise and they felt they had no other option but to take a stand. Now, to add insult to injury, many of those same workers are returning home to find parking fines landing through their letter boxes. This is the wrong response. It is a response that punishes people who are already pushed to the brink. These are people who did not have money last week and they are now being asked to fork over hundreds of euro for parking fines.

For goodness' sake, where is the common sense in all of this? Has the Government learned nothing over the last week? Is it not listening to where people are at? Is it any wonder that this Government is so detached from people's lived realities? It is staggering. The Government refuses to act on the issue of home heating oil. It dismisses and belittles those in hardship. It makes life even harder for many of those same people. I will ask the Tánaiste a direct question. How does he justify the decision not to decrease excise duty on home heating oil by a single cent? Given all that he knows about people being pushed to the pin of their collars and going without heat in their homes, why does the Tánaiste, as Minister for Finance, simply ignore those people, refuse to listen to them and refuse to act on their behalf on the issue of home heating oil?

The Tánaiste: I join with the Deputy in extending sympathies to the family, friends and community of Moya Brennan. She was a musical icon, a unique voice of extraordinary talent and somebody who played no small part in bringing Irish music to an international audience. May she rest in peace.

I thank the Deputy for the question. This has been a very challenging period of time for the people of this country. The pressures that people are feeling are real. We are working constructively to endeavour, as best we can, to assist people at a time of huge global turmoil. There is sometimes an effort to divide society into different groups. Everybody will benefit from the energy package we have put in place. That is because, as the Deputy knows, when you take measures to reduce energy prices, that has a positive effect in moderating the likely increases in the rate of inflation. While there has quite rightly been much discussion on fuel this week, we hope the measures we have been putting in place will have a broader positive impact in suppressing, insofar as possible, what is likely to be a growing rate of inflation. That is passed through directly when it gets to the supermarket floor. That is the first thing I would say.

I will get to kerosene in a moment but the second thing I will say is that this is not a small package by any fair or objective measure. I presume the Deputy would acknowledge that. It is a package of a total of €750 million in supports. It is either the largest or one of the largest packages in the European Union. I am holding up a table that proves that. This Government

has taken action on behalf of the people of Ireland, introducing one of the very largest packages in the European Union. The details of the package are well known. There are reductions in the excise duty on petrol, diesel and green diesel. There is a package for farmers, farm contractors, agricultural contractors, hauliers, bus contractors, fishers and many important supply sectors of the Irish economy.

The Deputy is also right that there is a real issue when it comes to the cost of home heating oil. On that much, we agree. However, we disagree on how to respond. We have taken steps to help people with home heating oil. We took a conscious decision to expand the fuel allowance season. The fuel allowance season was meant to be over by now. It was not meant to be available to people this month. It is worth €152 per household as a result of that extension. That is costing €71 million. The Deputy will know that the households that are most in need from a fuel poverty point of view get that. He will know such households in his own constituency. We all know them. They include many pensioners, carers, people with disabilities and, crucially, many low-income working people who are in receipt of the working family payment. About a quarter of all households in the country now receive that payment. I ask the Deputy to let people know that.

This is a targeted measure. I am watching what is likely to happen in Northern Ireland today, which the Deputy's party will know well through its role in the Executive. The measures Sinn Féin is likely to bring in today with respect to home heating oil will also be targeted measures and not universal measures.

On the second thing we have done, it is important to listen and we listened when people in this House said that we should suspend the increase in carbon tax on kerosene and green diesel. We support the carbon tax, as do most of the Opposition although Sinn Féin does not, because it plays a very important role in funding the climate transition and in supporting farmers, retrofitting and those in fuel poverty. We introduced that suspension.

Sinn Féin's solutions are not as easy as the Deputy suggests. I looked at one of those solutions. We should all look at people's ideas and be willing to engage on them. I had my officials look at Sinn Féin's proposal to return the carbon tax to the 2023 rates and to backdate this reversal to 1 May. I have been told that Revenue does not hold records of any individual end-users. Therefore, any retrospective adjustment is unlikely to be possible and could result in the unjust enrichment of suppliers, substantial administrative burdens and unanticipated costs to the Exchequer. This is not a question of a lack of empathy but one of making sure that the solutions we come up with together are practical and workable.

We have a large package of measures in place and we will continue to work our way through this challenging time.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I really do not understand why the Tánaiste is not listening to ordinary people. There has been an outpouring right across the country. The Tánaiste can wave his graphs all he wants, but he needs to really listen to ordinary people.

The Tánaiste: It matters.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: A young woman wrote to me and lots of other people this week. I think it is important for me to read out what she said. Listen to this. She said:

My own situation is becoming unbearable. Despite being in a dual-income household, I haven't been able to afford home heating oil for three weeks - three weeks without heat, not because I have been irresponsible but because I simply cannot afford it anymore. At the same time, I'm paying extortionate rent for a home that I can't even properly live in. Damp is setting in because I can't afford to heat it. I feel trapped. I am being squeezed from every angle with no relief and the future feels completely out of reach.

She went on to say:

I will never own my own home in this country despite working full-time and doing what I was told - going to college, getting the degree. As a working-class child of two working-class parents, that dream is gone. There is no pathway forward, only increasing pressure and diminishing hope.

They are the people the Tánaiste needs to be listening to, not waving his graphs. He should listen to ordinary people and respond. What was the Government's response this week? It would not cut a single cent of carbon tax from home heating oil. She is in a house that she could not heat for three weeks. She works full-time and her partner does the same, and the Government ignored her this week because it is not listening and it is completely out of touch.

The Tánaiste: No, it is quite the opposite, in fact. People are living through very tough and very challenging times but Deputy Doherty has got to be honest with that person who wrote to him as well. The Deputy can talk about waving graphs, but facts matter. I had Sinn Féin's measures assessed by officials in my Department, and they came back and said it was not doable.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Cutting carbon tax? Of course, it is.

The Tánaiste: Hang on a second. May I speak, please? Thank you. Revenue does not hold records of individual end users when it comes to home heating oil. If we did what Sinn Féin proposes, and I am accepting-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We are not looking for retrospective-----

The Tánaiste: You are.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is nonsense. On home heating oil.

The Tánaiste: With regard to a proposed amendment for solid fuel carbon tax, the Sinn Féin amendment proposed reverting to 2023 rates and backdating the reversal to 1 May 2023.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We did not ask for backdating.

The Tánaiste: I am going to write to the Deputy and explain to him the practical challenges with the Sinn Féin's measures. There are practical challenges.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Cut the carbon tax on home heating oil, simple as. The Tánaiste knows he can do it if he wants to.

The Tánaiste: Can I say something else? The Deputy had his time and I think the people deserve better than shouting and roaring. We cannot get through this global economic crisis if every week we come into this House-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: She cannot get through the week, never mind the crisis.

The Tánaiste: -----and the proposal is to abolish taxes and spend more. That is not a sustainable way through this. Abolishing taxes and spending more would not steer us-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What does the Tánaiste say to her?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty, please.

The Tánaiste: What I say to that person is we have her back. We put in one of the largest packages in the European Union.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Ah here.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: Come on.

The Tánaiste: We have reduced excise. They are benefiting from that at that pump. We have extended the fuel allowance and we will work through this together-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Is the Tánaiste telling me that he has her back? She cannot heat her home.

The Tánaiste: -----while Sinn Féin refuses to condemn intimidation against gardaí this week. It refused to stand by-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: She did not intimidate anybody.

The Tánaiste: She did not but you refused and your leader refused-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: She is sitting in a cold house. She is working every hour that God sends her.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: She did not intimidate anybody.

The Tánaiste: Time and time again, Sinn Féin refused to condemn the blockades. It is now in favour of blockades.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste is diverting. There are people sitting in cold homes and the Government refuses to cut carbon tax.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Hang on, Deputy Doherty. You put the question and the Tánaiste has attempted to answer.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am sorry. I am deeply frustrated. I apologise to the Leas-Cheann Comhairle but not to this fella over there who is completely out of touch.

The Tánaiste: You are out of touch.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: For the last 10 years, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil Governments have been lucky enough to preside over very healthy public finances. How they have spent – or misspent - our great wealth is another matter, though clearly the anger and frustration that we saw on our streets last week means that, even with the vast resources at the Government's disposal, it clearly is not getting it right.

It has been in its gift to splash the cash whenever its wants. There were tax breaks for big developers and burger barons in the last budget and more sectoral handouts this week, but where is the bailout package for PAYE workers to protect their incomes, to reduce their bills with targeted energy credits and measures to adopt solar and retrofitting at scale? Too many people simply cannot afford to even consider getting SEAI grants.

If successive Governments had taken our climate commitments seriously, we would not be in the cost-of-living crisis that we are now, with some of the highest energy prices in Europe. We have a budget for our emissions in this country. We have legally binding targets to reduce our emissions, or at least I thought we did. Our carbon budget is very much in the red and the Minister has admitted that we are going to miss our 2030 emissions targets by as much as 50%. The climate change and fiscal advisory councils have warned us that fines are going to come in, ranging from €8 billion to €26 billion by 2030. Who is the Government going to ask to pay for it? It will be PAYE workers again who will have to shoulder that burden.

Yesterday was overshoot day. If the rest of the world consumed at the rate that Ireland has since 1 January, we would have run out of resources globally on 14 April. That is a month earlier than it would have been last year. Would the Tánaiste tolerate this lack of budgetary indiscipline when it comes to our public finances? He has just said that we cannot keep spending more. Of course, he would not tolerate this but the manner in which this Government approaches everything to do with climate, environment and biodiversity gives the impression that we have loads of carbon budget to spare for all these highly polluting new projects that it wants to pursue. New private wires laws are going to turbocharge data centre expansion and imported fracked gas through the new liquefied natural gas reserve will power them. Once

again, it will be ordinary PAYE workers who will pay the price for all of this in their energy bills.

Most worryingly, we see the Government deciding that it just does not want to bother with the climate Act at all when it comes to large critical infrastructure projects. This Government has consistently scapegoated environmental concerns arising via the planning process or judicial reviews as the root cause of its inability to deliver anything meaningful, but none of the delays relating to the new children's hospital, for example, were due to environmental objections. There are any number of reasons it takes time to deliver large projects but dumping on environmentalists and environmental law is just dishonest.

We all want to see critical infrastructure delivered and delivered quickly, but will the Government reverse this decision to disapply the climate Act from the Critical Infrastructure Bill and can he tell me when PAYE workers are going to get a break from the Government?

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ahern for his question. I will reiterate my point that while there has been much discussion this week about various sectors that are vital to the Irish economy, whether they are farmers or fishers, hauliers or the likes, the fundamental point here is that this Government's package supports everybody because the PAYE worker and everybody else in this country needs food on the shelves. They need the ports operating, not blockaded. They need to make sure that our supply chains work. Many of the PAYE workers pulled up at petrol pumps this morning where the cost of petrol and diesel, while still too high, is lower than it was before we voted. In fairness, the Labour Party supported the cut on the excise this week as well. Crucially, measures that we take to try to somewhat contain - because no Government can fully insulate - the impact of very significant rising costs caused by the war in Iran help keep inflation down or at least moderate the growth of inflation. That does genuinely have a benefit for all of us in society, including PAYE workers.

I am really pleased that there is a meeting taking place tomorrow at the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF. As the Deputy knows, it is the body that brings together trade union representatives, employer representatives and senior members of the Government, including myself and the Taoiseach. It is more important than ever that we have really good and intensive engagement. I mean this sincerely: at challenging times in the history of this State, the trade union movement has stepped up time and time again and played a positive role. That does not mean, by the way, that we always agree on everything. I do not want to kill their street cred and I certainly do not agree with them on everything but having constructive engagement in process at times of challenge is something I value. This Government values it and I think this Oireachtas values it. I heard the comments of the general secretary of ICTU this week as well in relation to that. We should challenge ourselves, after the week that this country has had, to make sure we have very robust and constructive structures in place for ongoing engagement. I want to say that too.

In relation to renewables, I will start with a positive. Half of all electricity generated in this country in March came from renewables. It was the first time. I think it was 49%, just under half. We are making some progress. We need to do more and we need to do it faster because - and I agree with the Deputy on this point - as long as we are dependent on dirty fossil fuels

from abroad, there is a security issue in every sense, including an economic security issue. However, we are making some progress under the work of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. We saw 58,000 homes retrofitted last year. We have seen a record demand this year, with over 29,000 applications already in. We have improved the grants. I am sure that the Deputy was hearing from his constituents that it was cumbersome to have to do everything together. I was certainly hearing it from mine. As a result of those changes, the approval of the grants for heat pumps is up 95%, roof insulation is up 81% and cavity wall insulation is up 62% as well. In fact, in March alone there were more than 6,000 grant applications for windows and more than 6,000 grant applications for doors. These are encouraging signs.

On the issue of critical infrastructure, critical infrastructure can include renewable energy as well. I genuinely think that we can have different perspectives on this. It is taking far too long to deliver transformational projects, including transformational projects from an energy point of view. The Critical Infrastructure Bill tries to get that balance right.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I thank the Tánaiste. We welcome the LEEF meeting next week and the Labour Party will be supporting our trade unions here when they are looking for pay rises, when they are looking for remote and flexible working rights.

We are calling for free and cheap public transport and an expansion of those types of schemes. The Tánaiste did not indicate that the Government will continue to abide by the climate Act when it comes to our critical infrastructure. There are reasons other than those relating to environmental laws for projects in this country being delayed. A lack of resourcing of planning authorities, regulatory bodies and the courts over the past ten years has resulted in projects being delayed. It is not fair to dump on environmental laws.

It is not as if our rivers and waterways are in pristine condition or that our biodiversity is in a strong position. We need the climate Act. The whole point of section 15 of that Act is that public bodies can be held to account in the context of performing their duties in conjunction with our climate obligations. That should not get in the way of the construction of critical infrastructure. I ask the Government to look at this again and to reverse the decision in relation to the Critical Infrastructure Bill and section 15 of the Climate Act.

The Tánaiste: At least your politics are honest in the sense that we can either agree or disagree on certain policy areas and you can criticise us and we can criticise you. You do not come into this House and constantly suggest the abolition of significantly important taxes and come up with a load of new spending ideas at the same time. That is not a sustainable position. It was very interesting earlier in the week that the House did not divide when it came to some of these issues. It did not divide along the lines of the big bad old Government over here and all of the Opposition together over there. We were better than that, or at least many of us were, in terms of trying to engage constructively. I appreciate that.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: They voted no confidence in you. You may forget that. Are you serious?

The Tánaiste: Deputy Doherty, you had your go. It is their time.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This is Simon and his wee-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Stop, please. Go ahead, Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: This week the Sinn Féin Party took to social media to criticise Labour and the Social Democrats. I thought that was pretty pathetic.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You must be more worried about Micheál than we thought.

The Tánaiste: Come on, Pearse, give everybody a chance in this House. No bully-boy tactics, please. We support the Critical Infrastructure Bill. We will be happy to tease through the detail of it. The Deputy is right in that there are lots of factors involved. At times, environmental law can be a factor when there are projects we need to deliver at real speed. This is not about all projects; it is about those that are deemed to be critical. As the Minister takes the Bill through the House, he will engage constructively and tease through the detail.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It has been a bad week for the Government; it is been a good week for people power. The fuel protests caused the resignation of a Minister of State and the sudden appearance of the young Turks of Fianna Fáil. Those protests led to the majority of the Government being reduced and the Government being destabilised. That is before we get to the by-elections in just over a month's time.

It is often said that power comes from the barrel of a gun, but in this country it often seems to come from the cab of a tractor. The message that people will take, correctly, from the Government's response to the protests is this: if you do not take militant protest action and if you are not representing landlords or big business, the Government will ignore your demands, no matter how reasonable or justified they are. The fact that five years into a cost-of-living crisis the Government is still ignoring the demands of workers, carers and disabled people on the cost of living is truly outrageous. Prices have gone up by almost a quarter in the past five years, but the Government decided that the cost-of-living crisis was over as soon as the general election was. That is why it used the budget to withdraw the cost-of-living measures that it used to buy the general election. That included a cruel €1,400 cut for disabled people. That was a targeted measure.

Since taking over as Minister for Finance, the Tánaiste has ignored the very reasonable and modest request for €400 emergency payment in order that people can pay their winter heating bills. He has lectured workers, disabled people and carers that he has to be responsible and careful with the State's finances. Of course, that did not stop him finding €700 million for tax cuts for fast food chains and the hospitality industry, €400 million for property developers and €300 million for Google. It has not stopped him from finding €220 million down the back of the couch to give to hauliers and farmers.

Some of the excise cuts will trickle down to workers, which is welcome. It would not have happened without the protests. We have called for a price cap for years and we introduced legislation in that regard over two years ago. Without a price cap, the cuts will be quickly swallowed up by the further increases in oil prices caused by Trump and Netanyahu's illegal

wars, which the Government still has not condemned despite all of the talk of standing up for international law.

It is the same old story. Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil have plenty of money for business but when it comes to workers and carers, out comes the poor mouth. The trade unions need to take heed. We are in a new period at home and abroad and a new phase of militant protest is needed. Workers do not need tractors to force the Government to listen. The most effective form of disruptive protest is the strike, a power that all workers have. It is clear that the Government can take emergency measures when it wants to or is under pressure to. When will it introduce universal measures to protect ordinary people from the cost of living crisis? It has cut the price of petrol and diesel. Will it make public transport free immediately? Will it bring in a €500 energy credit for every household paid for by a levy on data centres? Will it levy the owners and operators of private jets so that they do not benefit from the excise cuts?

The Tánaiste: We have to acknowledge that real wages in this country are rising. We also have to acknowledge that we made very significant increases, quite rightly, in the disability budget this year, albeit with a big focus on service provision. Those increases totalled over €600 million. The Government is committed to the introduction of a cost-of-disability payment and a lot of very good work is being done by the Minister, Deputy Calleary, my colleague the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, and others. The consultation on that has closed. There was very good engagement from stakeholders, including people with disabilities and their representative bodies. I thank them for that.

I need to keep saying, because it is true, that the measures we took have benefits for some sectors but they also have an overall economic benefit that helps everybody. There is nothing that triggers inflation more than commodity prices. If we cannot take measures to try to suppress energy prices, insofar as anyone can during a war and the knock-on impact on supply to which it gives rise, inflation will increase even further. That will have a detrimental effect on the people to which the Deputy referred. I accept his bona fides in highlighting their cases.

The Deputy mentioned Google and others. That is fine; that is his politics. I must point out that €109.3 billion is expected in total tax revenue this year, about €34 billion of that, or 31.1%, is expected to come from the same corporate taxpayers the Deputy demonises. That is before we even get to the income tax benefit of the many thousands of people who work in those communities, some in Dublin and many outside it in terms of regional development.

The Deputy's views on protest are well known. We can have a debate on his a loose enough definition of what constitutes a protest. He and I have different views as to where peaceful protest starts and ends. Lots of genuine, decent people protested this week. There were also people who crossed the line in terms of legality. I saw people saying pretty horrific things to Deputy Murphy about his support for LGBT people in this country. I agree with him on his support for those people, and we have common cause in that regard. It worries me slightly that he is willing to perhaps adopt common cause with people who abhor much of what he champions. He may agree or disagree with that. I am not saying this to be provocative or rude, but the Deputy sees the bigger prize as mass protest. That merits reflection. Many people leading the protests oppose and abhor everything Deputy Murphy stands for, whether people think that is right or wrong.

On the VAT cut in the hospitality sector, which is supported by some but not all of those in opposition, people can refer to beef barons and name large fast food chains. The vast majority of people who benefit from the reduced rate of VAT on hospitality are small restaurants and cafés and rural pubs that serve meals in the middle of the day. They are the backbone of the domestic Irish economy. They employ a hell of a lot of people directly and provide benefits to more people indirectly. It is a measure that becomes more important than ever now in terms of supporting the domestic economy and reducing the cost for SMEs at this difficult time.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I do not think the Government gets it. If it got it, we would not have seen the scenes we saw over the past ten days. That is a result of the Government not listening and not acting. One in five people is at risk of poverty. Two in five parents have skipped meals or cut back on what they are eating in order that their kids can have enough to eat. Hundreds of thousands of people are in arrears in on their electricity or gas bills. That is what drove the protests. The common cause I and People Before Profit make is with people who are fighting for action on the cost-of-living crisis. The core demand that emerged from the protests related to price caps.

We were the only party calling for price caps. We introduced a Bill precisely two years ago in which we called for price caps. We will not allow ourselves to be intimidated from supporting protests by the presence of some far-right agitators with their own agenda who are simply trying to hijack and misuse people's anger. We make no bones about supporting effective protest.

I have heard the Tánaiste say on multiple occasions that the package brought forward the other day had nothing to do with the protests. I do not think there is a single person in the country, including the Tánaiste, who believes that. No one believes it. The message the Tánaiste sent out on foot of his actions is that protest works and achieves results and concessions. That is a message to everyone. We want to see that built on by mass, effective – including disruptive – protest to force universal action for everyone.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy used the term “disruptive protest”. I will not speak for Deputy, but I will say that I do not support the blockade of critical infrastructure or the idea that someone can tell me whether I can move freely around this country. I do not support some of the comments online last night from the so-called self-appointed leaders that if anyone on these benches on this side of the Chamber attends an agricultural show, we will be dragged out of it. I do not think the Deputy supports that either. We should condemn that, because we are better than that.

On price caps, the Deputy has a view. We have a different view. We do not believe they work. Liz Truss tried a version of this. We believe that price caps transfer the cost from the forecourt to the taxpayer. It does not disappear; it is just transferred. Price caps have significant budgetary implications in terms of the delivery of public services because they do not reduce the cost; they just transfer it from the forecourt to the taxpayer. It is not free money. It has a real impact, and it would cost many billions.

There are challenges in this country, but figures from the CSO now show that the average weekly wage is over €1,000. We are creating 200 jobs every working day. We have an ability

to make real progress on key issues and help people to work through the challenges they are facing.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I want to spend some time addressing an issue I have referenced before, namely the growing crisis of so-called parking wars and the service charge-related instability that is turning home ownership into a nightmare in many of our new communities. I give the examples of the Clonburris and Adamstown strategic development zones, SDZs, in my constituency, with which my independent colleague Councillor Helen Farrell, who I welcome to the Public Gallery, will be all too familiar, as will the Minister of State, Deputy Emer Higgins. There are other large-scale developments in respect of which people were sold the promise of sustainable living but, instead, residents who can afford to pay for housing or those offered places on choice-based letting, end up being trapped in a planning vacuum. The guidelines have slashed parking ratios to the bone. There is often fewer than one space per unit on the basis of the fantasy that our public transport is already world class. As we know, it is not. There is absolute chaos in many estates in Adamstown central, Seven Mills, Kilcarbery and Citywest.

Traffic index data from January confirms that Dublin is the third most congested city in the world. Residents in the SDZs are at the centre of this gridlock. It might be argued that it is counterintuitive to call for more car parking spaces, but there is a difference between owning and using a car. We should by all means discourage car use, but with a lack of public transport, people do not have the ability to get from A to B. They are often stuck because public transport in their areas is not yet a viable alternative. Reports from March show that the Connolly-Adamstown rail line is at full capacity, with over 200 people boarding at single stops and commuters literally pinned to the doors. We know that the DART+ South West is promised.

In Citywest and Kilcarbery, for example, residents have been forced into rotational parking apps that limit parking to three days. People can book it in advance. This causes issues because people who have designated spaces are seeing other people park in their spaces. Rented houses in which there are three people working in jobs that require them to travel means that vans are parked all over the place. A lot of the time, the owners feel that they do not have any other choice.

The other issue is the skyrocketing service charges in some Dublin estates, which have increased by more than 53%. A recent report from the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland, SCSI, confirms that three out of four owners' management companies, OMCs, have inadequate sinking funds for long-term repairs.

I have two questions. First, will the Government immediately review the parking ratios in Clonburris and Adamstown SDZs to facilitate overspill parking spaces? We cannot build car-free developments while the National Transport Authority admits that we do not have sufficient corridors. Second, will the Government finally complete the transfer of the Multi-Unit Developments Act to the Department of housing so we can have a regulator with teeth and stop the type of two-tier citizenship whereby homeowners are forced to pay for their own roads, lights and security on top of record property taxes?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Gogarty for raising this matter. I am grateful to have the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, beside me for some local knowledge on some of these

issues. I was in Clonburris not that long ago. I will get to some of the infrastructural challenges but I must say, being honest, that I was pleased to see the number and quality of homes being built and the partnership model that seems to exist – certainly from my visit - between the Land Development Agency, developers and the local authority. That is an important template for others to learn from.

We all know we are living through a housing emergency. We are all under pressure as the people's representatives to see more homes built. We have set a very ambitious target of 300,000 homes by the end of 2030. We have to get there. Quite frankly, that means all of our communities and constituencies taking more houses. I am encouraged to see the increase in this regard in Lucan, Clondalkin and more generally across the Deputy's constituency of Dublin Mid-West.

It is also true that those increases are putting real pressure on infrastructure. The Deputy highlighted the example of parking today, but there are a variety of issues in this regard, including public transport, schools and pitches. That is one of the reasons we set up the housing activation office because we need our local authorities to be able to work with central government. We need them to inform us about the key pieces of infrastructure they need or the things they need to be unblocked in order to deliver these homes, because we need to build communities as well as houses.

I live in a constituency that is not vastly different from that of the Deputy, especially the northern half where there is a significant number of additional houses being built, which we are glad to see. The challenges around ratios, parking spaces and the need for people to have a car are real and present too. On foot of the Deputy raising this issue, I will talk with the Minister, Deputy Browne. Some of these are matters for the local authority. Others are matters that central government can work through.

I am hearing about service charges a lot. This is a real issue for people. I need to check with the Minister for housing on this. We are committed to that transfer taking place and the completion of the Multi-Unit Developments Act. Let me try to get the Deputy an accurate timeline as to when that is likely to happen.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: The council is only implementing the legislation it is told to implement. When I tried to get a major department store into the Adamstown SDZ, council officials refused and said it would upset the retail hierarchy because Tallaght and Liffey Valley are the two main retail centres. Therefore, anyone living in Adamstown has to go to Liffey Valley. Buses on the L51 and L52 routes do not turn up half of the time, so people are going to have to drive to do a proper shop. Unfortunately, they cannot get the train to Liffey Valley. These are the kind of real-time issues that arise. People in the social houses at the Crossings in Adamstown are being told they have no parking spaces. We have seen situations where people are parking on footpaths and in bus lanes. For someone like me who lives the green lifestyle, is vegan, etc., the obvious reality is that people need to have access to cars. We have to revisit this issue and ensure that there is some form of parking spaces are designated for people in these areas.

The Tánaiste: I do not doubt the Deputy's green credentials, in fairness. The Deputy makes a fair point. All of this is always a balance. We are in a housing emergency but the point is

that we want people to move into those houses and for them to become homes. Practical requirements about where people park their cars are not issues that should be dismissed. The Deputy's community is, perhaps, a good example or case study for Government to reflect on. In many parts of the country, we are not seeing enough homes being built. In other parts, including in the Deputy's constituency, we are seeing a significant number being built. Maybe that needs to be reflected in terms of some of the specific challenges there might be in areas like Adamstown and Clonburris where particularly high densities of housing are going in. On foot of the Deputy raising the matter, I will discuss it with the Minister for housing and ask him to come back and have further engagement with the Deputy on it.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Gillian Toole: Cosúil le Contae Chill Mhantáin, tá a lán fadhbanna á réiteach againn i gContae na Mí. Prior planning prevents poor performance. You cannot manage what you cannot measure. We are snowed under with data sets.

Yet in Meath East, parents are alternating between commuting to work and campaigning alongside public representatives for childcare and school places. Students switch from study to work to keeping social connections trying to navigate disconnected, under resourced modes of transport. Examples include the 103 bus service. It is full leaving Ratoath before it gets to Ashbourne. The 109A has a reduced service to and from DCU. The M3 Dunboyne to Navan rail line is without a timeline or ring-fenced funding. Water supplies in Dunshaughlin and Dunboyne are at their limits in advance of much-needed home building.

There is a scarcity or a complete lack of social infrastructure, such as parks in Ashbourne and Ratoath. Currently, there is anxiety, fear and frustration among parents and school teams in Duleek, Dunboyne and Dunshaughlin. All are awaiting childcare places, school places, classrooms and appropriate resources not diluted in special education, but provided in line with will and preference. All of these issues have been compounded by numerous escalating costs of living. I try to be solution focused. I cannot see why these issues - similar to Deputy Gogarty, they are not just in my constituency, but in any rapidly growing area - are not anticipated and planned for.

I have questions for the Tánaiste that are in adherence with the programme for Government. What intergovernmental State or semi-State communication and collaboration has taken place? What plans have been or are being prepared for County Meath, which is in the programme for Government, to "ensure accurate estimates of the demand for essential services", including but not limited to school places, public transport, water supply and social infrastructure? What is the current status of the unit for future planning?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy very much for her questions. I know from our engagement to date on a variety of issues and her own professional background that she is data driven in terms of the questions that puts down in this House and, indeed, in the discussions that we had around the programme for Government. I thank her for that because what she is raising today, as she rightly said, is a commitment in the programme for Government.

I will ask the Minister, Deputy Chamber, as the Minister with responsibility in this area regarding the unit for future planning, because it will be based in the Department of public expenditure and reform, to engage directly with the Deputy to make sure that we get her the most up-to-date information about where that unit is and when it will be established. I am told that the work is now ongoing through a unit for future planning. There is a unit there across a number of key areas. The purpose of the unit is to look at how we can integrate long-term strategic planning more systemically into policy-making in line with the policy document - better public services. So far, the work has not got to the point that the Deputy is rightly raising here. It would be useful if it could in terms of that county-by-county basis because it is not. Even in a country the size of Ireland, some of the issues are common but there can also be very significant differentials. The housing example Deputy Gogarty gave us is an example of that too. In some parts of the country, we are seeing a very significant number of new homes and in others, not nearly the levels that we need.

We are engaging now on work to try to strengthen long-term planning right across the Government. The unit for future planning with the Minister, Deputy Chambers, is an example of that. There are also other examples. The decision that we took to publish a medium-term expenditure framework to effectively outline what levels of spending we have, not just for today or tomorrow, this year or the next budget, but out for five years on capital and current is quite important. That framework is based on analysis of past trends. The piece of work I am most proud of - it gets a bit of talk in here but not enough - is Future Forty. It is a really good piece of work done by officials in the Department of Finance. It looks ahead at demographic, technological, social and environmental trends. It basically says that if Ireland did not do anything in terms of policy and we were operating on a no change policy basis, what would our country look like by 2040? It is the antidote to short-termism. We are having a Cabinet committee on this very shortly. It will be discussed at the National Economic Dialogue. How we embed that treasure trove of information systemically in public policy, not just for the Government but everyone in the Oireachtas, agencies and State agencies is an important point.

The national development plan has €275.4 billion set out in public capital investment until 2035. This is beyond the lifetime of this Dáil. This again gives agencies an ability to respond beyond the short term. I did not get a chance to come back on childcare and school places but I will in my next contribution.

Deputy Gillian Triggs: I welcome the update that the Minister, Deputy Chambers, will be in contact with me. Another point that is related is the different Cabinet committees across those key areas I mentioned. I ask for an update in due course. It is interdepartmental and intergovernmental communication. Are there changes taking place from the perspective of team training? Knowledge, skills and attitude are one part of running a business. I consider running the country is effectively the most important business to be run. Taking people on that journey is also critical. I appreciate I am asking this now and had not given advanced notice. I would appreciate an update of the type of team training that is taking place. It is about working towards improvements. I do not particularly like the word "change" for change's sake but it is about working to improve situations. That is why I came in here. That is why I am collaborating and signed up to the programme for Government. Regardless of who the Government is or was at the time in December 2024, that is the commitment that I made. We have a lot of problems but I have solutions.

The Tánaiste: I appreciate that. That has always been my experience in dealing with the Deputy. Politics is about a number of things. One of them is that we are here representing our constituents and bringing forward the issues and what we hear. Second, we are obligated to do a bit more than just diagnosing the problem as the Deputy has gone further in her questions to begin to explore what the solutions look like and how can we constructively engage across political backgrounds.

On childcare, we have recognised as a Government that relying entirely on the market is not a viable option. It is not going to work. That is why we have now taken a decision and already an allocation for the very first time to have publicly-funded childcare facilities in terms of a call. That needs to be the start. On the big issue around how we reduce the cost of childcare, we are fully committed to delivering that commitment over the lifetime of Government. However, we have to build a system to make sure that we got the places.

Similarly on school places, there are a number of school projects under way in County Meath. Meath's population is not too dissimilar to my county's population in Wicklow is growing at a very fast rate. We will continue to engage on this.

On the issue of training, I truthfully do not have the answer but it is an important point in making sure we have that continuous professional development within the public service and support our public servants. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Chambers, to engage with the Deputy on it.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Government is closing down ten beds at St. Vincent's Hospital, Fairview, for children in mental health crisis at a time when so many of our young people are crying out help and left in awful situations. We are talking about children in some cases with severe depression, anxiety, self-harming, eating disorders and suicidal. It is real pain. It is real suffering here. Their poor parents are at their wits' end and sent from pillar to post desperately seeking services for their children and banging on doors of a broken system. Waiting lists continue to grow and grow. We only have 50 CAMHS beds right across the State. That is half of what is needed. The lives of children and young people in mental health crisis are on the line. Every single bed counts. We need more and now the Government is closing ten of them.

The head of the Psychiatric Nurses Association of Ireland calls this decision "inconceivable". I call it dangerous. It is dangerous for children who need urgent help. The Government cannot close these beds. These children need them and more.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I heard Peter Hughes, who the Deputy referenced, on the radio this morning. The Government is very happy to engage with him and the union he represents. The note available to me is that the use of the beds in Fairview was intended to be a short-term measure while other CAMHS beds were temporarily closed. There were always limitations around the beds. I do not say this in any way to disrespect the staff who do a good job. Admissions are restricted primarily to 16- and 17-year-olds. There were no out-of-hours or weekend admissions. There was not a dedicated eating disorder pathway. There were significant staffing constraints and unsuitable physical

infrastructure with the current building no longer fit for purpose. This was to fill a gap while they were waiting to open additional beds, including 11 additional beds in the state of the art 22 bed facility in Linn Dara in Dublin. I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Buter, to come back to the Deputy with more information and that we engage directly on this important matter.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We need them all.

The Tánaiste: There is some logic in that.

My notes suggest it is not a question of like for like in terms of the beds but let me check further.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Yesterday we saw the announcement of new special classes across the country and, for the first time, the introduction of these new so-called classes or hubs which will be in our schools and in which schools can enrol up to 12 students. I welcome proposals and reform but they do not negate the need for appropriate classes. I note the name of the proposed model is "inclusive autism classes". All autism classes are inclusive - I think the Tánaiste will agree with me on that. Was any consultation done with stakeholders or schools about this? How will schools be supported? It is my understanding there will be no increase in staffing. Will there be an opt-out facility? It also raises serious questions about the apparent contradiction in the Minister, Deputy Foley, stating diagnosis will not be required for primary school while introducing classes that appear to rely on an autism-specific threshold for access. Will the Tánaiste please clarify?

The Tánaiste: Absolutely. I thank Deputy Kenny for raising this issue and for raising the word "reform". If we are to have - as we are having - an honest discussion about special needs education, reform will have to be part of that. We cannot have a system that is designed around the system rather than around the child. We are constantly, quite rightly, opening more classes and more schools - we should, we must and we will. We are constantly increasing resources. We had the debate around SNAs and worked to fix that. We also have to make sure the model is right.

My understanding of these five inclusive special classes at post-primary that have been sanctioned is there was engagement between the schools and the Department. I thank the schools for that. This is an effort to try to address an acute and worrying situation. I heard Deirdre Matthews from the joint managerial board on the radio this morning. She was very positive about this model. There will be engagement more broadly with stakeholders, including disability stakeholders.

This is an honest effort to make a positive addition to the range of supports available. I do not wish to say these five schools have put up their hand. I am not sure that is correct but they have engaged constructively. I thank them for that. We should learn through this process and keep an open mind on it. It is a positive development. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to come back to the Deputy with the specifics.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Reports of double- and now triple-tap strikes are coming through from southern Lebanon. This is when the site of an initial air strike is hit again while medical

personnel are in attendance. Four medical personnel were killed yesterday in Mayfadoun. These included two paramedic volunteers: a young man of 22 and a boy of just 16 years old. These are war crimes being committed by Israel and they are chillingly familiar as the tactics it has used in Gaza for the past two and a half years, with the death toll now rising to 72,000. Meanwhile, this globe fails to hold Israel to account.

Why is the Government not speaking up more? When did it last push for the suspension of the EU-Israel association agreement? What is it actively doing towards that? Will the Tánaiste stand in support of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez as he raises his voice louder than ever before in calling out Israel's war crimes? And where oh where is our occupied territories Bill, which the Tánaiste promised would be on the Dáil floor last November?

The Tánaiste: I condemn outright the actions of Israel and the actions of Hezbollah. Israel is breaching, in my view and the view of the Government, international law. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, has been extremely vocal on this and is working with European counterparts. She has joined a number of statements and she likes speaking very clearly in relation to our foreign policy position around this. We must also condemn Hezbollah. I was in Lebanon not that long ago and welcome the Lebanese Government's very constructive efforts.

In relation to the occupied territories Bill, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, has received updated information and advices from the Attorney General and I expect her to be in a position to update this House shortly. I think we all want an urgent ceasefire between Lebanon and Israel. I hope these peace talks get back under way. I hear some of talk of that, potentially, today. I am conscious there are many Irish troops stationed in Lebanon who serve with absolute distinction as part of UNIFIL. I am pleased the Minister has informed me they are all safe and accounted for. We thank them for their service.

Deputy Charles Ward: The continued delay in I.S. 465 means families are still being exposed to defective materials with devastating financial consequences through no fault of their own. Following an EU complaint by Donegal homeowners, quarry audits were carried out and the Government is confident there have been no market surveillance failures since 2021. That claim is deeply questionable. FOI material released to me raises serious concerns about these audits, including the reliance on incomplete sulphur testing and clear compliance gaps. This points to failure in oversight and enforcement. Will the Tánaiste act to ensure accountability and strengthen legal protections, including legislative change? Have these issues been raised with the European Commission? When will I.S. 465 be delivered?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ward for raising this matter. He raised it with me in the House relatively recently, as he rightly should. I gave him the latest update then. I believed that process was drawing to a conclusion. I do not have any further information today but I will make sure the Minister, Deputy Browne, comes back to him on the timeline for the conclusion of that and any contact we have had with the European Commission.

Deputy Michael Collins: In the past month, Ireland has seen the damage we have done to our own economy by not being energy independent. We import fossil fuel and now we know how delicate this is. One major disruption and Ireland goes dry. We all know we must steer away from fossil fuels and towards renewables but the Tánaiste knows for today, tomorrow

and far into the future, tractors, lorries and hi-macs will need fossil fuel to keep the country going.

Since I came into the Dáil, I have been calling for the exploration of the Barryroe oil field. Minor checks look positive and indicate it has the potential to create 45% of our gas and crude oil, which could even be more. This could be a chance to accelerate towards renewables and meet all the targets, which are not realistic at the present pace we are going. In 2021, the company sought a licence to do exploratory drilling. This was refused by the then Minister, Eamon Ryan. Now that we are in a time of crisis, will the Government meet with the company and hear its proposals? I am not asking the Tánaiste to say yes to drilling - just to meet and see how we can tie renewables into the proposed plan for Barryroe and how the State can benefit.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Collins for raising this matter. I will ask the relevant Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to consider his request for a meeting.

From a factual point of view, the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 sets out changes in relation to not accepting new applications for petroleum authorisations or for future petroleum exploration licensing rounds. There are a number of existing licences - 13 across the country. If the Deputy is talking about a renewable element of this, I will ask the Minister to consider engaging and to come back to him directly.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I raise the need for increased oversight and accountability with regard to owners' management companies, OMCs. It is an issue in my constituency where we have larger estates that are delivered on a phased basis. Parts of the developments are occupied while other parts are still under construction. The developer of the estate can retain control of the OMC for extended periods, which is against the spirit in which OMCs are set up. In addition, the current model allows for a voluntary resident director to take on significant legal and fiduciary responsibilities. That can cause difficulties regarding transparency of who sits on the board and in terms of understanding decision-making process.

Under the programme for Government, we have committed to transferring regulation of the OMCs and the Multi-Unit Developments Act to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Will the Tánaiste provide an update on when that transfer will take place? Are there any plans to review the MUD Act 2011, to create regulations providing for the establishment of a register for OMCs and their directors, to increase accountability and transparency relating to them, to support the residents who live in these areas, to make sure they understand decision-making processes in their developments, to honour the spirit of the legislation and to truly make these companies into owners' management companies?

The Tánaiste: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta. I thank him for raising this issue, which is a growing issue in a number of constituencies. Perhaps his constituency is very prominent in that considering the volume of homes and apartments built and the number of multi-unit developments in place. Of course, that is very welcome but it means we need to put ourselves under pressure to keep the laws of the land and the regulatory structures up to date. It is utterly unacceptable that owners have no access to their OMC and that where concerns are raised around AGMs and the likes, people often cannot straight answers. That is not good. The programme for Government commits to transferring these functions to the Department of

housing. The Government remains committed to that. I need to check the exact timeline and come back to the Deputy. My personal view is there is a compelling case to review more broadly the existing law. I will discuss that with the Minister for housing and ask that he liaise with the Deputy.

Deputy Brian Brennan: I want to talk to the Tánaiste about one of my constituents, Eimear Byrne. Eimear is a 30-year-old from Arklow, a primary school teach in a Gaelscoil and a very talented and popular young woman but she needs our help. She has an extremely rare genetic disorder which led to open-heart surgery at the age of just ten.

1 o'clock

Three years ago, Eimear had again to undergo emergency heart surgery. The surgery saved her life but there were complications and she suffered a severe stroke. Recently, she was told there were three more aneurysms that required immediate surgery, which is highly complex. She has been advised by multiple hospital consultants that this operation cannot be carried out in Ireland and can take place only in Baltimore, USA.

Eimear has worked with the HSE. I have been in touch directly with our Minister on a treatment abroad scheme application. The wonderful community of Arklow and beyond are fundraising. Eimear is running out of time and we must do everything possible to ensure she gets this life-saving critical surgery.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Brennan for raising this issue with the usual passion, empathy and decency he brings to all matters on the floor of the Dáil. Our colleague the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, who is present, is working with the Deputy on this. I will certainly work with him on it, too.

We are all thinking of Eimear. We send our very best wishes to her and her family. None of us can even begin to imagine how difficult the last number of years have been.

A factual point to make is that the HSE operates the EU treatment abroad scheme for people entitled under what is called EU Regulation 883/2004. I am putting that on the record to be helpful. The scheme is consultant led and allows for a public consultant based in Ireland to refer a public patient who is normally resident in Ireland for treatment in the healthcare service of another EU member state, the UK or Switzerland. There is no statutory framework for the referral of patients outside of that. I do not say that to be difficult; I just say it to be honest. However, the HSE has informed officials in the Department that it has received an application in relation to Eimear's situation this April. The HSE is now trying to evaluate that. It has sought some further information, and when it has received that documentation, it will work its way through it and engage further with the family. The Minister for Health will continue to seek urgent updates on the status of that application, and of course she will engage directly with the Deputy.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I want to raise today the issue of St. Cecilia's School, Sligo. It is a special school that takes children with special educational needs up to the age of 18, and it is a lifeline for many children. However, we have been contacted by parents, many of them very frantic and frustrated because they are unable to get a place in the school. This is because the

necessary funding cannot be sanctioned. I spoke to the principal of the school. She is very frustrated. It is the first time this has happened. There is a feeling that there is an attempt to try to get the children to go into special classes in mainstream schools, which would be totally inappropriate due to the severity of their disabilities and special needs.

I submitted a parliamentary question this April and the reply I got basically stated how many new special schools had been built and what had been done here, there and all over the country, including in places like Cork and Dublin, but stated nothing about the specific school I had asked about. This is totally frustrating. One of the issues with parliamentary questions that needs to be brought up is that often when we ask about a specific thing, we get an answer about general matters. That needs to change, but that is a separate point.

I appeal to the Tánaiste to intervene in this case to ensure the children get the special classes they need in St. Cecilia's special school.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Kenny very much for raising the issue concerning St. Cecilia's School. It is absolutely the position of the Government that it is a matter of providing appropriate school places. The Government has shown that through investing in special schools. There was a view in the past, perhaps, that everybody could be mainstreamed. That is not practical for some children. Every parent would like to see it, I am sure, but some children will always have additional needs that mean they require special provision, and that is fine.

On foot of the Deputy having raised the specific situation with St. Cecilia's special school, I will speak directly to the relevant Minister, Deputy Naughton, and the relevant Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and ask that they revert to her on the specifics and see what can be done.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I wish to raise again the issue of low water pressure in the village of Ballyhooly in my constituency, Cork East. I have spoken on several occasions in this Chamber about the need to repair and upgrade the water network serving Ballyhooly because daily disruptions to water supply have persisted for years. Low water pressure in certain areas of Ballyhooly continues to disrupt daily household practices and this only gets worse as we approach the summer months. While some repairs are being conducted by Uisce Éireann, funding is needed for a complete upgrade of the local water network. This would improve the pipework from the reservoir to the village and eliminate the low pressure problem. With more housing development due in the area, I ask the Tánaiste to liaise directly with Uisce Éireann on the possibility of a full upgrade of the network being facilitated.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy McCarthy for raising this issue concerning Ballyhooly in Cork East. As he has reminded us, it is not the first time he has raised issues around the water network and the need for an upgrade.

I am informed that Uisce Éireann has introduced a number of measures to try to address the issues with the Ballyhooly network. I believe it has put in place a programme of mains monitoring. A leak find and fix was carried out to reduce the leakage levels. Uisce Éireann tells me this has increased pressure at properties where customers had experienced low pressure. It has also implemented pressure management to help maintain pressure levels across

the village. However, its work is not yet done. It needs to do more. Its network management team is continuing to examine the issue of leak detection, whether more can be done in that area, and whether further flow arrangements can be put in place to improve the reliability of the service. On foot of the Deputy raising this here today and the very significant additional investment of the Government in Uisce Éireann, I will follow up directly with the body and ask it to communicate with the Deputy.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: It will not surprise the Tánaiste and Minister for Health that at another session of Questions on Policy or Legislation, I have another question about rare diseases. Like Deputy McCarthy, I am going to keep raising this until I see some action. The programme for Government commits to an early access scheme. It also commits to a review of the reimbursement process, which numerous Deputies have raised here over the past few months. We have had people with Friedreich's ataxia and different types of muscular atrophy and dystrophy. The list goes on. Dr. Rónán Collins was before the health committee and I asked him about vaccinations. Vaccinations are subject to the same assessment process as drugs, from the most simple form of application to the most complex. We have an archaic, outdated system. Can we please knock heads together and undertake to carry out what is committed to in the programme for Government, or at least begin to do so? It is going to take a significant period to carry out the reviews. Can we please get on task and do the job at hand?

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I thank the Deputy for raising this again. I was very pleased to have the opportunity to meet many of the people with Friedreich's ataxia whom he brought to the Dáil. I want to highlight to Deputies that, importantly, our drugs budget has increased significantly this year, being well up at 9%. This is what the Department expected it to be. We made provision in the overall budget for a 7% uplift, and we are now at a 9% increase. We will make decisions more quickly. We are working on the reimbursement process more quickly, but Deputies need to be aware of the scale of the growth of the drugs budget and where that is going. That is because of people living longer and access to drugs of very good quality. As we make decisions on reimbursement and rare diseases in a shorter period, which is a really important part of what the Deputy is talking about, we need to be aware of the very significant additional costs we are already incurring in this period of 2026.

I assure the Deputy that the Department is considering every aspect of an early access scheme. We will continue to work with the Deputy on that, but I do need to flag the important budgetary consideration to all Deputies.

Deputy David Cullinane: The Irish Coast Guard is launching an enhanced aviation service from Waterford Airport today. I fully support and welcome it because it is a really important service. We all know that the search and rescue service has huge support right across the State, but particularly in the south east. Unfortunately, there were tragedies in the past and colleagues were lost, but it is great to see an enhanced service.

I want to raise a wider issue in relation to Waterford Airport because there is now a real opportunity to develop it. It is still a very sore point that the Government dragged its feet for too long on funding a runway extension. As the Tánaiste knows, a very wealthy private investor is now going to come in with money and extend the runway. We want to see that happen. If it

happens – I think it will very quickly – it will create huge opportunities economically, in addition to enhancing connectivity with, I hope, Britain and the rest of Europe. The Government will then have a role in supporting the airport. It has not got State funding for so long because there have not been commercial flights, but with the enhanced service from the Irish Coast Guard and the runway extension I hope will be built, there are real opportunities. I hope that when the extension is built, the Government will come with money and support and enable us to have a fit-for-purpose airport that I believe can transform the south east region.

The Tánaiste: For a rare occasion, I agree with the Deputy. I agree with everything he said about the very important work done by the Irish Coast Guard service. We think of all of those who have lost their lives in the service of others, and also of their families and communities.

I am really pleased to hear today about the enhanced service for the Deputy's community and constituency.

I agree that there is a wider issue in relation to the development of Waterford Airport. I am pleased - I am going from my memory of a discussion - that reference to Waterford Airport is in the regional airports policy as well, which is important. This is an island nation. We need to do more in terms of capacity at Dublin Airport, including lifting the cap. All of that is true, but we will still need our regional airports and there is a real chance to help to develop the south east if we can get this right. The Government will continue to work on this.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: At a time when the Minister for communications, Deputy O'Donovan, was calling for a review of RTE's coverage of the public protests, it is reported that he also approved a €20,000 pay increase for the CEO of RTE. This raises legitimate concerns around Government transparency and the potential of undue influence. In a separate matter, the former Minister for Finance, Paschal Donohoe, approved an additional €10 million for the International Monetary Fund, IMF, prior to subsequently taking a role with the organisation.

Simon Harris: That is the wrong organisation.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: This has given rise to the question of conflicts of interest.

(Interruptions)

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: That is wrong.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Will the Tánaiste confirm whether the matter has been referred to the Standards in Public Office Commission for examination for potential breaches of ethics? If not-----

(Interruptions)

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Please do not heckle me. If not, does the Government intend to make such a referral in order to ensure accountability and maintain confidence in the ethics and standards of public office?

Deputy John Clendennen: Disgraceful.

Simon Harris: The Deputy's comments are disgraceful and inaccurate and that has become the norm.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: They were questions, not comments.

Simon Harris: No, sorry, excuse me-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy O'Flynn, you have asked a question. Allow the Tánaiste to respond.

Simon Harris: The Deputy will shortly be required-----

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: It was not a comment-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Allow the Tánaiste.

Simon Harris: The Deputy will shortly be required to correct the record of the Dáil because I think the organisation-----

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: No, I will not. That is not true.

Simon Harris: Allow me to speak. This is not a blockade. The organisation that the Deputy is referring to is the World Bank, not the IMF, first of all. I ask him to please correct the record because he did not even bother to do his research. It was the World Bank. The second point is that as the current Minister for Finance, I provided to the Oireachtas committee all relevant documentation, which proves that the then Minister, Paschal Donohoe, followed the recommendation of his officials. He did not have to, by the way, because he was the Minister and he made the decision, but he followed the recommendation. They are all published and available to the Deputy as a member of the Opposition, but he did not read them. He just came in to slur him. That is the way the Deputy operates.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: And the other question? The Tánaiste did not answer the rest of the question.

Simon Harris: The answer to the other question is that the Deputy should read how State companies actually operate in terms of the role of boards and responsibilities.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: You are missing the first part of my question, Tánaiste.

Simon Harris: You referenced the IMF incorrectly. You should correct the record of the House.

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

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I correct that.

Simon Harris: Correct the record and get your facts right.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Okay. The record is corrected.

Deputy Rory Hearne: There are 60,000 households, many of them families with children, in receipt of the housing assistance payment, HAP. They are classed as having their housing needs met but I want to give the Tánaiste a case of one person in my constituency. Last night, I met a father with two young children who told me that he was sick with worry about being able to afford the weekly shop. He got to the Lidl counter and his debit card was declined. He had to walk away and explain to his kids why they had to leave the week's groceries behind. He lives in a private rental property that is riddled with mould and damp but he cannot complain for fear the landlord will evict him. Where would he go? He receives the HAP and now faces rent increases from Dublin City Council that will push him over the edge. He told me his story last night with incredible dignity but in the end, he broke down and cried. He feels hopeless but he is doing his best to keep going for his kids and his community.

The social contract is broken for this father and for thousands of families in Finglas, Ballymun and across this country who cannot afford the rent hikes from private landlords or, now, from city councils, too. They face eviction. They live with mould and damp, which is damaging their and their kids' health. What is the Government going to do to support these households to ensure that they are not going to face eviction and that councils have enough funding to deliver maintenance so that tenants are not living with mould and damp?

Simon Harris: First, I thank the Deputy for sharing that story with the Dáil. If the Deputy sends on the details to my office, I will be very happy to engage directly with Dublin City Council. People should not feel that fear if they are in a damp and inadequate property that - I say this not to be disrespectful - the taxpayer is helping to fund. They should not be expected to endure substandard accommodation. Dublin City Council, which is one of our largest local authorities, must intervene there.

I would argue that, when it comes to the issue of the social contract, fair rents being set for social housing is an important part of that, too. It is an important part of getting that balance right. There are significant supports, as there should be, available to help people in need in relation to housing but it is also very important that the rent levels reflect reality. Local authorities, generally, exercise significant restraint in relation to that.

There is obviously a very difficult and very upsetting case there of a man doing his best for his children. If the Deputy is happy to send me the details, I am happy to follow up.

Deputy George Lawlor: The Tánaiste will be aware that since Brexit, Rosslare Europort has seen an increase in freight of some 350%, which is obviously very welcome. However, Rosslare Harbour village is inundated with trucks parking right across the village. This is despite the existence of the old customs post. When I say old, it was fully refurbished,

resurfaced and lined out and has capacity for approximately 50 trucks. However, it is locked and inaccessible, and in the meantime, people in the village have to endure trucks parking all over the place. I ask that a bit of common sense would be used and this old customs post, which was totally refurbished prior to the massive investment in the harbour at Rosslare, be made available to allow trucks to park up while they wait to board ships.

Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Lawlor for raising this matter, which I know has become a real issue around Rosslare Harbour. I have been engaging with Revenue officials in relation to this and they have informed me that the old customs facility is being used to facilitate truck parking but, to the Deputy's broader point, the site is owned and managed by the Office of Public Works, OPW. What I will do, on foot of Deputy Lawlor raising it, is ask the Minister, Deputy Chambers, and the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, to engage with him on this. I will also ask that the OPW engage with Revenue and see if we can make progress on this.

Deputy Colm Burke: The Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, has highlighted that over-65s already account for more than 60% of inpatient bed days and that this group will grow from one in seven of the population to one in five by 2040. The national immunisation advisory committee has recommended respiratory syncytial virus, RSV, vaccination for those aged 75 and over and also for high-risk groups. The programme for Government committed to expanding RSV vaccination. I ask the Tánaiste to outline the steps the Government will take and the timeline for deciding whether an RSV vaccination programme for older adults will be implemented as part of managing future pressures on the health system and protecting the health of the older population.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank Deputy Burke for his question. It is certainly true to say that we have had enormous success with the RSV vaccination programme for infants, which significantly reduced infection, mortality and very severe illness for infants. I can confirm that we have sought a health technology assessment, HTA, for RSV immunisation by HIQA. The outcome of that will inform the policy decision that I make as to the most appropriate RSV immunisation strategy for infants but also for adults aged 65 and older. That HTA is due in the coming weeks. It is always the case with vaccinations that we take the World Health Organization's advice as well as the advice of our expert groups. We do that on an annual basis because, of course, circumstances change every year. I expect that HTA in the coming weeks and we will base our decision on that and on the intersection of the HSE's pathfinder as well.

Deputy Michael Cahill: What is happening in schools across County Kerry is simply not acceptable in 2026. I wish to be clear from the outset that we do not have a minor works problem; we have a systemic underinvestment problem. Nowhere is that clearer than in Scoil Iognáid Rís in Daingean Uí Chúis. The school is located in what is considered to be one of the most affluent towns in the country, yet the conditions in the main boy's national school are, in the words of the principal, "archaic". We are talking about children tripping on broken concrete and sustaining injuries requiring stitches, a basketball court from 1980 that is now unsafe and crumbling, a roof and window structures at risk of collapse, no proper toilets, no corridor, no hall, and no entrance space. There was a situation recently where a stranger was able to walk into the school unchallenged. That is not just outdated, it is dangerous.

I am calling for a comprehensive assessment of all primary and secondary school buildings in Kerry to properly identify the scale of refurbishment and modernisation required.

Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Cahill for raising this important issue. Of course, he will know I am going to say that, at the macro level, we are significantly increasing the capital budget for education, and quite rightly so. However, at the level that he rightly raises of his own county of Kerry and the specific issues he highlighted for an individual school, I will ask the Minister, Deputy Naughton, come back to him directly on that, but also on his request more broadly that we would look at the school footprint across the county of Kerry and the plans that could be put in place in relation to schools.

I will ask the Minister to come back to the Deputy on that.

Deputy Pa Daly: I recently met with the parents of an adult child with an intellectual disability. They told me that they were involved with the Before We Die campaign. Over 2,000 parents over 70 years of age are caring for adult children with intellectual disabilities, a rise of 20% since 2020, and there are nearly 500 who are in their 80s. These are parents who are mentally, physically and emotionally stressed as to what is going to happen to their children after they pass away. It is woefully under-resourced.

People with disabilities are people with rights too. Will the Government commit to delivering more residential places for adults with intellectual disabilities? Respite services are closed. There is little support from housing and little tie-in with local authorities. It is causing enormous stress.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Daly for raising this issue. I will get him the numbers, but there is a commitment to increase the number of residential places and respite services this year in the HSE service plan. Allow me to ask the Minister, Deputy Foley, to write to the Deputy on that.

On the broader issue, Before We Die is an excellent group. I look forward to meeting them directly. I know they met the Minister of State, Deputy Emer Higgins, recently as well. They are raising a lot of very important issues, including how the State needs to get much better from a planning perspective, and the stress and worry it is causing people. I think they have had good engagement with the Government so far. I look forward to sitting down with them shortly myself, too.

Deputy Brian Stanley: What we have in Laois and Offaly in relation to services for children with special needs and autism is a black spot. There are roughly 900 children at any one time on a waiting list for assessment of needs. There is no occupational therapy, OT, in primary care for children and young adults in Laois, and the latest information I have is that there is no approval to recruit such an occupational therapist. Four OT posts are vacant in children and young people's services. I asked the HSE on 17 February to confirm if approval had been given, but I still have not received an answer. The Minister for Health is sitting beside the Tánaiste. Is there approval from the Department of Health and the HSE management to recruit occupational therapists for young persons and children in Laois and Offaly? What progress is being made on that? Is the answer "Yes" or "No"?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Stanley. I know that much of this is the responsibility of the Department of disability, which, obviously, works with the HSE. The Deputy raises an important issue. My understanding is that there is now approval for 11 therapy posts in the midlands. Let me follow up with the HSE on that. Deputy Clendennen reminds me of this. I will come back to the Deputy directly on the OT piece.

There is also the broader body of work that I hope we can get right, as an Oireachtas, in terms of the assessment of need legislation that we are looking at together. I believe that pre-legislative scrutiny at the committee is due to conclude shortly. We need to look at the legislative structures that we have in place to make sure everybody has a right to an assessment of need, absolutely, but that the structures work much better. That is a really important thing.

With regard to the therapy posts, let me get the Deputy a note in relation to the midlands.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I ask that it be followed up.

The Tánaiste: I will follow it up.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.24 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.04 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.24 p.m. and resumed at 2.04 p.m.

Air Pollution (Amendment) Bill 2025 [Seanad]: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am very pleased to introduce the Air Pollution (Amendment) Bill 2025 to the House. The Bill completed its passage through the Seanad with some constructive engagement. At its heart, this Bill is about safeguarding public health, protecting our environment and ensuring that Ireland's air quality remains among the best in Europe. However, notwithstanding our compliance with all existing EU air quality standards, air pollution is a silent killer, including in this country. It is a fact that about 1,700 premature deaths in Ireland each year are linked directly to poor air quality, largely from solid fuel burning. That is approximately ten times the number of fatalities on our roads each year.

The personal cost to families is immeasurable. The economic costs are also stark. The Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, has estimated that between 2016 and 2019 treating just five air pollution-related conditions cost the State over €56 million. Furthermore, research now shows that long-term exposure to fine-particle matter is linked to many conditions, including depression and anxiety. This is why improving air quality is essential. Cleaner air means healthier, longer lives, fewer hospital admissions and lower costs to our health system. The importance of improving our air quality is clear. Indeed, it is highlighted in the programme for Government, which commits the Government to continuing efforts to raise air quality standards, especially in urban areas, ensuring healthier environments for all.

In regard to the threats to our air quality, the two main sources of air pollution in Ireland are the burning of residential solid fuel and emissions from the transport sector. We are making

progress through investment in public transport, active travel and retrofitting homes. However, we must also continue to reduce the impact of solid fuel on the quality of the air that we breathe. We are currently compliant with existing EU air quality standards and our national clean air strategy, and our programme for Government commits us to doing more as we acknowledge that any level of air pollution has a negative impact on our health and environment.

In addition, new, more stringent air quality limits have been agreed at EU level that will apply from 2030. As set out in the second clean air strategy progress report, there are specific areas of the country at risk of exceeding the new limits specifically as a result of the pollution caused by the burning of residential solid fuel. Failing to meet new EU air quality standards will mean that we have failed the people living in those affected areas, not to mention the potential for infringement proceedings for non-compliance with EU law.

One of the key tools to improve our air quality to date has been the solid fuel regulations of 2022, which focus on improving the standards of solid fuels placed on the market to ensure they emit lower levels of pollution, remembering that there is no such thing as a non-polluting solid fuel. The existing regulations require that a solid fuel must conform to the relevant requirements, depending on the type of solid fuel, including a maximum smoke emission rate, a minimum sulphur content and a maximum moisture content. There are also existing requirement on producers, retailers and transporters of solid fuel to ensure solid fuel meets certain technical standards or, in other words, is an approved fuel.

The Air Pollution Act 1987 has served us well but its enforcement provisions need to be updated. The solid fuel regulations of 2022 were a huge step forward in reducing the impact of solid fuel on our health and environment, but experience has shown that local authorities lack sufficient powers to enforce them effectively to ensure that only compliant solid fuel is being made commercially available for sale. That is what this Bill is about.

I wish to be clear on the new provisions being introduced under this Bill. First, it does not create any new restrictions on householders. That is really important to emphasise. I took this Bill through the Seanad and there was an attempt by others to suggest that it would be introducing all sorts of draconian laws that would impact negatively on homeowners. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Bill is not about punishing householders. It is about giving local authorities the powers they need to ensure that they can enforce the rules that apply to the production, transport and sale of solid fuel. It is about ensuring that householders can be confident that the fuels placed on the Irish market meet the proper standards. It is about creating a level playing field for compliant commercial operators. It is something that has been asked for by those in the retail sector. They want to have a fair and balanced approach to commercial activity. Second, it does not change turbary rights. The Bill does not change the current rules in respect of turf. People with turbary rights can continue to cut, gift or sell turf as before. The focus is only on the commercial sale and supply of solid fuels.

The primary aim of the Bill is to strengthen the enforcement toolkit available to local authorities and provide greater regulatory clarity. Its main provisions include: the reintroduction of fixed payment notices, also known as on-the-spot fines, for breaches of the solid fuel regulations by commercial producers, retailers or transporters, ensuring quick and proportionate enforcement; the ability to serve compliance notices, requiring corrective action to be taken within a specified timeframe, encouraging compliance; seizure and forfeiture powers, and the ability to remove non-compliant material from a commercial or retail premises.

This allows enforcement action to have an immediate impact on air quality and gives the consumer confidence that only compliant fuels are available for sale. Currently there are no powers within the 1987 Act to provide for the seizure and forfeiture of non-compliant materials relating to the commercial sale and supply of solid fuels and it is worth noting that such powers are available to enforcement personnel under the Waste Management Act 1996.

Another important measure is the provision of enhanced solid fuel registers for producers, retailers and transporters, ensuring that only compliant operators can legally trade. The Bill provides greater clarity about the function, appointment and powers of a registration body and the processes for registration, removal, appeals and transparency of information regarding the register. The Bill also provides clearer processes for registration and removal from the register, including appeals mechanisms, to improve transparency and accountability. Finally, there is a provision in the Bill to allow bodies to share data, where appropriate, to support enforcement. This is to ensure clarity in relation to any GDPR concerns that might have existed. These measures will strengthen compliance and ensure consumers can trust that the fuels they purchase are less harmful and less polluting.

I will now outline the provisions of the Bill section by section to clarify its content. The Bill comprises 23 sections. Section 1 gives the Act its formal name and allows different provisions to be commenced at different times by ministerial order. This is standard practice, giving flexibility so that complex parts, such as the new registers, can be rolled out in stages. Section 2 confirms that the principal Act being amended is the Air Pollution Act 1987. Section 3 repeals certain outdated provisions in the 1987 Act and in related environmental legislation from 2011 and 2015. The purpose is to remove redundant material so that the law is clearer and easier to apply. Section 4 expands the legal definition of "air pollution" so that it now also covers situations where emissions cause damage to property or create a nuisance. This makes the law more comprehensive and responsive to real-world impacts.

Section 5 further updates and rationalises definitions across the 1987 Act. This is mainly a technical clean-up to ensure consistency with modern usage. Section 6 creates a mechanism for imposing additional ongoing fines where an offence continues over time, for example, if false information is repeatedly provided, or if records or labels are persistently missing. This prevents operators from sitting out the system without consequence. Section 7 reintroduces the system of on-the-spot fines for breaches of the solid fuel regulations by commercial operators. These will be set at €1,000 and are designed to provide a quick, proportionate enforcement tool without the need for lengthy court proceedings.

Sections 8 to 10, inclusive, provide for the appointment of authorised officers by either the Minister or local authorities, and expand enforcement powers to include entering premises, with warrants expressly required for entry to private dwellings where the consent of the occupier to enter is not forthcoming; the ability to stop and detain vehicles, but only with An Garda Síochána or Revenue present; as well as serving compliance notices and inspecting fuels, documents and records. These sections also include safeguards such as applications for warrants, appeal processes, and indemnity for officers acting in good faith.

Section 11 allows the Minister to establish registers of persons engaged in producing, selling, or transporting solid fuels. This section provides the legal backbone for the new system of registration and compliance monitoring. Sections 12 to 20, inclusive, are a restatement of some of the existing provisions of the current Act but also provide strengthened enforcement

powers for local authorities, including the creation of clearer offences and penalties for smoke emissions that exceed legal limits, ignoring notices served by local authorities to limit emissions or failure by an operator to notify a local authority of an incident that creates air pollution. These sections also provide that air quality management plans prepared by local authorities are subject to ministerial direction, to ensure national consistency.

Section 21 inserts a new Part VA in the Act of 1987. Part VA of the Act covers fuel regulations and registers and is replacing and updating the current Part IA of the existing Act. The main changes from the original are that Part VA now establishes clear offences and penalties for contravening those regulations; provides for the appointment, criteria and potential removal of registration bodies; and sets out rules for oversight. The Minister may issue directions or guidelines, and registration bodies must comply. Part VA includes provisions for funding, fees, obligations and offences where a registration body fails to meet its duties; sets out the process for applying to be registered, how applications are considered, grounds for refusal, and notification and appeal procedures; requires registration details to be published online, increasing transparency; provides for removal from the register in cases of non-compliance, with rights to make submissions and appeal; and provides a powerful tool to immediately remove non-compliant fuels from the market, helping to protect consumers and air quality. Authorised officers can seize fuels, containers or even vehicles if they are connected with an offence and there are provisions for a court-based process for determining whether seized items should be forfeited or returned, with an appeal mechanism.

Section 22 allows for the sharing of information between local authorities, registration bodies, authorised persons, and other relevant entities, subject to data protection safeguards. This ensures enforcement is joined up and more efficient and effective. Section 23 provides for amendments to the First Schedule, which updates the list of pollutants covered by the legislation, bringing it into line with modern science and EU requirements.

In summary, Part 1 of the Bill tidies up the legislative framework, commencement, definitions and repeals. Part 2 of the Bill strengthens enforcement and local authority powers; introduces a modern regulatory regime for solid fuel operators with registers, compliance notices and seizure powers; enables proper data-sharing; and updates pollutant definitions.

In conclusion, this Bill is about ensuring that the fuels available on the Irish market meet required technical standards and are less polluting so that we reduce the impact of burning solid fuel on our health and our environment. It is about protecting lives and reducing the number of premature deaths associated with air pollution, while also reducing the burden on our health service and meeting our air quality commitments under both national and European law. It is about preserving Ireland's reputation of having among the best air quality in Europe and avoiding the reputational and financial damage of non-compliance with imminent stricter air quality standards.

I think it is fair to say that cleaner air is something we all want for our families, our communities and our future generations. This Bill provides the necessary tools to help achieve this. I look forward to Deputies' contributions and welcome the opportunity to engage in productive discussions on the Bill on Committee Stage.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Minister of State for his speech. We support the intent and objectives of this Bill. Cleaner air is something that every one of us wants for our families and

communities, and for future generations. We agree that local authorities do need stronger powers. We all know that the main sources of air pollution are solid fuel burning and transport emissions. While air pollution is often framed as an urban issue, it is very much a rural problem too. Across my own county, families depend on solid fuel for their heating. The open fire and the range are not just appliances, they are part of our culture also. While I fully support the aim of the Bill to ensure that the fuels being sold are cleaner and safer, we must also recognise the cost pressures that people are under. Not every household can afford more expensive, higher standard fuels. We cannot create a cliff edge where people already struggling to heat their homes are pushed into deeper hardship. We must have a just transition to renewables. Cleaner air cannot come at the cost of those who can least afford it.

As is the hallmark of recent years, there has been a plethora of new rules and set targets without outlining the pathway to get there. Many ordinary people have seen cliff edges that see them punished because they cannot afford to access an alternative. The local authorities need to be resourced to enforce the new rules. There needs to be a just transition for solid fuel homes and local retailers, more protection from the carbon tax for many rural and elderly homes that have no choice but to continue using solid fuels, for whom it is unrealistic to expect them to transition over. With the approach we have seen, it is not surprising that illegal smoky fuel imports have increased, which has to be dealt with.

Behind the technical language and all the amendments, people have been left behind, people on solid fuels. Energy poverty is spiralling. We need an all-Ireland strategy on it or we will never get to grips with air pollution. It is a public health crisis. Over 1,600 premature deaths, as was mentioned by the Minister of State, occur every year in Ireland due to air pollution.

It must be addressed but balanced with the fact that energy poverty harms people too - older people, rural households and low-income families. A record 320,000 households are in arrears on energy bills. As substantial as that is, it obscures the scale of the problem and it does not capture the hundreds of thousands of families on hardship pay-as-you-go meters who regularly get cut off for one, two or three days at a time. Nor does it capture the 750,000 households reliant on home heating oil who cannot afford to fill their tank because the price of home-heating oil has doubled over the past five or six weeks and the supports have not been there to address that.

Importantly it does not capture the households the length and breadth of the country that have no other option than to use solid fuels but have been hit by price hikes since the introduction of the carbon tax. In the past week in particular, we have seen the Government, Labour and Social Democrats cosying up to each other, holding hands and dancing around the carbon tax bonfire but without more accessible grants, it is a double tax. It is a wealth transfer sometimes for people in wealthier households. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have left these households behind.

There is a crossover between those who live in energy poverty and those who are reliant on solid fuels. The very people who most need the SEAI retrofitting supports are the ones who cannot afford them. At the climate committee yesterday morning, we heard about the two-year waiting list for the warmer homes scheme. One third of grants for electric vehicles are given to people who buy cars that are worth €55,000 or more. Is that acceptable? Does someone who can afford a car costing that much really need a grant of €5,000?

We have been warning about this for years. The Government's failure to support solid fuel homes is putting people at risk. It cannot talk about a just transition when designing schemes for the well-off. It cannot criminalise people for heating their homes when the alternatives are not there. We need to make retrofitting work for everyone not just the well-off. We need targeted supports for rural houses and solid-fuel homes, and we have been calling for that for years. Phasing it out without providing alternatives is madness.

Measures on air pollution that target solid fuels have to be accompanied by affordable schemes and targeted supports. For too long, local authorities have been asking for a task force to enforce environmental regulations. They simply have not been provided with the tools or the resources and then the Government blames them for the regulations not being upheld. This Bill finally gives them the ability to issue on-the-spot signs, the ability to seize non-compliant fuels and clearer authority to tackle illegal trade. They are positive and will protect honest law-abiding fuel merchants who register properly, meet the standards and sell clean, compliant products. They should not be undercut by those who ignore the rules and sell cheaper, dirtier fuels.

Local authorities which are already stretched very thin also need personnel. If the Government is serious about enforcement, it needs to fund and staff local authorities as otherwise we will be setting the councils up to fail, just like announcing all the new SNA posts and then not filling them.

I am glad the Bill does not interfere with turbary rights. We also need an all-island strategy. The Border of this island is once again exposed as unnecessary and harmful. We need to think beyond county lines, beyond the Border and take a united-Ireland approach. Air pollution does not stop at Newry or Aughnacloy, as we have long said. We need co-ordinated regulations, co-ordinated enforcement, co-ordinated public awareness and an all-island strategy. My colleagues in the North are already advancing policy in this area. Linking up with them is not just sensible; it is obvious and essential.

We support the intent of the Bill and we support cleaner air. I would like to make one point and we may come back to this on Committee Stage. The original 1987 Act states that owners of non-domestic houses shall use the best practicable means to limit or if possible, prevent air pollution. Given that the consequences of allowing pollutants from non-domestic operators are so serious, perhaps we could look to tighten that up. If a prosecution is taking place, does it not give a polluter, who is allowing microparticles to go into the air, too much leeway by just referring to "the best practicable means"? Should we look at moving to more of a strict liability situation in improving the Bill?

We support stronger enforcement but it must be fair and must be affordable. Local authorities need to be properly resourced. Rural communities must be protected. The strategy must be all-island in nature. Cleaner air cannot come at the expense of those who can least afford it. We must have a just transition. This Bill is a step forward to it. We look forward to working with the Minister and the Department in advancing it as quickly as possible.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I support the intentions and objectives of the Bill. Clean air was one of the first issues I brought up under Questions on Policy or Legislation so it is extremely important. As my colleague An Teachta Daly said, air does not know any borders. I am sure the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, as a strong united-Irelander, knows that too. It is

absolutely pivotal to our health and our well-being. It is something that many of us might not think about on a day-to-day basis but it is absolutely essential to our way of life.

Air pollution has a serious impact on public health and the environment. Indeed, it is the biggest environmental risk to our health. The European Environment Agency estimates that over 1,600 premature deaths occur annually in Ireland due to air pollution from causes, including respiratory illness, stroke and cardiovascular disease. That is ten times the number of people who died on our roads last year. It really is a huge figure. It is a public health emergency and I really welcome this Bill because those numbers are staggering. These deaths are also impacting on our healthcare services which cannot afford any more strain. These conditions require treatment that costs healthcare providers around €56 million. Polluting our air makes no sense for our health or our pockets.

The pollutants of most concern to us are to be found in the burning of solid fuels for home heating, such as coal, turf and wet wood. Even though bans have been in place in Ireland for these smoky fuels for many years and the 1987 Act restricts the distribution and sale of smoky fuels, there has been little or no enforcement. The local authorities are responsible for enforcement and have been hindered in their ability to enforce the law due to some deficiencies in the 1987 Act. Under-resourcing and the erosion of power within local authorities under consecutive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael governments means that local authorities find it increasingly difficult to do their job in all these sectors. It is all very well to amend older Acts to empower local authorities but if they are not resourced properly, how can we expect them to properly carry out their job? This is something that comes up time and again at the climate committee. We really have to look at proper funding for local authorities. We need resourcing of the local authorities as they are currently underequipped to enforce environmental regulations.

I also welcome that this Bill will not interfere with turbary rights or impose new restrictions on households. It will protect those who register and sell their fuels properly, who meet standards, and who sell clean and compliant products, which is very welcome. Those who act properly within the confines of the laws should not be undercut by those who ignore the rules and sell cheaper, dirty fuel. Having said that, it is important to recognise that there are communities where families depend on solid fuel for their heating. Not every household can afford to buy more expensive, higher standard fuel. In 2022, some 54% of households were using solid fuels to heat their home with 16% using them as their primary source of heating. People have had to turn to these sources of fuel because of the rise in the price of home heating oil which is only set to get worse as we have discussed at length in this Chamber.

Sinn Féin has repeatedly called for investment in renewables. However, what is the point in investing in renewable energy if it will only be used to facilitate the insatiable energy demands of data centres? I know this is about local authorities but we cannot turn a blind eye to this. Now is the time to invest in renewable energy to ensure lower electricity prices for households and to shield them from a volatile market.

We must be sure that this energy is not directly funnelled into expanding data centre capacity. Sinn Féin has been consistent about this. I have been consistent about it at the climate committee as well. We cannot keep up with the demand for data centres. We cannot keep building more data centres and giving them half the price of electricity that everyone else gets and that ordinary households pay.

We are not just running to stand still; we are running and we are still going backwards. We have to move on that. We have always stated our opposition to the likes of the carbon tax, for example, until proper alternatives are available for people. That is also something I have always spoken about. Carbon taxes can work only where there is an alternative. If people can afford clean energy, I have no problem with their being taxed for using dirty energy but the alternative simply is not there. I have said before that when the CFCs were in our aerosols, the Government and the EU did not put a tax on aerosols or on the CFCs that were in the aerosols; they banned them. We have to make sure we have clean energy because the carbon tax, while there is no alternative, simply will not work. We are only punishing those who are worse off when they have no alternatives at their disposal. That same logic that we applied when we were protecting the ozone layer must be applied here.

We need support measures and affordability schemes alongside this legislation to help those people make that transition and not penalise them for circumstances beyond their control. Tens of thousands of homes across rural Ireland are not connected to the gas network. Even in my constituency, right next to Dublin, Maynooth and Leixlip have gas but Prosperous and Clane do not. They do not have affordable alternatives. They cannot simply switch energy at the stroke of a pen. We already have 320,000 households and counting in energy arrears across the State, a number which will only increase with Trump's illegal war and Israel's illegal war on Iran. Therefore, while it is important we keep reducing our air pollution for our own health and well-being as well as the State's coffers, it is important we do not punish those who are already to the pin of their collar for simply trying to keep warm.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: We in the Labour Party welcome this Bill. It can be a small step towards an important aim, which is tackling air pollution and improving the quality of the air we all breathe in every city, village or rural area across our country. We all have a right to clean air. I pay tribute to groups like Irish Doctors for the Environment, which play an important role in fighting for this right across our country and educating us all on both the physical and the mental health effects of air pollution, and we can reduce them. The effects of air pollution are well documented. The EPA in its Air Quality in Ireland 2024 report found that around 1,700 premature deaths occur in Ireland each year because of poor air quality. The ESRI estimated in 2023 that between 2016 and 2019, a four-year period, acute healthcare costs for treating five conditions associated with air pollution, including asthma, cardiovascular conditions and things like that, amounted to €56 million. The costs of air pollution, therefore, in terms of both money and lives, are known.

What is also well documented are the drivers of air pollution, in particular the role that the burning of solid fuels plays in driving down air quality in our towns and rural areas. The EPA has identified nitrogen dioxide and fine particulate matter as the two pollutants most responsible for poor air quality in Ireland. The burning of solid fuels in homes is the primary source of one of these, PM2.5. That means there can be no excuse for burying our head in the sand and denying the clear link between solid fuels and air pollution and, in turn, no excuse for failing to recognise the link between air pollution and its effect on the health of our citizens.

What is more, this is an area that international actors have moved on in recent times. In October 2024 the EU introduced its new ambient air quality directive, with much stricter pollution limits due to come into force in 2030. In doing so, Europe was aiming to gradually align its regulations with the WHO's more stringent air quality guidelines, which were

published in 2021. The limit for fine particulate matter, PM2.5, would be cut by more than half between 2026 and 2030. The aim is to reduce premature deaths linked to pollution in Europe by 55% by 2030.

We know how important it is to meet our EU and international obligations, whether it is in this area of air pollution or on broader questions of climate and emissions. The consequences of failing to meet them are something we have discussed in this House many times. Just as we need to reduce our carbon emissions to meet those binding EU targets, it is vital that we tackle air pollution to meet our newly agreed EU targets by 2030. That will be a challenge. Our air quality in Ireland is generally good, and we meet all the current EU requirements, but we fall well short of the WHO guidelines. The EPA itself has raised its concern that we will really struggle to meet the new 2030 EU limits.

If there is cause for hope, however, it is that we know that this is an area where good regulation by central government can make a real difference. I can remember back to the Dublin smog of the 1980s, when I was a kid, and how that seemingly intractable problem was fixed by Government action. After campaigning by communities across the city, smoky coal was banned in the capital and we saw an immediate, dramatic improvement in air quality. That resulted in roughly 350 fewer needless deaths every year. I did not grow up in a PD household - far from it - but Mary Harney was always respected in our house because of the stand she took on smoky coal in Dublin back in 1990. Thousands of lives have been saved. It was our Labour Minister, Alan Kelly, who extended the ban on smoky coal nationwide in 2015, a ban which came into effect in 2018. The health benefits of these things are overwhelming.

That progress has, thankfully, continued. The national air pollution control programme report in 2024 shows fine particulate matter, PM2.5, dropping 33% from the 2005 baseline to 2021. Regulation has worked in this area but, again, we can and we must go further. The clean air strategy committed to reaching the WHO's various targets. The Irish Heart Foundation estimates that there would be almost a thousand fewer premature deaths annually from air pollution if we could reach the WHO targets. That is definitely something worth pushing for.

It is, therefore, welcome to see a Government taking this issue on and giving it the attention it deserves. This Bill is, of course, far from a silver bullet but ahead of the new EU regulations in 2030, local authorities and the EPA have identified gaps in the existing legislation, and the Government has moved to plug them, and that is certainly to be welcomed. By strengthening enforcement with reintroduced on-the-spot fines and the introduction of compliance notice, seizure and forfeiture powers, and clarifying regulatory processes through the registers being introduced, we will give meaningful powers, we hope, to local authorities.

These powers will be used to tackle what is a real driver of air pollution in this country, which is the sale and supply of non-compliant solid fuels. The EPA has warned us of the catastrophic environmental damage that large-scale illegal peat extraction is doing across this country. Some 300,000 tonnes of peat is being illegally extracted on a commercial basis annually, nearly all of which is being exported, and it is worth about €40 million per year. This is - the Minister referred to this earlier - completely separate from anyone's personal turbary rights, which, of course, we support, but the illegal extraction and commercial sale of thousands of tonnes of turf is decimating vital ecosystems and biodiversity. It is destroying the country's natural carbon sinks, precious boglands that absorb greenhouse gases and are important in the fight against climate change. While I note that this Bill does not apply to illegal extraction, I

hope the new enforcement powers under this Bill relating to the sale and supply of non-conforming solid fuels will have a material effect on the enforcement against this illegal trade in peat.

We should note the Bill is backed by the industry's representative body, Solid Fuel Merchants Ireland. It recognises how unfair it is if some sellers try to get around the laws that are there for everyone's good and undercut their law-abiding competitors by importing substandard fuels from Northern Ireland or elsewhere. In its words:

Honest, tax-compliant fuel merchants across the country have made major investments in cleaner fuels But they continue to be undercut by smuggled, high-sulphur products that evade carbon tax and harm our health. This legislation, if backed by real enforcement, can change that.

This Bill will not revolutionise our air quality on its own but it is a welcome step in the right direction. It needs to be accompanied with resourcing for local authorities and the EPA to carry out these new enforcement and regulatory powers. Unfortunately, this is an area that has been neglected before, and if we are to have any hope that the measures we are discussing today will have a tangible impact, local authorities need to be backed to succeed on them.

This is certainly something we learned from our discussion at the climate committee on this matter a number of months ago.

A 2023 report by the EPA on the enforcement performance of local authorities stated that air and noise enforcement had the lowest level of dedicated resources, with only 10% of staff assigned to this area in 2022. In the context of the five national enforcement priorities for air and noise, only 61% of local authorities achieved the required standard for enforcement of the solid fuel regulations in 2022. These powers need to go along with the resourcing needed to make them effective.

I would question the time it has taken to get this Bill here in view of the fact the general scheme was published in August 2024 and the Bill was published in July of 2025. It is disappointing that it only reached the Seanad in November and is only coming to this House now, almost two years after the general scheme was published. I understand that pre-legislative scrutiny was waived and that there was no open public consultation prior to the Bill being published. It seems that there was plenty of time to do those kind of things and to look closely at the Bill. It does not seem to have needed to be rushed in order to get to this point.

The legislation is important. It is important that we get it right and have full and informed debate on all of these things. As with any debate on enforcement legislation, it is important that we pause and make clear that enforcement can only be part of the picture. Eliminating smuggled, non-compliant fuels from our supply chains is an important step. If we want to have any hope of reaching our targets on air pollution, however, we need to have carrots to go along with the sticks. That means taking the energy revolution seriously and turbocharging retrofitting and the roll-out of renewable heating systems. It also means protecting people from fuel poverty by targeting households on the lowest incomes for retrofitting grants and programmes and, as others have said, providing a just transition. It further means - in this week of all weeks - finally recognising that we need to invest as a matter of urgency in making this country the renewable energy superpower it can be.

Ireland has a target of installing 400,000 heat pumps by 2030. The previous target was to install 45,000 by the end of 2025. The numbers being installed are nowhere near that. We need to reform the SEAI's grant scheme and aim for a rural energy revolution. The carbon tax plays an important part in financing just transition. That is why I was disappointed at the backsliding in respect of it this week. There are plenty of other measures this Government could have brought in to protect hauliers, farmers and everyone else who has to use oil and gas to get around the place. It could have used direct subsidies, direct payments and excise duty cuts. The Labour Party has supported all of those. Backsliding on the carbon tax sets a dangerous precedent, and the Government has made a rod for its own back when it comes to the budget in October. We all know that the carbon tax increase was set for May because that is when people are least likely to be filling up their home heating tanks and things like that.

Investing properly in clean energy infrastructure both on the macro level and through individual household supports will not just help us reach our climate targets, it will help to tackle fuel poverty, safeguard our energy security and, pertinently for this debate, improve our air quality and save lives in doing so. We also need to recognise the other activities that can affect our air quality. Maybe it is the long shadow of the smog of the 1970s and 1980s, but we tend to think of air pollution in terms of billowing clouds of smoke from small houses or businesses. Of course, any additional activity that puts pressure on our energy grid consumption inevitably contributes to air pollution. As capacity is put under pressure on the grid, clean energy sources are displaced by fossil fuel sources. As An Taisce has pointed out, the rapid expansion in the number of data centres in Ireland is having direct and indirect effects, increasing both the cost of electricity supply and total resultant air pollution. The latter would not have happened in an alternative scenario in which no new data centres would have been allowed. If we are serious about air quality and clean energy in general, we need a moratorium on the building new data centres until we can be sure they will not strain the grid, inflate household bills or derail climate targets. The Labour Party has long called for this.

The new private wires legislation going through pre-legislative scrutiny at the moment is only going to serve to expand the number of data centres around the country, which are likely to be fuelled by gas because of the lack of renewable energy sources at present. The cost of all of this will appear on to the energy bills of ordinary households and PAYE workers who are ultimately the people who are going to be paying for all of this.

This Bill is a small step towards a goal that will be difficult to reach without more ambition. We welcome the measures in the Bill and we recognise the importance of tackling air pollution. It will have real effects on the health of many of our citizens. However, if we are serious - as we should be - about reaching the goals set out by the EU, we need to see more ambition than just what is in this Bill, but as I said, the Labour Party welcomes it.

Deputy Barry Ward: I will start by welcoming the Bill. Given that it amends the Air Pollution Act 1987, it is somewhat overdue in terms of updating a lot of the terminology. I have looked through it.

While I welcome the Bill, its contents and the idea behind it, I want to start with a criticism. This is a criticism that I frequently make of legislation, particularly updating or amending legislation of this sort. When we look at the table of contents of this Bill, it amends the 1987 Act. Every section refers to things like, "Amendment of section 15 of the principal Act". I

understand how that works, but when this becomes law, a layperson will not be able to read it because it makes no sense in isolation. A person would have to find the 1987 Act, look to see what section 15 says, see which particular part it amends and then apply the amendment themselves. We do this all the time, and what we are doing is creating greater distance between citizens and their ability to understand what the law says. There is no need to do it either. When we have amending or consolidating legislation, what we should be doing is taking section 15 of the 1987 Act, repealing it and completely restating it in its totality in the amending Act. That way it is all there for everybody to see and everybody can be clear on what is involved.

With air pollution, there is not a huge amount of change in the legislation in that over the number of years, but if we look at things like taxation Acts finance Acts, social welfare Acts, road traffic Acts, there have been multiple amending pieces of legislation. This means that if a person wants to look up what the law says in a particular area, it is absolutely illegible. I am a lawyer. I read legislation, and I have been doing this for a while. This is difficult for me to penetrate. If it is difficult for me, it will be even more difficult for people who are not doing this all the time. It is incumbent on the House to say that we want to pass legislation that people can access. When they cannot, it is a waste of everybody's time. Worse than that, it is isolating ordinary citizens from an ability to see what we are doing.

That said, I have gone through the Bill and I welcome the provisions it contains. Air pollution is hugely important. It is the biggest environmental risk to human health, certainly in Europe. The number of unnecessary deaths that result from environmental and air pollution is enormous. This is hidden because people's actual cause of death is often not ascribed to air pollution. However, we know there is a growth in rates of asthma, particularly in kids. We know that there has been a growth in numbers of respiratory conditions. We know from statistics that there is a growth in deaths as a result of poor air quality and air pollution. It is appropriate that we should be doing whatever we can to address that. That is why I welcome, for example, the reform of section 4 from the 1987 Act to expand the definition, for example, of "air pollution" to make it clear that it covers myriad things that were not necessarily even envisaged when the legislation was passed in 1987. Such is the vintage of that particular legislation, it predates many of the things that are causing air pollution now.

Deputy Ahern mentioned data centres. I do not know if this problem is necessarily a justification for a moratorium on data centres. I understand where he is coming from in terms of a policy perspective, but I think there are much more proximate issues that are addressed in this that are very important. In particular, the enforcement measures in this Bill are very helpful from the point of view of empowering the State to take action where needed. That is the most important thing in this Bill. The fact is that there are scenarios we are allowing to slip through the cracks now. We need to plug those cracks in order to ensure that air quality issues are not going undressed because of a lack of legislative footing to do so. The revision of the 1987 Act is most important in that regard. Putting in place the things that we need to do to stop all of those threats to all of us in terms of air pollution is hugely important, and in line with the 2023 clean air strategy for Ireland. Providing those updates is really important. However, I also agree with what has been said by other speakers in this debate about providing resources to implement clean air and not just providing the systems and structures to allow us to prosecute those who are causing problems in the context of air pollution.

That is important, but if we really want to tackle this issue, there is a general environmental aspect that goes beyond air pollution. Water pollution is another issue, although I know it is not part of this Bill. If we are serious about addressing those issues, we must also be serious about resourcing the agencies that carry out enforcement at the local level. We must ensure that they can carry out their duties and that they have the resources to carry out investigations and to put in place the remedies that need to be put in place.

We should also be looking at putting in place schemes or systems to allow those industries or systems that are likely to fall foul of the air pollution legislation to do the best they can or to do more to ensure that citizens are kept safe from bad air quality. That goes beyond what is in this amendment Bill but a Government policy decision needs to be made so that those industries that create air pollutants are incentivised to do what they need to do and to act responsibly even before they meet the thresholds that result in criminal or administrative liability. Those companies should be incentivised to do something more to ensure they are reducing air pollution from their industries. They should also be aided in putting in place systems that might reduce their absolute contribution to diminishing air quality. I think this was referred to as a carrot and a stick earlier in the debate. I absolutely support that idea. This Bill is more about the stick. That is fair enough because the stick has to be strong enough to bring prosecutions to bear, where appropriate. That is hugely important.

I said that there are wider issues here and that air pollution is the biggest environmental threat to human health in Europe. However, there are greater environmental threats. Water quality is one. While it may not be specifically addressed by this Bill, the reality is that we benefit from a nitrates derogation in this country, which puts a greater obligation on us to ensure improved water quality. If we continue the way we are going, we are not going to do that. I recognise the need for that derogation but I also recognise the fact that there is much more we can do to improve water quality, whether in our inland waterways, in what is discharged into the sea or in the water around our coasts. That is also true of air pollution. There is always more we can do to ensure that we are reducing the number of toxins we are putting into the atmosphere and, perhaps more importantly, the number of toxins we are allowing industry to put into the air, whether as a byproduct of generating electricity or of generating other products.

There are a range of issues that are already affecting human health. This Bill will go some way towards addressing those and ensuring that the 2023 clean air strategy can be implemented in a way that benefits the population. The modernisation of the recognition of the legal framework for enforcing air pollution standards is really important. That is what the Bill does.

I know the reality is that most citizens will never read this legislation and that it will be dealt with by enforcement officers within State agencies and by people working in compliance within industries generating electricity or producing products. I know that but I still think this is an example of how we repeatedly pass legislation in this House that is not accessible to ordinary citizens. It should be possible for a citizen to read this legislation. In fairness, that is possible with the 1987 Act. For example, section 6 of that Act refers to "Industrial plant and existing industrial plant". You know what that means. Section 7 of this Act is about amending section 12A of the principal Act. I just do not think that means anything to people outside of the industry and those dealing with compliance and enforcement of the Act. In the scheme of things, would we not be much better off letting citizens know what the Bill and the Act actually do to make their air cleaner and safer to breathe? Would we not be better off bringing them

into the conversation about what is happening rather than creating legislative and legal jargon that isolates them from the process? I support the Bill and what it does. It is very important to modernise the framework for air pollution regulation but there are better ways to draft it. However, I support the substance of the Bill and welcome the Bill as it continues its passage through the Houses.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I welcome this Bill and the opportunity to discuss it and the subject of air pollution with the Minister of State this afternoon. I am glad to see that the Government is strengthening the enforcement of air pollution law and that authorised officers will now have enhanced powers of inspection, sampling and intervention. The introduction of fixed payment notices and compliance notices for more efficient enforcement is a positive change. I am very pleased to see the establishment of fuel registration systems and, I hope, tighter oversight of the fuel supply chain. I also welcome the move to update our definition of air pollution to align it with EU law. These changes are essential and very welcome. This Bill should lead to the fuel market being more tightly controlled and to illegal and high-pollution fuels becoming harder to sell. In turn, this should lead to air quality improvements if, and only if, enforcement is effective.

The issue of air pollution sits across many sectors and many Departments so it is important that our approach to it is cross-departmental and that it links climate action, transport, housing, energy and agriculture. This Bill is a positive step but, with its primary focus being on solid fuels and supply chain regulation, we risk ignoring the significant pollution that comes from transport emissions and agricultural activity. That is why a cross-departmental approach is so essential. I ask that further consideration be given to that point when the Government is looking at future legislation on air quality and pollution.

Earlier this year, I had the honour of hosting the Climate and Health Alliance in the audiovisual room, where it launched its policy paper, Clean Air - Healthier Ireland. What struck me most about that paper was not simply the quality of the research, which, as I am sure the Minister of State is aware, was exceptional, but also the clarity of the message. Air pollution is not an abstract environmental issue. It is a public health emergency and it is already having a real and measurable impact on people's lives, particularly the lives of those who are most vulnerable. The Climate and Health Alliance is a group of health professionals, researchers and advocates who see the consequences of poor air quality every day. They reminded us that air pollution contributes to respiratory disease, cardiovascular disease, cancer and adverse pregnancy outcomes. As a result, investment in cleaner air not only has a positive impact on the nation's health, but also reduces demand on already stretched health services and supports longer and healthier lives. The group also highlighted how air pollution worsens existing inequalities, with children, older people and low-income communities bearing a disproportionate burden. This is not only a health and environmental issue; it is also a social justice issue.

It is worth stating clearly that cleaner air is one of the fastest health wins available to us. Unlike some policy areas, where benefits take decades to materialise, improving air quality delivers immediate and tangible results including fewer hospital admissions, fewer asthma attacks, fewer missed school days and fewer families dealing with preventable illness. Despite all of this, air pollution is often overlooked and there is very little public awareness of the true health impacts of polluted air. Many people in Ireland assume that air pollution is not a problem

here because we do not have too much heavy industry. While we do meet EU limits in respect of air pollutants, Ireland did not meet the most recent World Health Organization air quality guidelines, which are considered to be much more in line with what is actually a safe level of exposure to air pollution. The WHO air quality guidelines represent the most robust evidence on the levels required to protect health. Ireland should really be looking forward and moving towards these standards. I ask the Minister to look at that.

In 2021, during the term of the previous Dáil, I introduced the Protection of Children's Health (Idling of Mechanically Propelled Vehicles in Vicinity of Schools) Bill or, put simply, the no idling Bill. The legislation was based on the very simple idea that children should not have to breathe in toxic exhaust fumes at the school gate. The Bill sought to ban the unnecessary idling of cars within 100 m of schools across the country. Emissions from cars, particularly when idling, increase the levels of nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter in places where children spend a significant portion of their lives. Particulate matter has been linked to suppressed lung growth in children and the development of asthma, heart disease and even type 2 diabetes later on in life. An idling engine can produce as much pollution as a car in motion and, in some cases, more. The Asthma Society of Ireland has repeatedly highlighted that children are more vulnerable to air pollution than adults not only because of their developing lungs, but also because of their height, which places them closer to exhaust pipes. One in five children in Ireland experiences asthma at some point and poor air quality is a significant contributing factor.

3 o'clock

The EPA has estimated that approximately 1,300 premature deaths in Ireland are caused or are attributable to air pollution. That is a shocking figure.

As we all know, enforcement is limited without public awareness and education. I do not think people idle their cars out of badness. They just do not think about it. As a parent, I did it as well. You are cold in the car. You are driving between different school car parks for pick-ups, and you are just sitting there. It is just more that people do not think about it. They do not think about the consequences and it not just for health. It is not practical to sit and idle your car because it costs a fortune, particularly nowadays. People do not realise that switching off their engine for even short periods can reduce emissions, save fuel and improve air quality for everybody around them. I ask that the Minister of State look at public awareness in relation to this.

I introduced this Bill in 2021. I hoped at the time that I would get support because Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil and, indeed, the Green Party had all stated that they supported a ban on idling outside schools, so I was quite confused as to why no one picked it up. It is a good piece of legislation. It is a practical piece of legislation. It is still in the system if the Minister of State wants to progress it.

There are a number of benefits with this particular Bill. It is simple. It is manageable. The people who asked me to do this were usually primary school children because they recognise its importance. They are the ones who are walking past car exhaust fumes and breathing this in. They know it is not healthy; they know instinctively it is not good for them. The parents who walk with them and the school community also know.

This Bill has serious merits and I would appreciate it if the Minister of State would consider looking at it and working with me on it. It would be important progress. It is the same with any of these Bills; it is not a panacea but it is an important step towards doing something not only for public health and the environment but also as a show of support to school children and a sign that we are listening to them.

While this overarching Bill we are discussing is a major step in the right direction, air quality will only improve if legislation and enforcement is backed up by proper resources to ensure that compliance is met. While enforcement powers are strengthened in this Bill, their effectiveness will depend heavily on the capacity and the resourcing of local authorities. Without sufficient funding, staffing and monitoring infrastructure, there is a risk that these new powers may not be fully utilised in practice.

Clean air should not be a privilege; it should be a given. While I really welcome this Bill and while it is a strong step forward on enhancement and regulatory clarity, there is a lot more work to be done in the area. I hope the Minister of State will work towards introducing further and broader measures to fully address the air quality challenges we face in Ireland.

Deputy Jen Cummins: When preparing for today, I read a document that is for secondary school teachers to use with students to educate them. Just as my colleague, Deputy Whitmore, said, it is about education. The students who will use this programme will learn all about how air pollution happens and what needs to be done to mitigate it. It was a fascinating read but I will come to that in a second.

I am a TD for Dublin South-Central. I am sure Members know that because I have probably mentioned it about 3,000 times since I have been in the Dáil. It is a city constituency, and cities have a particular challenge when it comes to air pollution because of the density of population living in them, cars, businesses and all of the different things that contribute to it. It is very difficult then to mitigate it when it is such a built-up urban area. However, there are things being done in the constituency by people trying to mitigate it, and I will come to them.

The area I represented on Dublin City Council when I was a councillor was the south-west inner city. That part of the constituency has the lowest amount of green space per square metre per person in the entire country. It is so urban, so built up and so concrete. There is not enough green space and the need for something to be done in that regard was one of the biggest things that came to my door as a councillor and, indeed, that still comes to it as a TD.

The document I mentioned earlier was fabulous, and I have it here. It talks about what air pollution actually does and the fact that it is a public health issue. When we see the detrimental effects of air pollution on the human body, it is quite frightening. The document states it causes headaches and forms of anxiety and it impacts on the central nervous system. It causes irritation to the eyes, nose and throat as well as breathing problems. Problems with asthma increase and it causes chronic bronchitis, lung cancer, reduced lung function, infections and cardiovascular disease. It impacts on the liver, spleen and blood. I do not know why I was surprised by this but it also impacts on the reproductive system. It is obviously part of the body but I was quite surprised to read that. If you are living in a very densely populated area that is polluted, it makes sense.

I have to agree with Deputy Whitmore. I was not a TD when she brought that legislation forward. I have a number of children and I spent quite a lot of time going to schools, doing collections and going sport and all of the different things they go to. I remember the idling of cars and being half-choked. When I had a lot of kids, I brought them all in the back of the car because we did not have those cool cargo bikes. They did not really exist then. My eldest is now 22 years of age and people did not really like cyclists going around with a trailer on the back, which we saw used in other parts of Europe. When they got older, we went around on bikes.

When you cycle with children in the city, you realise how polluted it is. You see how difficult it is through the eyes and lungs of your children, so I was very thankful to see Deputy Whitmore's Bill. I thought it was great. Being naive, because I was not involved in politics like I am now, I thought it would be in by that September but, of course, I heard today that she introduced the Bill in 2021 and it has still not been passed. I echo her plea to pass that because there are still mummies and daddies going around on bikes. Deputy Ahern is here and I know that he is a cyclist and has small children. It is really important to cycle around and to bring your children to various places. It is also important for the schools in a city constituency, which are built on a kind of postage stamp space and do not have a lot of green spaces.

I am talking about my constituency but I know it happens in other parts of the country too. There are organisations that are really trying their best to offset the detrimental impacts air pollution has on their environment. I want to namecheck them because it is really important. These are people who spend their Saturday afternoons, their evenings and their Sundays doing things for the rest of us in the city. They are trying to increase biodiversity. They are trying to increase the number of trees, for example. In Dublin 8, in particular, the number of trees is shockingly low. Anyone who drives through Dublin 8 on their way to Leinster House will know that it does not have a huge number of trees. I am not talking about Phoenix Park; I am talking about the city part of the constituency.

One of the groups is the Trees for Tents, which I am part of. We look at how we can increase the number of trees in the area, and not just any old trees but native trees. There is Blooming Crumlin in Dublin 12. It handed out trees recently to people in the area. It means that people now have a tree in their garden. They are the appropriate size for a city garden. We do not all have acres to plant big trees. This is really helping the air quality in the city.

There are also clean-up groups. I know we are talking about air pollution but part of the difficulty with air pollution is the amount of rubbish that is often left about the city and it is having a detrimental effect on people. There are environmental groups like Inchicore Environmental Group and the Liberties Litter Pickers. I could probably spend the rest of my time talking about all the different groups but these groups spend their time trying to offset the lack of green space and the air pollution that is in our area in Dublin 8, Dublin 10, Dublin 12 and parts of Dublin 20.

This Bill is very welcome and while it is great to have legislative measures, if they are not enforced, they are not really any use. When this Bill is passed, whenever that will be, I ask that the measures in it are enforced. I also plead that Deputy Whitmore's Bill is progressed to the next stage.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Air Pollution (Amendment) Bill 2025. This is legislation we have been promised for a fair couple of years and attempts to respond to a very real public health challenge that often does not get as much attention as it should. It also updates a framework that we have not kept pace with in terms of the scale of the problem across the country. The EPA air quality in Ireland 2023 report reminds us that air pollution, according to those figures, causes an estimated 1,700 premature deaths every year, needless and preventable deaths as others in the Chamber have outlined.

Our legislation is a little bit archaic at this stage. The Bill strengthens the Air Pollution Act 1987 and modernises, on paper, enforcement in line with the commitments set out in the 2023 national clean air strategy. It gives local authorities new powers for fixed payment and compliance notices, enhanced authority to regulate the sale and distribution of solid fuels and the ability to seize non-compliant products. All of that is positive on paper. As an Opposition TD who wants to be constructive rather than overtly critical, though, I also want to point out that the road to hell is paved with good intentions in so many pieces of legislation. We can have all of the strong wording we like, but if we want the Bill to deliver cleaner air and healthier communities and society, we must ensure the enforcement system is fit for purpose.

The evidence shows that, right now, the capacity is uneven, in some cases less than optimal, and under real strain. The best example is in my constituency, where the EPA's 2022 local authority environmental enforcement performance report, published in 2023, reported on various local authorities. Regarding my home area of South Dublin County Council, the EPA found that while the council ticked a lot of the boxes and met the required standards in many areas, it also identified specific weaknesses that were directly related to the Bill, including a reliance on an archaic and ageing compliant management system, backlogs of open environmental cases and the need for improvements in the enforcement of solid fuel regulations.

The regulations bit I get. The staffing and training levels are different issues. They will show whether the Bill will work in practice. I understand there are five litter wardens in south Dublin trying to police the area. Such work is pointless without staff. The Bill is not related to litter wardens, but it is related to enforcement. South Dublin is not alone, in fairness. The EPA has showed a pattern of staffing capacity constraints across multiple local authorities. That is why the Bill needs to be strengthened. I mentioned staffing and training. IT systems and inspection capacity are also necessary.

Without all of these things, the Bill will be a paper tiger. In that context, I want to emphasise the need to revisit the level of fines and what constitutes an effective deterrent. The Bill is good on emphasising proportionate penalties and one can understand that at one level. However, our State has a history of non-compliance on a range of issues. We have to ensure that the fines are meaningful enough to deter illegal fuel sales. If penalties are lower than the profit margins associated with selling non-compliant fuels, it is pointless legislation. Enforcement data from the EPA shows that repeat non-compliance is an ongoing challenge, so agencies have to get real teeth.

Enforcement is only one side of the equation. As my colleagues referenced, the other angle is affordability and practical support for our hard-pressed systems. The SEAI national heat study in 2022 pointed out that many households, in particular lower income households, relied on solid fuels because they had a lack of affordable alternatives. This is why retrofitting for

public housing is so important. If we strengthen enforcement without strengthening the supports, all we are doing is placing a further burden on those least able to absorb it.

The Bill should be accompanied by a comprehensive package of measures that, in fairness, are already directly relevant to the latest fuel crisis. We are dealing with an emergency situation right now. We had a debate on the motion of confidence where the Government was, rightly, accused of not responding quickly enough and not doing enough. In the medium term, we need proper strategies in place to help people reduce their fuel bills and move on to alternatives. We need expanded retrofitting and heating system supports, targeted in particular at those at risk of fuel poverty. The warmer homes scheme national retrofit programme is important. The SEAI progress report shows, unfortunately, that demand exceeds capacity and waiting times are way too long. If we want households to move away from smokey fuels, we must make cleaner alternatives accessible.

We also need supports for businesses impacted by the Bill. We need public information campaigns that talk about the damage caused by air pollution. On weather apps, I have often seen that the air quality in some rural areas is worse than in Dublin because of the burning of certain types of smokey fuel. We need to show how that has a direct impact on people's health. The EPA's annual air quality reports highlight the need for greater public awareness, especially in areas where pollution spikes in the winter.

We should also consider establishing an enforcement support unit. Other countries have a hybrid model whereby local authorities carry out the day-to-day enforcement and a national inspectorate supports investigations and ensures consistency in enforcement and compliance. This might be valuable for councils like south Dublin where the EPA audits have identified the capacity challenges I mentioned. We should have better annual public reporting by local authorities of inspection fines, compliance rates and enforcement outcomes to compare by local authority on an annualised basis.

While the Bill is a welcome and necessary step in tackling pollution from mainly solid fuels, we cannot ignore the fact that air quality in Ireland is not just damaged by home heating alone. The air quality in Ireland 2023 report points out that alongside solid fuel burning, transport emissions and industrial activity are major contributors of harmful pollutants like nitrogen dioxide and fine particulates. Vehicle emissions, in particular from diesel cars, vans and heavy duty vehicles, are well known as a source of urban air pollution.

Localised hotspots in urban areas need to be diminished near busy roads. I am thinking of the M50, N4, and N7, which fall outside the scope of the Bill. If we are serious about clean air, we need complementary legislation that addresses the issues. Low-emission zones, stronger standards overall and better investment in electric vehicles and public transport alternatives are broad issues. While not related to the Bill, smaller industrial and commercial sites are another area. The big-ticket companies are addressed, but some smaller sites fall through the cracks. We need to strengthen oversight and improve monitoring technology.

While the Bill strengthens enforcement on solid fuels, we have to have parallel action on transport and industry. I do not have time to go into the massive investment required in electric vehicles and giving people the ability to charge electric vehicles outside of their homes or adjacent to them using a domestic tariff. The more electric vehicles are on the road, the less pollution we would have. It is an absolute no-brainer. It is also a no-brainer in terms of rising

fuel costs if we can get homegrown renewable energy stored properly and converted to green hydrogen in some cases.

I welcome the Bill. It is just one Bill but important legislation. Complementary legislation is essential to protect public health and meet our obligations. In summary, if we want to succeed, we have to match enforcement powers with enforcement capacity. We have to match the regulations with support for households and businesses. The legislation has to be strong enough to do that. We need complementary supports. In general terms, I welcome the Bill.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is interesting that this Bill is being discussed in the Dáil in the middle of a fuel crisis for so many people. The Bill will focus on air pollution while many family businesses and small business will struggle simply to keep their houses warm in this fuel crisis. I received an email from a constituent during the week. She is a carer. She called in to see one of her clients, an elderly gentleman. He was sitting in front of his electric oven to keep warm because he had run out of oil and sticks to be able to heat the house. That is an incredible image. Pensioners who worked all their lives in this country are now forced, due to the lack of affordable fuel, to sit in front of an electric oven to keep warm. In many ways, it puts this discussion into perspective.

There is a slow-motion leadership challenge happening within Fianna Fáil.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Cop on.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: While Fianna Fáil wallows in never-ending dysfunction, older people in this country struggle to keep warm. The country cannot wait for Fianna Fáil to get its act together. I agree with many of the Fianna Fáil backbenchers, in that Micheál Martin has to go. All of these decisions the Government is involved in have significant consequences. Some of those consequences are unexpected.

I agree that we must become a country with far cleaner air. No one wants to see individuals lose their lives prematurely due to poor air quality or people developing diseases of the lung, etc., as a result of poor air quality. This legislation does not exist in a vacuum, however. It must exist in the real world in which people live and are struggling. The baseline is that we have 320,000 Irish households currently in fuel poverty. The issue we are hearing on the doorsteps and in our constituency offices is that people are struggling to keep the lights on, their houses warm and their businesses going. The unaffordability of fuels is the biggest issue people are experiencing.

In reality, fuel poverty and the lack of fuel also cause deaths in our country. It is estimated that approximately 2,800 people die in our country per year as a result of a lack of fuel. That is a very serious issue. In a scenario where fuel is getting harder to secure, reducing access to other fuels leads to poverty, people being unable to heat their homes, and deaths. That is not being understood enough by the Government.

There are people around the country, especially in regional and rural Ireland and older families who do not have the technology to use sustainable energy, who are dependent on turf. They cannot come about turf, however, because the local fella up the road who used to cut half an acre of bog cannot sell it to them any more as a result of Government law. One of the big

problems is that the Government's attitude to energy is Dublin centric. The fact the Government was not willing to give a real relief on kerosene - home heating oil - which is the basis of home heating in most of regional and rural Ireland, shows the disconnect of Ministers in this Government. They do not see beyond the M50 when developing policies.

This is quite a hardcore Bill, with €500,000 in fines and search and seizure powers to be provided in certain situations. At the other end of the scale, we have individuals who, for want of turf, sticks and coal, cannot heat their homes.

My difficulty with this Government is its reliance on the stick rather than the carrot to change people's behaviours. The shocking level of taxation put on fuel, for example, is a stick to move people out of fossil fuels but many people simply do not have an alternative. Behaviours are not changed when there are no alternatives. This simply enforces a punitive tax on people that they cannot afford to pay. There is a massive cost barrier in switching from coal, turf or sticks. These people do not desire to pollute or create unhealthy breathing air for individuals, but they have no option because they have no other fuel source.

The Government must use the carrot. This approach is harder. Competency is needed for the Government to be able to deliver it, and competency is in short measure in this Government for sure. Alternatives need to be offered to people. We heard about cars idling, for example. I will attend a public meeting tonight in Castleknock Lawn Tennis Club at 7.30 p.m. If the Minister is around, he might like to attend. It is not too far from him.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: What is it about?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is about fuel prices, the M50, traffic congestion and public transport, which are all reasonable and important issues.

I am told a freedom of information, FOI, request was submitted to the Department of Transport. This was reported in *The Sunday Times* this year. The FOI asked whether more public transport capacity would be provided in the Department's budget this year. That report said that there would be no extra capacity in public transport this year despite the level of funding going into it.

A lot of people are travelling from the likes of Meath. Some 60,000 people are forced to use their cars because there is no rail line. It has been promised since 1994. It is going to happen in, maybe, 2036 if no judicial review or anything else happens. These people would give their right arms to be able to get out of the car and sit in a train rather than the four-hour, desperate commute they have. The carrot I mentioned is the provision of public transport, including extra bus capacity as well as train capacity, to get cars off the road in order to clean the air so that people can live healthier and longer lives. That is the frustration that exists among people.

Deep retrofitting of homes is still inordinately expensive. It is incredibly expensive for those who live in a semi-detached or detached home, even with the grants provided. It is not available to most income classes at the moment. The provision of solar panels is still incredibly expensive. It costs between €7,000 and €12,000, depending on the level of rooftop solar panels and the type of battery you choose.

We have never been as rich but we also have never had as much of a squeezed middle as we do now. Middle income families often fall off a social welfare cliff. They are given no supports. They are too rich for energy social welfare supports but too poor to be able to provide the alternative sources needed to get out of carbon fuels.

I will mention something of interest to the Minister. This Government has competing objectives. One of them is the building of extra homes. Highly rated homes are obviously an objective in terms of reducing our energy policy, but they have a negative effect on the supply of homes. It costs an extra 12% to build an A-rated home compared with a normal home. We know there is a viability problem. Every time the price of a home increases, it becomes less viable to build, causing fewer builders to build and a reduction in supply. We know every time the price of a home increases, it also costs more to rent and makes it less accessible to people. While we might achieve the objective of fuel efficiency with A-rated homes, it costs us in the provision of homes on the other side. I still believe that the provision of homes is the most important issue facing the country.

The Minister must have seen this report recently that outlined that people who were spending more in A-rating their homes were not necessarily reducing their energy consumption by the same amount. That is a significant problem. If we are spending big chunks of money on the deep retrofitting of homes but it is not leading to the practical, real-world reduction in the consumption of fuels, then that money is going to waste in reality. We are not meeting the objectives and we are paying the money on it. I would like to hear the Minister's views on how we can square that circle in achieving those objectives.

We want to see the reduction of pollution and particulates in the air as well as the amount of carbon emitted into the atmosphere, but we want the Government to realise that there are other objectives that need to be achieved as well. One of the main objectives is fuel and energy affordability and security for families. That has been ignored, which is why we had the big crisis that led to the omnishambles last week on the streets of our country. That is one of the objectives that have been ignored.

The other objective that we have to look at is the provision of proper public transport. Hundreds of thousands of people are living in commuter hell at the moment. They undertake two- or three-hour journeys in and out of Dublin on a daily basis just to be able to work. That objective is not being achieved either.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I welcome the chance to speak on the Bill. I also welcome Deputy Tóibín recognising that people need financial supports and that we need a stable government to bring them in in the next few months. It is great to see that.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Stable. Show me the stable government.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I would not be looking for a few seats to make the Irish people worse off at a time of geopolitical turmoil. What we need right now is people who are going to stand up and lead. I will give the Minister solutions. I welcome that he referred today to the progression of plug-in solar. Has the Department investigated the cost of a temporary free public transport scheme? What would the estimated cost be? A lot of people who are using

public transport are on subsidies at the moment. At the moment, we need people to be able to commute and reduce their energy costs.

This Bill is about air pollution but when we speak about plug-in solar and how it will help reduce the use of fossil fuels, I welcome that the Minister said that in 2022 someone had submitted that plug-in solar was unsafe. I am on the climate and energy committee. I have requested and will continue to request information on who deemed it unsafe. If I was betting man, I would say it was someone who installs solar systems on the top of roofs that said it was unsafe. I refer to giving people an easy option. People in apartment dwellings in my constituency want to reduce their bills. We need to make it possible for them to buy a system that is a lot cheaper than the installation of a permanent system on their roof and allow them to plug it into their house. The Germans did it. There are examples. There is no complex planning and no major installation. We could even get a demonstration and do it within an hour. The Germans have over 1 million of these systems installed. That is just through their official scheme. That is not mentioning how many people were using their own kits that they were buying from online suppliers. These new units cost as little as €500 for a basic set-up. It is ordinary people who I represent. It is renters. It will help with air pollution because we are giving them a renewable source. At this moment in time, it is a renewable source that will reduce their bills and benefit their pockets. Each system is small but, together, they are cutting down emissions and reducing pollution. It is estimated that they are preventing hundreds of thousands of tonnes of CO₂ emissions in Germany. The installation of these systems is very simple. It does not require major infrastructure and it will give people immediate savings. I raised this yesterday. A lovely constituent of mine called me and said they would love to be able to avail of this. They have three children and they are struggling with their bills. That extra few bob in their pocket would help them right now. It is exactly the kind of policy we should be working for - low cost, high impact and quick. Regarding everything else, we are talking about housing, healthcare and the cost of living, and rightfully so, but the quiet thing that we have not been discussing but will be going into now is air pollution. I always talk about Dublin Bay and water pollution, so I welcome the opportunity to speak on this issue.

When I was younger I had asthma. Thankfully, I grew out of it. From studies, I know air pollution is a huge cause of juvenile asthma. There is also a huge number of premature deaths. We are above EU levels, but there are areas that have bad air pollution. What other countries are doing is something that we should follow. We could look at the Japanese and the Germans. I would say the members of the energy committee are fed up with me citing Germany as a guide for how we should do it, but the reason I mention it is because the German Government follows practical and logical solutions, whether it be plug-in solar or the moss that is used on the outside of buildings and is brilliant for absorbing PM_{2.5} particles. The 3D printing that can be used for this moss can also be used for nature-based solutions for flood defence in Dublin Bay North. We can bring in these systems of artificial reefs that encourage marine life and biodiversity in the waters. We should be using these nature-based solutions. Their installation is low cost and they are low maintenance. We would be using nature's base that is already there and established. In Dún Laoghaire they are using oyster beds to combat water pollution, which is a brilliant idea. It is purifying the water. When we come the issue of air pollution, there are solutions we can use to retaliate against it.

For local pollution in Dublin, we could look into bringing in alternatives, such as planting more trees. That is a very simple one. When I was researching for this speech, I came across

a study in the UK on the use of trees in heavily polluted areas - areas with traffic lights. The study indicated trees can reduce air pollution in such areas by between 20% and 40%. There are high-density plants that are known for reducing the level of pollutants in the air.

Members of this House are often contacted by constituents regarding issues they would like us to raise. One of the solutions that was mentioned to me was put in place in the Netherlands and France. The Minister might be laughing at me now but it is a very simple fix. It is a type of paint that can be used on roads and, in direct sunlight, it absorbs pollutants. I had not been aware of this previously. The person who rang me is doing a PhD in air pollution. I was blown away by the idea and looked into it further. There are a few videos on it. It has been shown to succeed. It is low cost. It is called photocatalytic road paint. Surfaces are treated with titanium dioxide, which breaks down air pollutants using sunlight. I was blown away when she rang me. It reduces nitrogen oxides, which are the main pollutant coming from traffic. It is a passive system with no maintenance once installed, just like nature-based solutions. It has been successfully used in other European cities. I will always come to the Minister with solutions. This is one that I would love him to look at. We could even paint the road ourselves. It would be nice to see a north Dublin road that is reducing pollutants. What we are trying to do is to use small areas of nature-based or scientific innovation, such as that paint, to benefit people and reduce air pollution.

The data is clear. I will go back to the start - solid fuel burning. Deputy Gogarty mentioned it. For example, there is smokeless transport emissions. These are the main drivers. To reduce solid fuel burning, let us give them the option of plug-in solar. To reduce transport emissions, let us give them the option of reduced fare or free public transport during this economic crisis. Let us accelerate the transition into cleaner heating systems.

Yesterday, the SEAI appeared before the climate and energy committee. I welcome that some Deputies have criticised the SEAI. However, the reality is that the SEAI and the grants it has made available have been studied by other European cities and countries as a result of the success rate and the high level of uptake. I would love for the initial cost of some of the schemes to be examined because there is not such a high uptake among those on lower incomes due to the cost. There are some contractors that will give you the work in lieu of the grant. We need to look into that if we are going to encourage people to participate, particularly those who are under economic strain.

The findings of the research are clear. Real-time pollution alerts are being used in other European cities. We are very lucky that we do not have that level of pollution in Dublin city. Another constituent told me he recalls a time when it was not possible to see from one side of O'Connell Street to the other. That was not in my time.

I wish to acknowledge a few groups that have been working with me since I have been in this House. They include the EPA, Dublin City Council and community groups, such as Tidy Towns, which are bringing in biodiversity products and encouraging it. Driving in today, I saw that one of the bus stops in Fairview, which is in my constituency, has a planter on top of it. I would love to see that rolled out more, with a few flowers and a bit of this. It would also reduce pollutants. It is a biodiversity spot.

My message is clear. I would love the Minister to look into the 2022 analysis of plug-in solar and see who deemed it unsafe. It is definitely something that we need to look into. It is a quick fix. The people would benefit from it now.

Debate adjourned.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

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

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss Garda powers relating to criminal and antisocial behaviour by juveniles.

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

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss the ongoing crisis of capacity at University Hospital Limerick.

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

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

Deputies Dessie Ellis, Paul McAuliffe, Rory Hearne - To discuss the proposed new school on the grounds of St. Aidan's CBS, Whitehall, Dublin.

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

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore - To discuss animal welfare and the progress of the puppy farming Bill.

Deputy Emer Currie - To discuss the need for a competitive funds industry in Ireland.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the need for an increased number of gardaí in Dublin Fingal West.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman - To discuss the new national drug-related deaths index, NDRDI, published by the Health Research Board.

The matters raised by Deputies Louise O'Reilly; Barry Ward; Robert O'Donoghue; Malcolm Byrne; and Dessie Ellis, Paul McAuliffe and Rory Hearne have been selected for discussion.

Air Pollution (Amendment) Bill 2025 [Seanad]: Second Stage (Resumed)

Question again proposed: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I thank all Members who were here earlier and contributed to the debate. A number of good examples have been raised of improvements to air quality. I will give my own area and local authority of Fingal County Council a plug. A scheme was brought in in 2019 called school streets. It was brought in by Councillor Eoghan O'Brien, who was mayor at the time and who happens to be my brother, on a pilot basis in one school, St. Oliver Plunkett National School, Malahide, one of the largest national schools in the country. They closed the road between 8.30 a.m. and 9.15 a.m. and then, in the afternoon, between 1 p.m. and 2.45 p.m. Initially, people were not overly happy at the idea but it is still in place and the air quality around the school improved 20% year on year in the first period. There is a 43% reduction in school-related traffic. Again, that reduction is continuing to grow - if that is not an oxymoron and Deputies understand what I mean. There is a 50% increase in active travel to school. It works. We have rolled it out to Pope John Paul II National School in Malahide and other schools around Fingal. While some are calling for legislation and I am happy to look into that, the local authorities are actually doing that in consultation and it really works. It is particularly good for national schools. These are young kids so we do not want idling cars around schools. It changed behaviour and people got used to it. Once there is good consultation, there are those types of measures. We do not need to legislate the hell out of everything. Common sense can prevail many times.

A lot of good matters were raised today. The Bill is important. I thank my officials again. They are why we have moved forward with this legislation. I see there is broad support for it across the House, maybe with the exception of Deputy Tóibín, which does not surprise me. The Minister of State and I have taken note of all the contributions, as have my officials. This is about improving enforcement and bringing in a more comprehensive suite of enforcement capabilities, like fixed-payment notices, compliance notices, powers to seize and the establishment of solid fuel registers - which, by the way, those in the retail of solid fuel trade really welcome. It is to try to take rogue operators out of the system as best we can. In a nutshell, it is about giving local authorities the tools they have asked for to enforce the rules fairly, consistently and effectively.

I appreciate colleagues' remarks and input into the legislation today and look forward to working with them on Committee Stage. Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

Question put and agreed to.

Air Pollution (Amendment) Bill 2025 [Seanad]: Referral to Select Committee

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy pursuant to Standing Orders 103 and 188.

Question put and agreed to.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

An Garda Síochána

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Minister sincerely for being here. I have often stood in the Chamber and given out about the fact the senior Minister is not here so I should, as a matter of course, record my thanks to the Minister for taking this Topical Issue.

The issue relates to the need to increase Garda numbers in my constituency of Dublin Fingal West. The reason we need increased numbers is historically we were low on Garda numbers and our population has increased while the number of gardaí serving the region has not. A number of issues are now putting strain and stress on the communities I represent. The Minister can imagine how it made people in my constituency feel when they opened the newspaper on 1 December 2018 and heard the joyous news from then Senator James Reilly that a final sign-off had been given on the works required at Rush Garda station and it was understood that the contractor should be on site in quarter 1 of 2019. The Senator said he was delighted the work would commence to refurbish the Garda station with contractors on site very quickly. He said he would press the Department to have the station manned and operational with adequate Garda resources in 2019.

Here we are now and it is 2026. Rush Garda station is still, to all intents and purposes, closed and the population all around it has increased. We now have a petition. A young woman by the name of Ciara has started a community petition for the people of Lusk - Rush and Lusk are beside each other. She has said there are more than 1,000 signatures on that petition. She says she has lived in Lusk since 2004. Her children were born there and go to Lusk Community College. Lusk has quadrupled in size and the population is still increasing but there is no Garda station serving it so all the pressure is being put on Balbriggan Garda station.

The Garda station in Rush was closed. It is now functioning as - I do not know what. When you look through the windows, all you see are boxes and boxes of files. There are never cars in the car park and I can tell the Minister for a red-hot fact there are no gardaí in it serving the people in the surrounding area who really need it. Lusk is the very same; there is no Garda station there. We have a problem because there are rising rates of antisocial behaviour and crime. My office is contacted weekly - sometimes more than that- by people saying they are having trouble contacting the guards. The Minister knows and I know the best deterrent against antisocial behaviour or any form of crime is a visible Garda presence and we do not have that in north County Dublin.

More and more pressure is being put on Balbriggan Garda station and the numbers in the station are not sufficient for the 200 km radius it has to cover. The gardaí in the station do a fantastic job but are put to the pin of their collar trying to cover an ever-expanding area and ever-increasing population. The number of gardaí is not commensurate with the number of people in the area and most definitely is not keeping pace with the number of people living in Dublin Fingal West. We need Rush Garda station reopened. We need a Garda station to serve Lusk. We need Skerries Garda station back open properly, if the truth be told. We also need more gardaí for Balbriggan Garda station.

An Ceann Comhairle: If the Minister indulges me for a moment, I will welcome all the former Members of the Icelandic Parliament who are in the Gallery. They are most welcome.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank Deputy O'Reilly for putting down this important Topical Issue. If I am available for Topical Issues in the justice, home affairs and migration area, I will do them. I am happy to be here to respond to the Deputy's query.

It is repeatedly the case - and it is very fair - that Deputies want more gardaí in their communities and constituencies. That is a good sign. It shows the constituencies and people of Ireland have faith in and are supportive of An Garda Síochána. That is not universal throughout the world. In some places there can be a negative relationship between the police forces and the communities they police, but it is not so in Ireland.

Dublin Fingal West is covered by the Dublin metropolitan region north division. It also covers Dublin Fingal East and parts of Dublin Bay North. At the end of February, the latest date for which published figures are available, there were 764 Garda members of all ranks assigned to the division, supported by 70 Garda staff and 23 Garda reservists.

The allocation of gardaí represents an increase of 13% since the end of 2016, when there were 676 in the division. The Garda staff number has increased by almost 63% in the same period, from 43 assigned in 2016, which in turn has freed up more gardaí to undertake front-line policing duties.

The request I get most of the time is for more gardaí in communities. As people will be aware, I have a policy to have high-visibility policing in our cities and towns and throughout the rest of the country. We have already been able to see that in Dublin, Cork and Limerick there has been a very noticeable increase in high-visibility policing. That is as a result of a policy of the Government that is being implemented by the Commissioner.

It is extremely important that communities have visible policing. The presence of gardaí is very much dependent on there being a pipeline of reserves and recruits and resources available to the Commissioner. Last year, 619 gardaí attested from the Garda College to take up positions across the country, beginning a career of service to their communities and the people of Ireland. Another 167 new gardaí attested in February this year, bringing the number to 786. I look forward to the attestation of new gardaí in two weeks' time, on 1 May next. Seven probationer gardaí were assigned to Deputy O'Reilly's division in February and 39 probationers were assigned in 2025.

Overall, since the reopening of the Garda College in 2015, 496 probationers have been assigned to Dublin metropolitan region north, which is almost 9% of all probationers attested since 2015. Just under 800 trainees entered the Garda College in 2025, which is the highest number since 2018. Recruitment is extremely important to ensure we get more gardaí into Deputy O'Reilly's constituency, Dublin Fingal West, and indeed throughout the country. We are seeing success in this regard at present.

Deputy O'Reilly also raised the issue of Rush Garda station and how she would like to see it reopened. I cannot give her an update in respect of that at present. I am here to talk about the numbers but I will certainly engage with her in respect of those issues.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: That is very welcome. I have a wee suggestion, if the Minister does not mind. It comes from the petition that Ciara has circulated. As I said, it has been signed by more than 1,000 people. What they are seeking is a formal assessment by the Department of justice and An Garda Síochána of the policing needs of the Rush–Lusk area. The Minister will understand that while the number of gardaí working in the Dublin metropolitan region is fine and big, I am talking about the men and women working out of Balbriggan and Skerries, where the numbers are not sufficient to cover the entire area they are in charge of.

The petition is also seeking the provision of a permanent full-time Garda station to serve the community. I am more than happy to take the Minister up on his offer. I will absolutely engage with him, with his officials and his office because I want to see a visible garda presence. His former colleague, former Deputy Farrell, has said Rush Garda station's closure has damaged the local community, leaving it feeling significantly less safe and less secure. The Minister should not take my word for it; rather, he should take that of his former colleague in government. I can refer to it not just because I live in the local area but also because the people who contact my offices in Balbriggan and Rush tell me so. It is true that people want additional gardaí and that very often TDs call for them in the Dáil, but I am seeking additional gardaí, additional infrastructure and the reopening of the Rush Garda station. Indeed, I am also seeking a station to serve Lusk. I have information on population growth to back that up. It is not simply the case that I want more gardaí for my area simply because I know that it would be good. I have the statistics to back it up. I can show the Minister that there has been population growth. The increase in the number of gardaí has not matched that.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Ciara's petition is probably trying to do what many other communities seek to do as well. In effect, she and the Deputy are looking for a formal assessment of the policing needs of the Rush area. I want the Deputy to know, however, that when the Commissioner sits down to decide where the new gardaí coming out of Templemore should go, he does it on the basis of a particular plan. In the past year, it has been for the purpose of achieving high-visibility policing, predominantly in the cities of Dublin, Cork and Limerick. However, he is now having new probationer gardaí put into suburban areas and rural areas as well. I suppose he has to decide on the basis of the needs of the country as a whole. We would all prefer it if the Commissioner put a significant number of recruits into our own constituencies, but he has to adopt a fair basis for all communities. He also has to take into account where the needs are. It is a complicated issue to determine where gardaí should be placed. As the Deputy will probably agree, there is no point in putting gardaí where they are not needed and where there are not high crime levels. Communities have to have a garda presence but there are areas where you need to focus gardaí, and that will be based on the Commissioner's assessment as to where the needs are greatest.

The Deputy has very eloquently advocated a permanent Garda station in Rush, in her area. What is more important to me is actually seeing gardaí out in the community. We have many Garda stations but it is not the stations that give people a sense of safety. Rather, it is the fact that there are gardaí on the streets or in the vicinity of the station. I will seek to prioritise the continued presence of gardaí in the community. People want them visible. I hear what the Deputy is saying about Rush Garda station. I will consider the matter and discuss it within my Department.

Antisocial Behaviour

Deputy Barry Ward: The issue I want to raise with the Minister today has some similarity to the last issue in that it relates to Garda action, particularly in respect of juvenile antisocial behaviour cases. "Antisocial behaviour" is an umbrella term that covers many different activities. Some will say that antisocial behaviour is just that, antisocial, but of course it encompasses criminality as well. I fear there are certain young people who are behaving antisocially, but by extension criminally, with impunity. They are not being held to account for what they are doing, for the impact they are having on local communities and specific residents, and in terms of their criminal actions.

The Minister knows I have been practising in criminal law for nearly 20 years and have dealt with juvenile cases. I would be the last to suggest we should increase the criminalisation of young people. Doing so is unhelpful in many ways. I will allude briefly to the dysfunctionality of our current Children's Court system and the delays in implementing all the progressive measures that were put into the Children Act 25 years ago. However, on the flip side of that coin, you cannot have a situation in which young people, teenagers, are doing whatever they want to whomever they want without any fear of consequence. That leads to considerable lawlessness in communities and massively interrupts the ability of ordinary people living in them to enjoy their property, get on with their lives, go to work, bring their children to school and even send their children to the shop. I have met people in the Dún Laoghaire area who tell me they will not let their 12-year-old children go to the shop on their own because of kids in the area who might intimidate them, intercept them or even rob them. We cannot allow that to continue.

I have raised this with the Garda. We are lucky in south Dublin's F and W districts, namely Dún Laoghaire and Blackrock, to have gardaí who are on top of their brief, who are working incredibly hard, who liaise with the communities and who are plugged into the situation. However, the problem is that they do not feel they are equipped with either the resources or, perhaps more importantly, the powers to deal with this issue. For example, a 14-year-old who engages in criminal activity in the local area, maybe at a low level, gets arrested by the Garda and is brought down to Blackrock or Dún Laoghaire Garda station cannot be left in a cell on their own, first of all. When they are there, they cannot be with one adult on their own. Two gardaí have to be with them. That takes two gardaí off the streets. They cannot be out doing the work we need them to do at a particular time. In due course, a parent is called. I acknowledge that many of these problems often stem from a lack of parental control. When the parent or guardian is called, he or she comes down to the station and the child is released into that person's custody. They are brought home and they are not even kept in the house for the rest of the night sometimes. No prosecution may flow from that. Whatever about there being no prosecution, the reality is there is a deficit at the moment in what gardaí can do to deal specifically with juvenile misbehaviour, juvenile antisocial behaviour and juvenile criminality.

4 o'clock

Obviously, the further up the scale of seriousness it goes, the greater the power of gardaí to act. At the moment, however, people in the Dún Laoghaire constituency, which is a lovely place to live and one that does not generally suffer from major crime problems, tell me that there is a growing problem with juvenile antisocial behaviour. This is a problem that exists in

parks and housing estates and on main streets. In Deansgrange recently, the windows of many shops were broken overnight. That was done by one particular offender who, I understand, has been apprehended by gardaí. I do not know the details, but I am sure it will take its course within the courts.

Further up the scale, gardaí may have the powers to act. That is fine. However, in terms of the stuff that impinges on ordinary people and prevents them from the peaceful enjoyment of their properties and their neighbourhoods or from going to work, school or to the shops, there is a major problem. I would love to hear the Minister's proposals for how we are going to deal with that.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank Deputy Ward for raising this very important issue. Obviously there is a complexity to how society should respond to criminality by people under 18 years of age but my starting point is looking at the impact it has upon victims. From the victim's point of view, as Deputy Ward has described, it is cold comfort that the person who is perpetrating the criminal act or the antisocial behaviour is, in fact, under 18 years of age. The impact of the offence or the antisocial behaviour on the individual is as significant as it would be if it was being carried out by an adult as opposed to by a child. That is why I start, as I am sure Deputy Ward does, by looking at the impact on the victim.

When it is the case that criminality is being carried out or antisocial behaviour engaged in by a person under 18 years of age, as Deputy Ward will be aware from experience, we have a different statutory procedure in terms of dealing with people who are defined as children under the Children Act. Since the enactment of the Children Act a quarter of a century ago, Ireland's approach has been to divert children from the criminal justice system, with detention being, as it says in the Act, an option of "last resort". That does not mean, however, that detention is not sometimes necessary. Regrettably, sometimes the detention of children is necessary. I am pleased to say that when it comes to Oberstown, we have been able, through consultation with the Minister for children, Deputy Foley, to increase the number of spaces available for boys in Oberstown. That was done as a result of consultation I had with the Minister, Deputy Foley.

An essential pillar of the child-focused approach is the Garda youth diversion programme, and that is effective. It provides a statutory basis for the Garda youth diversion programme. The intention of this programme is to divert children aged 12 to 17 years who have been engaged in such behaviour away from the criminal justice system and towards more positive, pro-social behaviour and life choices. Children who commit criminal offences are considered for admission to the diversion programme. Each such case is assessed and the director of the Garda diversion programme, the Garda superintendent, decides if the case is suitable for inclusion in the programme.

I recently had the pleasure of being out in Dún Laoghaire Garda station with Deputy Ward's colleague Deputy Devlin. I met officials and the superintendent there and was extremely impressed by their commitment to policing the area. Obviously, the challenges they face when it comes to dealing with juvenile offenders is consistent with the problems that exist around the country.

Young people deemed suitable by the director of the Garda youth diversion programme may be referred to the local youth diversion projects where, in collaboration with a Garda juvenile liaison officer, these projects provide supports to children to address their behaviour and engage

positively with their communities. People sometimes that youth diversion programmes are not effective or successful, but there is success in respect of them. If we look at the statistics in terms of the number of people being referred to youth diversion programmes, we can see that notwithstanding the year-on-year population growth, the number of children coming to the attention of the diversion programme has generally decreased.

I appreciate that this might not be of much comfort to the victim suffering from the criminality or antisocial behaviour of a person under 18 years of age but there does need to be a Garda response. If the individual child does not want to go along with the youth diversion programme, then the force of the criminal justice system must operate in the way that it should in respect of children. If we want to put in a different statutory regime that does mean amending the Children Act and having a broader conversation about whether we wish to change the way we deal with children or whether want to redefine the age beneath 16. These are very complicated issues that we need to carefully consider.

Deputy Barry Ward: I thank the Minister for his acknowledgement of the work gardaí in Dún Laoghaire and Blackrock are doing. I was delighted to welcome him to Blackrock when he visited recently. I appreciate his attention to the issue. I also acknowledge what he said about the progressiveness of the Children Act. That is important but if we are relying on Oberstown or incarceration for children, the system has already failed at that stage. There are people locally who tell me that there are young children who will say to them when they are confronted about their criminal behaviour that they cannot be touched or be arrested or face the consequences that would apply to an adult. The younger they are, the more they believe that and as long as they believe it, they will continue to act with impunity. They will continue to disrupt the lives of lawful and law abiding citizens in our communities.

It may be that a legislative response is required, but I also think that we should be having a conversation about this and asking ourselves what we need to do to ensure that there is some kind of an arrest to the antisocial behaviour that is creating victims in our local communities. As I said, the spectrum of activity ranges from bad behaviour, shouting or whatever in a local area to much more serious things like property damage to businesses, theft, robbery, assault and more serious matters. If only for the reason that we want to protect those children from the consequences of getting on a slippery slope to more serious criminality as adults, it is incumbent on us a legislature and as a State, on the Department and on An Garda Síochána to put a stop to this. We need to make sure the message gets out to those kids that if they are going to behave antisocially and criminally, there will be consequences and they will suffer them. I recognise what the Minister said about the juvenile liaison system. It has yielded results. There is no doubt about that. Maybe it needs more resources and maybe we need to make it more effective and more commonly used but there cannot be a message to young people, or children in particular, that they can behave with impunity because they cannot.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Obviously, the youth diversion programme does not mean that children cannot be arrested, convicted of offences or apprehended by gardaí. If gardaí come across youths who are involved in criminal behaviour or breaches of public order, they can apply the law in respect of them and it may be necessary at times for them to be arrested. The Deputy is right to say that this does result in further bureaucracy within a Garda station because arresting a child is treated differently to arresting an adult. That said, it still can be done and I

want to assure the general public that gardaí can arrest juveniles who are involved in the commission of criminal behaviour. However, that does not mean that subsequently, after their arrest and once they go through that process, they cannot then be put on the pathway of the youth diversion programme.

Deputy Ward will know that generally criminal behaviour is committed predominantly by boys and men between the ages of 14 and 30. Once they reach the latter age, they cop on and they stop engaging in criminal behaviour. The Deputy is absolutely right that we are doing a disservice to people between the ages 14 and 18 if we do not try to stop or divert them. If they are committing criminal behaviour on the last day of their 17th year, once they turn 18 they are inevitably going to end up in the adult system and will probably be incarcerated.

I should have mentioned that I recall being with Deputy Ward out in Dún Laoghaire. I was impressed by what is going on out there but policing of youths is complicated. I want to try to ensure that there are greater resources for gardaí but also for young people. If youths are hanging around, which sometimes happens more in the summer months, we need to ensure that we have the services available as well so that they can do things like play football or get involved in sport and be diverted away from the criminal behaviour. However, if they are involved in criminal behaviour, the law should come down on them relatively hard because if it does not, we are doing them a disservice.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to visit St. Mary's in Oldtown, which is in my constituency of Dublin Fingal West. I want to begin by sincerely thanking Julie, the principal, for making me feel so welcome. What stood out to me immediately was not just the dedication of the staff but the strength of the entire school community. The teachers, SNAs and the board of management are deeply committed and compassionate and are working tirelessly to support every child under their care.

However, it is impossible to ignore the reality in which they are doing this work. The building is over 80 years old and is under immense pressure. Much of the school operates out of outdated temporary accommodation. There are storage heaters instead of proper central heating. There is damp and mould present in classrooms. There are leaks, the floors have holes in places and the temporary building is warped. These issues give rise to real safety concerns.

This is not just inconvenient; it is unacceptable. There are 78 children in the school, including 12 in the special autism class. These children, some of whom have additional and complex needs, are learning in conditions that are cramped, cold and not fit for purpose. The facilities available to them do not reflect the care, dignity and support they deserve. This raises a fundamental question about equity. How is it fair that some children in our education system are taught in warm, modern and well-equipped buildings while others are expected to learn in environments that are deteriorating around them? What message does that send? From where I stand, it communicates something deeply troubling: that some school communities are valued less than others. The same applies to the staff. Teachers and SNAs in this school are on the Department's payroll, just like their colleagues elsewhere. Why should some educators have to work in cold, inadequate conditions, while others do not? Their dedication should be matched with basic standards of safety and comfort.

The school is currently at stage 2a of the planning process for a new building, but progress has been slow. In the meantime, the conditions remain the same or worsen. The reality is that delays have real human consequences. They affect children's learning, well-being and sense of belonging. They affect staff morale and their ability to deliver the high-quality education they are striving to provide. I also want to acknowledge and thank those who have been supporting the school and advocating on its behalf.

I am asking for two things. The first is that the Department acknowledge the reality that the accommodation currently being provided at St. Mary's Oldtown is substandard and not acceptable for any child or staff member. The second is that urgent action be taken. This means progressing the long-delayed building project to the next stage without further delay, and in the interim, providing funding for essential works to address the most immediate issues, such as heating, safety and basic infrastructure in the school. Ultimately, this is about fairness. It is about dignity. It is about ensuring that every child, regardless of where they live, has access to a safe, warm and supportive learning environment. St. Mary's Oldtown is a school full of potential, care and commitment. It deserves a building that reflects that.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I thank the Deputy for raising this matter as it gives me the opportunity, on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth, to outline to the Dáil the current position in relation to the school building project for St. Mary's Oldtown, County Dublin. This project was approved to enter the Department of Education and Youth's pipeline under the additional school accommodation scheme and is devolved for delivery to the school authority.

The project will provide three mainstream classrooms, one special education tuition room and a two-classroom special educational needs base. The project is currently at stage 2a, detailed design, of the architectural design process. The stage 2a report has been submitted to the Department and is currently under review from both a technical and cost perspective. All projects, including this one, are subject to the full due diligence requirements set out in the Department's infrastructure guidelines.

Although this project is not within the first tranche of school building projects recently published in the NDP sectoral investment plan, it remains part of the Department's overall pipeline of school building projects. The NDP sectoral plan involves a very strong emphasis on maximising existing capacity and prioritisation of school building projects to meet the most urgent needs. In this regard, there will be a strong special education dimension to the project roll-out.

The Department will continue to build on the progress made over recent years by continuing to roll out projects on a prioritised basis to meet the most urgent needs in terms of provision of additional capacity and modernisation of existing facilities. As part of planning ahead for the next tranche of projects to progress to tender, the Department-led prioritisation process will continue over the course of 2026 and 2027 in order to assess and evaluate the progression of individual projects through the design pipeline, having regard to the continual need to maximise existing capacity and determine the prioritised needs going forward. This process will involve engagement with key stakeholders and individual schools and will ultimately inform the next tranches of programme roll-out to tender. The Department-led energy and

condition survey of the school estate, which will be finalised later in 2026, will provide an additional evidence base for assessing priorities.

Based on the ongoing prioritisation process, some projects may be added to the list over the course of 2026 and 2027, having regard to their prioritisation and urgency of need, and taking account of the ongoing ability to progress them to tender and construction within the parameters of overall funding. Where appropriate, the Department will also assess opportunities to undertake advance enabling works for the most urgent and complex projects to facilitate a smooth progression to construction in 2028 and beyond. Any interim accommodation requirements will continue to be assessed and considered by the Department on a case-by-case basis to determine the prioritised needs and approach for addressing same.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I accept that due diligence needs to be carried out, that everything needs to be ticked off and that the boxes need to be ticked. The year 2028 would mean a long time waiting for the next tranche, so I thank the Minister of State for clarifying that additional projects may be taken on in the interim if the school reaches significant progression within the project stages. In the spirit of moving this on, the school has recently requested a meeting between the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and the board of management. While an agenda was sought by the Minister's office, a meeting has yet to be confirmed. I would strongly urge that this engagement takes place without further delay. I would be happy to invite the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to the school and would be happy to facilitate such a meeting with the school community and board, should that be necessary.

Deputy Robert Troy: Deputy O'Donoghue will appreciate that I am answering on behalf of my colleague. He has made a strong and compelling case for additional works at this school in the very near future. We were all disappointed when the announcement was made some months ago if schools that we articulate on behalf of in our respective constituencies were excluded. The amount of resources is always finite, so there has to be prioritisation. From my perspective, and even from the Deputy's perspective, I am happy to see in this reply that the Department is not cutting out the possible inclusion of other schools depending on the need in 2026 and 2027. It is helpful that it allows for the opportunity for enabling works to be done that would allow it to go to construction in 2028. To me, that indicates a Department that is willing to work with the school authorities to ensure that any additional works that can be done in 2026 and 2027 will be done, which is welcome. There is also an acknowledgement that, at a time of resource constraints, it may be possible to do enabling works so that shovels are ready to hit the ground in 2028.

The Deputy has made a case on behalf of the school in question. I undertake to relay what he has said to the Minister, Deputy Naughton.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I want to raise the case of Gorey Hill school in Gorey, County Wexford. This is a school for learners with complex learning needs aged between four and 18. It was officially opened only at the beginning of 2025, although it had been in operation from late 2024. Part of the reason the school was opened was that there was so much pressure on

St. Patrick's Special School in Enniscorthy that there was a need for additional places in counties Wexford and Wicklow for young people with complex learning needs.

In fairness, through co-operation between the Gaelscoil, An Foras Pátrúnachta, the patron body, Waterford Wexford Education and Training Board and the Department, this school was very quickly able to get off the ground using a number of areas within the Gaelscoil that were not in use. There is also on the site a very successful naíonra, a preschool provision, operating through the Irish language.

This school is extraordinarily well run. I pay tribute to all the staff there. It is among the first schools that are going to be rolling out the new educational therapy services. However, we are already we are into a situation where this new school is full. The school has to inform parents and others as to how many places will be available. For the 2026-27 school year, there are no new places for admission into the school and that is because the school is already full.

There is a proposal to expand the school. There is a modular development being set out. There is a concern, and rightfully so, among some of the parents in regard to the Gaelscoil and the naíonra and the potential impact it may have on play areas if a modular building is put in place, thereby limiting the number of play areas and parking spaces within the facility. There is strong support for the school, but consideration has to be given to the impact on the existing Gaelscoil and naíonra.

What guarantees are in place in the context of additional places? For those who want to have places in the school from this September, if the modular building is proceeding, has there been consultation with the parents, the naíonra and others who are going to be impacted if it goes ahead? Will the building require planning permission? What is the timeline in that regard? More importantly, the intention in respect of this provision was that it was to be an interim measure. The long-term goal was to have a specially built, fully functioning new special school on a greenfield site. The reason we know this - the Minister of State knows it as well - is that north Wexford and south Wicklow is one of the fastest growing areas in the country. There is a huge demand for special education. We already know, and I know from talking to primary school teachers and parents, about the demands for places within this school.

Our long-term goal is that we get the commitment that was made - a very clear commitment and timeframe for the building of a school for those with complex learning needs. It is important right now, in the immediate term, that we spell out exactly what is going to happen to ensure there is sufficient provision within the immediate community.

Deputy Robert Troy: I am taking this matter on behalf of Deputy Michael Moynihan, Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth, who sends his apologies because he cannot be here today. I thank the Deputy for raising the matter and giving me the opportunity to outline the Department of Education and Youth's plans to address the accommodation needs for Gorey Hill School.

Gorey Hill School is one of four special schools established for the 2024-25 school year. The school operates under the patronage of Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board, ETB. The school currently supports 37 young people aged between four and 18 who have a diagnosis of autism and-or complex learning needs, with a professional recommendation requiring the support of a special school setting. The staffing comprises an administrative

principal, administrative deputy principal, seven class teachers and 18 special needs assistants, together with ten post primary co-operation hours per week.

The school is based in a Department-owned school property in Gorey. Surplus capacity in the building was repurposed to make it suitable for special school purposes and to facilitate the opening of the new school. The repurposing project was delivered under the Department's special educational needs reconfiguration and modular accommodation programme, which facilitated the school opening as quickly as possible. The programme involves the use of project management supports which is designed to enable the accommodation to be provided as quickly as possible and help ease the administrative workload for school authorities in relation to the management and delivery of projects. This is a collaborative process between the project manager, school authority and the Department of Education and Youth.

The property provides an opportunity to facilitate a co-location arrangement with other schools, which is consistent with the Department's approach of maximising existing capacity and enabling local unmet needs for special school places to be met. The school is now at capacity and additional accommodation is required to facilitate further enrolments. The site at Gorey provides a good location for expanding capacity with a permanent modular extension for the school.

The Department of Education and Youth regards the current repurposed school building as the permanent location for Gorey Hill School. It is intended that the permanent capacity at the school will be expanded through the provision of the proposed modular accommodation project. This detail is currently being worked through and the Department is engaging with Waterford and Wexford ETB during this process.

The modular accommodation framework is a key part of the Department's strategy for the provision of good quality functional accommodation to meet the permanent accommodation requirements for prioritised individual schools. Between 2020 and 2025, the Department of Education and Youth has provided €174.6 million in capital funding for Wexford schools. Over this period, a total of 58 schools have been upgraded either through provision of a new school building, a large-scale extension or provision of modular accommodation.

There are currently seven school projects in Wexford under construction. One school project will go to tender or construction in 2026-27, and this summer, eight schools are approved to undergo works as part of the summer works scheme. In addition, since 2020, a total of 80 special classes have been opened in Wexford, ten of which were sanctioned for September next. Budget 2026 has secured funding for 3,000 new specialist places and the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, is currently examining where these places are best located for the 2026-27 academic year.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State. I appreciate that he is taking this on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, who has indeed visited Gorey Hill School. There is an acknowledgment in here that the school is already at capacity and that there is greater demand.

The concern I have in regard to the answer that has been provided is whether regard has been had to the potential impact the proposed modular construction will have on the play area, car parking and ancillary services that exist on the site already, and if there has been a sufficient

level of consultation around this. Everyone wants to see the school grow, but this should not be at the expense of either the Gaelscoil or the naíonra. I would encourage that there should be consultation with the parents who are concerned about that but, as I said, they are incredibly supportive of the school in the long run.

This is in an extremely busy area of the school. We have a second level school, Creagh College, with 1,000 pupils in the area, as well as not just the Gaelscoil but two other primary schools, all within a couple of hundred metres of this site. It is already an extremely busy educational campus. There are obviously concerns that if we are looking at expanding educational facilities on the same site, some of that will have a knock-on impact. I certainly support and want to see the development of the school. As an interim solution, the modular solution is what may be necessary and the creation of the school was done at breakneck speed, for which I really praised the Department. It was what it needed to do.

I am concerned, given the projected growth in population plus the demand within the area, that in the long term this modular extension is potentially seen as the long-term solution. We in north Wexford have been told many times that when we get a new school, that is the last school the area will get and yet, the population continues to grow and we eventually get an additional school. The Department needs to go back to the drawing board and have a long-term plan to ensure that we have a greenfield site for the building of a new special school in the area.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): I thank the Deputy. I call Deputy Ellis. Apologies; I call the Minister of State.

Deputy Robert Troy: That is fine. I reiterate that it was very welcome and helpful that he arranged a visit by the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, to the school, where he saw first hand the challenges that are there. The challenge is to ensure the additional demand is met with additional capacity in a timely way as well. The one point I will have taken from the original reply is that there is ongoing engagement between the education and training board and the Department to ensure we can meet that demand, while at the same time not compromising the facilities that are currently there. I will bring the Deputy's message back to the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, loud and clear that the consultation needs to continue but also needs to conclude in a timely fashion to enable that modular unit to be delivered, increasing capacity for the children with special educational needs.

Ultimately, that is what we need to do. We need to ensure that children who have special needs have the opportunity to attend school in their own locality rather than being transferred for miles, because that is not in anybody's interests either.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Dessie Ellis: St. Aidan's CBS Whitehall first opened in 1964 and is part of the very fabric of our community. It has provided an excellent education for generations of boys from around Whitehall, Glasnevin and Ballymun. Over the years, substantial amounts of money have been spent on maintaining the school buildings and 60-year-old prefabs. The demand for

secondary school places and applications for admission to St. Aidan's are high and the school is always hugely oversubscribed.

There are two phases to the proposed new development. The first phase will be the construction of the new, modern school into which the students will decamp from the old, dilapidated prefabs. The second phase will be the removal of the old prefabs and the building of much-needed ASD units, which will include a sensory room as well as special educational needs classrooms. The project was granted permission by An Bord Pleanála on 24 February 2025. However, the school, the parents and the community are dismayed that, to date, St. Aidan's is not listed among the 105 projects specifically highlighted as moving to tender and construction by 2026 and 2027 in the first tranche of the 2026 NDP roll-out. This oversight needs to be addressed, and St. Aidan's should be included on the NDP priority list.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: As Deputy Ellis has said, this is an incredible school. It is incredibly popular and it does an amazing job. Unfortunately, the principal of that school recently met Deputy Hearne, Deputy Ellis and me to ask the question, "To be, or not to be". The school is at stage 2B and the question is whether it will progress. What is proposed is fantastic. We are talking about 15 classrooms and 15 other rooms, including science labs, construction rooms, technology rooms and special education facilities. It is disappointing that the school is not on the priority list. The Tánaiste has given some indication that other projects will be funded. St. Aidan's and a number of other projects in our area need to be on the list the Department is progressing. We also need to make sure that there is no delay in terms of the school's ability to plan and design the project. Can other elements of the project be progressed while they are waiting for the final construction phase? The school community, the principal and the parents are really passionate about this project. They want it to happen because they know the difference it will make.

Deputy Rory Hearne: To follow on from my fellow Deputies in Dublin North-West, we are highlighting this issue today because St. Aidan's CBS in Whitehall is at the centre of the community. It provides excellent education. We met the school principal and deputy principal recently, who outlined their very real frustration with the lack of progress on promises of new school buildings. Tá foirgneamh scoile nua ag teastáil ó St. Aidan's agus ó phobal Whitehall, Glasnevin and of course the wider area up to Ballymun where students come from. The community needs a school. Tá siad tar éis fanacht rófhada. They are waiting too long. What really is causing frustration is the need for clarity from the Department of education as to why St. Aidan's is not on the priority list. It should be. It is urgently needed. We look forward to hearing the Minister of State's response.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Deputies for raising this matter. I am taking it on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth. I know that Deputy McAuliffe has engaged directly with the Taoiseach on this but it is very positive to see such cross-party support on an issue.

The school was approved to enter the Department's pipeline for a project under the additional school accommodation scheme, ASA. The project will provide 15 general classrooms, five special education tuition rooms, a two-classroom special educational needs base, one music room, one multimedia room, one art room, one construction studies room, one technology prep room, two project stores, two science labs, one prep area, one design-computer

graphics room, and ancillary services. The project was devolved to the school authority for delivery.

This project is currently at stage 2B. The stage 2B report was submitted to the Department in January of this year and is currently undergoing a comprehensive technical and cost review. All projects, including this one, are subject to the full due diligence requirements set out in the Department's infrastructure guidelines. Although this project is not within the first tranche of school building projects recently published in the NDP sectoral investment plan, it remains part of the Department's overall pipeline of school building projects. The NDP sectoral plan involves a very strong emphasis on maximising existing capacity and prioritisation of school building projects to meet the most urgent needs. In this regard, there will be a strong special education dimension to project roll-out. The Department will continue to build on the progress made over recent years with the continued roll-out of projects on a prioritised basis to meet the most urgent needs in terms of provision of additional capacity and modernisation of existing facilities.

As part of planning ahead for the next tranche of projects to progress to tender, the Department-led prioritisation process will continue over the course of 2026 and 2027 to assess and evaluate the progression of individual projects through the design pipeline, having regard to the continual need to maximise existing capacity and determine the prioritised needs going forward. This process will involve engagement with key stakeholders and individual schools and will ultimately inform the next tranches of programme roll-out to tender.

The Department-led energy and condition survey of the school estate, which will be finalised later in 2026, will provide an additional evidence base for assessing priorities. Based on this ongoing prioritisation process, some projects may be added to the list over the course of 2026 and 2027, having regard to their prioritisation and urgency of need and taking account also of the ongoing ability to progress them to tender and construction within the parameters of overall funding. Where appropriate, the Department will also assess opportunities to undertake advance enabling works for the most urgent and complex projects to facilitate a smooth progression to construction in 2028 and beyond. Any interim accommodation requirements will continue to be assessed and considered by the Department on a case-by-case basis to determine the prioritised needs and approach for addressing same.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I understand the Minister, Deputy Naughton, is not here to take this really important issue. I appreciate the Minister of State taking it. I hope this does not lessen what we are saying and what we are looking for. The urgency of this and of prioritising it is crucial to the people in the area and to the school itself. They have done tremendous work on this. Everything is in place and ready to go. We need a commitment. I know the Minister of State said there might be a possibility of some other schools being included. We are urging that they be included as soon as possible to get this moving forward.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I echo what Deputy Ellis has said. To reinforce the point, this is a very constrained site. It is quite compact. There is a portion of it that is owned by the religious order where housing is actually being developed. In the wider Santry area, it is very positive that we have more housing supply but there is an increasing population. Around the corner on the Swords Road, the Department of education has planned two 1,000-pupil secondary schools. This morning at the Committee of Public Accounts, the Secretary General of the Department

of education said there were opportunities to include additional projects. St. Aidan's should be one of those.

Deputy Rory Hearne: It is important that St. Aidan's is included in the new list and is prioritised. I again express the frustration from the school. The principal and deputy principal outlined that they had submitted the developed design to the Department in January of this year but they were still waiting to get a response on that. The Minister of State set out that it was undergoing a comprehensive technical and cost review. It would be good to get a very clear timeframe for when the Department is going to give its response in terms of that review, and to give the school some indication of when this is going to be developed.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the three Deputies again for giving me an opportunity to update the House regarding the accommodation at St Aidan's CBS Whitehall.

The Department is committed to ensuring appropriate accommodation is available for all school pupils and will, in the wider context outlined, ensure that each school project under the school building programme is subject to due diligence required under the Government's infrastructure guidelines. The Deputies made a very strong case for the school this evening. Deputy McAuliffe has confirmed what was said at the committee today. It is possible for additional schools to be included in 2026 and 2027.

I assure Deputy Ellis that it is no less relevant that I am taking the debate this evening. I will relay the strong points that the Deputies have made this evening to my colleague the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to reinforce the message that this school has a priority to be included in 2026-27. Even for those that are not included in that, the Department is looking at ways to ensure that enabling works can be done so that when a further tranche of money becomes available in 2028, further schools will be added at that stage. The Department has been as flexible as it can be to ensure the maximum amount of construction work happens in 2026, 2027 and on into 2028.

The Deputies have made compelling cases this evening for St. Aidan's and I undertake to bring that back to the Minister, Deputy Naughton, on foot of their representations here in the House.

Disregard of Historic Offences for Consensual Sexual Activity Between Men Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

Is iontach gur shroich muid an Stad seo leis an mBille seo. Bhí sé seo foilsithe ach ní raibh muid ag súil go roghnófaí é go tapa is a bhí don díospóireacht ar an Dara Chéim. The Bill states:

...it is declared and recognised that all those, whether applicants or otherwise, who were prosecuted or convicted of offences arising from consensual same-sex sexual activity between persons of full capacity are entitled to and hereby receive an apology and an acknowledgement that maintaining such offences was, on the part of the State, improperly

discriminatory and contrary to human dignity and that it infringed human rights including in particular the right to personal privacy and autonomy.

That is the basis of the Bill I move today. Tá áthas orm an Bille um Neamhaird a Thabhairt ar Chionta Stairiúla i dtaobh Gníomhaíocht Ghnéasach Chomhthoiliúil Idir Fir, 2025 a bhogadh ar an Dara Chéim tar éis don Dáil glacadh leis an Chéad Chéim d'aon guth nuair a foilsíodh é i mí Iúil 2025. Gabhaim míle buíochas leis an LGBT restorative justice campaign, go háirithe na daoine a bhunaigh é, lena n-airítear Kieran Rose, Karl Hayden agus Brian Sheehan. Bhí siad ag brú na ceiste seo chun tosaigh. They addressed TDs and Senators in the audiovisual room of Leinster House earlier this week. Throughout the process, they have been in contact with me and other spokespersons on this issue. Some of them are here in the Gallery this evening.

Gabhaim míle buíochas leo siúd who contributed to the drafting of this legislation, which in many ways I plagiarised from them: Céile Varley, Cillian Bracken and the law firms, Goodbody and Clifford Chance. Gabhaim buíochas leis na Teachtaí eile a shínigh an Bille seo – Teachtaí Ged Nash, Pádraig Rice, Paul Murphy, Roderic O'Gorman agus iarTheachta Dála agus Uachtarán na hÉireann reatha, Catherine Connolly. Is é seo an Bille deireanach a thionscain sí agus tréaslaím léi as an éacht atá bainte amach aici ó shín. Is Bille é seo a chuirfidh deireadh leis an éagóir a rinneadh ar fhir leis na glúnta de réir géarleanúna coilíní.

The fact that this Bill has been co-sponsored by TDs from Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, the Social Democrats, People Before Profit, the Green Party and the Independent Catherine Connolly before her election as President indicates the groundswell of support and consensus across this House on this issue. Not alone was the Opposition united on the need for a disregard process, but the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, indicated at the time that he was not opposed to this. He has also indicated that he will not oppose the legislation on Second Stage and, in fact, intends to bring his own proposals forward in the very near future. I know he has promised that before, but he promised me that it would be within weeks this time. I hope we can then get the Government's approach to the need for this legislation before us and then we can deal with the amendments shortly. This will allow us to put to an end once and for all the wrong committed for many years. Every day wasted is a day where we are failing to account for the nation's dark history when it comes to the persecution of gay men.

That persecution can be traced way back to Act for the Punishment of the Vice of Buggery (Ireland) 1634, which was imposed by a British colonial regime. That law remained on the books in this State until 1993 along with the other draconian laws from the Victorian era that criminalised men who engaged in consensual sexual activity with other men. The first law stated it was for "the detestable and abominable Vice of Buggery committed with Mankind or Beast". Consensual same-sex activity was lumped in with bestiality. It also stated that offenders shall suffer such pains of death and losses as felons be accustomed to.

When the Free State was founded, this homophobic bigotry was enshrined in law again in the running of our Defence Forces where consensual activity was deemed a military offence subject to court martial. That was reinforced as late as in the Defence Act 1954.

When the Government of the day was finally dragged kicking and screaming into decriminalising consensual sex between men in 1993 following the famous case taken by our good friend in these Houses, David Norris, who took the case all the way to the European Court

of Human Rights, there was little acknowledgement then or since of the lives that were utterly destroyed by the horrific penal system that existed for generations or of the lived reality of being gay in this State and the climate of fear in which gay men lived or left Ireland to escape. There was no space for people who did not conform.

This was also the time of the Magdalen laundries, the industrial schools, forced adoption and record incarceration in psychiatric hospitals. For gay men, the State was against them, the church was against them and in many cases their communities were against them. At the very least, they feared that their own families were against them. The criminality associated with gay sex meant that there was little support during the AIDS crisis and sometimes homophobic violence was normalised in our society, which meant that they lived in fear of their life with nowhere to turn.

Decriminalisation came ten years after the brutal murder of Declan Flynn in Fairview Park, which sparked the first Pride march in Dublin in 1983. In the ten years leading up to the decriminalisation, the State commenced criminal proceedings in 309 cases, resulting in 94 convictions. Dozens more cases of buggery were known to the Garda in 1993 and more men could well have been prosecuted. We must remember that the mere threat of prosecution was used to blackmail gay men. They would be named and shamed in the newspapers. They might lose their jobs or their families. In some cases, they faced judges whose unbridled homophobia was plain for all to see as they spoke openly about how they would have given a higher sentence if they could.

Some local gardaí also demonstrated particular vindictiveness. Of the 68 criminal proceedings commenced in 1969, 20 were charged in Tullow, in County Carlow, alone, including teenagers aged 15, 16 and 17.

So much for protecting children, when children were in fact being criminalised by the State. Imagine the fear that was felt by those largely working class men and juveniles whose sexual activity became the talk of the town. It was talked of as a crime, and they were expected to pay extortionate bail bonds.

I have done a bit of research since I embarked on this legislation and the passage of First Stage. It is only a cursory snapshot through the papers that are online. These are the files here in my hand, and each one of them is just one story out of one paper, a snapshot in time, but they reflect the attitudes of the day. The attitudes from the first one I have, from 1929, remain the same right up to the last one I have found at this stage. My work is not complete. I am missing two decades of research. This is only from a search for "gross indecency", which was what most men were charged with. I can and will continue, but I hope in all this that we look at this and that when the Minister produces legislation, we get into looking at funding a piece of research to see the level of persecution in the State and the effects it had on people.

In the *Irish Independent*, on 26 October 1929, it says the following. It is short enough because these were very short notices.

Exemplary Sentence.—Judge Davitt sentenced Victor Furley, who pleaded guilty to a large number of counts of gross indecency, to 15 years' penal servitude, and in commending Det. Officers Madden and Cryan, who had assisted in bringing the accused to justice, said it was revolting that police officers and Irishmen should have to be employed in detecting such crimes.

That is from 1929, and it does not stop there. As I said, this is a cursory glance through snippets in time. I go up to one that I found quite horrendous in *The Nationalist & Leinster Times* on 25 March 1950. It records the following case. It is quite a substantial report, which usually is not the case. They were usually one or two lines, but this one went into quite some detail.

His Lordship [that is, the judge] said to the accused that it was sad to see a man of his stamp in court in a case of this kind. As Counsel said, his case was one more for scientific medical treatment than one for ordinary imprisonment.

"Dempsey, are you determined to make a manly effort to cure yourself of this trouble?" his lordship asked.

Prisoner [who was obviously scared to death of what was in front of him]—I am.

That is the type of fear there was. I will not read out any more but I have done a job of work and, as I have mentioned, there was a piece of work done in relation to Tullow. It just shows that, in certain areas, certain gardaí or certain judges had a specific bent towards convicting and persecuting those who they felt were criminal. That was their approach.

This Bill does not accomplish everything that was set out in the report, which was to address our failings. The justice Minister at the time, Charlie Flanagan, and the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, issued apologies on behalf of the State in June 2018 to those affected, but the criminal records of the convictions still remain. A first effort and progress to expunge those convictions using confidential Garda email addresses failed utterly as nobody came forward. It is unsurprising that victims of injustice would feel that they would have to go back to the perpetrators to seek their help.

Between 2021 and 2023, the working group was set up to examine the disregard for convictions. It produced a comprehensive report outlining the harsh realities of this gross human rights abuse. It proposed 95 recommendations for a disregard scheme. As I said, this Bill does not address all of those. It cannot. There are restrictions on us as Opposition TDs. We cannot put a charge on the Exchequer. Such practical things like resourcing and counselling supports cost money. We will hopefully get into some of that when we deal with the Minister's amendments. We address the need for research and redress to find out what the consequences are. Ours is not the only country in the world that has gone down the road of trying to address this hateful persecution. This Bill establishes a process for applying to the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission for a disregard of one's conviction as well as an appeals process and a review of the process within three years, along with annual reporting of the performances of that function. A disregard will provide clarity that there are no grounds for dismissing or prejudicing a person from office, profession, occupation, employment or any other right or privilege which citizens are entitled to on the basis of such conviction.

Acceptance, recognition, justice: no less is deserved by the generation of men who did nothing but take part in the love that dare not speak its name. In this, the land of Oscar Wilde, it is time that love spoke freely and those men were heard.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): Ar dtús, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Teachta Ó Snodaigh as an mBille seo. Is Bille fiorthábhachtach é. An bhliain seo caite, bhí díospóireacht idir an Teachta Ó Snodaigh agus

mé féin sa Dáil ar an gceist seo. Tar éis sin, chuaigh mé ar ais chuig an Roinn agus dúirt mé leis na hoifigigh gur mhaith liom Bille nua a fheiceáil go tapa. I thank Deputy Ó Snodaigh and the other Deputies who have co-signed this Bill for their consistent work on this issue. Last year, Deputy Ó Snodaigh raised this in, I think, an oral parliamentary question to me and I said I would go back to the Department and try to see whether I could expedite the process of introducing legislation. I was aware at the time that there were plans within the Department to bring in legislation, but, as a result of Deputy Ó Snodaigh raising it, it catalysed that further engagement. After our engagement on the floor of the Dáil, I wanted to see what could be done to speed up the process. I am very conscious that the men who are alive who are affected by this - the numbers may be small, but the point is still very significant - will be of a considerable age, and I think a legislative measure should be introduced as quickly as possible to ensure that a disregard scheme can apply for them.

After our engagement in the Dáil, I went back to the Department. I was thinking at the time whether some simple type of scheme could be introduced, in a similar way to a scheme that had been introduced in the UK in respect of the Post Office dispute and scandal that arose over there. There were issues in respect of how that type of scheme could not operate, but one of the benefits of my raising it was that I was able to instruct officials that I wanted to get the legislation enacted as promptly as possible. The effect of that was that I instructed that I wanted it to go as a Committee Stage amendment into the miscellaneous provisions Bill. A lot of work had been done on the Bill already, but my saying I wanted to have it in on Committee Stage in the miscellaneous provisions Bill expedited it, and I acknowledge Deputy Ó Snodaigh's role in contributing to that expediting of the Bill.

The Government will not oppose this legislation. There are some issues with it that I will discuss presently. As to where we are, I got approval from the Government a number of months ago - I think two or so months ago - to introduce Committee Stage amendments to the miscellaneous provisions Bill, which has already gone through Second Stage here, that would establish a disregard scheme. It was very good news that approval from the Government had been put in place and that a general scheme for the Committee Stage amendment had been drafted. The drafting is ongoing in the Attorney General's office and the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel.

I am not opposing this legislation.

5 o'clock o'clock

In fairness to Deputy Ó Snodaigh, I know that neither he nor I cares which legislative instrument gives effect to the disregard scheme, provided it works. The scheme being drafted in the Department at present is more robust. Once that is ready to be introduced on Committee Stage in the Dáil we can move promptly after that to get it enacted and to get the scheme up and running. I did indicate to Deputy Ó Snodaigh yesterday that I hoped Committee Stage would take place next month. I am putting pressure on my officials to do so and the fact that I have now said it in the Dáil will put even further pressure on them. This is something I will seek to actively work upon.

We are here to discuss Deputy Ó Snodaigh's Bill. It sets out an application-based statutory process for the disregard of historic convictions relating to consensual sexual activity between men. It assigns to the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC, the responsibility

for reviewing applications and for issuing disregards. In the scheme for which I have approval from Government to introduce, it is not IHREC doing it. It will be another person appointed by me who will be solely focused on the disregard scheme. The objective of Deputy Ó Snodaigh's Bill corresponds with Government policy and specifically the programme for Government commitment to implement legislation to disregard specific historical offences related to the criminalisation of homosexuality. As such, this Bill is consistent with the Government's policy and that is why I will not be opposing it.

However, while the intention of the Bill has obvious merit, there are legal, policy and operational issues with this Bill as drafted, which I will outline shortly. As I said, I am working on the scheme to be introduced on Committee Stage. It is also important as Minister for justice that I again acknowledge that the laws which criminalised consensual sexual activity between adult males in Ireland, as in innumerable other jurisdictions, are now widely recognised as a historical injustice, motivated by ignorant and prejudicial societal attitudes. Those laws were introduced under British rule but persisted for some 70 years after the establishment of the Irish State, before finally being repealed in 1993. However, while over 30 years have passed since the applicable offences were abolished, their malign effects continue for all those who were unjustly rendered criminals in the eyes of the State. To this day, consenting adults who were convicted under these laws still bear the unmerited stain of criminal record. It is true that history cannot be rewritten and we cannot change the fact that although convictions occurred, nor undo the hardship, humiliation and lasting pain they caused. What we as legislators can do, however, is find a means by which a conviction of this kind can, in effect, be nullified, such that the person who incurred it is, to all intents and purposes, treated in law as if it never happened. A legislative scheme to enable the disregard of these convictions is long overdue and, as I have said, the Government is committed to its introduction. Unfortunately, this cannot be achieved by way of a simple blanket disregard of all such convictions. That is because the applicable common law and statutory offences did not distinguish in any way between consensual and non-consensual activity, nor between adults and minors. In the eyes of the law, two adult men engaging in sexual activity in the context of a loving relationship were not only committing a crime, but committing precisely the same offence as that of a predatory male who committed the same act with a boy. This further illustrates how deeply inequitable these laws were, but it also has the unfortunate legacy that an across-the-board expungement of convictions under these laws is clearly not viable. Any given case must therefore be assessed on its own merits by reference to whatever records are available. It was in this context that in 2021 the working group was established to examine and make recommendations on an application-based scheme for the disregard of eligible convictions. The working group met on 11 occasions with follow-up research, legal analysis and stakeholder outreach occurring between each meeting.

In late 2022, my Department held a full public consultation on key issues relating to the development of a scheme to disregard relevant convictions. This consultation yielded about 150 submissions from individuals, LGBT and other non-governmental organisations, trade unions and political parties and representatives. These submissions were of great value to the working group in its deliberations and helped to inform its final recommendations. The working group's final report, published in summer 2023, contained 95 recommendations on how to establish, operate and promulgate such a scheme, and on key matters such as the range of offences that should be included, the proposed eligibility criteria for a disregard, the legal

effects of a disregard, and procedures for applications, record retrieval, decisions and reviews. The report was subsequently referred to officials in my Department to inform the development of legislative proposals that would align as closely as possible with the report's recommendations, while ensuring that the scheme would be legally sound and as accessible as possible. The number of recommendations in the report and the many procedurally and legally novel aspects of the proposed scheme have necessitated a lot of care being taken in the process of legislative analysis, consultation and drafting. However, as I said earlier, the legislation is now in an advanced stage of development and I intend to very shortly bring it before the Houses by amendment to the Criminal Law and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026.

Turning to the Bill under consideration today, its Short Title specifically states that it is for the purpose to provide for a disregard scheme. However, the qualifying offences set out in the Bill include the relevant offences that were repealed in 1993, but also any other offences pursuant to statute or common law where the behaviour constituting the offence consisted of consensual same-sex sexual activity. As worded, this would encompass offences which are still in force and hence are not legally appropriate for inclusion in a disregard scheme. More broadly, it would encompass a wide range of public order, morality and indecency laws under which heterosexuals were also liable to prosecution for inappropriate conduct. Even if the scope were restricted to repealed offences, it would be extremely difficult to determine whether a given conviction occurred purely because the conduct at issue happened to be of a homosexual nature. A further issue with the Bill is that it does not clearly or explicitly set out the criteria that are to guide the decision on whether to grant a disregard or an appeal of a refused disregard. While the definition of consensual same-sex sexual activity in section 2 of the Bill appears to be an attempt to set out such criteria, this term is not subsequently used in relation to the consideration of applications. The definition also fails to take due account of various circumstances that might still render a conviction unsuitable for disregard, such as evidence of payment for the sexual activity or evidence that the activity involved a vulnerable person or took place in the presence of a child.

Furthermore, the Bill does not make any provision for case records to be obtained from relevant public bodies to inform assessments and decisions on applications. The Bill does contain some well-considered provisions, including measures to support awareness of and access to the scheme. These include the requirement for a public information campaign and an explicit provision that applicants will not incur a fee when making an application. That said, and while there is much merit in the objectives of the Bill and I commend the drafters for the fact that it has catalysed and expedited Government action, I am advised by the Office of the Attorney General that it is not currently of a standard to have it enacted as it is and it would clearly need significant work.

Notwithstanding the policy and legal issues with the Bill that I have outlined, I want to reiterate my appreciation to Deputy Ó Snodaigh and others for their work in bringing it forward and for helping to further raise awareness of this important matter. I too want to commend Kieran Rose, Karl Hayden and Brian Sheehan for their consistent campaigning in respect of this issue. They, along with us, will want to ensure that we get legislation on the Statute Book as quickly as possible that can be of benefit to those men who are still alive. Obviously the scheme I am drafting will also apply in a posthumous way and people will be able to apply for disregards in respect of deceased relatives. I am very conscious that those who were unfairly criminalised by these anti-homosexual laws and their loved ones have waited a long time for a

scheme by which their convictions can be disregarded. It is clearly a goal that is widely shared in this House. I believe that the legislative scheme I will shortly be bringing forward offers the speediest route to achieving this in a way that is workable, equitable and accessible. It will clearly set out the offences in scope and will be comprehensive in setting out the disregard criteria and legal effects, along with the procedures for making, considering and determining applications, and for independent reviews of refused applications, among other essential matters. As mentioned, I will be bringing forward the scheme as an amendment on Committee Stage to the Criminal Law and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026. I know I will get the support of Deputies when these amendments come through and obviously Deputies may want to put forward their own further amendments in respect of it on Report Stage or even on Committee Stage when they see the amendments coming through. The establishment of the scheme will serve as recognition of the moral wrong that these laws visited upon so many gay men. For those who unfairly incurred criminal records as a result it will provide a basis to finally remove this wholly undeserved stain on their good name.

I again thank those who moved the legislation. Deputy Ó Snodaigh's question last year prompted a motivation on my part to ensure the legislation could be enacted as quickly as possible. The best vehicle to do that is the miscellaneous provisions Bill. As I have said before, miscellaneous provisions Bills have huge advantages. You can get a lot of provisions into them. Once this provision comes in, it will provide the remedy that is so needed in this area.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank my colleague, an Teachta Ó Snodaigh, and the LGBT+ Restorative Justice Campaign for all of the work they have done on this. I will read a newspaper article. It is very brief.

A 24-year-old Blackrock man was remanded on his own bail today on a charge of gross indecency.

He was arrested by Garda John McCormack in Fairview Park on January 6 and charged with "committing an act of gross indecency" with an Englishman in the park.

Solicitor Maurice Walsh told Judge Thomas Fitzpatrick that there was no injured party as such, but that his client was "most abused" in the incident.

The defendant was remanded to February 10 for reports and the DPP's direction.

That was on 27 January 1992. It is quite hard to imagine this was so recent in our past. That was my first year in college. I was 18 years of age. That young man was 24. For most of his adult life he has had to carry and endure that stain. I hesitate to use that word because it should not be a stain or a stigma but that is effectively what was done to him. That was in 1992. Although it is historical, we are not talking about something that is ancient history. It is in our very recent past. It is very shocking to contemplate the fact that homosexuality was only decriminalised in 1993 and yet we have taken so many strides. However, when we take a step forward, we do not always look back to ensure we have tidied up and dealt with all of the consequences. In this instance, we clearly have not.

I welcome the fact that the Minister has responded to the pressure put on by an Teachta Ó Snodaigh, by the campaign groups and by other parties here. It is very good that he is bringing forward his own legislation. However, if it is the case that his legislation is delayed or that

there are blockages, there is legislation that can be worked on because that legislation was introduced this evening by an Teachta Ó Snodaigh.

We will all remember the campaign for same-sex marriage in 2015. I know I do. I walked the legs off myself. We knocked on doors and we talked to people. In the main, I found that people's attitudes were good and positive. It surprised me that there were still some conservative elements and some people who had a lot of hate in their heart and who were not able to make that change. However, love is love, or however you want to put it, and there was a majority decision on that day. I was in the city centre and the celebrations were absolutely fantastic. Everybody hugged each other and we all said "We did it." However, it was not done and it was not finished. We need to ensure that we bring everybody along and that we do not leave people like that young man behind or leave them with that stain, stigma or whatever word we might want to use. As we often say, there is still unfinished business.

The discussion we are having this evening, prompted by an Teachta Ó Snodaigh and the campaign group, is very timely given that there has been a noticeable rise in homophobic attacks and abuse. That can be heard in the coarsening of language and seen online, including in that awful place, the manosphere. You also see high-profile people like Brendan Courtney talking about their own experiences. Mr. Courtney was attacked last year and he has talked about the rise of an anti-gay rhetoric. He said that there is anti-gay rhetoric building. We should do everything and anything we can, collectively as a Parliament and as a people, to call a halt to that. Passing this legislation sends a very clear signal not just to those people who are impacted and members of the LGBTIQI+ community, but also to those people who seek to participate in the rise of homophobic rhetoric, anti-gay activity and all of that hate and awfulness.

A pardon is not good enough. There must be a disregard. There was never any offence committed so there is nothing to be pardoned. There must be a disregard. We have to be absolutely unequivocal about that. There is cross-party support for this legislation. That can be seen. Other parties have signed it, which is really welcome. The Government has also indicated support for the legislation. If the Minister is going to introduce his own Bill, that is grand. Let him do it quickly and we will work with him to ensure it is passed quickly. If he is not going to introduce his own legislation, I ask that he work with us on our legislation.

It is rare to stand in the Dáil Chamber and find that everyone is agreeing with each other. However, we might look around afterwards and ask, even though we all stood here agreeing with each other, what was the end result? The end result has to be the quick passage of meaningful legislation so that what we all agree was a grave injustice can be righted for those people who were wrongly convicted. An apology is fine but the disregard is what people want. There was never an offence committed so there is no need for any pardon. A disregard is what is needed. I commend an Teachta Ó Snodaigh, the members of all of the campaign groups and the other parties that have signed this legislation. I really do hope that this time next year, or even in a couple of months' time, we will have this legislation passed and that the work will be done. We are all in agreement so there is literally nothing stopping us from doing this.

Deputy Máire Devine: It is time Bill was dealt with. It is good to see that the Minister has acted on the prompting of my colleague Deputy Ó Snodaigh. It is good to have this debate in the Chamber. I thank everybody who has got it to this stage, including the guys up in the

Gallery who have pushed for it. The Minister promised this would happen in February but he has acknowledged that he is a few weeks behind. I hope he is going to rectify that and get it to Committee, Report and Final Stages.

This about putting wrongs to right and lifting State-imposed burdens that destroyed lives. As a member of the rainbow caucus within the Oireachtas, I will state we seek a speedy resolution to this and urge that the Bill be passed. It is but one of the 95 recommendations set out in a report published in 2023. Today, we are focusing on the establishment of a legislative scheme to enable the disregard of relevant criminal records.

There was violent persecution and entrapment of those suspected of male same-sex intimacy. They were deliberately hunted by the State authorities. They were hunted to humiliate them and their families, to put their jobs in jeopardy, and to cause their landlords, local churches, clubs and so on to learn about them. Every aspect of life was threatened by the State authorities. They were interrogated and fired from their jobs. Moral panic was enthusiastically encouraged, aided and abetted by State agencies. This fuelled further moral panic.

The decriminalisation of sexual acts between men was officially achieved in 1993. As was said earlier, this removed the colonial-era laws of the Brits that had previously been in force here. Among the activists involved was a man with whom I served a term, the bold former Senator, David Norris. He took the legal challenge. He worked on it for 16 years and took the challenge in 1987.

His tenacity and his boldness have to be acknowledged, as do the guys in the Chamber from the LGBT+ Restorative Justice Campaign. They did not let go and did not back down.

We need to acknowledge what happened prior to 1993 and the suffering that the secrecy brought. It is known too well in many sectors in Ireland. We are good at secrets, we are good at hiding, we are good at locking away, we are good at humiliating and we are good at isolating and hunting others who may be perceived as different.

There were 900 odd convictions. Those included young 15- to 17-year-olds who were convicted for intimate behaviour. It was under the British occupation and their rules at the time, but it was also carried on with our own rules within this State. We did not seem to be bothered about having a look at them and trying to change them to make things better from a human rights perspective. It seemed like a throwback to Victorian era, but it is recent and, as Deputy O'Reilly said, it is within easy living memory.

We also had members of the Defence Forces who were convicted in military courts for having same-sex sexual relationships. To be discharged dishonourably and shamed must have been horrific for them.

Like many working class inner-city girls in the 1980s, I did not feel that I had a future in this country. I left and started nursing in Brighton. I did not know about this stuff, but Brighton was like a Mecca for gay and bisexual people to gather and feel safe. It was a safe enough haven. There was a lot of different hatred towards them, but it was a safe enough haven. I was a young student nurse, a Dub from Dublin 8. I told my friend Ciarán about me being present in an admissions ward and the British police came along. They were not arresting me at that time but they came along with a young man who was from the country in Ireland. He was from

Tipperary. He was bound by his hands and feet. They literally threw him in the door of the hospital. He had fled from Ireland, as so many others that I met in the small Irish community in Brighton had, because there was nothing there for them. They could not live their lives as they wanted to. They were a shame on their families. As Deputy O'Reilly said, a stigma existed. They fled and were disregarded. They were sent away and exported.

It was also the time of the very beginnings of the HIV epidemic, and it was that double whammy. Some of the poor young men who were struggling with being far from home and being disregarded by home also contracted HIV. The fear that was around at the time was just enormous among all the population. They did not have anybody to turn to. They did not have the comforting warm embrace of a mam, dad, brother or a sister. They survived very much alone and that was an absolute tragedy when I think back on it. I was very upset by it at the time but I did not know what to do because none of us were sure what this epidemic would bring. It brought a lot of sadness to already isolated and emotionally impoverished people.

I have a couple of asks of the Minister of State. The first is that we progress the Bill whatever way we can. The Minister said he would. Whatever way we can, let us progress it urgently. Second, can we please find funding for research into historical cases and the social history - the wrong history - of what occurred in this country prior to 1993?

We need to be very proud when this Bill passes because it will have repercussions internationally. It will reverberate around those countries that still have this criminalisation and show us in a positive light as did the marriage equality referendum. It will send a message to a very disturbed world, a world that has recently risen up with much hate and a lot of chaos. I urge the Minister of State to act with urgency. Let us get this across the line. Tá sé in am.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I really just wanted to be here to show my support for this Bill and to thank Deputy Ó Snodaigh and everybody who participated in this Bill, as well as the people up in the Gallery. It is incredibly important in this day and age. I am really saddened that we are in a situation that there has been a kick back against such a positive move over the past number of years towards understanding and accepting difference. That is really sad. I find it really difficult when I hear some of the horrific language being used by people on protests against immigration, the LGBTQ community and educating children. We are really going down a very dark road and it is something that everyone of us needs to stand up against. This Bill is part of that.

I find it really difficult to understand. I grew up in the north inner city as a teenager in the late 1970s and 1980s. I remember Fairview Park. I was a teenager when a man was beaten to death by people I knew and went to school with. We did not understand because we had been programmed and given information all our lives that this was a horrible thing that these men were doing. A lot of people of my generation and the generations before that believed it. It led to the situation we are in now.

We lived in an extremely oppressive and regressive State for many decades from the reds under the bed with Jimmy Gralton, the only Irishman ever to be excluded from his own country because he a communist, and young working class people, boys and girls, were sent to institutions for the most minor of things. They were sent away from their families for years into the likes of St. Joseph's industrial school in Clonmel and Letterfrack. There were many places. We had the Magdalen laundries as well where some young girls were locked up for the

rest of their lives, and for what? That is the regressive and the oppressive State. We should never forget that because the minute we try to gloss over that, that is when we start to have these regressive people coming back and we need to stand up against that.

I listened to and read the Minister's statement. I welcome the fact that there has been movement on it, but why do these things take so long? Why did it take a parliamentary question from Deputy Ó Snodaigh for the Department and Minister to say that we need to deal with this? This should have been dealt with.

I read the working group's report. It was one of the main recommendations in the working group. As the Minister said, the number one recommendation was "...a legislative scheme be established to enable the disregard of relevant criminal records and this Bill seeks to deliver on that recommendation". Why did it take so long for us to get something like this done?

It is really important that we get it done as quickly as we can. It is the least that we can do as a Legislature. It is the least that we can do in this country to send the message out to those people who are left and to those who have passed away who did nothing wrong.

It was the State that was wrong, and the State needs to apologise. I hate to use the word "convictions". They need justice. They did absolutely nothing wrong and that is why the State needs to make their voices heard. I appreciate everybody who has taken part in this debate and those who have been part and parcel of bringing the Bill to where we are now. We really need to move on. Some people do not have the time to hear the words that they have been vindicated.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: I start by thanking Deputies Ó Snodaigh, Nash, Rice, Murphy and O'Gorman and former Deputy and now Uachtarán Catherine Connolly for sponsoring this important Bill. I thank the LGBT Restorative Justice Campaign, in particular my dear friend, Brian Sheehan, for its incredible campaigning on this over many years. I also want to acknowledge the Minister and Department's commitment and urgency to pass legislation that will realise the aims of the Bill. For that I thank them sincerely.

The Bill is named as a disregard for historic offences for consensual sexual activity between men and aims to clear the names and records of men who historically engaged in sexual activity and were convicted of a crime for doing so. It should be noted by all good-minded people that nothing these men did then in Ireland or now anywhere was immoral or criminal. It hurt no one. Sexual relationships between consenting adults are a normal, natural and healthy part of the human experience, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. By contrast, it was the State that acted criminally and immorally, passing laws to persecute those who loved and celebrated each other and did the normal and natural things that all humans do and have done since the dawn of time.

It should go without saying that the criminalisation of sexual relationships between men has an awful history and, just as awfully, still has support in other parts of the world. Thankfully, Ireland, on the whole, has moved past those times. Thankfully, we recognise that love between adults in all its incarnations is something we should not just tolerate or legalise but embrace and celebrate. Thankfully, we play a major role on the world stage for gay rights. I pay particular tribute to the courageous campaigners who did so much to help Ireland realise that, including people like former Senator David Norris, former Uachtarán Mary Robinson, Tony Walsh, and all of the campaigners for marriage equality in Ireland in 2015.

In 2015, a group of friends and I got together to raise funds for marriage equality between Irish citizens in New York city. We thought it would be a small quiet affair, a humble table quiz, but crowds of people showed up. Companies sponsored prizes and we raised thousands of euro for marriage equality, doing our small bit from 3,000 miles away. I want to pay tribute to my friends Tara Coppleson, Simon McDonnell, Quentin Fottrell and Orla Tinsley for doing this work, among other campaigning, to make marriage equality a reality.

I remember weeks later watching a TV screen in a pub in Manhattan in the early hours as the results rolled in from Dublin Castle, watching the cheering crowds as Ireland proudly declared the to the world that love is love and all you need is grá. It pains me immensely, as it does many others, to think of the generations of people who went before us and did not hear those roars of acceptance, those cheers of jubilation and victory over a law and system that had too long denied them. I think of the men, young and old, who had to hide a part of themselves from society, family or friends and found solace only in private places. The light they shared in those private places kept a light burning for so many that came later, even when it seemed like there was no light at all. It was their courage, fortitude and unapologetic actualisation that led the way for so many. We, as a State, are indebted to them and to the lives they led under a State that treated them so badly.

As the Bill shockingly lays bare in its Schedules, Ireland has had a law against these acts on the books as far back as 1634, by edict of the Parliament at Westminster in England. At many times since then it was a capital offence, punishable by death. Most in this House know it was only decriminalised in 1993. Shockingly, military law still refers to the old 19th century criminal laws which state it is an offence in the Defence Forces under the Defence Act 2007, although in 1993 the then defence Minister, David Andrews, affirmed in the House that it would not be considered in breach of the regulations of the Defence Forces.

Let me be very clear. I unequivocally condemn every administration - British, Free State and Republican - that enacted, defended, enforced and supported these heinous laws over a 359-year time period. To date, no apology for those in the Defence Forces who were stripped of medals, discharged, court-martialed or otherwise isolated or persecuted by their superiors has been forthcoming. No meaningful disregard has occurred. No restoration of good name, military status or military decoration has occurred. That must change with the Bill or other legislation and it must change as soon as possible.

For those men whom these historical laws affected I want, for my part, to extend my sincere apologies that the State has not granted you and your families restitution for the normal act of being gay. It was beyond any human decency to have persecuted you in any way, not to mind in the profession of serving your country. A 2023 report from the Department of Justice specifically pointed out that should a person have been discharged with ignominy from the Defence Forces as a result of any of the above offences, subject to the eligibility criteria, the Department of Defence and Defence Forces consider whether any medals awarded that were withdrawn as a result of this discharge with ignominy may be returned to the affected person or their family if deceased. I strongly support that view as not just a symbol of restitution, but a recompense on behalf of the State for the individuals and their families who served the State so well yet were treated so poorly. As former defence Minister David Andrews said at the time of decriminalisation, the Defence Forces would modify regulations in light of the repeal of anti-gay laws. It stands to reason that any disregards under the Bill or other legislation would

also apply to relevant offences under military legislation and rules of conduct. This Bill does that and it is critical that it does. It is of the utmost importance that these crimes of the State against those who served it are remedied. I would be grateful if the Minister and Department would confirm in the remarks at the end of the debate whether, through support of the Bill on Committee Stage or by other means, he and others in his Government will commit to such actions of restitution.

I am conscious that behind each of these laws and convictions there are stories of real human beings living in the world, just being who they were born to be, being human and part of the natural order of things, yet they were forced to undergo horrendous treatment by the State in terms of criminalisation and punishment that no human should have to endure just for being human. It is in sombre recognition of those people and all of that painful history that I support the Bill and commend it to the House for urgent enactment by the Oireachtas.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I begin by thanking Sinn Féin and Deputy Ó Snodaigh for all of their work on this. I was delighted to cosign the Bill on behalf of the Social Democrats. It is now 33 years since homosexuality was decriminalised, but some men are still living with the negative impacts of criminalisation. Let us be clear. The prosecution and conviction of gay and bi men for consensual sex was a gross violation of their human rights and did immeasurable damage. These arrests and convictions destroyed lives. These laws also had a negative impact on those who were not convicted because the mere threat of prosecution was used to harass people in the community.

The archaic laws also had a major impact on the provision of public services, including HIV and AIDS prevention. The State must right the wrongs of the past and we are running out of time for some of these men. The Government must act urgently to disregard these historical convictions and deliver true equality for LGBT people in Ireland. I welcome the remarks of the Minister that the Government will make progress on this because we have delayed far too long.

As others have mentioned, there is a very long history when it comes to these laws in Ireland - almost 400 years of history.

The Act of the Punishment of the Vice of Buggery Ireland 1634 was the first Act of an Irish parliament to punish the sexual act between adult men. Under that Act, sex between men was a capital offence punishable by death. This act was repealed by the Offences against the Person (Ireland) Act 1829, which retained the death penalty on conviction of buggery. This 1829 Act was subsequently repealed by the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, which removed the punishment of death upon conviction and instead classified buggery as an offence by penal servitude for life. It also introduced the offence of attempted buggery, which was punishable by a sentence of penal servitude of up to ten years. The Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885 criminalised gross indecency between adult men with a maximum penalty of two years imprisonment with or without hard labour. The 1885 Act subsequently extended criminalisation to all sexual acts between men. The 1861 and 1885 offences dealing with buggery and gross indecency applied to both consensual and non-consensual acts. These laws remained in place following the foundation of this State and, in many ways, the new Irish Government doubled down on them. They remained in place until they were repealed by the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 1993. That is within most of our lifetimes. These leave

a long legacy of structural and systemic homophobia. I shudder to think about the number of people who suffered under these laws over 400 years.

In 2018, on the 25th anniversary of decriminalisation, the Taoiseach at the time, Leo Varadkar, issued an apology to the LGBT community on behalf of the State. Subsequently, a process was commenced to right the wrongs of the past. It is great to see we are moving forward in that regard with both this Bill and the Minister's commitments. This disregard scheme should be open to anyone who believes the law was used unfairly to police, arrest, charge or convict them because of their sexual orientation.

There are various accounts of how people were targeted by these laws. People were targeted by public order, vagrancy and lodging laws and other police operations. There may be the need for future work as to how the laws impacted on women and trans people, particularly in the context of their treatment through the family courts. We must not forget them. It is important we make this scheme as inclusive as possible for the wide breadth of the LGBTQI+ community.

It is important that any effort made by the Government must ensure people are encouraged to participate in this scheme. There are a number of ways in which participation in the scheme can be encouraged. First, it must be acknowledged that many people will be hard to reach. It is important, therefore, that the scheme is promoted widely, is open and accessible and ensures confidentiality. A large number of LGBTQI+ people left Ireland to find safer places to live. Efforts should be made to promote the disregard scheme abroad, including in countries such as the UK, US, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Irish embassies and consulates must promote the scheme once established. In addition, the Irish LGBTQI+ community abroad should be funded to promote the scheme within their own communities. At home, community groups across the island should be supported and funded to participate in the scheme and encourage local communities to take part. Any scheme set up by the Government will not be worth it unless we ensure participation and make it possible for people who suffered under these laws to meaningfully participate. It is important that this process is as accessible as possible and that the person appointed by the Minister undertakes a trauma-informed approach in line with international best practice.

It is important that if there is any onus to provide information or documents, it rests with the State rather than the individual. If information or documents are not available, the person's testimony should be accepted. Care must be taken not to retraumatise people during the disregard process. The disregard working group set out an extensive list of human rights and equality principles. In its next step, it should set out how the principles will be put into practice. For example, all staff working in the scheme should be trained in the areas of trauma and human rights. In addition, we should look abroad to see how this is best carried out in other countries.

Most importantly, for the disregard to be effective, it must be placed within a broader context. We must consider the full impact that criminalisation has had on LGBTQI+ people, communities and wider societies.

Many of our current LGBTQI+ community organisations across the country are underfunded. They struggle to support people and communities who were hurt by these anti-LGBT laws, policies and practices. Additional State funding must be provided to create and sustain services, particularly for older people. That level of funding and support is currently not in place. Parts of the country have no existing services. The State has failed to provide these

services, and I have no doubt that criminalisation is one of the key reasons the State has never stepped in to support the community during those 70 years under criminalisation. These community organisations have fallen behind. They do not receive the same level of support that other community organisations receive. That wrong must be righted. We must provide additional supports. There are whole counties across the country that have no dedicated community services and supports. I ask TDs from those counties to start advocating for those services for the communities they represent.

If truly restorative justice is to be adopted, it must address a wider set of policy issues. These include but are not limited to access to timely trans healthcare; banning conversion practices; robust hate crime prevention; improved sexual and mental health services; and commencement of the Health (Assisted Human Reproduction) Act. It has sat on the books for far too long. The Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, needs to get her finger out and commence and introduce a second Act because people are waiting. LGBT families exist today who are waiting for their rights. We are waiting far too long and I am getting very frustrated with the delays.

We also need to have a discussion about intersex rights, and the list goes on. We have raised these issues repeatedly and I frankly feel ignored by the Government when we raise them. I do so time and again. On the last occasion I spoke about this, it was with the Tánaiste. I reminded him that Ireland is ranked 15th in Europe in terms of LGBTQI+ human rights and policy protections by ILGA-Europe, an international body that ranks all the countries across Europe. We have been stuck in the mid leagues on LGBT rights for far too long. We are not making progress. I ask the Government to come out and set an ambitious goal in this regard. The Social Democrats have called on the Government to set a policy goal of being the best place in Europe to be LGBTQI+. It should set that as a goal and take the steps over the remaining years of this Government to achieve that. If the Government truly means what it has said around the disregard scheme and supporting the community, it will set that as a policy aim. It will put a policy in place and try to achieve that goal and move up through those rankings. I ask the Minister of State, in his concluding remarks, to make that commitment to the community tonight. The only way we are going to achieve true restorative justice is by tackling the issues faced by the community. Today, there are people who are left on waiting lists for trans healthcare and experience hate crimes out in the community. We have issues today. This is not just about the past; it is about the present and the future. I urge the Government to take action on it.

Finally, I thank the campaigners on this - Karl Hayden, Kieran Rose, Brian Sheehan and Ciarán Brady - as well as the Gay Project in Cork which partnered with the legal firm, Clifford Chance. I also thanks its barristers, Ms Céile Varley and Mr. Ciaran Bracken, and the whole team of people involved in this campaign over a very long period of time. They put in a lot of work, effort, research and campaigning. They reached out to people and went through historical records. The amount of work that has gone into this has been phenomenal, and I commend them on doing all of that work. I know some of the same individuals are involved in many of the other campaigns I mentioned, and they continue to advocate for those as well. I thank everyone who paved the way for the Ireland we have today. I commend the campaigners and activists who continue to call on the State to do better because the State can do better.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: To begin, I express my deep appreciation to Deputy Ó Snodaigh for bringing this Bill forward and continuing to put his experience and passion behind this particular issue. I also thank those Deputies who are cosignatories of the Bill as well as the Deputies who have spoken and joined this debate tonight. I appreciate the openness of both the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, to engage with the core principles of this particular Bill and their commitment to bring forward amendments to it. As a cosignatory of the Bill, there is real openness to have a constructive debate on this Bill and look at amendments to see how we can strengthen elements of it.

It is important this is done quickly. While recognising the real achievement of being here and debating this Bill today on the floor of the House, this has taken a long time. It has taken too long. I hope, in the spirit the Minister and Minister of State have come into this House and made commitments to move this swiftly, we see that brought forward.

The reason we are here today with the Bill finally arriving at the floor of Dáil Éireann, despite the elapse of time, is because of the tireless efforts of a number of campaigners over many years. Some of them are here in the Gallery and many are watching online.

I wish to recognise that tireless work on this, and indeed, many issues. The rest of us across the LGBTI+ community and I owe them many, if not all, of the rights that we enjoy today as citizens - rights that had to be fought for. I am deeply grateful to their work over many years.

The consequences of a legal conviction are very real. There is the direct impact on the person who has been convicted in terms of a fine or maybe a prison sentence. There is a social stigma. We know that stigma is one that will continue very often for a long time after a person has served their time and has been released. There is the impact on families. There are very practical issues around the loss of income. There is the practical necessity of separation when somebody is incarcerated. Again, the stigma that attaches to somebody who has been convicted can often attach to their wider family. They can see exclusion within their local community. That power of the State to officially sanction its own citizens has real meaning and real strength. It is one of the true defining factors of a state that it has that power to punish its citizens.

In my time as equality Minister, I had the opportunity to travel to Poland and meet with leaders of Polish LGBTI+ groups. This was at the time when the Law and Justice party was in government there. They were telling me how that party was co-opting and marshalling apparatuses of the state. I was struck by what they said about how the government there had used the ombudsman for children in Poland, as an organisation, and had used the sanction of the state to target LGBTI+ groups that were working with young people. It was casting that work as some sort of act of child abuse or grooming. I know the role that the Office of the Ombudsman for Children plays in this country. Yes, it can be a real thorn of the side of a government, but always in a good sense. It is always trying to make things better for all children, particularly the most vulnerable children. What I learned on my trip to Poland illustrated to me what happens when the weight of power of a state is aimed against someone for something that is so basic and intrinsic for them. The power of the State is very real. That is why a process for lifting or removing State sanction, when that sanction was implemented for the wrong reasons, is so important.

I think we all accept that a person's sexuality is an innate part of their humanity and that the expression of that sexuality is part of a body of rights protected by human rights and

constitutional rights. In that context, we have to recognise that Irish law made being gay a crime in this country. It made being in love with another man and acting on that love a crime. It made taking a fancy for a guy and acting on that fancy - something as basic as that - a crime. It criminalised those very basic elements of humanity. The Bill we are debating seeks to make some reparation for that treatment. What we are doing today is entirely consistent with a set of actions that Ireland has taken over the past 15 or 20 years to recognise, and try to make some recompense for, how our State treated other minorities and other vulnerable groups after we gained our independence. We can think of our treatment of women who became pregnant outside of marriage. We can think of our treatment of the children of those women. We can think of our treatment of members of the Traveller community. For each of those groups, certain steps have been taken. There are other groups that the State probably needs to do more to recognise, particularly those who were institutionalised for a disability or for having a mental health illness.

Deputy Donnelly rightly drew our attention to the increasing levels of homophobia and transphobia in our society. Deputy Rice spoke to that issue as well. While it is positive to be here today looking to advance important legislation, it is sad to say that Dublin and Ireland today are less safe for members of the LGBTI+ community than ten years ago. I have seen that retreat in safety in my own lifetime. One naively assumes that progress and enhancement of rights is always going to be one way, but that it is not the case. I saw that in Poland. Hundreds of thousands of Hungarians saw that in their own country, but hopefully the pendulum of progress can begin to swing back now after Sunday's election results. We have seen a retreat in safety for members of the LGBTI+ community in our country. That is a source of real concern to me and many people in this House.

Bearing that in mind today, with the law that is before us we have an opportunity to clearly restate our values as an Oireachtas and as a country. We have an opportunity to recognise and right the wrong that was done to hundreds of our citizens over many decades.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank the Deputies who have contributed to this important topic. It is important again to state that there is agreement across the House that we should introduce a disregard scheme to ensure that the unfairness of these convictions that were imposed upon Irish men in the 20th century can be removed and disregarded. As has been indicated, the disregard scheme is different from a pardon. In effect, it means that there should never have been convictions at all. While I accept what Deputy O'Gorman has said, I am very disappointed and disturbed to hear that Ireland is a more threatening place now in terms of potential attacks on gay people. That is a matter of extreme concern to me. I have heard it from others before. We need to emphasise repeatedly that attacking people or targeting people because of inherent characteristics within their personality, sexuality or make-up is completely unacceptable. In a republic, that type of behaviour is abominable. We must completely re-emphasise that.

I thank Deputy Ó Snodaigh for introducing the Bill. The next time we will be discussing this issue in the Dáil will be when I am down in the committee room for Committee Stage of the miscellaneous provisions Bill. I want to try to get that legislation enacted as quickly as possible. I want to see the disregard scheme up and running, so that people are aware of it, can be informed about it and can avail of it. We will then be able to respond to the unfairness of those convictions.

I want to make one other point. Maybe I am trespassing on territory that is not my responsibility as a legislator or a member of the Government. The Supreme Court decision in the case of *Norris v. Ireland* is a decision of the Supreme Court that remains standing. The narrow interpretation of the constitutional right to privacy that was set out in the *Norris* judgment is an issue of concern to individuals. Obviously, that is not a matter for me to look upon. It is a matter for another arm of government if the circumstances should ever arise.

I thank Deputy Ó Snodaigh and the other Deputies who have put forward this Bill. Responsibility is now on me to ensure I can bring the Committee Stage amendments promptly before the Dáil to ensure we can get the scheme up and running as soon as possible.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I wish it was this good all the time. I thank the Minister for his positive comments throughout - from the get-go when I asked the parliamentary question to the First Stage, when I talked to him afterwards and the debate today. I thank all of those who took part, including na Teachtaí Louise O'Reilly, Máire Devine, Paul Donnelly, Eoin Hayes, Pádraig Rice and Roderic O'Gorman agus, dar ndóigh, an tAire féin.

6 o'clock

Gabhaim buíochas leo mar, go minic, bíonn sé deacair daoine a fháil chun páirt a ghlacadh i ndíospóireachtaí tráthnóna Déardaoin. Gabhaim buíochas leo siúd a sheas an fód agus a bhí anseo. Is léir ón oiread daoine a bhí anseo don díospóireacht cé chomh tábhachtach is atá sé mar ábhar. Nuair atá seans againn ceart a dhéanamh nuair atá ciapadh tar éis a bheith déanta ar dhaoine, ba chóir go dtapaímid an deis chun ceart a dhéanamh agus an rud sin a chur i gceart.

It has been a good debate. I thank those who contributed today and those who have been raising our awareness over the years, in particular the LGBT+ Restorative Justice Campaign. I mentioned Brian, Kieran and Karl earlier. Some of them are with us today. There are also the drafters, Céile and Ciaran.

I draw people's attention to the booklet they produced, *Disregard and Redress*. It is a useful introduction if there are people listening or looking in who are interested in the topic. In its few short pages, it outlines the effects much better than I can on the people affected by the criminalisation of homosexuality in this State and, when people went before the courts, what they were faced with. Mention was made of Declan Flynn. There are a number of them in Rathmines and so on in the seventies. I was a very young child at that stage but I remember the eighties, similar to Deputy Donnelly. The one I remember is when Charles Self was stabbed to death in 1982. It was not the fact of the horrific death. That was bad enough but it was the glee - I do not know whether I am using the wrong word - with which the gardaí took it upon themselves to seek out nearly every gay person in this city, interrogate them, visit their workplaces and hound them day in and day out until they gave their fingerprints or accounted for their movements, just by virtue of the fact they had got it into their heads that a person who was gay had committed the killing and stabbing of Charles Self. I do not think that murder has ever been brought to a conclusion but its effects are explained in this booklet.

The booklet was put together to encourage us as parliamentarians to address this issue. That is when, in many ways, I came to this issue. A redress or disregard process is not something that happens all the time. We have a relatively new State. It is 100 years old and still grappling with the legacy of colonial laws. Every couple of years in this Parliament, we have legislation

repealing hundreds or thousands of old colonial laws. We do that but the legacy here is still live. My colleague, Deputy O'Reilly, quoted from a case in 1992. There are probably more.

I have taken a cursory glance through files and shared some of the documentation with others. If people want them, I am happy to share. It is just what is available in this new modern age in the archive of newspapers online. You put in a search and, all of a sudden, get results. I was only searching for two words: "gross indecency". I did not search for the other charges that might have been brought. I have not finished. I have about 80 pages - one page per newspaper article. I have 30 more years to do since the founding of the State. That is me, an amateur historian, throwing in a word.

We need to find out the full effects and we will when the disregard scheme is up and running. We will hear people's stories or, maybe more so, become aware of them, especially those who, as my colleague, Deputy Devine, said, emigrated. There are so many people. I and probably everybody in this Chamber know people who feared prosecution and the persecution that came afterwards, and sometimes before. Even my cursory glance showed people not turning up in court. It is obvious they got the hell out of Dodge before their whole world collapsed. In many cases, it did collapse. They had to leave their jobs and had their full details published in local newspapers and endured the scandal that drew upon them. They then became open to being targeted by conservative elements in small communities. *The Valley of the Squinting Windows* springs to mind. There was definitely that kind of view in small-world Ireland, not rural Ireland but Ireland as a whole. You had it in urban communities as well. That persecution, prosecution, marginalisation, isolation and ostracisation went with it. We are trying to right that in a small way.

This is not the end of this. There were 95 recommendations. Many have been addressed. There are still some we need to address. By us having this debate today, I hope it sends the message we will not stand by and allow the comments that Deputies O'Gorman and Donnelly referred to. There is now an increase in homophobia again. As a Parliament, we are united on that and will not stand for that. It is not just coarseness in debate or discourse. It goes beyond that to physical attacks now. It seems to be becoming acceptable to attack people who stand up for gay rights or LGBTQ rights or even speak about it. I know that on my Facebook tonight I will be targeted just for having the gall, in their eyes, to stand up and raise an issue. It is easy for me; I just delete, hide, block. I am not the one who has to move around the city and make a display of affection with another man or another woman. That can draw physical attacks from some of these idiots. We have to stand against that type of attitude. We have seen it in other countries in the EU and we will not tolerate it here. We have come a long way and need to stay well away from that which gave us the title of a conservative society. We are not. We are a welcoming society and always have been but there have always been elements which have wished to make us a close-minded, conservative and retrograde society.

Gabhaim buíochas arís le gach duine as a bheith liom sa díospóireacht, go háirithe iad siúd a thug tacaíocht dom leis an mBille ar an gCéad Chéim. Tá a fhios agam nár chóir dom labhairt faoin Uachtarán ach bhí sí anseo nuair a bhog muid an Bille seo ar an gCéad Chéim. Tá súil agam go mbeidh sí i láthair nuair a théann an Bille os comhair an Uachtaráin. Beidh sí an-sásta go raibh sí mar chuid den phróiseas, idir thús agus dheireadh an phróisis.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 6.10 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 21 Aibreán 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.10 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 21 April 2026.