



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 21 Aibreán 2026

Tuesday, 21 April 2026

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome everybody in the Public Gallery. For the benefit of the public, speaking times have been agreed by the House and are displayed on the clock. If the clock turns red, a Member's time is up. When a Member rises, their time begins. Where time is shared, the Chair will indicate this. All contributions must be made through the Chair, and every Member speaking is entitled to a fair hearing. Our constituents expect our debate to be respectful discourse. I thank the Members.

I now call on Deputy Mary Lou McDonald under Standing Order 38.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Can we extend a very warm welcome to Margaret Loftus, who is in the Public Gallery and is appearing before the justice committee today?

The Taoiseach has published his spring economic forecast and it tells a very clear story. The Government expects the State's surplus to grow from €5 billion to over €9 billion, meaning billions more flowing into the Exchequer. The Government is taking in billions more, yet people cannot afford to heat their homes. People cannot pay their electricity bills. It is as though there are two different realities in this country: one in the Taoiseach's forecast of growth and surpluses and another at kitchen tables across the land, where there are cold homes, mounting bills and real fear.

The energy crisis is not easing; it is intensifying. Electricity prices are forecast to rise again and the Taoiseach's own Ministers warn of increases of up to 9% in the months ahead. We saw repeated hikes last year and now more are coming. More than 300,000 households are already in arrears on their energy bills, yet the Taoiseach's response is not to act but to comment, not to intervene but to observe. It is as if the Government is a spectator in this crisis rather than a government responsible for fixing it.

Over 750,000 households rely on home heating oil, and their bills have doubled in a matter of weeks. Last week, my colleague an Teachta Pearse Doherty spoke about a young working

couple, both in employment, who have gone three weeks without heat because they cannot afford it. They did everything right.

They have worked hard, studied and built their lives and still they cannot heat their homes.

Families now face rising school transport costs and the return of junior and leaving certificate fees. That is what the Government is bringing to people's doors. It has scrapped energy credits and refused even to cut carbon tax on home heating oil when people needed relief most. While pressure mounts, the Government pulls supports. The moment households need help, it steps back. When intervention is required, it chooses inaction. Now it seems its message is that things will get worse and it will look at it again in October. That is six months away.

This is exactly what the Government did last year. It delayed and waited and when October's budget did come, its decisions actually left people worse off, so here we go again. On the one hand, the Government talks of rising prices and further shocks while on the other, it tells people to struggle on and wait. That is unacceptable. The Government has been warned about soaring energy costs and has been told that its measures are inadequate and that people need real intervention but it did not listen.

This failure is not confined to energy. We see it in housing. This weekend, figures show eviction notices surging since the Government's rent hike Bill came in - exactly as we warned. People see the same pattern. The Government does not listen, it delays and it makes the wrong calls and ordinary people pay the price.

On the back of the Government's spring economic statement today, the question is simple. With billions more available to it, why does the Government choose not to act for people who cannot heat their homes or meet their electricity bills? How does it justify refusing to act on the cost of home heating oil while prices remain so high? Why does it refuse to introduce energy credits when people desperately need them? Why does it not bring forward meaningful cost-of-living supports?

The Taoiseach: I do not agree with the Deputy's analysis. The Government understands fully the pressure people are under as a result of the various cost shocks over recent years from Covid to the invasion of Ukraine, when inflation was at its peak of 10%. We understand that. Prices are at an elevated high and now the war in the Middle East has again created a significant shock in terms of fossil fuel supply globally and prices. Every country across the world is grappling with this reality.

We have responded in a substantial, targeted and sustainable way - not just a global sum of €750 million but in terms of food production, road haulage and a reduction in excise duties, which benefits everybody. We will continue to keep a focus on this. In terms of home heating and other issues, we have to look at more permanent ways to ease pressures on families, particularly from energy pricing more generally.

The Deputy referenced the Government surplus but, as she knows, there is an Exchequer deficit of about €1.8 billion. The Deputy knows what is happening here. We are transferring funding from the Exchequer into the investment funds so it is not as if there are billions hanging round in a drawer somewhere to just take and spend. The Deputy surely knows that. What is happening with that funding is that it is being invested in people, housing, energy and

infrastructure and offshore wind projects. That is what ISIF is doing - solar farm financing, grid expansion and interconnectors, battery storage systems for renewables, building energy retrofit programmes, the EV charging clean public transport fleet, the circular economy, forestry carbon sequestration projects, national scale retrofit financing platforms, equity in large housing developments, delivery of nationwide housing supply, mixed tenure schemes, urban regeneration partnerships and regional housing projects. That is where the investments are happening and much more than that.

However, the Deputy seems to misunderstand that, or is she saying we should wind up the funds - the Future Ireland Fund and the Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund? The Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund is helping to fund the metro. Is the Deputy saying we should scrap the metro? Is she saying we should scrap these projects in which ISIF is investing? I think that would be a huge mistake. We are very clear that housing remains our ultimate priority. Infrastructure is key to everybody in the country. That is clear. Disability and child poverty are other issues. These are areas on which we have focused very strongly and are in a position to target.

The Deputy does not pay any heed to these factors. She seems to want to risk everything in the middle of this war. I think that would be a foolish thing to do. Notwithstanding what I have said, I think it does make sense, after a €750 million allocation so far, that we would look at how, structurally, we can ease the pressure on families permanently in the energy cost area. That will take a bit of work because we need to be targeted in how we allocate people's resources. That is a fundamental point that I think the Deputy consistently ignores.

An aidhm atá againn ná cabhair agus tacaíocht a thabhairt do dhaoine. Tá roinnt déanta againn. Níl aon amhras faoi sin. Is é seo ceann de na pacáistí is mó ar fud na hEorpa. Tá níos mó le déanamh againn. Beidh moltaí againn i gcomhthéacs na cáinainéise a bheidh againn i mí Dheireadh Fómhair. Beimid in ann an brú atá ar dhaoine a laghdú níos mó. Sin an aidhm atá againn.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: That is guff, plain and simple. The Taoiseach has given us a catalogue of his own failures. On housing, the metro and infrastructure, it is fail, fail, fail on his part. Now, as we learn that the projected surplus will grow from €5.1 billion to more than €9 billion, the Taoiseach has the poor mouth for struggling families. That is all he is offering. I do not know if the Taoiseach thinks that people live lives of fiction. I want him to hear very clearly that families are struggling now, today, in the here and now. Part of our economic resilience, and the health of our economy and our society, has to be to intervene when families are struggling. You do not leave them in the lurch. You do not leave hundreds of thousands of people unable to meet their electricity bills, or hundreds of thousands of people struggling to pay for their home heating oil. There is an obligation on the Government to listen, to hear and to intervene. Why will it not do that, with all of these additional billions that are now projected?

The Taoiseach: Retrofitting is not a failure. Two hundred and fifty thousand houses have been retrofitted. That is a success, and all of those families can enjoy lower bills as a result of that retrofitting.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They do not have lower bills.

The Taoiseach: The Government did not wait. The Deputy has to be honest that over the last number of years, we have brought in very significant schemes that permanently reduce the cost of living for people. The free primary and second level school books scheme has reduced costs for families with children going to school. We also have the free hot school meals, a very recent innovation, which also helps families. The national childcare scheme is a universal subsidy that helps to reduce the cost of childcare. In terms of the fuel allowance, we have extended that, and brought in 50,000 extra on the working family payment. We did not wait.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: You do not live in the real world.

The Taoiseach: In the budget, we took very concrete measures. A new baby grant of €280 is paid in addition to the first month of child benefit for children born or adopted on or after 1 December 2024. We have all of those measures. We have extended the free travel pass, and also the medical card for the over-70s. There are lots of things we have done. We are going to do more, and we will do more in the time ahead.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: You do not live in the real world.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I acknowledge Margaret Loftus and salute her courage.

Another week has passed, and the cost-of-living crisis continues to heap pressure on families who are struggling to make ends meet. When people look to the Government to give them some hope, it tells them to manage their expectations. They are left wondering what it takes to get the same urgent treatment it affords to sectoral interests. I am left asking the same thing.

Every day, the Taoiseach stands in the Dáil lecturing us about prudence and restraint. Of course, he is right to point to global instability as a driver of chaos. It is, clearly, but that instability cannot excuse his inaction at home. In fact, decisive action and cool heads are exactly what we need at a time of chaos. Unfortunately, the disarray internationally has infected the Government too. Just as Viktor Orbán lost his election in Hungary, it seems the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, has lost his sense of humour.

It is clear that Trump has lost the plot, and we are all paying the price, but the Government has lost its touch, not that it ever had it, really. Where are the cool heads? Where is the decisive action? As the spring economic forecast indicates, there is money there. It is how the Government is spending it that is the problem. Nowhere is that problem clearer than in the mixed messages coming from the Taoiseach's own Cabinet.

In here, the Taoiseach tells us he is acting prudently but in the media, the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance has transformed into the Minister for commentary and kite-flying, floating a stream of potential budget measures. In recent weeks, we have heard about saving scheme tax cuts and changes to inheritance tax; in the past 24 hours alone, new income tax measures and energy credits; and this morning, the Taoiseach is talking about new Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, grants. His shedsits are the latest - €14,000 tax free for people with large gardens. Where is the plan? Where are the supports for PAYE workers?

This is the failure of the Taoiseach's budget last year writ large. It is the original sin of his Government's lack of vision and ambition for the country. In October, there was no money for

the renewables revolution that we need. There was nothing for universal public childcare, yet the Government found €1 billion in tax breaks for developers and fast food chains. The question is obvious: how can the Government move quickly for some but not for others, when nearly 500,000 households are in arrears on their energy bills, grocery prices are rising and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is warning that electricity prices could go up by up to 9% this summer?

The Taoiseach is failing to introduce the systems change that is needed. Other countries like Spain are offering an alternative by investing heavily in renewables, recognising the link between tackling climate action, reducing household bills and securing the energy grid. Unlike the Irish Government, the Spanish Government has a vision. Will the Taoiseach give hope to hard-pressed PAYE workers, adopt targeted energy credits, support pay rises and invest in real climate action to insulate against energy shocks?

The Taoiseach: I appreciate very much the Deputy's sincerity in wanting to look after people under pressure. We have a similar position but I think we need an honest debate as well. The Deputy cannot just come in here and say we have no vision for investment in the grid. Where has she been in the last number of months when we announced an investment of up to €19 billion in the grid? I refer to the PR6, where we put substantial billions of equity into EirGrid. Why does the Deputy come in then and say something that is patently untrue? *Per capita*, I would say we have invested more than Spain. We are number one in Europe in terms of the integration of renewables to the grid. That is true.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: Also for data centres.

The Taoiseach: Let us have an honest debate where we can agree and disagree on the facts and let us not make up stuff that does not have any basis from a factual point of view.

In terms of the surplus, I repeat that is going into the funds, such as the Future Ireland Fund and the infrastructure and nature fund. The Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF, manages that and it is being invested in a whole range of areas including renewables, such as offshore and onshore wind projects, solar farm financing, grid expansion and interconnectors, battery storage systems for renewables, investment platforms for energy developers and funds combining wind and grid-scale storage. Then there is the building of the energy retrofit programmes. There is a whole range of investments out of those funds going into that renewables space and protecting us in terms of developing a low-carbon public infrastructure for the future and electric vehicle, EV-charging, clean public transport fleets, a circular economy waste system and, above all, a lot going into housing, with equity in housing developments, delivery of nationwide housing supply and so on, such as the private, social, affordable and mixed-tenure schemes.

Money is being invested. We are not letting it hang around doing nothing. Therefore, the more honest position would be whether the Deputy suggesting that we would stop the funds or pause investing in them. Of course, they are necessary for the future pressures that will undoubtedly arise because of the ageing population and more expenditures that will arise in health services and looking after older people in our society because our lifespan is increasing dramatically as well.

In the meantime, we have allocated €715 million now in terms of supports. We have reduced, effectively, the excise on diesel by 32 cent. That will benefit workers. It benefits everybody, more or less, in society. Petrol is down 27 cent from where it would be if we had not intervened and marked gas oil will be up to about 20% when the scheme comes in for contractors. I will come back later on that sectoral thing the Deputy accused us of doing.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: By all means, let us have an honest debate. The Taoiseach will have to acknowledge, in honesty, that the Labour Party supported the funds.

We did not support any narrowing of the tax base. We accept, of course, a renewables revolution requires investment, and requires money to be invested in it. However, if we are having an honest debate, let us talk about the ESRI report which acknowledged that Ireland has the highest energy prices in Europe and that a huge problem, which the Taoiseach must recognise, is that our electricity prices are being driven by gas prices. We are among the countries in the EU with the highest reliance on gas - a fossil fuel - and that is extremely costly. We have an extremely high proportion of households still using oil for heating. We are out of line with other countries which have invested more extensively in renewables and are pushing renewables to power electricity generation. Instead of that, the Government, particularly since the Green Party left office, is relying on an expanding series of data centres which are gobbling up electricity, and relying on the importation of LNG. Where is the vision there? Why are we not seeing more of a move from subsidising dirty fuels?

The Taoiseach: We have put billions into the funds.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We supported the funds.

The Taoiseach: We then have an Exchequer deficit of €1.1 billion. That is what we have after the moneys is allocated to the funds. We do not have billions of surplus, if the Deputy accepts that the moneys should go to the funds, and she accepts that they should. When they are in the funds, they are being invested and so on under ISIF. We take the Deputy's point in terms of pressures that people are under. On the renewables, we are investing very significantly. ISIF is investing in many projects in respect of offshore wind and other areas. I have a full list of the housing area, transport, you name it.

From the sectoral interests point of view, the Deputy said we only looked after sectors. We do need to look after food production, so farmers do need to be supported in terms of food production. Contractors do as well. That is not narrow sectoral interest, we all benefit if the food production system can produce food at a reasonably affordable price. We need hauliers to get our goods to the shelves of shops in an affordable way.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Last year the Minister of State, Deputy John Cummins, was clear. Modular units in people's back gardens would not be available for rent on the private market. He said: "I don't see this as a rental measure. I see it as facilitating intergenerational movement." There was broad agreement across the Opposition. These units could help families and they should but opening them up to the private rental market was always going to lead to exploitation. We can already see exactly where that road leads. On Clare Street in Dublin, up to 22 people are crammed into one house, paying up to €890 for a bed. That is in a

room with three or four other people, with the landlord raking in almost €20,000 a month. This is not a functional housing system. This is a return to tenement conditions which were rampant in the worst years of this State. It should not be tolerated but this Government seems to think differently.

Today, the Taoiseach is calling it practical and pragmatic to charge market rents for cabins in back gardens. Let us be clear about what that means. It means charging €2,000 to €3,000 a month for a shed in someone's garden with no tenancy rights because they would be rented out using licensing agreements. The same loophole is already being used in Clare Street right now. These renters have no security of tenure, no statutory notice periods, no rent controls and no access to the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB. Renters are being thrown to the wolves and this Government is telling them they should be happy about it. It is outrageous.

I know so many young people across the country are angry today but more than that, they are exhausted. They look at this Government and what it is doing and they just despair. Taoiseach, would you blame them? What exactly is the Taoiseach's vision for young people in this country? Is it for them to be ripped off by landlords, to scrimp and save to live in garden sheds, to be denied their tenancy rights? Unfortunately, that is the legacy the Taoiseach is leaving. For anyone watching today, I want to be clear.

There are solutions to the housing crisis, such as establishing a State construction company, modular home factories to dramatically increase the supply of affordable homes, a new State savings scheme to raise billions to fund them, and a ban on no-fault evictions to protect renters instead of treating them like second-class citizens. These are all political choices the Government could make but refuses to. How can the Taoiseach justify renters being charged extortionate rents to live in back gardens with no tenancy rights?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy looks at the world through one prism when it comes to housing; we look at it through another. In my vision for young people, housing is number one and it means a relentless focus on supply. The Social Democrats have opposed all supply measures in this House for the last number of years and they keep on criticising every single initiative that we have undertaken. If we do not get supply up, we will not moderate rents. All the rest is just populist waffle if we do not really focus on what matters.

The Deputy talks about legacy. When the previous Government was formed in 2020, direct social housing builds were in the low thousands. Last year, in 2025, we built 9,000 social homes, the highest on record since the State was founded. While I can never be happy when it could be higher, that is a reasonable legacy in terms of permanent provision of social housing. The good news is that up to 23,000 more are in different stages of design and development. That is one aspect. The others are affordable and cost rental.

Yesterday I was at a sod-turning for 800 new units, not cabins but real units in Richmond. The Tánaiste was in Drogheda where about 600 new units will be built. The Minister, Deputy Browne, will be in Drogheda tomorrow for, I think, another 600. Those are sod-turnings for 2,000 houses and apartments this week alone. We built 36,000 houses last year, delivered in 2025. That is the highest since records began and up 20% on 2024. Some 170,000 houses have been built since 2020, with 50,000 apartments built. On planning momentum, 8,000 permissions were granted in quarter 4 of 2025, up 19%. Permission was granted for 20,000

houses in 2025, the highest since 2009. There have been 8,000 commencement notices in quarter 1 of 2026. These are facts. It is not enough; we want to get to 50,000 per annum.

In terms of the exemptions, the Deputy said exemptions were a good idea if just for family members. I think that is what she said. If it is just for family members, are they no longer cabins? The Deputy used very derogatory language when she said they were for rent, but if the very same structures are built for family members what are they? They are not cabins anyway, because they have to be in alignment with the existing building record regulations. I think many people will welcome this.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Are you going to check it?

The Taoiseach: We will keep it under review. We will look at every single way we can ease pressure on people, ease pressure on the private rental market and also give opportunities to people. We will follow up with guidelines for rural housing. We have a crisis with housing but we will never solve it if we criticise every single measure that a Government introduces, which the Social Democrats have been doing for five years. I believe we have to explore every option to get more houses built.

Deputy Holly Cairns: When the Taoiseach comes in here week after week and gives this profoundly positive spin about housing, I have to wonder if he even feels convinced by his own words. We do not just have record rents and record house prices; we have record homelessness. We are talking about more than 17,000 homeless people, including more than 5,500 children, and the Taoiseach comes in here and gives this unbelievably positive message. He then says that this Government is not out of touch. It is difficult to even respond to but ultimately, it is evasion, deflection and a way of avoiding the question so I will just ask him again. Does he accept that people renting these cabins, these sheds in people's gardens, will not have any protection or any renters' rights? Is he okay with that? If not, what is he going to do about it?

The Taoiseach: I am solution driven in terms of housing and the Deputy is not.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Answer the question.

The Taoiseach: Sorry, I am answering the question. The Social Democrats, for example, voted against all residential zoning proposals on Fingal County Council. Two weeks ago, when the council agreed development plans to zone for 5,000 additional homes, the Social Democrats opposed them.

Deputy John Cummins: Shocking.

The Taoiseach: They opposed the project in Ballymastone as well. People are now living in those houses. The Social Democrats cannot just keep opposing everything and claim they are serious about housing. That is the point I am making. Choices have to be made. As regards the planning in terms of the exemptions and so on, it is a major package of exempted development regulations to reduce planning bureaucracy. Planning bureaucracy has slowed us down in terms of housing provision. This will speed up delivery of additional units and

maximise existing housing stock. It frees local authority resources for large-scale projects, introduces clear national standards, allows subdivision of homes to create just one additional unit, simplifies attic conversions and supports rental supply. The rent-a-room relief applies.

Deputy Rory Hearne: All waffle. Answer the question.

The Taoiseach: All of that will happen.

Deputy Rory Hearne: All waffle.

The Taoiseach: No, it is not.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Taoiseach will not answer the question.

The Taoiseach: I am very clear: we will reduce the pressure on the-----

Deputy Rory Hearne: What about renters who will be stuck renting these-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Roderic O'Gorman is on his feet.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. At Cabinet today I understand the Government approved Robert Watt to head the special purpose vehicle, SPV, charged with addressing dereliction in Dublin city centre. His appointment comes a full 18 months after the report of the Dublin city task force was published but, helpfully, 24 hours before the writ is moved for the Dublin Central by-election. The task force report proposed a set of ten recommendations, or ten big moves, for the city. Tackling vacancy and dereliction and bringing abandoned sites in the city centre back to productive use is one of those big moves. City council officials have told councillors that the special purpose vehicle Robert Watt will head up will lead on the vacancy and dereliction work and will have another role in one of the other recommendations, namely revitalising O'Connell Street and the surrounding areas. Two of the recommendations, therefore, are being led by the SPV.

I want to ask the Taoiseach about some of the other recommendations. What of the recommendation for a total regeneration of social housing complexes in the city centre, giving tenants warmer homes and protecting them from the worst of the next energy crisis? What about the recommendation to deliver better and more localised services for vulnerable populations? What about the recommendation to provide an additional 1,000 gardaí across the city centre area? I cannot say the Government is doing nothing about that last recommendation. The *Dublin Inquirer* reported that in the 18 months since the report was published, 40 extra gardaí have been appointed across the two city centre districts. On that trajectory, those additional 1,000 gardaí will be provided some time in mid-2063.

I have been out canvassing across Dublin Central with our candidate, Councillor Janet Horner. The lack of Garda presence and the sense that low- to mid-level antisocial behaviour is now just tolerated are prevalent across all communities. The task force report itself sets out

that a total of €750 million to €1 billion in extra investment is necessary to deliver all ten big moves.

As the voters of Dublin Central put their attention to the by-election, I have three questions for the Taoiseach. When will the large-scale regeneration of social housing begin? Is the Government still committed to the additional 1,000 gardaí, and when will they be delivered by? How much additional spending - I am speaking about additional spending - has been provided to date to implement the task force's ten recommendations?

The Taoiseach: I was out in Dublin Central last evening with Councillor John Stephens, and it was a very pleasant evening indeed. There was good feedback and a lot of issues raised, of course, on the doorsteps.

Yes, approval has been given to the expected appointment of Robert Watt as CEO, seconded to the special purpose vehicle. The SPV is a key legal vehicle to ensure not only the implementation of the task force report, but also the regeneration of the core of Dublin city, particularly the O'Connell Street area more generally, because it will have powers and capacity. The Government will not be found wanting in supporting housing provision in the area. There is, as the Deputy knows, quite a range of properties in private sector hands at the moment. That is an evolving situation, but I would like to have a situation emerge where the State has greater capacity to revitalise key assets on O'Connell Street, in particular the GPO.

We are doing a lot of investment in Moore Street.

The last budget dramatically and significantly expanded the living in the city initiative. A lot more substantial grants are now available to support living above the shop and to support mixed-use development. We are also committed to unlocking under-used urban space for housing and enterprise and then pulling everything together under planning, housing, transport and heritage, so that we get a consistent, one approach to the development of the city.

Dublin City Council has begun the task of setting up the Dublin city task force special purpose vehicle. The CEO designate is Robert Watt. It is putting in staff with the required technical skills for an interim programme management unit. Essentially, all the building blocks are being put in place now to get moving on what is a ten-year integrated area strategy for Dublin city centre. It will tackle vacancy and dereliction and get real change and will transform the situation there. I am confident we can do it. As a Government, we are very committed to doing it. We believe the GPO will be a major flagship project at the core of Dublin city.

Various funding streams will facilitate the objectives both of the task force and the special purpose vehicle itself. Getting the special purpose vehicle together is taking a bit of time. In terms of gardaí, we have significantly increased their number. We have continued to do so and recruitment at Templemore is very positive at the moment.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The Taoiseach says the Government will not be found wanting and he has listed a number of undoubtedly valuable projects, like the Moore Street regeneration. However, these were in train years before the Dublin task force published its report. The whole idea behind setting up the task force was because additionality was needed to move the dial within Dublin's city centre. It was never meant to be a repackaging of stuff we were doing already. The Taoiseach says he has been out canvassing, and I am sure he will

be back again. I think the Taoiseach will need better answers for the people of Dublin Central because he has consistently cited the special purpose vehicle. Yes, that is important in terms of the regeneration of O'Connell Street and the surrounding areas but the work on Dublin City Council's social housing stock is not being led by the special purpose vehicle. So many of those tenants are suffering from the energy price crisis now but that work is not being led by that. Will he give me clarity on who leads that work?

The Taoiseach: It is not as if we are not investing right now, as the Deputy knows. About €132 million from the urban regeneration and development fund, URDF, has already been already allocated for the north inner city concept area 1 proposal. This involves the regeneration and redevelopment of several areas of the north city that have suffered from dereliction and decline. Some €60 million of URDF funding has been allocated to the Parnell Square cultural quarter project and a €44 million project to refurbish the fruit and vegetable market is currently on site. That is outside the core inner city area but it is adjacent to it and it will be an important driver of regeneration.

On policing, we have about 3,894 gardaí assigned in the Dublin metropolitan region, supported by 90 Garda reserves and 463 civilian staff. The Dublin north central and south central divisions were the first areas to roll out the new high visibility policing initiative. During the first six months of the roll out there were increased detections for public order offences. Body-worn cameras are in use across three stations. I know the Deputy was against them but they are helping with the detection and reduction of crime as well.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 35 I call on the Chief Whip, Deputy Butler, to move the arrangements for this week's business.

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion *re* Eleventh Report of the Standing Committee of Selection (*without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately*)
- Motion *re* Organisation of Working Time (Reproductive Health Related Leave) Bill 2021 (*without debate*)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Motion *re* Special Education, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Statements and Q&A post European Council meeting of 19th March 2026, pursuant to Standing Order 133 (*not to exceed 1 hour 33.5 mins, followed by 20 mins Q&A and Ministerial response for 5 mins*)

- Public Health (Tobacco and Nicotine Inhaling Products) Bill 2026 (Second Stage) *(to be taken no earlier than 4.10 p.m. and if not previously concluded, to adjourn at the end of the first speaking round; not to exceed 3 hours and 34 minutes)*

- Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of a Council Decision to resume Vehicle Registration Data exchange with the United Kingdom for the prevention and investigation of criminal offences *(to be taken no earlier than 6.30 p.m. and to conclude within 60 mins)*

- Health Information Bill 2024 (Amendments from the Seanad) *(to conclude within 1 hour)*

- Motion *re* Bye-Election for Dublin Central *(without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)*

- Motion *re* Bye-Election for Galway West *(without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)*

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion *re* Earth Day, selected by Independent and Parties Technical Group.

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Education (Medical Emergencies in Schools) Bill 2026, sponsored by Deputy Eoghan Kenny.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

In relation to Tuesday's business, it is proposed that:

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

(a) Parliamentary Questions to the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance pursuant to Standing Order 47(1), that were due to be taken on Tuesday 14 April, 2026 shall be taken today for 96.5 minutes immediately following the Questions to the Taoiseach;

(b) private members business shall be taken on conclusion of Parliamentary Questions to the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance pursuant to Standing Order 47(1) with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business;

2. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Eleventh Report of the Standing Committee of Selection shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately; and

3. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Organisation of Working Time (Reproductive Health Related Leave) Bill 2021 shall be taken without debate.

In relation to Wednesday's business, it is proposed that:

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

(a) the time allotted for Government Business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business and the Dáil may sit later than 9.30 p.m.;

(b) the Statements and Q&A post European Council meeting of 19th March 2026, pursuant to Standing Order 133, shall be taken at the time when the SOS pursuant to Standing Order 25(1) would normally be taken, and on the conclusion of the Minister's response to the statements, the sitting shall stand suspended either for one hour or until 4.10 p.m., whichever is the later;

(c) in the event proceedings on the Public Health (Tobacco and Nicotine Inhaling Products) Bill 2026 conclude before 6.30 p.m., the sitting shall stand suspended until 6.30 p.m. when the order of business shall resume with the Motion re Proposal approval by Dáil Éireann of a Council Decision to resume Vehicle Registration Data exchange with the United Kingdom for the prevention and investigation of criminal offences;

(d) any motions to be taken without debate shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on the Health Information Bill 2024; and

(e) the weekly division time shall be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on any motions without debate;

2. the Statements and Q&A post European Council meeting of 19th March 2026, pursuant to Standing Order 133, shall not exceed 1 hour and 58.5 minutes, and the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:

(a) the arrangements for the statements, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the arrangements contained in the table immediately below (to be read across);

(b) following the statements, questions and answers shall be taken for 20 minutes;

(c) on the conclusion of the questions and answers, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed five minutes; and

(d) members may share time.

	Gov	SF	Lab	Gov	SF
Mins	15	10	5	9	3.5
	SD	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	5	8	3.5	5	8
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	
Mins	3.5	5	8	5	
Total: 1 hr and 33.5 mins					

3. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Public Health (Tobacco and Nicotine Inhaling Products) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be interrupted and stand adjourned at the end of the first speaking round and the following arrangements shall apply:

(a) the first-round speeches, not including the Ministerial response, shall be in accordance with the table below (to be read across);

(b) where speeches conclude before the 3 hours and 24 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(c) members may share time;

	Gov	SF	Lab	Gov	SF
Mins	20	20	20	12	4
	SD	Gov	SF	IPTG	Gov
Mins	20	12	4	20	12
	SF	ITG	Gov	SF	OM
Mins	4	20	12	4	20
Total: 3 hrs and 24 minutes					

4. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of a Council Decision to resume Vehicle Registration Data exchange with the United Kingdom for the prevention and investigation of criminal offences shall be taken no earlier than 6.30 p.m. and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(a) the order of speaking and allocation of time shall be as follows:-

- opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 10 minutes;
- speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, the Labour Party, Social Democrats, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 7.5 minutes per party or group;
- speeches by non-party/group members – 7.5 minutes in total; and
- a speech in response by the Minister – 5 minutes; and

(b) members may share time;

5. the proceedings on the amendments from the Seanad to the Health Information Bill 2024 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 1 hour, and any amendments from the Seanad not disposed of shall be decided by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments to the Seanad amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Health;

6. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Bye-Election for Dublin Central shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately; and

7. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Bye-Election for Galway West shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately.

In relation to Thursday's business, it is proposed that:

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

(a) topical issues shall be taken immediately following the SOS for not more than 120 minutes and up to ten topical issues may be taken; and

(b) Parliamentary Questions to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science pursuant to Standing Order 47(1), that were due to be taken on Tuesday 24 March, 2026 shall be taken today for 96.5 minutes immediately following Topical Issues, with consequential effect on the commencement time for the Second Stage of the Education (Medical Emergencies in Schools) Bill 2026 and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements agreed to?

Deputies: Not agreed.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: The former leader of Fine Gael let the cat out of the bag in recent days. He said out loud what has been whispered by senior Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael personnel for many years - this divide-and-conquer approach between urban and rural Ireland. People in rural Ireland see the carbon tax as a penalisation of them for choices they do not get to make.

They have to heat their homes with home heating oil. They need to use petrol and diesel to get by in rural Ireland. I want clarity from the leaders of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil in the Dáil. I want respect for people in Ireland. The Government must stop using this approach of divide and conquer on our people. It is fooling nobody.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Since November, the Government has been acutely aware of the exponential growth in the number of children who require an additional needs school place for the coming academic year. While I welcome the fact that over 430 classes have been made available, the exponential growth in demand means that nearly 600 special classes are required. The Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Ministers have been aware of this since November. We are six months in now. We need statements in the Dáil on how we are going to deal with this exponential growth.

Deputy Jen Cummins: Inclusive education in this country has been limping from one disaster to the next. In September, there were not enough school places. In November, the portal closed, meaning that parents could not notify the NCSE of their children's needs. In February, we had the situation with the SNAs. Now, in April, we have a new inclusive special education system. Does the Government actually have a plan for special education that is fully thought out? We need a proper debate on special education in this Chamber.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We need urgent explanations and statements from the Ministers on the use of Shannon Airport and Irish airspace by the United States military while it is conducting with Israel its brutal and illegal wars against Iran and Lebanon and the ongoing genocide of the people of Gaza. This is particularly needed given that the number of US overflights has increased by 56% since the Iran war started and that, incredibly, the Department of foreign affairs undercounted US military flights through Irish airspace by 250 flights.

Deputy Michael Collins: In 2016, when the Taoiseach was in opposition, he said:

...political parties should not think Parliament is their possession and that they can control anything that happens. To date, we have had such an experience, where Deputies have been removed from committees because they voted against the Government's line.

Why has he now done a 360° turn in trying to remove Deputy Danny Healy-Rae from the agriculture committee at 3 p.m. because he voted against the Government? This decision has to be reversed and we need a debate on the issue.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: A Cheann Comhairle, under-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on the Chief Whip to respond. I am sorry but Deputy Healy-Rae is not entitled to speak.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Under Standing Order 35(3)-----

Deputy Ged Nash: Justice for the Kilgarvan one.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Under Standing Order 35(3), I believe I am entitled to say a few words.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, Standing Order 35(3) allows Members to move amendments to the Order of Business. Does the Deputy have an amendment?

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I have.

An Ceann Comhairle: I ask the Deputy to state his amendment.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: My amendment is that I be allowed stay on the committee on agriculture. My understanding is that I was appointed as an Independent member rather than a Government or Fianna Fáil member.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is fine. I call on the Chief Whip to respond.

Deputy Mary Butler: Just so that all Deputies are aware, I will clarify that they do not need to be a member of a committee to attend meetings. I note the comments made and the requests for statements. These will be considered at the meeting of the Business Committee on Thursday, as normal. The Order of Business stands.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Order of Business agreed?

Deputies: Not agreed.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Justice for Danny.

Question put: "That the amendment to the Order of Business is hereby negatived and the proposed arrangements for the week's business are hereby agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 81; Níl, 66; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Cairns, Holly.	
Burke, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Burke, Peter.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Butler, Mary.	Collins, Michael.	
Butterly, Paula.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cronin, Réada.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Crowe, Seán.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cullinane, David.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cummins, Jen.	
Calleary, Dara.	Daly, Pa.	
Canney, Seán.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Chambers, Jack.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Clendennen, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Connolly, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Cooney, Joe.	Gould, Thomas.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Cummins, John.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Currie, Emer.	Healy, Seamus.	
Daly, Martin.	Hearne, Rory.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Kelly, Alan.	
Dillon, Alan.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Dolan, Albert.	Kenny, Martin.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Fleming, Sean.	Lawless, Paul.	
Foley, Norma.	Lawlor, George.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Geoghegan, James.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	
Grealish, Noel.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Heneghan, Barry.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Heydon, Martin.	Nash, Ged.	
Higgins, Emer.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Keogh, Keira.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	

Lahart, John.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Lawless, James.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
Lowry, Michael.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McGuinness, John.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Murphy, Michael.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Naughton, Hildegard.	Sherlock, Marie.	
Neville, Joe.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Connor, James.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghail, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Timmings, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Michael Collins.

Question declared carried.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael attempted a shameful plan to cut SNAs, with some schools facing a loss of as many as six or seven SNAs with absolutely devastating consequences for children and young people. Of course, they were forced into a U-turn by the anger from parents, children, young people and, of course, SNAs. This cannot happen again. Our motion this evening calls on the Government to immediately engage with

the Save our SNAs campaign and advance and implement its updated and improved circular on the role of SNAs. This is all to ensure that every child and young person gets the supports they need. Will the Taoiseach agree to engage with the campaign and support the new circular?

3 o'clock

The Taoiseach: I introduced the whole concept of special needs assistants to education back in 1998. The numbers have grown expediently since. We are now at 25,000 SNAs. In any honest way, how can the Deputy suggest there are cuts in the number of SNAs when it is the opposite direction? In fact, the Government today approved further investment in education, which will mean more special needs assistants above the 25,000 for the 2026 to 2027 school year.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Will the Government engage with the campaign?

The Taoiseach: The campaign is a flawed campaign. It is a false one.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is what?

The Taoiseach: We do not need to save SNAs because we are expanding the number of SNAs. We actually have more SNAs.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: It is a very real campaign. I am asking the Taoiseach to engage with it.

The Taoiseach: We have more investment. The Deputy is searching for votes. I understand that.

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

The Taoiseach: We are actually investing more. The Government has approved more investment in SNAs today.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Government will not engage with it.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Today, a survivor of a mother and home, Rosemary Adaser, along with human rights barrister, Caoilfhionn Gallagher, were in Leinster House meeting TDs, including my Labour Party colleague, Deputy Ahern. They met with the special advocate for survivors, Patricia Carey. They are seeking clarity on Philomena's law. They want to ensure justice for mother and baby home survivors who are now resident in Britain - 13,000 people from Ireland. There are welcome guidelines in place since 9 April but survivors are still concerned that without statutory unpinning in particular that there may be an issue about the retrospective effect. They fear that 700 survivors who have already applied to the redress scheme in Ireland may lose out on benefits in England.

I raised this last year with the Taoiseach on the visit to the Dáil by Liam Conlon, the MP for Beckenham and Penge in England, who had brought forward Philomena's law in Westminster. The Taoiseach issued a joint communiqué with the British Prime Minister from the Cork summit in March on this but we just need to ensure the Government can work with the British Government to ensure clarity for the survivors.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. Time is up. I ask the Taoiseach to respond.

The Taoiseach: There comes a time when one has to accept the bona fides of the Government on this. We have worked with Keir Starmer's Government on this.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I acknowledge that.

The Taoiseach: We had a very good outcome on this, thankfully, when we got the British Government to agree. We are very confident that they will receive redress and that they will not be disadvantaged on receipt of redress in terms of whatever welfare or benefits they may be on in the United Kingdom. That was a good outcome of the UK-Ireland summit that we had in March. That is what we want to do.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: It is the retrospective effect-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy. We do not do back and forth in questions like this.

Deputy Liam Quaide: There is a shocking double standard in how mental health services for young people with intellectual disabilities are staffed compared with mainstream CAMHS. In mainstream CAMHS, multidisciplinary staffing is treated as basic good practice. Yet in CAMHS-ID teams, for a group of children with even more complex needs, there is a far lower standard set by the Government. There is not a single CAMHS-ID team in the country staffed to the level set out in the HSE's own model. The services overall are funded at only 43% of the recommended level. In some parts of the country, such as Cavan-Monaghan, these specialist services do not exist at all. Elsewhere CAMHS-ID services exist only in the most threadbare form with a psychiatrist working with one or two other colleagues. This matters enormously in light of Kerry CAMHS where children with intellectual disabilities and autistic children were among those most badly failed with little or no meaningful multidisciplinary intervention alongside extreme overprescribing and polypharmacy. How can the Government justify this lower standard of support for some of the most vulnerable young people in mental health services?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up. I ask the Taoiseach to respond.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the question. We are increasing investment incrementally year-on-year in this area. We started from a low base in respect of CAMHS-ID. I think there is an extra €2 million for that specific area in this year's budget. We are going to increase that. Recruitment has been challenging but we are going to expand it and are going

to continue to expand it. There are about 45 people working in that area at the moment but we need more obviously. We are going to continue to invest and expand.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I ask the Taoiseach to make a public statement directed at the German Government in support of Daniel Tatlow-Devally who is an Irish citizen who has been incarcerated along with four other fellow activists in a German high security prison for 11 months. He is going on trial next Monday because he was involved in a direct action against Elbit Systems that produces weapons in Germany for the Israeli regime and its genocide against the Palestinian people. He is being tried under legislation which is normally reserved for organised criminals. His treatment and the treatment of his fellow activists is outrageous.

It was direct action but it was a peaceful protest. They even filmed themselves and in no way resisted arrest. They are being treated shockingly. They are on trial. It starts next Monday.

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

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Irish Government should speak up in support of these activists, including our Irish citizens.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on the Taoiseach to respond. The Deputy's time is up.

The Taoiseach: My understanding is that consular services are being made available to those involved in this. The Deputy has not defined what he means by direct action. We will do everything we can to uphold the human rights of any Irish citizen in any jurisdiction. That will continue. We will continue to do that. The courts and the legal system in a given country will also have to take their course. We do not have the capacity to interfere or intervene in the court processes and the hearing of a particular case, but we can and do advocate for citizens so that their basic human rights would be respected in all circumstances.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They are not.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: In my constituency a family have already buried one child due to Friedreich's ataxia and their second child is now in a wheelchair due to the same disease, which is advancing. A treatment called SkyClarys is clinically approved and has been shown to slow the progress and the State refuses to reimburse it. Let me be clear: this is not about science or availability; this is about a decision not to fund. What does the Taoiseach say to parents watching their child's disease progress in real time while a treatment exists but is withheld? I want to ask him a direct question. Will he instruct the Minister for Health to fast-track a reimbursement decision for SkyClarys and define the timeframe? Yes or no.

The Taoiseach: First, it is not a simple decision not to fund. That is not a fair way of putting it. I have spoken to the Minister for Health on this issue. As the Deputy knows, there is a legislative framework governing the reimbursement of medicines, particularly for rare conditions. This is a very sad case with very difficult circumstances for the family. I have spoken to the Minister and I will continue to engage with her this week. I cannot promise

anything today. The health technology assessment was not positive in terms of how they do their work. It is an area on which I will come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I want to raise with the Taoiseach a fairly harrowing incident that took place in my constituency over the weekend. Mary, a 91-year-old lady, fell and injured her hip at 2.15 p.m. and despite an ambulance being called, none attended to her until 6.15 p.m.. She was waiting, lying on the ground, for over four hours for an ambulance. A member of the Garda Síochána was there to assist her, and members of the public were there. This has caused widespread consternation in our community and led to other people worrying. Will the Taoiseach help me get to the bottom of what has happened here? Will he make sure that we have continued investment in our fire-based emergency service in Dublin, of which we are very proud? Will he also help bring an end to the practice whereby ambulance drivers have to wait at acute hospitals for long periods to transfer patients from their care into the care of the hospital?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy McAuliffe. I certainly will try to help him to get the background to what happened here if he could feed more information and details to me. As he is aware, the Dublin Fire Brigade ambulance service covers the Dublin area. It is unacceptable that a woman would be lying on the ground for four hours. I will get a response from the ambulance service for the Deputy.

Deputy Grace Boland: Our airports and ports are the front door to this country, but we are making public transport unnecessarily difficult for visitors from the moment they arrive. Visitors still need a Leap card or the exact coins to use a Dublin Bus service. As we know, contactless tap-and-go is not expected to be fully rolled out in Dublin only until 2028. Leap cards are regularly sold out at Dublin Airport at the few retail outlets that sell them. There are regular reports of people being unable to buy Leap cards. There is a clear lack of visible information for passengers arriving at the airport on where they can purchase them. The reality is that visitors can land in Ireland and still struggle to pay for a simple bus journey into the city. It is not rocket science. Will the Taoiseach please talk to the Minister for Transport and ask him to instruct the NTA to liaise with both Dublin Airport and Dublin Port to make sure that we install Leap card machines so that visitors to our country can easily access the city?

The Taoiseach: In fairness, the NTA and the airport regularly engage, and resources have been made available. However, I will speak to the Minister in respect of the general area. He is well aware of it. Again, the airport authorities and the NTA have a lot of resources. They have a lot of their own resources, or the airport certainly has. There are times too when these agencies need to get on with it. It is not always at the Minister's desk.

Deputy John Brady: Last Friday, a constituent of mine from Wicklow presented at St. Vincent's University Hospital A and E after suffering a suspected mini-stroke. He was vulnerable and afraid but after being seen was told nothing would happen over the weekend. He was told to go home and come back on Monday. He did exactly that. Yesterday morning, he went back as instructed but then had to wait for hour after hour. Morning turned to night, and at midnight he was still left sitting in the A and E, which was absolutely bursting at the seams. Then the reality of it came. After being admitted, there were no beds, not even a trolley.

He was given a chair and placed in a shower room in the A and E, with four other men and a woman, all of whom were patients. All were left sitting because there was nowhere else to put them. They were left there for several more hours. That is not care or dignity, and it is totally unacceptable. Under the Taoiseach's watch, as this is happening, what is he doing in the here and now to address this crisis within our A and Es, not just at St. Vincent's down the road but also right across the State?

The Taoiseach: There has been a huge investment in the reform of A and E services. We need to focus in on the management of the resources within given hospitals. The Deputy said the person had a stroke.

Deputy John Brady: A mini-stroke.

The Taoiseach: Any person with a stroke should not be sent home in the first instance. That is a clinical issue. That is what would jump out at me immediately. Having to come back a couple of days later is a worry from a clinical-outcome perspective. I do not know whether the person has made a complaint or whether the Deputy has done so on his behalf. That should happen because then we could track and get answers and responses. That should not happen. There is no excuse for that.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: It was good to welcome the Taoiseach to Fairview yesterday for the Land Development Agency, LDA, sod turning at Richmond Village, which involves 779 homes within a close shout of the city centre. The tenancy mix has not yet been determined. Does the Taoiseach agree that affordable homes for purchase is probably the best way to give citizens a stake in their communities? Does he agree that while the LDA has this mandate, in theory it probably could be strengthened further, although it will involve resourcing? Will he encourage the LDA to work towards a maximum amount of affordable-purchase housing at the Richmond Village site?

The Taoiseach: I do not want to get into specific interventions in terms of mixed tenure or the approach at any given site of the LDA. We have indicated to the LDA that it can do more than social and affordable housing and move into the private-provision area as well to get a broader mix. It is a very good development, with 779 homes. Many big developments are now coming under the aegis of the LDA. It really is the key national intervention in housing at the moment. Thousands upon thousands of houses are under its stewardship right now, and thousands more are in the pipeline. As it evolves, I see as flexible and broad a mix as possible. I am sure the LDA will take on board what has been said in respect of the Richmond Village site.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I previously introduced right-to-be-forgotten legislation as a Private Members' Bill. The Central Bank (Amendment) Bill was adopted by the Government and obviously was part of the programme for Government. However, we are still waiting on the Government amendments so that legislation can be progressed to Committee Stage. So many cancer survivors are waiting for this legislation to give them certainty, especially when seeking to buy a home. The right-to-be-forgotten legislation allows cancer survivors to move

on from their cancer diagnoses so that after a period of five years or so, these diagnoses will not be considered when they are seeking life cover to purchase homes. I ask the Taoiseach to find out when the Government amendments will be published so the right-to-be-forgotten legislation can move to Committee Stage and be progressed further because there are a lot of people waiting for it.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy very much. I pay tribute to her on her initiative on the legislation, which she introduced. I will talk to the Minister, Deputy Harris, and the Minister of State, Deputy Robert Troy, about when they expect the amendments to come forward. I will revert to the Deputy because I believe it is important legislation, particularly for those with cancer and survivors of cancer. This Bill will be of great benefit.

Deputy Réada Cronin: The dire condition of another school in my constituency in of Kildare North, this time in Celbridge, is causing distress to students and teachers. Scoil na Mainistreach has had an ongoing issue with a roof over the past few years, and it is only getting worse. The school has had contractors out and they said it should not attempt another patch job after numerous patch jobs given the poor construction of the school in the first instance. The contractors are also concerned that the internal structure of the school has been damaged.

The school decided to apply for funding under the emergency works scheme as it was too late for the summer works scheme but it was rejected by the Department as it does not fall under the category of emergency works. To parents in Celbridge who are sick and tired of their schools being disregarded by the Department of education, this is just pedantic. I ask the Taoiseach to speak to the Minister and her Department to cut through the red tape and ensure the school gets a new roof over the summer, ensuring no further damage to the building.

The Taoiseach: A new roof probably does not fall under emergency works but probably falls under some project. An entire new roof would be substantial-----

Deputy Réada Cronin: I know but-----

The Taoiseach: -----but I will talk to the Minister.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Come on, lads. Get-----

The Taoiseach: I know but the minor works scheme is for lesser works. I am not going to get into that but I think it is a project in itself. I do not know where the project is in terms of the various stages with the Department but I will talk to the Minister for education in respect of it.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Many people got packages over the past week or so. People with machines involved in the construction industry and the provision of services, whether pipelaying for water, electricity or telecommunications, use a lot of green diesel. To my understanding, they have not been included in any package. The cost of building and construction is going up every day but this has been exacerbated a lot further. I ask the Taoiseach to consider looking after those involved in services provision and the construction

industry because rollers, diggers, cranes and every kind of machine is run on green diesel. That has gone up by over 80 cent and has only gone down, as far as I can see, by only 5 cents. A lot more needs to be done.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate the Deputy raising the issue. Certain aspects of construction are covered by the schemes but not machinery yet. However, I will ask the various Ministers covering agriculture and transport to have a look at this. Again, we have made progress on a number of fronts. We have to await the detailed development of the schemes in terms of contractors and farmers. The transport scheme is nearing completion. I will talk to the relevant Ministers.

Deputy Jen Cummins: The recently announced results of the primary school survey indicated some very interesting results. Sixty percent of parents in the denominational schools would like to retain their ethos and 73% of parents in single-sex schools wanted to move to a co-educational model. Eighty seven percent of parents with children in English-medium schools wanted those schools to retain that medium and not move to Irish. The results are very interesting but they are only part of the results. The results from the cohort of parents with children from age zero to school age have not come out, and neither have those of the educators who were able to fill in that information. They have not been published. What is the timeframe for publication?

Unfortunately, divestment is moving at nought miles per hour. The move to co-educational is very welcome. It is bringing us into the present as opposed to keeping us in the past. The result on the Gaeilge is a little disappointing. When will the results of the full survey be published and what process will be put in place to ensure divestment and other things move a little bit quicker?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy very much for raising the issue. It is a very interesting survey which will inform policy development in time. There has to be significant consultation. I will talk to the Minister and ask her to perhaps engage with the Deputy on the next steps.

I did not quite get the point the Deputy made about Gaeilge. We will talk later.

Deputy Jen Cummins: A total of 87% want their schools to stay English-medium schools. Only a small number want to move to Gaeilge-medium schools.

The Taoiseach: Gaelcholáistí.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Would the Taoiseach live in a shed? The Government's plan to allow landlords to rent out modular units risks subjecting renters, vulnerable young people and migrants to this very phenomenon. This is potentially opening the door to the exploitation of vulnerable renters in the private rental market. Yes, we need more flexibility for exempted development but allowing landlords to rent these units out is not acceptable. This will lead to poor-quality expensive rental accommodation. It is absolutely outrageous, in my view, to rent these out on the open market and to treat tenants as licensees with very few protections. Will

the Government at least pause this until a full review of licence arrangements is completed and basic protections for tenants are put in place?

The Taoiseach: They are not sheds.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: They can be.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is just playing politics by calling them sheds. If they were not for rent, they would be not sheds. It is so hypocritical. If we came in and said planning exemptions for relatives or for sons and daughters for buildings outside, such as residential units in the back garden, would be introduced, they would not be sheds any more according to the Deputy, but the minute we said they would be for rent, they are sheds. This is what he is saying. It makes no logical sense. There are potential costs of up to €80,000. Those are not sheds.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Some of them are.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is already making up his mind before anything is built. Does he care about supply at all? Does he really care about it? Is housing just a game in here where we keep on shouting names across at each other? I think the planning exemptions are good. They will release planners from all the small stuff that goes on such as attics and Velux windows, which people go on and on about.

Deputy Michael Collins: The proposed development of a respite and day service support for individuals with an intellectual disability and an autism centre in Dunmanway is a live project. It is a project that has been discussed for over ten years. While it moves at a snail's pace, sometimes it stops. The former Minister of State, Anne Rabbitte, did a lot of work on it - I give her credit where credit is due - and had progressed it to the point of moving faster. In recent months, John and Mary McCarthy in Dunmanway donated the grounds so now it is up to the HSE to make the next move but it continues to go from person to person because somebody moves to another area and then another area. Jim O'Mahony and the rest of the Kilbriain committee are extremely frustrated at the way it has dragged on. They are all doing voluntary work dragging in funds as best they can so this project can go ahead. Will the Taoiseach look into it and find out where it is at and how we can we progress it to the point of it going to planning? That is a very important stage and it is not there at this present time.

The Taoiseach: I think I might have met with people at the very beginning and I did outline that the initial work had to be done to make sure that current funding was available and that it was aligning with existing plans because the land has been donated voluntarily and freely and a huge amount of voluntary fundraising has taken place. I will ask the HSE what the state of play is now to make sure we get this moving.

Life Annuity (Ireland) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the establishment and regulation of Life Annuity agreements for homeowners, to provide for consumer protections, and to provide for related matters.

This Private Members' Bill comes from a very practical place. It comes from my work as a public representative and a solicitor dealing with people who are trying to navigate their financial situation later in life at a time when they are arguably vulnerable and should be able to enjoy those years and not have to worry about financial challenges and risks. Time and again, I have seen people who own their homes and have worked hard all their lives to do so but find themselves with very limited options when it comes to accessing the value of their assets when they need it. They are in many cases asset rich but cash poor. When they look for solutions, the options available to them are not always suitable. In reality, the main option currently available on the table is the traditional equity relief scheme. Many people will know of seniors' money products, which often have very high compounding interest rates and complex terms and which can over time significantly reduce the value of the person's home or wipe it out completely.

Crucially, those products do not provide people with a steady income to support their day-to-day lives so this Bill is about offering an alternative to those who need it. It is not about encouraging people to release equity from their homes and it is not about replacing existing products. It is about creating an additional regulated option that will be suitable for many. This regulation introduces a framework for what is known as a life annuity model. Similar systems have been operated successfully in other countries, including France. Many people would be familiar with a viager scheme. Under this model, a homeowner can receive a lump sum and an ongoing income in exchange for transferring an interest in their property while retaining a legally protected right to remain living in their home for the rest of their life. The financial terms are determined in a structured way with actuarial input ensuring that arrangements are fair and reflective of individual circumstances. It is important to say that arrangements like this are already happening. They are happening informally and privately and without any real regulatory oversight and this is where the risk lies. People are entering into agreements without clear protections, without standardisation and without safeguards we would expect in any modern financial system.

What this Bill seeks to do is bring those arrangements into the open to regulate them and to ensure they are fair, transparent and properly overseen. At its core, it is about giving people certainty - certainty that they can remain in their home, certainty that the terms they are entering into are fair and certainty that proper protections are in place. The Bill includes a number of safeguards. It requires independent financial legal advice, provides for a cooling-off period and clear disclosure requirements and ensures that these agreements are subject to proper regulatory oversight. Most importantly, it protects the homeowner's rights to remain in their home for life. This is a central principle of this legislation.

This Bill also recognises the broader reality that people are living longer, that the costs of living are increasing and that many people are looking for practical ways to support themselves financially while remaining in their own homes. For some, this type of arrangement may be the suitable option, while for others it will not be. This is entirely as it should be. The Bill does not prescribe a solution. It merely creates a framework. It provides a choice and I hope

that regardless of political perspectives, Members of this House can engage with that principle because, ultimately, this is about dignity, independence and giving people financial options later in life. I commend this Bill to the House.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): It is not being opposed.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

Eleventh Report of the Standing Committee of Selection: Motion

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

That Dáil Éireann, pursuant to Standing Order 33, and with effect from 21st April, 2026, approves the Eleventh Report of the Standing Committee of Selection, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 17th April, 2026.

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 86; Níl, 56; Staon, 1.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Bennett, Cathy.	O'Gorman, Roderic.
Aird, William.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Brady, John.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Buckley, Pat.	
Boland, Grace.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Cairns, Holly.	
Brennan, Brian.	Carthy, Matt.	
Brennan, Shay.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Brophy, Colm.	Collins, Michael.	
Browne, James.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Burke, Colm.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Burke, Peter.	Cronin, Réada.	
Butler, Mary.	Crowe, Seán.	
Butterly, Paula.	Cullinane, David.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Cummins, Jen.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Daly, Pa.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Cahill, Michael.	Donnelly, Paul.	

Callaghan, Catherine.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Calleary, Dara.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Fitzmaurice, Michael.	
Chambers, Jack.	Gannon, Gary.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Clendennen, John.	Gould, Thomas.	
Connolly, John.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Cooney, Joe.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Healy, Seamus.	
Cummins, John.	Hearne, Rory.	
Currie, Emer.	Kenny, Martin.	
Daly, Martin.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Lawless, Paul.	
Dillon, Alan.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Feighan, Frankie.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Fleming, Sean.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Foley, Norma.	Murphy, Paul.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Geoghegan, James.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Grealish, Noel.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Harkin, Marian.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Heneghan, Barry.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
Heydon, Martin.	O'Hara, Louis.	
Higgins, Emer.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
Kelly, Alan.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Keogh, Keira.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Lahart, John.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Lawless, James.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Lawlor, George.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Lowry, Michael.	Quaide, Liam.	
Martin, Micheál.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Maxwell, David.	Rice, Pádraig.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	Stanley, Brian.	
McCarthy, Noel.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	Ward, Mark.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
McGreehan, Erin.		
McGuinness, John.		
Moran, Kevin Boxer.		
Moynihan, Michael.		
Moynihan, Shane.		
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.		
Murphy, Michael.		
Nash, Ged.		
Naughton, Hildegard.		
Neville, Joe.		

O'Brien, Darragh.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		
O'Donoghue, Robert.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Sheehan, Conor.		
Sherlock, Marie.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Wall, Mark.		
Ward, Barry.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and Emer Currie; Níl, Deputies Michael Collins and Ken O'Flynn.

Question declared carried.

Organisation of Working Time (Reproductive Health Related Leave) Bill 2021 [Seanad]: Motion

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I move:

That notwithstanding the Order of the Dáil of 1st May, 2025, Deputy Marie Sherlock be designated the member in charge of the Organisation of Working Time (Reproductive Health Related Leave) Bill 2021.

Question put and agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. Before we move to Taoiseach's Questions, I welcome Shillelagh National School to the Gallery. You are most welcome.

The Taoiseach: What is the name?

An Ceann Comhairle: Shillelagh, County Wicklow, guests of Deputy Brian Brennan.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Child Poverty

1. **Deputy Catherine Ardagh** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the progress his Department is making in tackling child poverty. [7895/26]

2. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the progress his Department is making in tackling child poverty. [7896/26]

3. **Deputy John Connolly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the progress his Department is making in tackling child poverty. [7897/26]

4. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the progress his Department is making in tackling child poverty. [23830/26]

5. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the progress his Department is making in tackling child poverty. [23835/26]

6. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the progress his Department is making in tackling child poverty. [26563/26]

7. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the progress his Department is making in tackling child poverty. [26694/26]

8. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the progress his Department is making in tackling child poverty. [26737/26]

9. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the progress his Department is making in tackling child poverty. [26750/26]

10. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the progress his Department is making in tackling child poverty. [26752/26]

11. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the progress his Department is making in tackling child poverty. [26755/26]

12. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach the progress his Department is making in tackling child poverty. [26810/26]

13. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the progress his Department is making in tackling child poverty. [28284/26]

14. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the progress his Department is making in tackling child poverty. [28391/26]

15. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach the progress his Department is making in tackling child poverty. [28393/26]

16. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the progress his Department is making in tackling child poverty. [28441/26]

The Taoiseach: I would like to take the opportunity to welcome Shillelagh National School pupils to Dáil Éireann. They are very welcome indeed.

I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 16, inclusive, together.

Reducing child poverty is a key priority for this Government, as set out in the programme for Government. In September 2025, the Government agreed a new and ambitious child poverty target to reduce the child consistent poverty rate to 3% or less by the end of 2030 from the current rate of 7.8%. This target is guiding decisions, action and investment across government.

In budget 2026, the Government prioritised targeted supports for those impacted by poverty. Some €28.9 billion will be spent on social protection this year, including over €1.15 billion of new measures to assist households and more than €320 million in targeted measures designed to tackle child poverty. Key measures include the largest ever increases to child support payments, higher income thresholds for the working family payment and expanded access to the fuel allowance and the back to school clothing and footwear allowance. These measures are in addition to cross-government initiatives under way, such as free school meals, free schoolbooks, free GP visit cards and enhancements to the early childhood care and education schemes, including the development of our new DEIS strategy. This will include DEIS plus, which includes more targeted measures for schools with severe disadvantage. It is very encouraging to see the effects of these measures starting to take hold.

Recent data from the Central Statistics Office's Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2025, published on 11 March, shows a welcome reduction in the child consistent poverty rate in 2025 from 8.5% to 7.8%, demonstrating the impact of Government measures to date. However, of course, we know we have to do much more to deliver our target and enhance long-term outcomes for children and society generally.

While consistent poverty is a very important metric, it is not the only way we have of measuring how children are doing. The programme office on child poverty and well-being has compiled a dashboard of indicators that will be used alongside the new child poverty target. This captures the multidimensional nature of child poverty and well-being, as alongside income supports, we are also advancing actions in housing, employment, childcare and public services.

The Government's new housing plan, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities*, recognises that homelessness is the single most pressing social issue that we face. It provides dedicated capital funding of €100 million, which will be ring-fenced to support local authorities to acquire properties to tackle long-term homelessness. This funding will be used specifically to acquire suitable units to exit families who are the longest in emergency accommodation and for Housing First units for individuals with complex needs who are experiencing homelessness. Given the importance of this issue for child well-being, the Department of the Taoiseach and

the Department of housing are working together on a new action plan on child and family homelessness, supported by relevant Departments and State bodies.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have 16 Members offering. I propose a minute each. I call Deputy Catherine Ardagh.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle. CSO data show that one-parent families make up around one in four families nationally but this rises to over one in three in Dublin city. These households, predominantly led by women, are far more exposed to deprivation and lower incomes. In areas like Dublin South-Central, where disadvantage is more concentrated, what targeted measures will be introduced to specifically support lone-parent families and reduce child poverty?

Deputy John Connolly: Among the priorities of the child poverty and well-being programme in the Taoiseach's Department is to enhance participation in culture, arts and sport for children and young people affected by poverty. In many of our disadvantaged communities, there is an absence of active and passive recreational spaces where children can congregate, come together, enjoy each other's company and generate some positivity from each other. Last year, the Government provided €500,000 spread across all local authorities, a maximum of €20,000 per local authority. We need to increase that funding.

Yesterday, I was in the Headford Road part of Galway city. It is an area of significant population with one of the biggest DEIS schools in the city. It has no playground and very little by way of play spaces or active recreational spaces.

We need to look at this area in terms of disadvantaged communities, and enhancing and further providing facilities for the children of those communities.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I fully support the measures the Taoiseach has outlined. The target of 3% is commendable. Ultimately, we should be working towards a complete eradication of child poverty. While that is aspirational, it should be the target. This time last year, many rumours abounded about the inclusion of a second tier of child benefit as part of budget 2026. Ultimately, it did not make the cut. Can the Taoiseach can confirm what plans there are within his Department, alongside that of the Minister, Deputy Dara Calleary, to ensure that we will see a second tier of child benefit payment introduced in budget 2027 as a real, concrete measure to tackle child poverty?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Taoiseach mentioned child poverty. There are a quarter of a million children in forced deprivation, 8% in consistent poverty, and one in five workers is low-paid in an economy that has vast wealth and a budget surplus. The Taoiseach mentioned DEIS plus. In Dublin 15 and much of the constituency I represent, there is huge anger among principals that so many schools have been left off the DEIS plus list. Earlier I raised the two primary schools in Corduff left off DEIS plus even though it is an area where principals have described gangland crime and criminality. I refer also to Blakestown Community School. Not one secondary school in Dublin 15 was included on the list, despite us having the youngest population and huge areas of poverty. All of the orange parts of the map I am holding up are in these areas I am talking about. Blakestown Community School has very disadvantaged

status. It has problems with educational attainment, employment issues, criminality and lone parents. A significant number of children live in care or emergency accommodation. There are English language learners, a huge number of pupils of heritage status other than Irish and children with Traveller identity who do not want to identify as Travellers. The school experiences so many of these issues. If we look at the overall population of schoolgoing age, it is absolutely baffling that one primary school, Ladyswell National School in Mulhuddart, and no secondary school made the DEIS plus list. There is a superleague of poverty now that the Government is forcing schools to compete in. All schools should be getting these supports.

Deputy Mark Ward: The latest figures on child poverty are showing exactly what we feared. Over a quarter of children aged under 16 are growing up in poverty. The Government has received warning after warning and it did not listen. I want to talk about the Clondalkin Equine Centre in my own area. It is a wonderful place. It is in an area of high deprivation as the Pobal index will tell us. It is like an oasis of calm in a really disadvantaged area. Last Thursday, we had a wonderful visit from President Catherine Connolly to the equine centre. It was fantastic. The kids were absolutely brilliant in showing the President around the area. The equine centre does not receive any core funding. It has 20 stables and it is not able to be self-sufficient. It is in danger of closing. What supports are in place for a centre like this in an area of high deprivation that has high levels of child poverty?

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Last weekend, I listened to constituents in apartment dwellings who are struggling with the rising cost of energy, particularly single parents. A singular plug-in solar system would have a payback period, depending on grant size, of between 12 and 24 months. In conjunction, if we used 500 W and 800 W, it would really help people who do not have access to rooftops to reduce their energy bills. Is there any update from the Department of the Taoiseach? I welcome the work of the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien on this issue of plug-in solar.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The issue of child poverty can be exacerbated by disability. I want to bring up the case of 14-year-old Harry. He is non-verbal and has been diagnosed with ASD, ADHD and general moderate learning disability. He has been in University Hospital Limerick, UHL, since 30 March. He is in a state of extreme distress and is engaging in daily self-injurious behaviour. He is confined to a single hospital room under 24-hour supervision by security guards. This is a medical setting. Timber blocks have been installed on windows to prevent escape. This is a repeat of a 2022 incident where Harry was similarly marooned in UHL due to lack of appropriate HSE disability provision. He has been in a full-time disability service run by RehabCare for the past four years. He was put in a temporary Red House facility in Limerick on 11 February 2026. On 30 March, he escaped this, barefoot, releasing fire exits and climbing gates. He was on the main road. He was, and is, in a situation that is not appropriate. The family cannot get sufficient communication from the HSE. We need a solution to this situation.

An Ceann Comhairle: Understandably, it is not necessarily a child poverty issue but the Taoiseach might address it.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate all the questions that have been asked. The Deputies have raised some important issues. Deputy Ardagh raised the issue of lone-parent families. It is correct that they can be particularly vulnerable at times to higher levels of deprivation or poverty. Child support payments are a very effective way to give additional supports. The latest budget saw a record increase of €8 for under-12s and €16 for children aged 12 and over, I think. We are going to continue to do that.

That relates to the question about a second-tier payment. There are a number of mechanisms to get there. I will engage again with the Minister, Deputy Calleary on this for the next budget. The child poverty unit in the Department of the Taoiseach is engaging with all Departments but particularly the Department of Social Protection in terms of how we can increase income supports. The child support payment is a very direct and effective way to support. There are also means test thresholds we can look at as well to facilitate lone parents who are working to receive higher payments. The free books scheme and hot school meals scheme also help and facilitate lone-parent families. In some instances, the DEIS scheme is significant as well as DEIS Plus. We will continue in terms of the child support payments, higher income thresholds, access to fuel allowance, back to school clothing and footwear allowances. They were all expanded this year to about an extra 50,000 people. Some of those were lone parents. The free GP visit cards for everyone under eight, and better enhancements to the early childhood care and education schemes will all be supportive. We will engage with the organisations representing lone parents to see what more we can do to improve that situation.

Deputy John Connolly raised a very important issue. I think €500,000 is too low. That probably came under the Department of children. It is too low. For years there have been problems in terms of children's playgrounds coming under different Departments. I absolutely agree that recreational space is vital to the well-being of any child. The Deputy mentioned Headford. Some areas of our cities historically never had enough green area provided. We can do more and can do better on that. I will keep an eye on that in the context of the next budget to enhance that fund. I will talk to the relevant Ministers, both in terms of children and disability but also in terms of allocations to local authorities more generally. Some of these initiatives suffer from pass-the-parcel between different Departments. The point is very well-made in terms of availability of play facilities. Play is key to child development. Children learn far more through play at an earlier age than through formal education so it is critically important.

On the two-tier child benefit, we had a lot of discussion on it last year and I engaged with the Department of social protection, the Minister, Deputy Calleary and the Secretary General. One of the challenges was that under the model, a lot of existing families could lose out. We do not want that to happen. A lot of design work is under way. It is an open question as to whether we will go for a ring-fenced second tier or will continue to enhance child support payments, which have a very positive and immediate impact on child poverty rates.

4 o'clock

We are also looking at the cost of disability. The Minister has convened stakeholders' groups to consult on how a cost-of-disability payment would work, the extent of it, the limits and so on and who would benefit. That is not unrelated to child poverty either and could be a particular support to families of children with disabilities.

In terms of DEIS plus, I do not like the phrase super league of poverty; that is unfair. We have the DEIS programme which is quite extensive and which we expanded significantly about two and a half years ago. It means a significant reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio in those schools, additional financial supports and other supports. The DEIS plus was set up with a view to having a targeted approach for very severely disadvantaged schools, even more than the DEIS itself. By definition it is not for every school. Targeting is important in the allocation of resources. There is actually something wrong if everybody gets it because that is not actually helping children who need it most.

Politicians did not decide the list; it was independently decided. We can look at the methodology. I accept that sometimes we look at it and wonder how a particular school did not get in when another school did. We can look at the research and those who did the research to identify the schools that qualified for DEIS plus. There are significant issues in many communities - not all Government-created. We have to respond to and deal with them, and help the children who suffer as a result of particular background issues or whatever. DEIS plus is one further measure to assist children who are in very difficult situations to enable them to learn properly and to have some chance in life. That is what we are doing with the DEIS plus scheme.

Deputy Ward asked about the equine centre in Clondalkin. I am a strong believer in equine centres. They can have positive therapeutic and recreational impacts for young people, in particular children. I am not sure if the Deputy was saying there an issue with the funding there.

Deputy Mark Ward: There is no core funding for it at the moment. It is trying everything.

The Taoiseach: I know the HSE is funding some equine centres but they may be of a different kind than the one in Clondalkin. I think the one in Clondalkin is more generally directed at youth so the Department of Education and Youth should be dealing with that. I will take that back to the Minister for Education and Youth to see what we can do there.

Deputy Heneghan spoke about the plug-in solar system. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is very open to that. Anything that enhances the ability of people to reduce their energy costs is something we should be doing and investing in because it leads to a permanent reduction in their costs. I know the Deputy has been a very strong advocate for novel approaches to energy efficiency, such as the private wires Bill and plug-in solar. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, is very open to this and I will ask him to meet the Deputy to pursue this and to engage on it.

Deputy Ó Murchú raised a very distressing and sad case. I am always somewhat reluctant to discuss individual cases of children in the Dáil or in public. The HSE should develop capacities to help children in situations like this to avoid having a child locked up in what seems to be a mental health unit in a hospital. It is Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, is it?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: No, it is in Limerick. Deputy McGettigan gave me the details and I can send them on to the Taoiseach afterwards.

The Taoiseach: If the Deputy sends me the details, we will pursue that. It is a very distressing case indeed.

Disability Services

17. **Deputy John Connolly** asked the Taoiseach for an overview of the Budget 2026: Spotlight on Disability report recently published by his Department. [18505/26]

18. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Taoiseach for an overview of the Budget 2026: Spotlight on Disability report recently published by his Department. [18506/26]

19. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach for an overview of the Budget 2026: Spotlight on Disability report recently published by his Department. [26756/26]

20. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach for an overview of the Budget 2026: Spotlight on Disability report recently published by his Department. [26938/26]

21. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach for an overview of the Budget 2026: Spotlight on Disability report recently published by his Department. [28285/26]

22. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach for an overview of the Budget 2026: Spotlight on Disability report recently published by his Department. [28392/26]

23. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach for an overview of the Budget 2026: Spotlight on Disability report recently published by his Department. [28394/26]

24. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach for an overview of the Budget 2026: Spotlight on Disability report recently published by his Department. [28395/26]

25. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Taoiseach for an overview of the Budget 2026: Spotlight on Disability report recently published by his Department. [28442/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 17 to 25, inclusive, together.

Improving the lives of disabled people, advancing their rights and enabling them to reach their full potential, is a core focus and priority of the Government. The Budget 2026: Spotlight on Disability report was published by my Department in December 2025. This is the first budget spotlight report prepared by the disability unit in the Department of the Taoiseach, which was established to bring a renewed focus, urgency and weight to disability issues.

Drawing on inputs received from Departments, the report outlines new or enhanced disability-related measures introduced in budget 2026 that will support the implementation of the Government's overarching strategy for disability, the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030.

The report finds that budget 2026 had a particularly strong focus on investment in both disability and mainstream services. A record €3.8 billion allocation to the Department of Children, Disability and Equality for specialist disability services represents a 20% increase in

funding for disability services, which will improve both the sustainability of the sector and the delivery of residential, respite and therapy services for children and adults.

The disabilities workforce is growing year on year. From the end of December 2019 to September 2025, the disabilities workforce in HSE and section 38 providers grew by over 21%. Building on growth achieved in 2025, budget 2026 will allow for further targeted expansion in the workforce across key services. In 2026, funding has been allocated for an additional 945 whole-time equivalents, which will bring the disability workforce to almost 23,600 by the end of this year.

Budget 2026 is not just about investing in recruitment but retaining the people we already have in the sector. This includes investing in pay and pay-related costs, such as those associated with recent pay deals and providing funding to meet the costs of the pay deal agreed with workers in section-39-funded services in the voluntary sector.

Last year the HSE appointed an assistant national director for the disabilities workforce to drive disability workforce initiatives with particular emphasis on enhancing recruitment and retention in children's disability network teams. Additionally, a first-ever dedicated national director for disability will be recruited in the HSE, as well as six new regional disability leads in the health regions.

During 2025, the HSE has focused on analysing retention challenges to inform the development of meaningful retention actions. A disability workforce strategy will be developed by the HSE in 2026 to meet growing service demands and address recruitment and retention challenges across specialist disability services, including children's disability network teams.

Special education also saw record investment under budget 2026, totalling €3 billion, which will see an additional 860 special education teachers appointed along with over 1,700 special needs assistants. In February this year, the Minister, Deputy Naughton, announced the phased roll-out of the new education therapy service, which will see occupational therapists and speech and language therapists placed in schools. The first 45 special schools to benefit from this service have been selected and are based in clusters in Carlow, Cork, Dublin, Galway, Kildare, Kilkenny, Louth, Laois, Limerick, Longford, Meath, Monaghan, Tipperary, Westmeath, Wexford and Wicklow. The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and the Minister, Deputy Naughton, intend to have a further roll-out of the service on a phased basis with a wider roll-out to special schools commencing in the 2026-2027 school year.

The current assessment of need system is not working as it should for children, many of whom are on long waiting lists for services. Work continues to fully resource children's disability network teams to enhance capacity. It is important to note that children do not require an assessment of need to access health services, including primary care, children's disability network teams and mental health services.

Since June 2024, over 7,700 clinical assessments have been commissioned privately through the assessment of need, AON, targeted wait list initiative to support the delivery of AON reports, at a cost of €27.8 million. Budget 2026 allocated a further €20 million to this initiative to deliver up to 6,000 additional clinical assessments, with a specific focus on autism assessments.

Other initiatives outlined in the report include increased investment in housing adaptation grants and in the public transport retrofit programme, along with enhanced supports for employers for the employment of disabled people.

In addition, budget 2026 also contained targeted and mainstream social protection measures which will support households with disabilities, including increases in weekly rates, expansion of eligibility to schemes and amendments to income disregards for carers. Budget 2026 is a first step in the Government's ambition to deliver the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030. I believe we have made a strong start in year one of our programme of work and investment. Future budgets are expected to build on this progress to ensure disabled people are supported, empowered, and enabled to fully participate in their communities and society.

Deputy John Connolly: We all very much welcome the introduction, as the Taoiseach mentioned, of the new therapy and education service that will be implemented in special schools from next September. I very much welcome this for two schools in my constituency, Ábalta Special School and St. Joseph's Special School. One other commitment of the programme for Government - I think it is also included in the strategy in the Taoiseach's Department for tackling child poverty and supporting well-being, which the Taoiseach spoke about earlier - is to implement a single point of access for children referred to primary care, disability or mental health services. We are all familiar with the frustration of parents who are referred for a particular service and, when they visit that service, are advised that it is not the appropriate service for their child. People will be familiar with terms like CAMHS, CAMHS-ID, community psychology, disability network teams and assessments of need. It is crucial that we actively seek to implement a service such that there is no wrong door for the parent, that whatever referral they receive can act on the needs of their child and that these services work together and co-ordinate together to make sure that the child receives the appropriate service they need in a timely manner.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Budget 2026 unforgivably made some people in receipt of disability payments up to €1,400 worse off. People with disabilities want to contribute to society and want jobs in their communities. They have the same ambitions in life as everybody else. Ireland has one of the lowest disability employment rates in the EU, at between 32% and 33%. That is nearly 20 percentage points below the EU average. The wage subsidy scheme, which financially supports employers who employ people with disabilities, has facilitated the participation of many disabled people in the workforce. However, disabled entrepreneurs are excluded. Therefore, employers are financially supported to hire disabled people but disabled people are not supported to employ themselves. As the Taoiseach's Government has said that it will prioritise disability, will he examine how the wage subsidy scheme can be expanded to include disabled entrepreneurs?

Deputy Liam Quaide: Does the Government accept that disability service delivery in this State has become extraordinarily fragmented and that this fragmentation is making it impossible to guarantee equity, to plan services properly or to ensure public money is being used in the most effective way? I ask this because a recent response to a parliamentary question of mine shows that the HSE now has approximately 1,172 service arrangements or grant aid

agreements with over 494 organisations providing disability services on its behalf. This includes 226 private, for-profit companies. On paper, we talk about integrated, standardised, person-centred community services; in practice, what we have is a disjointed system that is haphazard, dispersed and, essentially, ungovernable. When services are channelled through hundreds of separate organisations, it becomes much more difficult, if not impossible, to ensure a similar standard of support regardless of where a person lives. It also inevitably means waste through duplication, administration and contract management. What will the Government do to move towards a genuinely direct public provision of disability services, proper workforce planning and genuinely standardised rights-based support for disabled people and their families?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Two years ago the parents of Dublin 15 took to the streets, or took to autism-friendly protests in parks, to highlight the dire situation whereby they could not get proper education for disabled, neurodivergent or autistic children. Two years on, we had a special task force in the area, which, as the Taoiseach well knows because it has been raised several times, did a huge review, but that review has not been published. We have 19 secondary school students who do not have school places in the area as well as many primary students. I want to mention one school that has written to me and all TDs, namely Hansfield Educate Together National School. It says it will have to consider putting students on-----

The Taoiseach: Again?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Hansfield, in Ongar. It will have to consider putting students on shortened school days, which is reprehensible. The school knows it will get flak for it but feels it has no alternative. It asked for an ANA and SNA review for an increased allocation and it was refused. It has seven new students who need SNAs. Only one student left. It also has 13 emerging students who need support and it has two autism classes in which at least two students have been told by the professional care team that they need one-to-one SNA support. The Government is not providing basic SNAs to the schools that need them. Why is that?

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I welcome the improvements for disabilities that were highlighted but I would like to raise some issues I would love to be addressed as well. We would love some more attention in Dublin Bay North for Stapolin Educate Together National School. I have raised this multiple times. It has great staff. I visited again recently and it has a fantastic campaign on behalf of the children I represent in Dublin Bay North. The school is looking for a modular building so it can have a special class sanctioned. Speaking to the SNAs in that school-----

The Taoiseach: Sorry? It has a sanction?

Deputy Barry Heneghan: It has not had the special class sanctioned because it has no room in the school, so it needs a modular building. I have spoken to the SNAs across my constituency as well and they-----

The Taoiseach: What is the name of the school?

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Stapolin Educate Together National School in Baldoyle. I have spoken to those SNAs and some of them are involved in the Save our SNAs campaign, which has developed an alternative circular.

Also, last week we had the residential placement for people with intellectual disabilities in north Dublin from the Before We Die campaign.

I am sorry for raising two matters with the Taoiseach.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I was contacted by somebody, like the Taoiseach, who might have an interest in the all-Ireland final on 19 July, before anyone mentions the county I am from, which is doing quite well at the moment. The fact is that the free travel option they would have on the basis of their disability was not available in the rail options that were open to them. They wanted this highlighted as a point.

I agree with Deputy Conway-Walsh, and we have spoken before about the need for a cost-of-disability payment, but we need to increase supports for those in work too. The work and access programme and the wage subsidy scheme need to be looked at. The latter definitely needs to be applied to those who are also self-employed and entrepreneurs.

I will give one example of another specific issue:

I am writing to ask for your assistance regarding an issue I'm experiencing with the current taxi licensing system. I have a long-term spinal condition which limits my ability to carry out heavy manual handling. Under the current regulations, new taxi licences are restricted to wheelchair-accessible vehicles and standard saloon taxi licences are no longer being issued. As I am not in a position to safely operate a WAV due to my condition, I find myself effectively without a viable pathway into the taxi profession.

Obviously, this is an unintended consequence, but it is something we need to look at.

The Taoiseach: Deputy John Connolly was the first to ask a question. The schools therapy programme is working well. On the issue of the single point of access, the HSE has embarked on the idea of a one-door approach. The outgoing CEO, Bernard Gloster, was very focused on this. All last year at the Cabinet subcommittee on disability, he gave a very clear undertaking on behalf of the HSE that there would be a single point of access. Culturally and every other way, that is now being rolled out across the HSE. Deputy Connolly is absolutely correct when he says that children should not be moved from pillar to post. There should be one point open and there is now. It has been established. I will ask the HSE to get a report to the Deputy in terms of an update on it, but obviously a big change like that will take some time to bed down and be uniform. It is not disconnected from school places or the broader area of looking after children with disabilities such that we can move faster to provide the services the children require as opposed to being put from pillar to post. I will ask the HSE if we can get an update on that for the Deputy. He is absolutely correct that it is the only way to go. Up to last year, the situation was not acceptable. We had a debate about the therapy in schools service. I undertook prior to the election that it was a red-line issue for us that we wanted a schools-based therapy service. In many ways, that flowed from the inadequacy of what was happening within the health service in respect of therapy services and provision.

To Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh, I would say that the budget allocated €3 billion to special education alone. There was €130 million for grants to adapt the homes of older people and disabled people. There is a €10 increase in the disability allowance and the expansion of the wage subsidy scheme. There was a €375 increase to the income limit for carer's benefit and we increased the monthly domiciliary care allowance by €20. There is a lot of long-term, permanent, positive measures for disability. The Deputy is correct in raising the wage subsidy issue. I have spoken to the Minister, Deputy Calleary, on this. Improvements were made last year but we are open to more radical improvements. In particular, I will speak to the Minister about disabled entrepreneurs. I do not see any reason they should be excluded from the wage subsidy scheme. We also need to look at the facility and capacity of people with disabilities to participate in the workforce without losing their disability allowance immediately. There are lots of issues around that. There are limits to how much a person's income rises. We need to be a bit more radical in that respect. Workplace participation will be an area of focus in the next budget. People with disabilities are not being given enough opportunities to enter the workplace. We have a poor record on this as a society and as a country. We have to do far better in that respect. The public service has made a lot of progress but needs to make more progress in facilitating employment.

We have various employment schemes, such as Deaf Enterprises in my own area. We have made good progress with the HSE in that regard but for a long time there was no clear structure to support highly qualified craftwork such as upholstery and the repair of furniture, which is a great circular economy solution to the wider community that benefits. They were very skilled people but the financial sustainability and underpinning of it was not what it should be, so every now and again they would come looking for a bailout or some supports. We have improved upon that. Those are the areas. There are many other kinds of enterprises of that kind that we will do better on.

I agree with Deputy Quaide that it is fragmented. We have inherited a system long before the State became involved in the seventies in disabilities where many of what we now call section 38 and section 39 organisations emerged from a period before State intervention, when organisations were set up to look after people with disabilities. We have come a long way since then but it is still problematic. There have been lots of improvements, including service level agreements, regarding complementarity with the State but the sustainability of quite a number of the organisations is an issue. In the long-term evolution of services for disabilities, there will have to be greater State involvement but that can only happen through an evolutionary process. There is a lot of expertise in these bodies as well, which we cannot lose. There is great voluntary endeavour and community and family engagement attached to it, all of which are positives when channelled and supported in the right direction. We do need to work hard at that. I think the Deputy said there are 1,172 grant-aided organisations providing services. Some are small and some are very large. We need to improve and streamline the relationship with the HSE regarding accountability and strategic future planning. I have an interest in this area. It is one of the reasons we have brought the ETBs in more on special education. Over time, the ETBs will have to develop capacity and experience, which they may not have had. At least now they have a wide range of resources and administrative capacity that can support the establishment of new special schools at primary and post-primary level. Perhaps we could have new campuses in education which would involve what we might call mainstream primary and secondary and special education schools all on the one campus. Ideally, that is where we

should head in future school development so that there is proper integration on the campus overall. However, I do not disagree with the Deputy's fundamental point regarding the fragmentation.

To Deputy Coppinger, I will seek out where that report is. There is no reason it should not be published. In terms of Hansfield and Ongar, we will engage. We will have 25,000 SNAs this year. We might now have more because the Government took a decision this morning in terms of the inclusive special school model, which will mean significantly more teachers and SNAs. This is because of the increased numbers who availed of the portal that was opened early last October. I cannot go into detail on every specific school but I do not know whether they have appealed that decision by the NCSE in respect of the number of SNAs they have sought.

Deputy Heneghan raised the issue of the modular building. I will ask the Minister for education to respond. I do not know if the Deputy has talked to the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, about this or not. Regarding the Save our SNAs campaign, I will meet the group and anyone who wants to meet me. My main point was that we are not in the zone where we have to save SNAs, because the number of SNAs is expanding. We will have a workforce planning framework for SNAs. Redeployment means that there will be employment security. I have a great commitment to SNAs. I introduced the concept in 1998 when I was Minister for education, and the number has grown exponentially. I see it increasing. The school therapy service is very important. I also think we have to look at other methods and supports that schools may require, such as behavioural therapy over time. There is not a one-size-fits-all model for how we approach children in need.

On the Before We Die campaign, I have met the group. At the next meeting of the disability committee, we will be looking specifically at that shelter issue. I have spoken to the Ministers for housing and disability. It will take a whole-of-government approach to make sure that we can provide adequate sheltered housing and supported housing for adults with disabilities so as to relieve their parents of the stress and anxiety they are currently experiencing.

Deputy Ó Murchú referred to the wage subsidy campaign and the all-Ireland, did he?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It was about all-Ireland tickets for the person who could not get the free travel option for the all-Ireland final date. They have tried to book it but they are not able to get the free travel option.

The Taoiseach: For the all-Ireland?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Exactly. They are getting ahead of themselves, but you know--

The Taoiseach: There must be a lot of them from Cork, are there?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: There may be.

The Taoiseach: I will follow that up. It is not available on the date, is it?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: No, it is-----

The Taoiseach: It rarely is though for the special services, is it?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: No, but these are not even the extra services that are put on. Usually this would be available but it is not available. The other thing was the guy with the spinal injury.

The Taoiseach: He cannot get to the match.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: No. The guy with the spinal injury has been knocked out of the taxi industry because he has to buy a wheelchair-accessible vehicle and he is not able to operate it. I understand how this has happened. I will send it on. It is an unintended consequence.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Murchú, I am sure the Taoiseach will follow up with you.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Tax Rebates

231. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he is aware of the issue around accessing and cash flow in relation to the diesel rebate scheme; if consideration has been given to providing the benefit of the diesel rebate scheme as a direct cut on excise on diesel at the pumps; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26925/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Obviously, the priority questions were submitted before the announcements last week, which the Government was forced to make by people pressure and by parties in opposition like Sinn Féin, but we know that half measures do not cut it. Still we see so many people, particularly hauliers, who are locked out of the rebate scheme. There are reasons for this, such as if they are transporting livestock, their own product or if they do not have a haulage licence. There is a serious issue with cash flow. I have argued time and again with the Taoiseach that the direct reduction needs to be given at the fuel pumps. That would benefit not only hauliers but also everybody else who relies on petrol and diesel and who are paying extortionate prices during this time of crisis. Will the Tánaiste finally listen, see sense and actually cut fuel prices to affordable levels at the pumps?

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Simon Harris): I have looked at this issue in terms of both access and cash flow in relation to the diesel rebate scheme. As the Deputy knows, the diesel rebate scheme is a state aid that provides qualifying road haulage and passenger transport operators with a partial repayment of mineral oil tax paid on auto diesel. The scheme operates in accordance with the EU's energy tax directive, as it must, and with the general block exemption regulation on state aid. In 2025, almost €40 million was paid out

under the scheme, providing targeted support to the road haulage and passenger transport sectors.

The diesel rebate scheme rate of repayment is linked to the average retail price of auto diesel, based on data from the CSO. A 7.5 cent rebate has applied to all claims over the period from quarter 1 of 2021 to quarter 4 of 2025. In response to the current fuel crisis, I recently increased the repayment cap from 7.5 cent per litre to 12 cent per litre. This enhanced repayment rate applies to claims in respect of fuel purchased from 1 January to 30 June this year.

The Deputy raised a genuinely interesting point regarding the point at which the rebate is applied. I have been looking into this. I am advised by Revenue that the operation of the diesel rebate scheme on a remission basis at the pump is not compatible with the legal basis of the scheme as repayment rates are determined on an ex-post basis. I looked at whether the scheme could be redesigned but, even if the scheme were redesigned, the application of mineral oil tax reductions at the pump to qualifying transport operators would require the introduction of complex real-time validation systems and shift compliance risks to fuel retailers. For these reasons, Revenue considers that improvements are more appropriately focused on administrative efficiencies to lead to faster repayments. Revenue encourages customers to file claims immediately when the period to claim opens, which I believe many do, and to ensure that claims are completed correctly and that supporting documentation is available if requested by Revenue.

Revenue is mindful of the financial impact of the current increase in fuel prices and the importance of the rebate scheme to licensed operators. It will work with claimants who are unable to obtain tax clearance on a case-by-case basis. Where a claimant has tax clearance and yet has some tax liabilities, Revenue will process any claim and offset any refunds against liabilities. I will have another chance to come in but, as is always the case with cash flow issues, it is important that there is engagement with Revenue. I know that Revenue will be constructive in that regard.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste is missing the point here.

Deputy Simon Harris: I am trying not to.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I do not know if he is doing it deliberately or not. If you cut excise duty directly at the pump, it benefits the hauliers, transport operators and bus companies that need that measure for cash flow, but it also benefits everybody else. It benefits carers, nurses, doctors, teachers, street cleaners and everybody else in society. That is what should be happening here. That is the best way to cut costs for the hauliers, who would then not have to wait three months and deal with more paperwork and red tape as they fill in applications to the rebate scheme. What people are demanding and took to the streets for, although the Tánaiste refused to listen to them, is a cut to excise duty at the pumps. They wanted costs driven down. There is still capacity to do some of that because we are still not at the minimum levels of excise duty on petrol and diesel. A carer who rocks up to the petrol station tomorrow will pay €2.07 per litre. He or she is paying more excise duty on that litre of diesel than is required under EU law. That is a fact and that is wrong. It is wrong at a time of huge surpluses in this State and when the Government now has €4.1 billion extra that it did not expect to have. People

are really suffering but the Government is still refusing to listen, refusing to understand and, what is worse, refusing to act appropriately.

Deputy Simon Harris: I will make a couple of points. We are not refusing to listen and we are certainly not refusing to act. We have brought in one of the largest packages of support in the European Union. That is a statement of fact. That is the right thing to do because our economy enables us to.

Second, I do not say this to be argumentative but, on diesel, the advice available to me is that we have actually gone further than the energy tax directive allows. We have had to write to Europe to seek a derogation in that regard. That is genuinely advice that has been made available to me. We have gone further than we should have under the EU energy tax directive, such is the scale of the challenge around diesel.

Third, I am answering the specific question the Deputy tabled, No. 231, which relates to the diesel rebate scheme. This is a very valuable scheme. Hauliers value it and farm contractors sought it. The sector sees value in the scheme. The Deputy asked me what I thought was a very legitimate question and I am endeavouring to answer it in good faith. He asked whether there is a better way of administering the scheme. The specific question I was asked was whether we should look at trying to provide the benefit of this scheme as a direct cut. The advice available to me suggests that would not be the most effective way to go about it and that it could actually lead to a greater administrative burden.

Cash flow is a real issue and the Deputy is right to highlight it. I have asked the Revenue Commissioners to try to identify further administrative efficiencies to further improve this scheme from a cash flow perspective.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Does the Minister accept that the nurse pulling up to a petrol station, putting diesel into her car and paying €2.07 per litre, the price I was seeing last night, is paying more excise duty on that fuel than is required under EU law? It is a simple question.

Deputy Simon Harris: Is the Deputy asking about excise duty on petrol or on diesel?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am asking about diesel. Under European law, the minimum excise duty to be imposed on her diesel is €330 per 1,000 litres. She is paying more than that. That is the reality. The issue here is that the resources are in the State. The Minister knows that. The money is there. The money is there to help people. It is there to help hauliers, nurses and gardaí. It is there to help the people but the Minister is refusing to do that. His head has been seriously stuck in the sand for the past two weeks. People power had to be employed in ways it had never been before to get Deputies Simon Harris and Micheál Martin to wake up and listen. These half jobs are not good enough. Some €2.07 is far too high when it comes on top of everything else, including all of the pressures and the withdrawal of various supports from families last October. That is what the Minister is missing and what he is failing to understand. This question was very simple. The Minister can do this in a different way, which would benefit everybody but he does not want to do it because he is penny-pinching.

Deputy Simon Harris: We really are not. Significant lessons have been learned from the past number of weeks. The Deputy and I might agree on some and completely and utterly disagree on others. I was disappointed to see his support for blockades. I was not disappointed to see him joining protests. In fact, I would expect him to do so. That is fine in a democracy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I was disappointed when you threatened them with the Army.

Deputy Simon Harris: I was genuinely disappointed to see several of the Deputy's colleagues refuse to condemn illegal action. I do think that is genuinely disappointing. We have to pull together and do our best. What I would say to those the Deputy has highlighted in this House, the nurses and those in other professions, is that the actions we have taken are real. There is €750 million worth of measures. The Deputy knows this brief well so he will know that not only will this package have a particular benefit in reducing the price of diesel and petrol compared to what it would have been and do things like extending the fuel allowance period and putting in place a diesel rebate scheme for hauliers and a package for farmers, but that it will also have the effect of reducing the inflation rate by about 0.6%. That is the advice of the chief economist. Although the inflation we will end up seeing in supermarkets will be too high as a result of this war, the rate would have been 0.6% higher were it not for this package. That also has a real and genuine benefit in trying to insulate people. We also have to keep some firepower for the winter. I have no doubt but that the Deputy will, quite rightly, have many ideas on what we should do to help people through a winter challenge. An energy crisis in the winter is even more challenging than one in the summer. This is a balance. I think the step-by-step approach is genuinely the right one.

Tax Data

232. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if his Department has assessed the predicted shortfall in revenue from the recent cuts to the carbon tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [28778/26]

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Will the Tánaiste give us an account of his Department's assessment of the shortfall in revenue from the deferral of the carbon tax increase?

Deputy Simon Harris: The estimated cost of delaying the carbon tax increase on home heating fuels until October is €22 million. This represents approximately 2% of the overall carbon tax revenue allocated for expenditure in the last budget, which was over €1.1 billion. While there will be different views and perspectives on the carbon tax - I know the Deputy's view - I will be very clear that the carbon tax remains a core part of Ireland's climate policy, which aims to reach net-zero. The Deputy will agree that the need for society and the economy to decouple from fossil fuel dependence is even more apparent now, given the volatility in the international fuel markets. However, you also have to apply a degree of common sense. I am not suggesting the Deputy would not; I am just saying I had to. When we were limited in what we could do on the likes of home heating oil, allowing a carbon tax increase to proceed would have pushed up costs further. I did not believe that to be the right thing to do at this moment in time.

While we are not discussing it enough, the best way to insulate our economy and society from fuel price shocks is to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels. Carbon tax funds are allocated for expenditure on measures that will achieve this such as the continuation of the national retrofitting programme, investment in community energy efficiency measures and funding for greener farming practices. I reassure the Deputy that the full amount allocated from that sum of just over €1.1 billion in budget 2026 will still be spent on the intended measures. In other words, the €22 million deferral will not come off the climate action fund or other climate measures. It will be met from running a smaller budget surplus. The allocations set out in budget 2026, which were approved by this Oireachtas, remain the voted amounts for the year. This includes carbon tax funding commitments incorporated into the national development plan, which provides medium-term certainty for sectors and communities supported by these measures.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: On the evening we voted on the financial resolutions, I noted that the Tánaiste's decision to defer that increase shattered that coalition that had existed in this House across Government and some parts of the Opposition where difficult votes to support the carbon tax had been taken. I genuinely have to ask why. As the Tánaiste pointed out, the value forgone is actually very small in terms of the overall package, €22 million out of €505 million. It is 4.3%. I spoke to a number of Fianna Fáil backbenchers the next day and they made the point that for six years, they had gone out and batted for the carbon tax and the Tánaiste's action had really pulled the rug out from underneath them in terms of the case they were making. By deferring the increase, the Tánaiste has ceded the ground to those who say the carbon tax is the root of all evil, and he has lost that case for that constant expansion of that pool of money for ACRES, the warmer homes scheme and retrofits, and ultimately it has not won the Tánaiste one iota of thanks from the people who have always opposed this particular measure. Again, I have to ask the Tánaiste why he did it.

Deputy Simon Harris: I do not look for thanks in politics and I certainly do not look for thanks from political opponents. It is not why I do this job. I do look for ways of assisting people and you have to bring the people with you too. While the Deputy obviously supports the carbon tax, I appreciate that many in opposition stand by the carbon tax too and do not engage in populism on this. It is an important form of tax revenue. However, we do have to look at the reality in terms of the cost of a fill of home heating. We had to look at the reality in terms of green diesel. It did not make sense to decide to tell people that we were going to further increase the cost of their home heating oil.

There also needs to be a sense of perspective in relation to this. That decision has not resulted in any reduced amount of money being spent on the climate action fund or on the retrofitting programme or on the fuel allowance because it is €22 million. It is 2% of the total amount that we expect to take in. I would also make the broader point that when the carbon tax was legislated for, I think, in 2020, the war in Ukraine had not happened and the war in Iran had not happened. I support the carbon tax. Some in the Opposition do not and some in the Opposition do; that is fine. However, these are realities in terms of the impact on the energy market and you can believe in a carbon tax and also believe that now might not have been the right time to further increase it.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The Tánaiste has spoken about common sense and it not making sense now to allow these increases to take place but he has to recognise the precedent that he set he it suspended the carbon tax increase because of the blockades in our streets. The Tánaiste has to understand that the people who have seen him bend and break now will anticipate that he will do it again and will look to put that same level pressure on it when it comes to the next set of decisions coming in October of this year.

When it comes to October of this year, can the Tánaiste set out what his starting point is in respect of the carbon tax? Is he committed to continuing to grow that pot of money that is available for ACRES to support farmers, to support the further roll out of the warmer homes scheme and other retrofit schemes, and to have additional money so social protection payments like the fuel allowance can be increased, or is it a wait and see matter? Are we just going to wait and see until October and see what level of pressure is going to be deployed against him? Will his common sense mean that he will actually duck the decision again?

Deputy Simon Harris: I do not think that is a fair portrayal. We have managed as a country to introduce a carbon tax. We have managed to bring in over €1 billion in it. We have managed to legislate for it on a multi-annual basis. We did not bomb Iran. We did not disrupt 20% of the world's energy supply. The Government has to use the levers at its disposal.

If we want to engage in real and meaningful climate action, we have to try to bring people with us, and the centre of Irish politics has to try to bring people with it as well. This measure needs to be seen in the round. It is 2% of the total amount we are expecting to take in carbon tax this year. It does not have an impact in reducing the climate action fund, and all taxation measures - and I say the same no matter what taxation measure I am asked about - are a matter of consideration at the budget. The tax strategy group in my Department looks at all things and I am committed to the carbon tax. I am committed to the legislation behind the carbon tax and committed to the carbon tax growing as part of our climate action in this country. However, I am also committed to looking at how we can assist people with their energy costs in the here and now, and there are some areas where there are limited tools available because there are no other excises on the fuels. Deputy Doherty and I had this debate. Carbon tax was on the kerosene. Some wanted me to reduce it. Instead, I just did not proceed with the increase, and I thought that was a balanced approach.

Tax Reliefs

233. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will consider the maximum removal of excise duty, both carbon and non-carbon, from green diesel, given the vital role of green diesel in primary production like farming and other sectors such as construction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26926/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister steadfastly refused to cut excise duty on green diesel, despite all of the evidence and the knowledge that farmers are under serious pressure. The reason is that the excise duty on green diesel is carbon tax. It is the carbon component. Does the Tánaiste know something? A farmer does not care what it is called. He does not care whether it is excise, carbon or whatever else. He just knows that the price has gone from 97 cent a litre up to €1.80 and, as Minister for Finance, the Tánaiste is refusing to cut it at the

pumps. He has the ability today to still support farmers in a way that really matters, right here, right at the pumps, by actually removing carbon tax from green diesel. Why will he not do it?

Deputy Simon Harris: If I adopt the approach as Minister for Finance of abolishing taxes and increasing spending, it does not get us to a good place as a country. That is why. It is not a sustainable economic policy to abolish that tax and increase public spending. We know where that will get us.

There are legitimate conversations we can have around windfall receipts and surpluses and around how to deploy them but the Deputy and I know that it is done in a one-off space. You do not do that in relation to more consistent measures and eroding the tax base would be doing a disservice to people in rural and urban Ireland as well.

The Deputy made the point - and I take it - that the farmer could not care whether it is carbon tax or not carbon tax; they just quite rightly care that the cost of green diesel is just too high. I accept that point but I would say back that they do not particularly care what lever we use to help them only that we help them. That is why in addition to the NORA levy and in addition to deciding not to proceed with the increase, we did also put in place a scheme. I accept the point from farmers and others that there needed to be a scheme and needed to be assistance. As the Deputy knows very well, we brought in a specific scheme - a fuel subsidy support scheme - under the Minister for agriculture's remit to assist farmers, agricultural contractors and fishers facing unprecedented increases in fuel payments. The payments will cover the months of March up until the end of July, which, as the Deputy knows, coincides with the peak fuel usage on farms. The scheme will provide around €20 million per month in supports, and it is worth approximately 20 cent per litre of marked gas oil, MGO. When that is combined that with the other measures, it is a significant, important and proportionate response as well. We have done some elements in relation to excise. Other than the carbon element, I admit there was not much to do. We did take action on the excise and on NORA and we have supplemented that with a 20 cent scheme that is worth roughly 20 cent per litre of MGO. That is the balanced approach we have taken to try to help.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It would cost €14 million a month to actually remove carbon tax from green diesel, the cost of which has gone through the roof for farmers. Talk to agricultural contractors and talk to ordinary farmers. Talk to the farmers who are telling me that this scheme, which we have not seen as the applications are not even open yet because this a Government that dithers, delays and only acts when it is pushed into things, is going to create more paperwork. What the Government will not listen to is that it has the ability to reduce the excise duty on green diesel at the pump for the farmer right now. It would cost €14 million a month in the context of a surplus of over €9 billion, money we are going to take in this year, and we are not going to spend.

The Tánaiste should not give me his guff about this breaking the economy. Supporting farmers is the right thing to do. It will not break the economy. Supporting farmers is what any responsible Government should be doing. The ability is here to support people in terms of the scale of this crisis but the Government is refusing to do it, and the reason it is refusing to do it is for the simple reason it is called carbon tax. Is that not the truth?

Deputy Simon Harris: No, the truth of the matter is that Sinn Féin is isolated on this issue. We heard a lot about the united Opposition. We had a vote in the Dáil on this issue. Labour, the Social Democrats, the Green Party, the Government parties, the Government-supporting Independents, an overwhelming majority in the Dáil, believe that the Sinn Féin position is short-sighted, short-termed and populist-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The people backed me and-----

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy is getting like-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Talk to the people and the Tánaiste will get that message very clearly.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You are living in this bubble too long, Simon. Go and talk to ordinary people.

Deputy Simon Harris: If the people backed Sinn Féin, the Deputy would not have been the Opposition's spokesperson on finance for 16 years. The people do not back Sinn Féin, so stop speaking-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: For the past two elections, we have had more seats than Fine Gael.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty, please.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy is over there shouting and roaring for 16 years. He must be exhausted but while he is over there shouting and roaring, we are working with constructive people in opposition and constructive people in government to try to pull this country together. While Sinn Féin wants to cause chaos, we have taken measures to help farmers.

I think the Deputy would accept that the IFA represents farmers. It has been in the room and has welcomed this scheme. He can pooh-pooh it. He is not a farmer and neither am I.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister needs to get his head out of the clouds and sand and talk to ordinary people. He can pontificate all he wants, point fingers at me and say I am isolated and people do not back me in here. I do not give a damn because I know that I am on the side of ordinary Irish people. I know that people are being pushed to the pin of their collar. I have met them on the streets and in homes across the State over the past number of weeks. I know they need action and leadership and they are not getting it from the Minister. That is what I am doing here. I am giving them a voice and I do not care who else is on my side because I know the side I am on. The Minister is on the wrong side.

The question people will ask me after this exchange will be how the fella across from me justifies €9 billion of a surplus. Last night I spoke to an elderly person in Galway who has no fuel in her tank to heat her home. Carers told me the old woman apologised to them because the house was so cold. At a time the Exchequer's coffers are bursting, people are going cold. That is not a republic that is worthy of the name. The Minister has the opportunity to change that and make a real difference for people, but he refuses to do so because he is too long in this bubble and is out of touch with ordinary people.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy is in a so-called bubble longer than me, but his anger might be making him forget that fact. He is in the bubble a long time. I am not sure who he thinks elects me to Dáil Éireann, but he should come to Wicklow and meet the people who have never not elected me. He should not give me guff about who represents the ordinary people. Everybody in here has a mandate and people who vote for everybody are ordinary people. The Deputy does not have a monopoly on that.

He likes to suggest that the Government has not acted. Objectively, and ordinary people know this, the Government has put in place one of the largest packages in Europe. We have reduced the cost of diesel at the pump by 32 cent per litre. We have reduced the cost of petrol by 27 cent per litre. We introduced a scheme for farmers, hauliers and fishers. We cannot just see this crisis through the today and tomorrow because the Deputy and I know it will not end today or tomorrow. We have to prepare for the time ahead and that is why we published a series of economic forecasts that show how the economy will grow and inflation will impact in three different scenarios. That allows us in here - constructive ideas are welcome - and outside of here to frame budget 2027 and begin to put in place measures to help people. We will do so and we will get through this and do more to support people.

We cannot do everything in the here and now. We certainly cannot abolish every tax. The Deputy does not want to just abolish the carbon tax. He wants to abolish the property tax. If we abolish, abolish, abolish, how do we fund public services and make sure we have the resources we need in the future? He cannot ask me to abolish every tax that he does not like and increase public spending.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am not asking the Minister. He should not be stupid. He should not be silly.

Deputy Simon Harris: We cannot do both.

Tax Code

234. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will consider the maximum removal of mineral oil tax on home heating oil given the substantial price increases; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26927/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am sure the Minister will not listen to this either.

Deputy Simon Harris: I always listen.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: He always listens. The last time the Minister listened the Government was trying to turn the Army on our own people. That is the listening. That is the reaction we got from Government.

Deputy Simon Harris: There is one army.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Let me just say this here-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Can both of you please address your remarks through the Chair and we might get through the questions?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Some 750,000 households across the State rely on home heating oil to heat their homes. Last night, at a public meeting attended by hundreds in Galway to discuss the cost-of-living crisis, I spoke to a carer who went into a home of an elderly woman. She worked all her life, paid her taxes and did everything right and apologised for the house being so cold because the heating had run out. The Minister refuses to cut excise duty on home heating oil to support household like hers, along with 750,000 other households. We have record surpluses of over €9 billion, yet the Government refuses to introduce a measure that would cost €14 million per month. Why is the Minister so out of touch? Why is he acting so Scrooge-like when he knows people are cold in their homes today because they cannot afford to heat them.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy cannot come in here and spend the surplus and then pursue a policy agenda that would have resulted in us never having it. We would not have had a surplus if we had followed his economic plan. It has been hard-won and earned by the Irish people and is there to be deployed in an appropriate manner and to make sure that the Deputy's children and mine never experience the austerity we experienced. It is there as an intergenerational support. The Deputy knows that. We put it into funds. They are not rainy day funds; they are funds to prepare for the changes and challenges the country will face in terms of demographics. They are funds to deliver infrastructure and climate projects. They are funds that are making a real difference.

The cost of home heating oil in this country is too high; of that there is no doubt. The energy crisis caused by the war has had a real impact. We have decided not to proceed with the carbon tax increase to assist in not making that situation worse. It is a fair comment. The Deputy asked me to suspend it and we did so because it is a proportionate response.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I do not want it suspended; I want it cancelled.

Deputy Simon Harris: Fair enough. Once we do one thing, the Deputy wants us to do the next. He originally asked us to suspend it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Please.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle. It is my time so I am going to speak.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go ahead.

Deputy Simon Harris: I have been very clear that we do not rule out the need to make further energy interventions. An energy crisis in the months of April and May will be very different from an energy crisis in the months of October, November and December. We have to prepare for that period too. The fuel allowance is being provided to 470,000 households. I do not know the circumstances of the pensioner's home the Deputy was in last night, but I know many pensioners, including those most at risk of fuel poverty, people with a disability, carers and low-income working families now more than ever qualify for the fuel allowance. A typical household receiving the fuel allowance will have received €1,216 over the course of the fuel allowance season.

The carbon tax makes up 10% of the total cost of home heating oil based on figures from 16 April. We have extended the fuel allowance season by a further four weeks to assist people who are struggling to pay for their home heating oil and those most at risk of poverty and to help them offset some of those costs.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This is the problem. The Minister does not understand the scale of the crisis or the lived experience of many people across the State. Before we had a fuel crisis, 320,000 families could not pay their electricity bills. Families were pushed to the pin of the collar because of increases in grocery prices, rents and insurance and childcare costs that were like a second mortgage. A generation felt home ownership was outside of the reach because of Government policies. The fuel crisis, brought on by external factors, has tipped people over the edge. People expect the Government to respond.

I spoke to the Minister about an old woman to wear an extra jacket because she has no heating in her home. This is not an isolated incident. A young woman wrote to me to tell me she had no home heating oil for two weeks because she could not afford it on top of medical and childcare expenses. She wrote to me on the day the Government announced its latest package of half measures. She said for the first time in a long time she felt a sense of hope, like maybe the pressure might ease even slightly, but by the time she finished work and saw the news, that small glimmer of light was gone again. She said it is hard to describe how it feels. The Minister sits there and pats himself on the back. He said our budget surpluses have doubled. We have €4 billion extra that we never thought we would have, but an elderly woman has to put on a jacket because our house is cold and a woman who is married to a fella who works every hour that God sends cannot afford heat in her home. There is something seriously wrong in this republic when people are left like that.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy suggests the Government does not take action to endeavour to assist people. That is his mantra. That is air enough. That is what he says but it is not true. There are other facts.

We are presiding over a country where the average weekly wage is over €1,000. They are not my figures; they are from the CSO. Every working day in this country 200 new jobs are

being created. The long-term unemployment rate is at around 1%, an historic low. We announced a package of €750 million to directly help people, including the person to whom the Deputy referred. We have reduced the cost of filling a car relative to what it would have been, extended the fuel allowance, supported key sectors of the economy and, crucially, introduced measures that are reducing inflation. It would have been higher by 0.6% a month were not for the measures we have taken.

In our latest budget we provided the largest ever increases in areas such as the child support payment. We are prioritising those most in need. The Deputy said I do not understand the scale of the problem. I am not sure he understands it. No government in the world can fully insulate its country from the economic impact of this war. We cannot look at this through the prism of today or tomorrow. We have to look at this in terms of preparing for the time ahead because if we do not keep our powder dry and instead do everything that comes into the Deputy's mind today or tomorrow that might make us popular in the short term but it sure as hell will not keep the people of this country safe in the months ahead.

5 o'clock

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste's mantra again speaks to me of the fact that he does not understand where people are at. Does the Tánaiste think the woman who wrote to me does not know what she is earning? Of course she knows what she is earning but she also knows that the cost of electricity has gone through the roof. She also knows that the weekly shop is a lot more expensive than it was last week, that the cost of childcare is another mortgage and that rents are increasing. Now she also knows that her house is cold for two weeks because she cannot afford to heat her home.

I am not asking the Tánaiste to spend all of the €9.1 billion surplus. Rather, I am asking him to do what a responsible Minister for Finance would do when he or she sees that citizens are suffering and in crisis - to show leadership and act to support them. The Tánaiste can do that. He can cut excise duty on home heating oil today. It would cost €14 million - not billion - per month. The Tánaiste refuses to do it, however. It would make a real difference to her and so many others like her but the Tánaiste refuses to do it. He is seriously out of touch with where public opinion is at on this.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy is seriously out of touch in terms of the scale of the economic challenge facing the world right now. The Deputy's position on this is to ask for more and more money to be spent every day. Maybe that is what one does when one is in opposition. In fairness, not all Opposition parties do that, but maybe that is what the Deputy's party does when it is in opposition. The Deputy is ignoring the fact that he would not be able to speak to any of my European counterparts who has done more. If he brings in Rachel Reeves or asks the finance ministers in Germany, France or Italy - he can pick any country - he will learn that we have taken more action than almost any other European country per head of population, and rightly so because we have run the economy well. If the Deputy were sitting on this side of the House - thankfully the people have not put him here the last number of times they were asked - we would not have the surpluses that he now demands we spend. We have to take this step by step. That is not a mantra; it is a fact. It is the best advice available to me. Asking me to do more on heating during the summer months when I have to prepare for the winter months is not a sensible thing. This is about actually----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What is she supposed to do? Should she wear another jacket or tighten her belt? What advice do you have? Should she put on another coat?

Deputy Simon Harris: If you accept that the fuel allowance is a payment, albeit one you want to blow a hole in through the carbon tax-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is nonsense.

Deputy Simon Harris: Ignoring that, if you accept that the fuel allowance is an important way of helping the people most at risk of fuel poverty, which I think is your position in the North-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Are you saying they are just stupid and not managing their budgets? What are you saying?

Deputy Simon Harris: The only step the Sinn Féin Minister of Finance in the North has taken is a very small step towards a smaller version of the fuel allowance. You are in government in the North.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: They cannot afford their heat.

Deputy Simon Harris: You have the First Minister, the Minister of Finance and the Minister for the Economy-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: They cannot afford their heat.

Deputy Simon Harris: -----but you are not doing anything to help in the North at all. People need to look at how you say one thing down here and you do another thing up there.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You need to have a bit of cop-on.

Deputy Simon Harris: It is complete hypocrisy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You know that excise duty cannot be reduced in the North.

Deputy Simon Harris: There is lots you could do.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Do not be stupid. You know that. Do not let yourself down.

Deputy Simon Harris: There is lots you could do.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: For God's sake, you know that the North does not have taxation powers.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty, address your remarks through the Chair. Have a bit of respect for other Members in terms of how you address them. There is an appropriate way to do that. You might engage with and check the Standing Orders as well so that when you come in here, you understand that you are governed by certain Standing Orders.

Tax Appeals Commission

235. **Deputy Shay Brennan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance his response to concerns regarding changes to rules governing hearings at the Tax Appeals Commission; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27/12/26]

Deputy Shay Brennan: My question concerns the proposed changes to hearings of the Tax Appeals Commission, particularly the removal of the taxpayers' automatic right to a private hearing. It will instead become a matter of discretion for the commissioner. Is the Tánaiste concerned that this change will deter taxpayers from exercising their right to appeal a Revenue assessment?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank both Deputy Brennan and the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and Taoiseach for their engagement on this matter. The revised general scheme of the finance (tax appeals and fiscal responsibility) Bill was published in November of last year. Head 5 of the general scheme concerns necessary amendments arising from the 2021 Supreme Court judgment. In this case, the Supreme Court held that the fact that all hearings before an adjudication officer were not held in public was inconsistent with the Constitution. A number of amendments are necessary to ensure the Tax Appeals Commission complies with that judgment.

It is important to say that the proposed changes will not remove the possibility of private hearings at the Tax Appeals Commission. Appeals commissioners will have discretion on whether to accept a request for an appeal to be heard in private, but they must consider whether privacy is necessary for that appeal to proceed. As such, there will remain the option of a private hearing where this is necessary for the appeal to proceed on a fair and just basis. I can think of many examples where it would be necessary for an appeal to be in private.

The finance (tax appeals and fiscal responsibility) Bill remains under pre-legislative scrutiny at this time. I assure the Deputy that we will consider the matters raised by stakeholders – I have met a number of them through the Irish Tax Institute - and those of the members of the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, and Taoiseach in advance of publication of the Bill.

The proposed Bill seeks to give appeals commissioners discretion to direct whether an appeal hearing is held in public or in private. This amendment is being proposed based on advice received from the Office of the Attorney General. It is anticipated that a greater number of appeals will be heard in public following the enactment of this Bill. However, appellants will still be able to request that an appeal is held in private. The grounds for that will include maintaining the confidentiality of sensitive information and protecting an individual's right to respect for their private and family life.

As I stated earlier, I am open to further engagement on this. I do not wish to prejudge what the pre-legislative scrutiny might say but I imagine it may require further legal engagement with the Office of the Attorney General. If there is a way of nuancing this or providing further clarity, I am very open to that because I want to get this right. I must, however, be truthful about the Supreme Court consideration. I am open to engaging and trying to get this right. I look forward to the report from pre-legislative scrutiny.

Deputy Shay Brennan: The Tánaiste will appreciate that the right to challenge a Revenue assessment is a fundamental protection for every taxpayer, but this right has little value if exercising it carries an unacceptable personal or commercial cost. If public exposure alone is enough to deter a taxpayer from pursuing a legitimate appeal, we risk undermining the entire system.

It is worth noting that 20% of determinations of the Tax Appeals Commission were found in favour of the appellant. Those taxpayers were of course correct to appeal. Under the proposed change, they would likely forgo their right to do so. Is the Tánaiste able to confirm whether the Department plans to carry out any assessment of the impact of these changes on taxpayers' rights before this is progressed further?

Deputy Simon Harris: The position as of now is that we have been endeavouring to comply with the Supreme Court judgment. Following that judgment, the view from the Office of the Attorney General was that there were proposals that we needed to make changes to the tax appeal system, specifically around the request for appeals to be held in private as well as the determination of appeals in the absence of a hearing. It is important that there are clear safeguards in place and clear grounds that an appeals commissioner must take account of. No one wants their sensitive and private information in the public domain; I understand that. There are issues that could cause harm to the public interest, such as sensitive information or information relating to public order and national security. The anticipation is not to have a significant jump in appeals being heard in public, nor do we wish to make it a deterrent. The right to appeal is important. The Revenue Commissioners have significant power and there must be a right to appeal.

While I do not wish to pre-empt the process, from following the hearings and listening to what is being said during the pre-legislative scrutiny process, including from stakeholders such as the Irish Tax Institute, I hope to give further consideration to this Bill, which includes engaging further with the Office of the Attorney General from a legal point of view to determine whether there is an ability to nuance further. I have to be cognisant of the Supreme Court judgment, however.

Deputy Shay Brennan: The Tánaiste might appreciate that there is potentially a significant and expensive unintended consequence of this. As he is fully aware, Ireland's attractiveness as a location for multinational investment depends significantly on our tax policy, particularly the certainty and fairness we apply to taxation matters. The Tánaiste may be aware that a risk review of 20 EU member states showed that all provided rights to private tax appeal hearings. The changes proposed in Ireland would leave us very much exposed as an outlier. For multinational companies weighing up where to invest, the confidentiality of their business affairs and tax proceedings matters greatly. A system that risks public exposure for disputing

a Revenue assessment is unlikely to be viewed favourably by these multinationals. Given the magnitude and importance of corporation tax receipts to our public finances, how has the Tánaiste considered the significant risk to Ireland's reputation as a competitive tax jurisdiction if this change to our tax appeals process is progressed?

Deputy Simon Harris: Obviously, making sure Ireland remains a competitive location for foreign direct investment, FDI, is an important consideration. I will reflect further on that on foot of the Deputy raising it. In looking at what other parts of the world do, we see that Canada, England and Australia operate in a similar environment to what the current legislation, as currently drafted, proposes for our tax appeals system. New Zealand is an exception where tax appeals are not open to the public. Across the EU, there is a significant variety across tax appeals bodies but it is certainly not uncommon to have a system where appeals are public in the first instance and then held in private at the discretion of an appellant for a stated reason.

In 2025, 1,192 new appeals were received and 1,286 cases were closed. A total of 237 appeals were scheduled for hearing in 2025, of which 93 subsequently proceeded.

It is very common for appeals to be settled, withdrawn or consolidated with other appeals, or indeed, dismissed in advance of any hearing taking place. We will give this further consideration. We will take the recommendations seriously from pre-legislative scrutiny. However, the question is how we can be compliant with the Supreme Court ruling and how we get that balance right.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

EU Directives

236. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will push at an EU level for electricity, including a separate category for residential electricity, to be added to the list of items that a zero VAT rate can be applied to in order to give member states maximum flexibility in designing their response to the energy crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26930/26]

298. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will discuss reducing the VAT rate for 0% for domestic electricity with his EU counterparts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26730/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I raised the crisis in people's homes in terms of their electricity bills with the Minister on numerous occasions. If we were to visualise this, it is 300,000 families. How many times would we fill Croke Park and the Aviva Stadium over and over again with the families who cannot pay their electricity bills? It is absolutely scandalous that people have been left in this situation. Time and again we have put forward the arguments that it was wrong to withdraw energy credits at a time of a cost-of-living crisis. It was wrong to leave people without those supports. Will the Minister make the argument at a European level to allow for zero VAT rate to be applied to residential electricity to give us the options to provide additional support beyond just energy credits to these families?

Deputy Simon Harris: I propose to take Questions Nos. 236 and 298 together.

I thank the Deputy very much. The EU VAT directive, which Irish VAT law must comply with, generally holds that all goods and services are liable for VAT at the standard rate which must be set at a minimum of 15%. If a good or service is listed under Annex III of the VAT directive, a reduced or zero VAT rate may be applied. It is important to note that Ireland applies more reduced and zero rates than every other member state. Some member states prefer not to introduce greater variability in VAT across the EU.

The last amendments to Annex III were agreed in 2022 after four years of negotiation. Unfortunately, electricity was not included in these amendments and, therefore, the lowest rate that may be applied to VAT in Ireland is the second reduced rate of 9%. The application of the 9% VAT rate on supply of gas and electricity was introduced from 1 May 2022. This measure was extended on a number of occasions. In the most recent budget, we decided to extend it out to 31 December 2030. The total estimated cost of the reduced VAT rate for gas and electricity from its introduction on 1 May 2022 to the end of this year will be over €1 billion.

We are actively engaging at an EU level. There is to be an informal European Council meeting this Thursday or Friday in Cyprus where the EU will bring forward proposals around energy affordability. My understanding specifically in relation to VAT is that there would be unanimity required for any changes to the VAT level. I do not see that as a likely outcome. I am just saying that to be honest. At present, there are no proposals at a EU level to reopen the VAT directive regarding zero rates for electricity. However, officials in my Department and across Government continue to engage with our European counterparts and with the European Commission in relation to energy affordability measures. The European Commission is working with member states on the EU-wide response to the crisis. That is why we have chosen to extend the maximum lowest rate of VAT we can currently apply to electricity and gas bills until the end of 2030. We are very eager to see if Europe wishes to go further on that. I am not detecting that there is any such unanimity at a European level in relation to reopening the VAT directive. However, I will ask. I will keep the Deputy and the House updated should that position change. Of course, the fact that VAT change requires unanimity as opposed to other measures Europe may decide to bring forward is a challenge.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I thank the Minister for his response. When he rises again, will he clarify for the House whether he has written to the Commission and asked it for this to be part of its tool? Has he asked the Commission to consider and agree a zero percent rate of VAT on domestic electricity? As he knows, the Commission has published its draft. It said it wanted to engage with member states. I am sure it engaged with the Minister in relation to this. Did the Minister ask the Commission and formally put that proposal to it in relation to the zero percent? In the absence of the Commission's agreement - the mechanisms in terms of member states having to agree - there are other measures that can be introduced. Energy credits is a way of supporting families and, indeed, the Minister brought it forward for many years himself. Does he not recognise that given the scale of the crisis, where people are at, that so many households cannot pay their electricity bills and that one in four households cannot pay their gas bills, there needs to be an intervention now? People simply cannot wait.

Deputy Simon Harris: We have not formally made a request in relation to zero percent VAT. The reason we have not is that my genuine feedback from engagement with the European Commission is that it is unlikely to have unanimous support. I am not against formally seeking further discretion on VAT but we have tried to target our asks to areas that we hoped we could make progress on, including seeking a temporary derogation from the minimum rate of taxation applied to auto diesel because the Deputy has been asking me to go further on diesel. I do not mean just because of the Deputy but many people, including him, have been asking me to do that. We have gone beyond what the energy tax directive allows us to do. We sought a derogation in relation to that. The reason we have not formally asked is that it is not possible to seek as a member state just a derogation from the functioning of the VAT directive. We would have to have unanimity in relation to that. The feedback we have been getting from the Commission is that is unlikely to be the case. However, I am happy to further pursue that with the Commission in terms of seeing if there will be such unanimity but I do not want to create a false expectation. It is my genuine view that it is unlikely to be something forthcoming from Europe.

In relation to energy credits, I said yesterday and today that I do not think anything can be off the table. It would be foolish for us to rule in or out anything. The Deputy has heard me say this before but it is my genuine view that an energy crisis in the winter is very different from an energy crisis coming into the summer months. Therefore, we need to keep these things under review as we approach the autumn and winter in terms of budgetary plans and what is the best thing to do to assist people should the energy crisis persist.

We also have to have other options and, indeed, I have heard interesting suggestions here about how we can help people with their own measures in terms of their own homes, whether that is retrofitting or solar panels and whether there is more we can do in that space to make that easier and more generous. I would be interested in engaging on that. I will keep an open mind on further energy interventions in the time ahead.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Sometimes I am lost for words in here.

Deputy Simon Harris: I try to be constructive.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I know. I hear what the Minister is saying but, seriously, I do not know what more we need to do here. These are families. There are 300,000 plus of them who cannot pay their electricity bills. The Minister saying that if the Commission allows us to have a zero rate, we would be happy with that but the Government has not even asked.

Deputy Simon Harris: That is not fair.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It has not even bloody asked the Commission to put this on the table. Last week the Commission asked the Minister and his Department what else they think it should do in this toolbox. The Minister has not even asked. There are families today who cannot pay their electricity bill, and these are people who are working and two income households. The level of arrears they have has increased. We have record numbers in the history of the State who cannot pay electricity bills. The Minister has not even asked.

Deputy Simon Harris: That is not true.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: There is a serious problem here. I do not want to repeat it over and over again but the Government needs to get down from the ivory tower. It needs to understand where people are at. People expect more from a government. People expect the Government to have their back and fight their corner. The Government is not even asking.

Deputy Simon Harris: People expect more from an opposition. At a time of a national crisis when a Minister stands up and is trying to constructively engage, the Deputy just wants to give me the lines to take back. I explained to the Deputy very clearly. I said we are happy to go back and further engage with Commission. Hang on for a second.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The decision was made in 48 hours.

Deputy Simon Harris: Just for a second, Deputy. Our Taoiseach - yours and mine and the Taoiseach of this country - will engage with his European counterparts when he attends an informal meeting of the European Council. Up for discussion at that meeting will be what more measures can we take. Ireland will make its position clear. The priority of my Department has to be to ask for things that individual member states can seek. Individual member states can seek a derogation under the energy tax directive. Individual member states cannot seek a derogation under the VAT directive. Therefore, the only way the VAT directive can be change is by unanimity.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I agree.

Deputy Simon Harris: It is not about asking the Commission. It is not a member state. When we have engagements at the likes of the European Council, which the Taoiseach will have, it is about establishing whether there is unanimity. I am giving the Deputy an honest view in this House that I do not believe that unanimity is there. Do not give me the palaver about ivory towers here. This is about truthful debate. The Deputy asked about energy credits. I did not rule them out. I gave other views in relation to solar panels, retrofitting and things we can do.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Government withdrew them.

Deputy Simon Harris: I talked about €750 million package. Just because I do not agree with every position the Deputy adopts or because I point out legal and technical difficulties around them does not mean the Deputy cares and I do not. It just means I am being honest.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I did not withdraw them.

State Savings Schemes

237. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance his plans for a new savings and investment scheme for retail investors; the estimated cost to the Exchequer in terms

of tax foregone in the first five years of the new scheme under preparation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26421/26]

Deputy Ged Nash: I ask the Minister to update the House on his plans for a new savings and investment scheme for retail investors and if he could enlighten the House as to what he anticipates the estimated cost to the Exchequer in terms of tax forgone in the first five years of the scheme might be, and if there is, in fact, an assessment already done on that basis.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Nash very much. The starting point here, on which many of us agree, is that Ireland does not have a sufficiently diversified savings and investment culture. I am quite conscious that we are having this conversation against the backdrop of significant economic challenges for people right now. I fully get that. However, even against that backdrop, I am also quite conscious that there is a lot of money on deposit in Ireland today. Even this week people are putting relatively small amounts of money aside to try to build up their own buffers insofar as they can for the times ahead. A lot of them are in low-yield deposit accounts where inflation is eroding their value over time. That is just the truth. Deposit accounts are right for many people. I understand the role deposit accounts have to play, and for many will be their source for putting money by for a later date, but they should not be the only practical option. Investment in capital markets can offer households another path to long-term financial well-being. It can also support growth and competitiveness in the wider economy. I have announced the Government's intention to introduce a legislative framework for an investment account this year as part of the finance Bill. We want to make investment simpler, clearer and more accessible for ordinary people. We want to help to make some of their hard-earned money work harder for them over time. The aim is to legislate for the framework in 2026 to allow for accounts to be offered from 2027, but it will also be a key part of a broader rethink of the taxation of retail investment. I would welcome the views of Deputy Nash and others in relation to that.

In recognition of the importance of encouraging retail investment, budget 2026 did provide for a reduction in the rate of taxation on returns from Irish and equivalent investment funds and Irish and certain foreign life assurance policies from 41% to 38%. In addition, the budget also included a commitment to publish a roadmap in 2026, setting out the intended approach to simplify and adapt the tax framework to encourage retail investment in future finance Bills. The roadmap will be published in the coming months in advance of the budget. It will take into consideration developments at an EU level in respect of a savings and investments union, including the recommendation on savings and investment accounts. The actual cost of this in the initial years will depend on the specific parameters of the account. That work is still ongoing and costs will be prepared as part of the budget process.

Deputy Ged Nash: I welcome the debate on this. I accept that we need reform in this area. I have no difficulty with that. There has been a lot of focus on the deemed disposal rule. There is no doubt that how it operates is an anachronism and reform is needed. That should not sideline us from the need to develop alternative routes to allow people to plan for their future. I am glad the Tánaiste referred to the context of what people are experiencing at the moment. Investment is very much a minority sport. Most people are concerned with surviving and not how they are going to invest relatively substantial amounts that they have on deposit on

schemes and accounts that may deliver more for them. I accept that this does need to be part of the solution in terms of preparing people for the future.

Mention has been made by ourselves in the Labour Party, and by the other parties, of the need to develop some products that might enable Irish people to invest some of their hard-earned savings in, for example, housing development in Ireland and in assisting high-potential start-ups, and so on. Is that the kind of area that the Tánaiste expects people to be able to invest in at a reasonable rate?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Nash for his comment on the deemed disposal rule. I agree that there is, rightly, a lot of debate in this House about the rate of it. He made the broader point about the purpose it serves - or does not serve - any more. We need to have a substantive examination of what the policy intent was and if it is still valid today. The truth is that I do not believe it is. How do we unwind that? Can we do it in one go - just take a number - and what is the roadmap? We need to come back and have a conversation around that.

I fully accept the point about the cost of living. I am very conscious of it. I am also conscious that we are among the best savers in Europe. We talk about building up our own financial resilience. The country has to be able to help ordinary workers, as they are often referred to in this House - everyday people - to build up their own financial resilience as well.

My intention, to be very honest, in the first instance is to set up as simple an account as possible to get this up and running. Many other European countries have done this. I have heard constructive ideas from Deputy Nash and others on whether this could be used to help to invest in start-ups or housing. That merits consideration. The question is whether we would do that in the first tranche or if we would just get an account up and running. I think we would just get it up and running in the first instance. I am also conscious that there are other savings bonds. The NTMA, for example, runs the prize bonds, etc. We can look at whether there is a way of overhauling that too. It is worthy of further exploration.

Deputy Ged Nash: I understand that people are risk averse because people have been burnt before. There are always risks to investing. Any model or scheme that is developed has to be very clear on that. I understand why the Tánaiste might want to dip his toe in the water in a tentative fashion in the first instance, and then maybe move from there. The Tánaiste has been quoted as favouring the Swedish model. It is one that people will be familiar with. On the basis that he has an understanding of the Swedish model and his officials may be going in that direction, has any assessment been done at this point on the tax implications for the Exchequer on the tax expenditure side in terms of tax forgone? It would be relatively easy to come to some kind of a conclusion - at least on a desktop basis - as to what the implications would be if we were to introduce a very simple straightforward model like the Swedish one. The Tánaiste seems to be moving away from the UK ISA-type model. Could he put his thinking on that, and what is informing it, on the record? In the available time, could he also indicate what engagement he has had on this with the Central Bank and if it has been helpful in assisting the Department?

Deputy Simon Harris: Yes, there has been very helpful engagement with the Central Bank. We held the savings and investment forum in the Central Bank. The Governor of the Central

Bank opened the meeting, which was very useful. We want to take the feedback from that. The point about the tax forgone is something I am very conscious of. I do not have that information yet but once I have it, I will be very happy to share it at an early stage with Deputy Nash and with the House.

Deputy Nash and I were in government together. I remember in my earlier days in the Oireachtas trying to copy the Dutch healthcare system. What I quickly learned is that the Irish people are not Dutch. The Irish people are not Swedish either. The Swedish model has many advantages. It is generally seen as best in class, but there is no off-the-shelf model, we will have to take what is best practice and adapt it for our own national culture and environment. The Swedish model is one we are looking at. The UK model is to be commended too but it does have a very high cash level that I think has a significant drag. I am not sure we necessarily want to replicate that element of it as well. We had a good forum with several hundred people from a whole variety of backgrounds. They fed in their views. I will be back to them with the next iteration. I am very happy - indeed eager - to have Opposition engagement on how to get this right in the times ahead.

Financial Instruments

238. **Deputy Aisling Dempsey** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will commit to the removal of the so-called "deemed disposal" tax in relation to ETFs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26607/26]

245. **Deputy Grace Boland** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance further to the commitment in the programme for Government to progress the recommendations of the Funds Sector 2030 review to support greater retail participation in capital markets, whether his Department has assessed the recommendation to remove the eight-year deemed disposal rule applicable to exchange-traded funds and other investment funds; the estimated cost to the Exchequer of abolishing this rule; whether the Government intends to remove the deemed disposal provision; the timeline for any such reform; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25770/26]

Deputy Grace Boland: The Funds Sector 2030 review recognised that exchange-traded funds, ETFs, sit at the centre of Ireland's ambition to increase retail participation in capital markets - people who are planning for the future and parents who are planning for their children's college education. The current tax framework, in particular the eight-year deemed disposal rule, is a material barrier to that objective. Could the Tánaiste confirm if his Department has assessed abolishing the rule, what the estimated cost to the Exchequer would be, and when he might make a decision on it?

Deputy Shay Brennan: My question is very similar. It relates to the so-called "deemed disposal" tax on ETFs, which requires Irish investors to pay gains every eight years, even where no sale takes place. The programme for Government has committed to an implementation plan to address this anomaly. Like Deputy Boland, I wonder if we could get an update on the details of this and the current timeline.

Deputy Simon Harris: I propose to take Questions Nos. 238 and 245 together.

I thank Deputies Boland and Brennan very much for raising this matter. Their questions relate to the rules governing the taxation of indirect investments such as investment funds and life assurance products. As referenced by Deputy Boland, chapter 7 of the funds review focuses on enabling and encouraging retail investment. It does make a number of recommendations including the removal of the deemed disposal rule. Deputy Brennan reminds us of our programme for Government commitments. These recommendations are being given careful consideration. We are looking at the existing regime and how it operates. The specific change raised by both Deputies is the removal of the deemed disposal rule. There is a specific reference to its application to exchange-traded funds. There is no separate taxation regime specifically for ETFs.

We need to remind ourselves why deemed disposal was introduced. It was introduced at that point in time as an anti-avoidance measure that applies to investments in Irish-domiciled investment funds and life assurance products, as well as equivalent offshore funds and certain foreign life assurance products, in order to prevent the indefinite roll-up of income and gains, and the associated loss of tax to the Exchequer. That is the history, if you like, to remind us all but the world has changed a lot since then and our policy and thinking need to change too. Under deemed disposal, taxes are levied eight years after an investment is made, and every subsequent eight years, regardless of whether a disposal has in fact occurred. The tax is levied on any gain in the value of the investment from the date of the acquisition to the date of the deemed disposal. On the ultimate disposal of the investment, any tax paid is allowed as a credit against the final tax liability.

The funds sector report noted that changes were needed. It did say that changes to deemed disposal would require guardrails to protect the Exchequer and ensure that appropriate taxation is paid. That is important. I think we all agree on that.

The most recent budget committed to publishing a roadmap for the taxation of retail investment, setting out an approach to simplify and adapt the tax framework to further support retail investment while retaining necessary and important anti-avoidance protections in a proportionate manner. The relevant recommendations of the funds review, including deemed disposal, are now being considered as part of the work under way in the Department of Finance on this roadmap. We will be publishing this in the coming months and in advance of the budget.

As I announced at the first annual savings and investment forum, on 31 March, a key aspect of the roadmap is the development of a new Irish investment account that aims to reduce the complexities related to retail investment taxation and allows Irish people to grow their savings more efficiently. That complexity is one of the real issues keeping middle Ireland out of investing in this country.

The cost estimate of changes to deemed disposal is the challenge. The information available to Revenue does not allow it to isolate the tax returns due to deemed disposal rules from other events that could give rise to a tax liability. We need to work our way through this. If it were assumed that all relevant retail investment exit taxes were as a result of deemed disposal, which of course they are not, removing deemed disposal could give rise to a potential cost of €284 million, based on tax paid over the past eight years.

As the Deputies know, we took some steps in this area in the most recent budget. An estimate was prepared of the Exchequer impact of deemed disposal not applying, assuming the deemed disposal was closer to 50% of the total tax paid. This assumption results in an estimated full-year cost to the Exchequer of €142 million for the removal of deemed disposal. However, I am being truthful in saying there is not an exact science because of the complicating factor.

I reiterate the point that we took steps in the last budget to reduce the rate to 38%. That was important. There is, however, the broader issue of whether the policy is fit for purpose. I am not convinced it is. It is somewhat outdated. We need to have a conversation about how it could be overhauled, with new, appropriate guardrails put in place. Alongside that, though separate and distinct, is the question of how we develop a new investment account that reduces complexity, has one point of tax and puts the responsibility for collecting that tax on the provider of the account, the institution, not the person making the investment.

Deputy Grace Boland: I thank the Tánaiste. I very much welcome that update. It is good to hear that the roadmap will be published in advance of the budget, though it is disappointing to note that the Revenue Commissioners cannot actually track the amount of revenue to the Exchequer.

On the issue of removal, the reality is that under the current regime, a retail investor in an ETF faces a much higher tax rate and earlier taxation and cannot offset losses compared with someone investing directly in shares. Low-risk, diversified investing is taxed earlier and more heavily than speculative stock picking. Therefore, we really need to do something for parents who are looking to the future and those who weathered really bad times in the 1970s and 1980s and know how important it is to put money away for a rainy day but who are seeing the value of their savings eroded through inflation and very low deposit rates.

Deputy Shay Brennan: I too thank the Tánaiste for his clear answer. The core issue here is one of fairness within our own tax system. An investor in individual shares pays capital gains tax at 33% and then only when they eventually sell those shares. However, an investor who chooses a diversified ETF, which is arguably the more prudent investment choice for an ordinary saver, pays a higher rate on the gains they have not yet realised. As was mentioned, they also cannot offset their losses in these, and they face a tax settlement every eight years, regardless of their intentions regarding the underlying ETF. This creates a disparity that is very hard to justify. I appreciate that the Minister gave a detailed explanation as to how this came about by way of trying to justify it. I agree that there are complexities but does the Minister in turn agree there is a very strong case for removing the rule in the near term, not just because it is part of the programme for Government but also because it is the fair thing to do for Irish savers?

Deputy Simon Harris: The short answer is "Yes" and the next word is "but". Yes, I see the policy challenge here. I do not like a situation where the world has evolved and policy has not caught up. Therefore, I would like to see an overhaul in this area. I am quite committed to that and to reforming retail investment. The only reason I say "but" is in relation to the near-term aspect. No matter what question anyone asks me on tax, I do not want to tie our hands, as a collective government or Oireachtas, in terms of decisions we may make in the time ahead.

However, the Irish people can judge this Government, in its current form, on what it did in its first budget. It reduced the rate associated with the rule from 41% to 38%. That was a statement of intent by my predecessor, the then Minister Paschal Donohoe.

Second, we said we would publish a retail investment roadmap for overhauling this sector and roll into that the recommendation of the funds sector report, which deals very much with deemed disposal, among other areas.

Third, we have given a commitment that we are not just going to say we are going to champion the savings and investment union at a European level but are also going to make sure there are practical benefits for citizens in Ireland in terms of establishing an investment account.

I have no doubt we will be able to make progress on this together in the time ahead. I would hope we can make progress on this in the near term, but let us work through that. I am learning it is important when you are a finance Minister to say tax matters are a matter for budget day, and I am quite comfortable with that. That is the appropriate way to proceed.

Deputy Boland's point on parents and others is important. I have heard some ill-informed comments – *Quelle surprise* – on the investment account. First, you would swear we were the only ones doing this. We are certainly not the first. It is the right thing to do. It is a recommendation of the European Commission. We cannot just talk about financial resilience at a macro level; we have to bring it into people's households.

I have heard it asked whether this is just something for the wealthy. The wealthy are well able to look after themselves. They do not need our help. They are not the people being blocked out of investments. The people being blocked out of investment are parents, the garda married to the nurse, the teacher, the civil servant, the small business owner and the person trying not just to get by but also to get ahead. This is an opportunity, over the longer term, to help families, or middle Ireland, to build up resilience. I am extraordinarily committed to that.

Deputy Grace Boland: I appreciate the Minister's comments. I look forward to seeing the roadmap and having discussions in the House on it. I thank the Minister.

Deputy Shay Brennan: There is another dimension to this. Ireland's position as a major ETF hub in Europe is something we should rightly be very proud of, but there is a contradiction at the heart of that success. Ireland is one of the best places in the world in which to manage and distribute ETFs but one of the most difficult places in Europe for an Irish resident to actually invest in them. Foreign investors in Irish-domiciled ETFs enjoy growth with no deemed disposal obligation, while Irish investors investing in the same products do not. Does the Minister acknowledge that this anomaly undermines or may erode our reputation as a well-functioning financial centre?

Deputy Simon Harris: I would put it in a slightly different way, but I agree with the broader point. Given our country's huge success in financial services, the considerable revenue, jobs and prosperity this has resulted in and the fact that we have in many ways become a global hub for financial services, there is an irony in our being a major global financial services centre when, at the same time, we have locked so many of our citizens out of meaningful participation. "Ironic" is probably the diplomatic word. We have to challenge ourselves, and I have to

challenge myself, to see how we can ensure the tax regime in this country is not getting in the way. It is the Government's job to help where it can, but it is also sometimes the Government's job to get out of the way. Our tax regime is in the way of people being able to invest and to access ETFs and their like.

Deputies Brennan and Boland quite rightly made a point on the differential between the exit tax and CGT. In fairness to former Minister Donohoe, there was a step made in the right direction with the decrease from 41% to 38%. However, CGT is at a different level.

We have made it clear as a Government that we are committed to making progress on this, ensuring Ireland has a much more diversified savings and investment offering, ensuring that is accessible to all our citizens and not just the wealthy, and ensuring the tax system is fair and that politics is not just a reductive debate about how to hand out public money but a more sophisticated and informed one about how to ensure hard-working families are able to get ahead, and not just get by in life, by making sure the tax system works in that direction.

Fiscal Policy

239. **Deputy Michael Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the work being carried out by his Department to ensure that citizens have access to robust and detailed financial analysis regarding the implications of a potential united Ireland, including disparities in taxation, public spending and fiscal transfers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24950/26]

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Murphy for this question. As somebody who would like to see a united Ireland in my lifetime and as somebody who is proud to lead a party that has "the United Ireland party" in its full title, I very much welcome the question. I want to engage constructively with Members across the House on this. The Government of Ireland is committed to the unity of the Irish people.

We are committed to that with a focus on reconciliation and developing the three sets of relationships recognised in the Good Friday Agreement to unlock the full potential of our island. Through the shared island initiative, the Government is prioritising the work of building co-operation and reconciliation with an ambitious agenda to deliver progress and to remain steadfast in fully implementing the Good Friday Agreement.

Obviously, the principle of consent and the possibility of change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland are fundamental elements of the Good Friday Agreement endorsed by the people North and South and accordingly the Government's approach with regard to Irish unity is guided by Article 3 of the Constitution. Thus, in the event of a future referendum within the consent provisions of the Good Friday Agreement, the Government will make all necessary preparations in accordance with the terms of the Constitution and the principles and procedures of the agreement.

To date, the Government has advanced the largest ever programme of all-island investment to build a more connected island through the shared island initiative, backed by a €2 billion shared island fund. Last April, the Government launched a new phase of a joint research programme with the ESRI, which is really the nub of the Deputy's question, focusing on

strategic policy and co-operation considerations for the island. Much of what the shared island unit has been doing, which we all support, has involved investing in really meaningful projects. The ESRI strand is particularly interesting because it looks from a policy point of view at the compatibility elements between how things are done in the North and here and where the differences are. Within days of coming into office, I was very pleased to launch a new annual ESRI series entitled "Assessing Economic Trends in Ireland and Northern Ireland". At the launch of this report, I highlighted how valuable the series is, especially its deeper data comparisons and economic indicators, which together offer important insights and food for thought and help inform us of the policy we need to develop. I will return to some of that in a moment.

Deputy Michael Murphy: For me, it is really about ensuring that citizens are properly informed. Any decision must be grounded in credible, transparent and accessible financial analysis. I know various independent academic studies are being carried out and some already exist but I do not think there is any single authoritative, State-led body of work. There are a number of areas where clarity is essential, including taxation; the difference between tax bases North and South around income tax, corporation tax and indirect taxes; public spending around health; social protection measures; public services; and the complex area of fiscal transfers, such as the extent of subvention currently provided by the UK. These are complex issues. Other jurisdictions facing future constitutional or structural change have invested in serious, evidence-based preparatory work and there is no reason we should not do the same so that citizens can make that informed decision at the appropriate time.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I agree completely with the Deputy on this question. It is really welcome that this has come down. I acknowledge the Tánaiste's comments on this. We all acknowledge the shared island unit and the work it is doing but the question we need to ask ourselves is whether we believe we are enablers of bringing about constitutional change in a system that operates under the Good Friday Agreement and with consent, and most if not all of the people in this House believe we are. Therefore, we have to do the preparatory work.

These are complex issues and it should not be left to academics, the ESRI or others to do this. We have to find a way and a space and we must recognise the space we will occupy in doing this but we must find a space to carry out some of this work. I think back to when Simon Coveney was competing for leadership of Fine Gael. He spoke about setting up a committee to look at this and talked about papers, and I thought it was a very good argument. We have lost time. This is coming down the tracks and we have to be prepared so I really welcome this debate.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I certainly welcome that question and would welcome answers even more. Deputy Currie will know what I am talking about when I talk about what was agreed at the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. That was cross-party. It involved perspectives on constitutional change concentrating on finance and economics. We have a number of agreed recommendations that really need to be implemented. We heard it was reckless not to prepare. It is reckless not to do this work, regardless of one's constitutional preference or how people will decide to vote at the end of the day. One of the recommendations was that an Oireachtas committee be mandated, adequately

resourced and dedicated to preparation for a united Ireland - for doing the preparation. It is reckless not to prepare. The Tánaiste will probably be Taoiseach in a number of months' time. I ask him to please implement these recommendations.

Deputy Simon Harris: I welcome this rare moment of unity. It is really good. We all have different political traditions that we can debate and that is fine, but Deputy Conway-Walsh would like to see a united Ireland in her lifetime and I would like to see a united Ireland in my lifetime. I agree that the shared island unit is doing good work - really good work. I notice that across the community, as I am sure Deputy Conway-Walsh does. Regarding Deputy Michael Murphy's question and the constructive contributions of Deputies Doherty, Conway-Walsh, Currie, Connolly, Shay Brennan and Cooney, the economics of this are important. I will send the remarks I made at the launch of the ESRI report to Deputy Conway-Walsh. Looking at this from a financial and economic point of view will ultimately be an important part of any debate whenever it arises and we have a responsibility to be prepared to engage on it. I often grapple in my own head with what the best way of creating that space is. Perhaps the Good Friday Agreement committee would be a good opportunity for us to engage on that report. I take the point that it is not all about the ESRI but there is ESRI-funded work with which all of us might want to familiarise ourselves. I am very happy to have an engagement with the appropriate committee on this matter.

Deputy Michael Murphy: It is important to acknowledge that a lot of analysis has already been done and is likely to be done but it is fragmented and very technical. It comes back to that overarching point I am making, which is that it is not easily understood by the general public. It is so important that information is collated in a way that is coherent and user-friendly and uses easy-to-understand language. Should we commission some kind of centralised, cross-departmental assessment that would publish regular updates and ensure that information is presented in a clear and non-specialist way? It is really about informing democratic discussion. It is not about prejudging any outcome. Without this, there is real risk that the public debate becomes shaped by partial information or competing claims.

Deputy Emer Currie: I also welcome this debate. We have had great engagement on the Good Friday Agreement committee in our work examining the constitutional future of this island. Everybody has a voice. I welcome research and information from anywhere to contribute to this debate.

Two things that have not been referenced are the productivity gap that exists North and South and the difference in educational attainment. There are great opportunities on an all-island basis. I am thinking about mid-Ulster, where I am originally from, in the engineering and manufacturing sectors so there are learnings across the board. Engagement is key and there will be no regrets on an all-island basis in progressing a financial and economic strategy that benefits anyone but that ultimately, from my perspective, bring us to a united Ireland.

Deputy Simon Harris: We clearly need to have a longer debate in this House and the Whips and others should work out a way to facilitate this discussion. We should not fear it because, as Deputy Michael Murphy said, it is about information, facts, getting as much information as possible and identifying where there are information gaps.

My Department published "Shared Island, Shared Economy" in 2024, which examined the macroeconomic performance, broad sectoral structures, fiscal structures and linkages between the two economies. It found that overall economic connections between Ireland and the North have continued to deepen, supported by increasing cross-Border trade, labour mobility and joint investment initiatives. The economy in this part of the island is significantly larger, with GNI* *per capita* around 25% higher than GDP *per capita* in Northern Ireland - a gap that has remained broadly stable. Productivity levels are higher on this part of the island, although that gap narrows considerably when multinational activity is stripped out, with Northern Ireland performing broadly in line with Ireland's Border and midlands region.

Sectoral structures differ greatly. Ireland has a greater concentration in this part of the island in knowledge-intensive services, while the North has higher public sector employment and greater reliance on social welfare spending. There is also other data. There was a 2025 study by DCU and Ulster University, looking at the initial net fiscal cost of reunification. There is a debate around that. The Institute of International and European Affairs also looked at it, and suggested a much larger cost. The point is that we should not fear discussion, we should not fear facts and we should not fear preparedness. There is a responsibility on all of us to see how best to take that forward.

EU Presidency

240. **Deputy Shay Brennan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the latest update on his Department's preparations for Ireland's EU Presidency; the way in which he plans to oversee budgetary discussions on the next multi-annual financial framework post-2027 in a manner that will safeguard Ireland's fiscal interests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26559/26]

Deputy Shay Brennan: I am seeking an update on the Department's preparations for Ireland's EU Council Presidency and, in particular, how the Minister intends to approach the negotiations on the next multi-annual financial framework, which Ireland will chair. Can the Minister advise how he intends to safeguard Ireland's fiscal interest in these negotiations?

Deputy Simon Harris: The Presidency is taking place in a few short months' time, as the Deputy said, so I thank him for highlighting this. The Presidency of the Council of the EU is a critical focus for all of us in government, the Oireachtas and my Department this year. It represents an important opportunity for our country to shape European policy priorities, including the EU's economic and financial agenda.

I am pleased to say that our preparations are well under way across both policy and operations. Our Presidency priorities are being prepared in line with the EU strategic agenda for 2024-2029. Of course, those priorities will depend on the progress of the Cyprus Presidency, which comes before ours. We will take stock of this and stakeholders' views before we publish our final Presidency programme in June. However, driving progress on the post-2027 multi-annual financial framework will be an important focus.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and I jointly lead the development of Ireland's positions on the MFF. This involves close co-operation with other Government colleagues.

During our Presidency, Ireland will progress various elements of the wider MFF package, from overarching negotiations to sectoral files. The precise tasks for Ireland will depend on the state of play at the end of the Cyprus Presidency in June.

The overarching negotiations on the MFF are advanced through the General Affairs Council, GAC, where we are generally represented by the Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, in consultation with all relevant Departments, is preparing for these meetings. The Economic and Financial Affairs Council, ECOFIN, which I will chair during Ireland's Presidency, focuses on the revenue side of the EU budget - own resources - and the management of the annual EU budget process. The European Council, attended by the Taoiseach, provides strategic guidance throughout the negotiations and will ultimately reach political consensus among member states on the file.

Ireland, as Presidency, will ensure close and constructive co-operation with the President of the European Council. The European Parliament will also be required to give its consent to the regulation for the MFF after the European Council reaches a political consensus. Our intention, during our Presidency, is to act as an honest broker and to lead negotiations in a manner that protects the interests of the EU. Intensive preparatory work is under way.

Deputy Shay Brennan: During our Presidency, Ireland will chair and oversee the MFF negotiations, and will do this while simultaneously facing a reduction in our own allocations under the new framework due to our continued economic growth. I am not saying that is a bad thing. In one sense, we are in an advantageous position as we get to set the agenda and we are present at every negotiation. However, given the expectation that we act as impartial chair, does the Minister accept that this could work against us when it comes to pursuing our own fiscal interests? If so, how does he intend to manage that?

Deputy Simon Harris: It is a key question, and one the Government has been considering. We took a decision earlier this year, during my time as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, to outline Ireland's MFF budgetary priorities much earlier in the cycle for that very reason. The Deputy is right. When you take up the Presidency, there is an advantage to that, of course, and it is an influential and important position to have, but you are also expected to act as honest broker. Ireland took a decision, and the Government agreed, to formally agree our budget priorities for the MFF and communicate them to the Commission at an early stage. We have also had a number of Commissioners here, including the budget Commissioner, the agriculture Commissioner and others, to engage with me, the Taoiseach, the Minister for foreign affairs, the Minister for agriculture, the Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs and others. We have used the period in early 2026 to set out our priorities to work with other member states that share a like-minded view.

The challenge with the European budget, not too dissimilar from this place on occasion, but maybe on a larger scale, is that everybody has ideas on what to spend money on but people are less enthusiastic about funding it. That is also the challenge. Europe has a long list of ideas it would like to spend money on but the real substance of the debate is how we manage to prioritise those ideas. We have all heard a whole variety of things. Ireland, as an experienced member state in its eighth Presidency, will play an important role. I assure the Deputy that protecting our own national interest has been a priority in the early part of this year.

Deputy Shay Brennan: There is an expectation that the agreement on the MFF will be reached before the end of 2026. Ireland effectively carries the responsibility for delivering one of the most complex and contested negotiations in recent EU history within that six-month term. These negotiations involve deeply-held national interests across 27 different member states. There are significant disagreements on spending priorities. Overall, there is a total budget of approximately €2 trillion. Does the Minister believe that agreement is genuinely achievable within that timeframe? What commitment can he give that Ireland will do everything in its power to deliver a deal, given the significant reputational dividend that success would bring for Ireland within the EU?

Deputy Simon Harris: I think it is doable but it is extremely ambitious. For the Council of the European Union to reach an agreement at a relatively early stage, in other words, by the end of this year, provides a degree of certainty in a world that is craving certainty. There is a real premium on trying to reach agreement because there is so much uncertainty in the world right now. It is not inevitable that that will happen. The Deputy is right that the process is tedious in its various parts. It ultimately becomes a matter for the President of the European Council, President Costa, to seek that consensus or agreement among European member states. The Taoiseach, who is very experienced in his area, will represent our country at that, and I know it will be a priority for him as well. Ireland certainly will not be found wanting. Obviously, there are elections in different member states, and although I will not comment on them, they will have an effect. There has been a change of government in some member states, or there is due to be very shortly.

We have outlined our own priorities. As a significant net contributor to the EU budget, as the Deputy pointed out, but which is often forgotten by others, it is right and proper that our voice is heard. We have outlined the areas that we want to see a real focus on.

Enterprise Policy

241. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the fiscal measures currently in place to support enterprise development and investment in regional towns and rural communities; the further tax-based initiatives being examined to promote balanced economic growth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25715/26]

Deputy John Connolly: I ask the Minister for an update on the fiscal measures currently in place to support enterprise development and investment in regional towns and rural communities; the further tax-based initiatives being examined to promote balanced economic growth; and if he will make a statement on the matter

Deputy Simon Harris: As the Deputy knows, the Government is committed to balanced regional development and supporting rural communities, as outlined in the programme for Government. Regarding fiscal supports, a range of tax-based enterprise supports are available to businesses and enterprises across the country, in particular SMEs. These incentives complement more regionally specific direct expenditure measures and schemes overseen by the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment and its agencies. At a taxation level, the measures available are generally available nationwide but when they are coupled with the

specific expenditure programmes available through the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, Enterprise Ireland and others, we can see a compelling opportunity for investment in the regions.

Examples of incentives for SMEs include the employment incentive scheme, start-up relief for entrepreneurs and start-up capital incentives. These reliefs are key supports that help provide SMEs and start-ups with alternative funding sources by incentivising investment in SME start-ups. Another example is the revised entrepreneur relief, which provides a reduced 10% rate of capital gains tax on chargeable gains on the disposal of a qualifying business asset up to a lifetime limit of €1.5 million, a limit that was increased in the last budget. There has also been an increase in the rate of the research and development tax credit from 30% to 35%, and that is being used by many SMEs as well.

As part of budget 2026, we saw the living city initiative, a tax incentive that offers tax relief to regenerate and convert homes and vacant properties. We have expanded that to Athlone, Drogheda, Dundalk, Letterkenny and Sligo, and it is already in place in Galway, as the Deputy knows. The much talked about reduction in the VAT rate for the hospitality sector will disproportionately benefit many rural and regional communities by reducing the cost base for the hospitality sector, which is an important part of the tourism sector. From an IDA and Enterprise Ireland point of view, we continue to promote balanced regional development in every way we can.

Deputy John Connolly: The Tánaiste will be aware that the national planning framework proposes to distribute the future population growth of the country equally between the greater Dublin region, the regional cities and the metropolitan areas that surround them. To facilitate that, we need enhanced infrastructure development, and we need to increase housing options for people in those locations. We also need to look at enterprise and fiscal measures to promote the development of industries at home and attract greater foreign direct investment into those regional cities.

6 o'clock

I do not think we should rule out targeted fiscal measures at those locations.

There is one other thing I would like to get the Tánaiste's opinion on. We have seen it recently with Dublin City Council. In fact, I think Galway City Council made the initial invitation to or request of the Department of Finance to introduce some type of tourism tax, where the regional or local authority could benefit from additional revenues generated by people coming to spend time in the cities.

Deputy Simon Harris: Personally, I am very positively disposed to that once it is a matter for the local authority. As the Deputy rightly said, I am a big believer in empowering local democracy. If you run in your community and get elected by your community, you should have real powers. A revenue-raising power is one. If you happen to be a member of Galway or Dublin City Councils - they are two examples - and you say, "Hang on a second, we want to bring in a small tax on a hotel room or the like", that should be considered and people should be given an opportunity to ring fence it. That is very much a matter for local government and I think national government should, if at all, be an empowerment in relation to that.

Infrastructure delivery is key. I am delighted to see the Galway ring road, as I am sure the Deputy is. We have got to get better at delivering critical infrastructure more quickly, particularly in the regions. We now have a very ambitious capital plan but making sure we cut through bureaucracy and planning processes that take too long is going to be key to delivery.

However, unlike we often hear in this House, I think regional Ireland and regional cities are going well. Cities like Galway are doing well. We have got to just make sure we support them from an infrastructural point of view and continue to keep the focus of State agencies on them too.

Deputy John Connolly: I very much welcome the Tánaiste's support for the initiative. My understanding of it is that while the local authorities would be the gatherers of the tax, it does require Department of Finance legislative change to try to make sure it is possible and feasible for them to do so. There is a sincerity and a genuine need for it in those cities or regional towns where there are significant numbers of tourists. There is an increased need for services, such as street cleaning at festivals, and all the types of services that visitors expect to see when they come to enjoy these occasions. I am delighted to see the Tánaiste is open to the idea. I hope that we can progress it and allow the local authorities to include it as part of their budgetary framework in terms of revenue generation.

Deputy Simon Harris: I am very much up to the idea. Generally, people come to this House and come up with ideas on how to spend money. It is refreshing to have people come into this House and come up with ideas on how to generate money. A tourism tax or levy at the very least merits consideration. I say "tax or levy" because they are obviously very different. A levy is something that may not necessarily involve my Department or the Revenue Commissioners; a tax would. There is a whole series of issues that needs to be worked through. The next natural point should be the completion of the review on the powers of local government and local democracy. That might be a useful point at which we can have further engagement. I am happy, in the context of Galway, Galway City Council and the issues the Deputy has raised, to have further engagement or meetings with him on this matter.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Tánaiste. We have run out of time and cannot take any further questions.

Special Education: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

recognises that:

— the State is systematically failing children with additional educational needs, their families, and the professionals who support them;

- there is a chronic and worsening shortage of appropriate school places, denying children access and forcing other children to travel excessively long distances, often outside their own communities;
- special schools for children with Mild General Learning Disabilities (MGLD) are being redesignated in practice and by stealth;
- early intervention classes are being closed at a time when demand for early support has never been higher;
- the vast majority of new special classes announced have been allocated to autism or Autism Spectrum Disorder, reflecting a continued pattern of concentration of provision in one category of support, despite the fact that students across the country present with a wide range of learning needs, including MGLD and language disorders, that require different educational supports and approaches;
- the proposed changes in relation to access to school places based on assessment and diagnosis have the potential to further redesignate classes and or schools, dilute expertise in special education teaching and support;
- access to essential therapies, both in school and in the community, is disgracefully lacking;
- the inclusive special classes announced by the Government last week are no such thing, offering the same level of support with larger class sizes, they are a further diminution of support, introduced with no consultation;
- Ireland has the largest class sizes in Europe, a reality that affects all children and particularly children with additional educational needs;
- the decision to remove "complex needs" from the Special Education Teaching (SET) allocation criteria was a deliberate act of rationing, designed to reduce access to support under the guise of reform;
- access to Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) remains restricted by an outdated Circular that ties support narrowly to "primary care needs", denying access to children with behavioural, sensory, emotional and communication needs;
- the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has an impossible task, and is forced to function as a rationing and gatekeeping body;
- the Minister for Education and Youth has failed to provide the exact number of children with additional needs still awaiting an appropriate school place for the 2026/2027 academic year, disaggregated by county and educational setting (primary/post-primary, special class/special school); and
- the system of inclusive education in Ireland is fundamentally broken, and as demand continues to rise, the State's response has been to ration access to essential supports in order to save costs, rather than to meet needs;

condemns the Government for:

- its abject failure to strategically invest, plan, and deliver appropriate school places and supports for all children with additional needs;
- effectively denying children access to education based solely on their additional needs, thereby violating their fundamental rights; and
- creating an environment where parents are forced to resort to legal action to vindicate their children's basic right to education;

calls on the Government to:

- establish an all-party Oireachtas Committee on the future of inclusive education, by June 2026, mandated to hear from all education stakeholders in a full public forum, and to report back with legislative and policy recommendations within 12 months;
- immediately publish the exact number of children with additional needs still awaiting an appropriate school place for the 2026/2027 academic year, broken down by county and educational setting (primary/post-primary, special class/special school);
- ensure that additional funding is provided to meet the unanticipated demand for school places for September 2026, to guarantee it does not reduce resources and funding elsewhere in the Department of Education and Youth;
- immediately engage with the Save Our SNAs campaign to advance and implement their updated and improved Circular, ending the current cruel and arbitrary restriction of SNA access;
- advance the SNA Redeployment Scheme and SNA Workforce Development Plan, in consultation with SNAs, to ensure recognition of their invaluable and expanded role;
- immediately stop the cuts by stealth, redesignations and initiative announcements without consultation;
- guarantee an appropriate school place, not merely an offer of a place, for every child with additional educational needs for September 2026;
- reaffirm that genuine inclusion means the right of every child to attend their local school, alongside their peers, neighbours and friends;
- expedite access to essential supports, including speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and psychological services within the school setting;
- initiate an independent review of the role, function, and resourcing of the NCSE and Special Education Needs Organisers to improve efficiency, transparency and performance;
- review and immediately increase the Special Education Teaching allocation model, to reverse the removal of complex needs from the qualifying criteria, and to ensure allocation is based on need rather than artificial caps or historical ratios;
- commit to a multi-annual programme of class size reduction, reducing the average class size to at least the European Union average, beginning in Budget 2027, recognising that smaller classes are a prerequisite for inclusive education;

- establish a time-bound school building delivery task force, with a mandate to ensure the expeditious and priority delivery of special schools and special classes, this task force must include relevant technical and departmental expertise and incorporate continuous engagement with local school communities and parents; and
- to immediately reverse the decision to reintroduce Leaving Certificate and Junior Cycle fees, and to roll back the hike in school transport fees, including the doubling of fees for secondary students and the 33 per cent increase for primary pupils, in recognition of the ongoing cost-of-living crisis; and

resolves that the current model of inclusive education is a failure, rejects the Government's rationing-by-stealth approach, and demands an immediate shift towards a properly resourced system, that guarantees equal access and opportunity and where no child is left behind, this shift will be well informed through the hearings of an all-party Oireachtas Committee on the future of inclusive education.

Across the State, thousands of families have been failed, ignored and exhausted by a system that claims to offer inclusive education but instead delivers ration, denial and despair. The State is systematically failing children with additional educational needs. That is not hyperbole; that is the lived reality of parents forced into legal action to vindicate their child's most basic right, the right to an education. It is the reality of children travelling impossible distances outside of their own communities because there is no school place for them at home. It is the reality of children who are lucky to have a school place but who are there for an hour a day because the support simply is not there. It is also the reality of professionals, principals, teachers, special needs assistants, SNAs, and therapists who are forced to work in a system that fails children and who themselves are not adequately supported.

Time and again, whether it be access to SNAs, language disorder classes, mild-general learning disability special schools or early intervention classes, the Government's response is diminution, cuts by stealth and reduction or withdrawal of support - in some cases, withdrawal of support before that support even materialises. It is cutting corners and it is cutting children off. The removal of complex needs from the special education teaching allocation criteria is another example of this - a deliberate act of rationing disguised as reform.

The Government and the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, restrict SNA access through an outdated circular that ties support to narrow primary care needs, ignoring behavioural, sensory, emotional and communication needs. They force parents to the courts to vindicate their children's rights and spends millions of taxpayers' euro in the process. We have the largest class sizes in Europe. For children with additional needs, that really is devastating. The Minister, Deputy Helen McEntee, as Minister, did nothing about this. Will the Minister, Deputy Naughton, be the same?

Sinn Féin condemns this Government's abject failure to plan, invest and deliver. It is violating children's fundamental rights but condemnation is not enough; we need action. We need a guarantee of appropriate school places for every child for September 2026, not merely an offer of a place but a real place. We need expedited access to speech and language therapy, SLT, occupational therapy, OT, and psychological services within schools. We need an independent review of the NCSE and special educational needs organisers, SENOs. We need

the special education teaching, SET, allocation model reviewed and increased, reversing the removal of complex needs.

We need a multi-annual programme to reduce class sizes to at least the EU average, starting in budget 2027. We need a timebound school building delivery task force. We need an all-party Oireachtas committee on the future of inclusive education to be established in June 2026. This would be a Sláintecare committee for inclusive education to build a cross-party consensus on the long-term vision for inclusive education in Ireland and to make policy recommendations. We need the exact number of children without a school place for September published immediately. We need the cuts by stealth stopped. We need an end to the cruel restriction of SNA access. I ask the Minister to please engage with the Save Our SNAs campaign and advance their updated circular now. In this cost-of-living crisis that the Government seems so oblivious to, we need to reverse the reintroduction of exam fees and the hike in school transport fees.

The current model of inclusive education is broken. Rationing by stealth must end. No child should be left behind. I ask the Government to please support this motion and let us begin the real work of building a system that guarantees equal access and opportunity for every single child.

Deputy David Cullinane: Hear, hear.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: This is not the first time we have brought forward proposals on special education during this Dáil term, nor is it the second or the third. This is Sinn Féin's fourth Private Members' business on special education. Despite our best efforts, every time we have brought forward solutions, the Minister and her Government have consistently let families and their children down. The issues are only getting worse. The recent SNA crisis, the closure of early intervention classes and having the largest class sizes in Europe show that this Government is failing our children.

Tonight, in the Public Gallery, a young woman named Grace and her father are here. Her father has tirelessly advocated on her behalf and has lived experience of our special education system. She sent me a letter where she explains how her mild-general learning disability school has done so much for her educational and personal development. I really want the Minister and Minister of State to hear this. Grace wrote:

Everything changed when I started at this school. I was finally given the space to learn at my own pace. This support has allowed me to thrive. I feel safe, happy and positive about my future. I have a great circle of friends and I feel welcome every day. However, I am worried that if you redesignate our school, other children who are just like me will not receive the opportunities I have. I am proof that this school works. Please protect our school's designation so that the children coming after me can also find their confidence.

I agree with Grace. It is shameful that mild-general learning disability, MGLD, schools are being redesignated by stealth. The State can protect children like Grace tonight by supporting our motion, which calls for these redesignations to stop immediately.

Over the weekend, I spoke with Linda in Kildare, who told me she could not get an appropriate school place for her child. She spends seven hours of her day in her car just to get

her children to school and home again. Linda's children are considered the lucky ones because they actually have a school place. Meanwhile, there are children doing additional years in preschool because they have no school place and then there are children who the Government has completely abandoned. They have no choice but to remain at home, like Zoe. Her mammy, Rachel, wrote to me and told me her story. Zoe was in an inappropriate school place that did not meet her needs. She should be in first class now but has been homeschooled by Rachel for the past few years. She has told me that she has joined every possible waiting list but just cannot get a place for Zoe. Does Zoe not deserve to be in school, learning and playing with her peers?

This is just another example of how children with additional needs are being treated as less than. Arís is arís eile, this Government is failing to deliver. Mar sin iarraim ar an Rialtas anocht ní hamháin chun tacú leis an rún seo, ach chun gníomhú air gan mhoill. Tá sé thar am ceartas a thabhairt do na páistí seo agus dá dteaghlaigh. Déanaigí an rud ceart.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Hear, hear.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The Government is sleepwalking children, families and schools into a crisis in September. It surely can see what is coming, yet for whatever reason it continues to fail children with additional needs. Across the State, children are still waiting for appropriate school places. In Waterford, I am in touch with so many parents crippled with worry, deeply angry that they are being forced to fight to secure a basic right to education. Educators are being forced to fight to protect their roles, out on protest to be allowed to continue supporting children. In their own words, I will tell two stories from constituents in Waterford. Sabrina is a mam. She told me her youngest is seven and non-verbal. They have no speech and language therapy. They cannot get equipment because there is no senior therapist to sign it off. They even had to take the HSE and the Department to the High Court just to get a school place. Katie, an SNA, said it is heartbreaking to see children still waiting for placements. She said they are severely understaffed and underpaid. The job is physically, emotionally and mentally demanding. There is no risk pay, even when staff are injured. They support safety, learning, communication and care all at once without the support needed to do it properly.

We in Sinn Féin and parents and educators across the State have been warning of this for years but the Government has failed to act. Classes are being redesignated without consultation. Supports are being diluted. Children are being denied access based on need. The Government has failed to plan, failed to invest and failed to deliver. It is a political choice and it has always been a political choice but the Ministers have always made the wrong one. It needs to be reversed now.

Deputy John Brady: As Cathaoirleach of the Committee of Public Accounts, last week I exposed that in recent years, the Department of education has spent over €2 million on legal costs and court settlements in cases involving families seeking appropriate school places. That is in addition to the €10.5 million spent by the State on legal defences to challenges by parents regarding assessments of need. This is an absolute insult to every parent fighting tirelessly for their child's basic right to education and to every child left without supports they need. This money was not spent on classrooms, special classes or additional supports but on defending the indefensible. This is public money wasted on adversarial legal battles against families who,

as a last option, have to take legal action to vindicate their children's rights. Instead of planning effectively and investing adequately to ensure sufficient school places, the Government has chosen to meet vulnerable families in the courtroom. Parents are exhausted. They are frustrated. This will be another kick in the teeth to those who are already facing immense pressures. This situation lays bare the fundamental failures at the heart of special education provision. It is reactive. It is not proactive. It is adversarial and not supportive. This money should have been invested in additional special classes, SNAs and meaningful supports within our schools. The Government and the Minister must change course. They must commit to long-term planning and genuinely engaging with families and school communities because all our children deserve better. The Minister must support this motion and start proactively dealing with special education and putting the supports in place.

Deputy David Cullinane: The way children with disabilities and their families are treated in this State is an absolute disgrace. We are here not just every year, talking about school places and appropriate school places for children with disabilities. We have tabled countless motions on a range of issues from school places to assessments of need to therapies children are being deprived of and are not getting. We do not see any action from Government. Parents are at their wits' end. They are tired, frustrated, angry and they see a broken system and a Government that is simply not fixing it. Worse than that, they feel gaslit when it comes to special classes. They are told to contact their local SENO. They contact the local SENO and get a list of so-called special classes and are told in each and every case that the classes are full or there is no availability. In some cases, they get 14 or 15 refusals. It is heartbreaking for a parent not to know if their child will have the appropriate class come September. I received dozens of emails and phone calls in advance of the debate today, from parents I have dealt with in the past and now unfortunately parents I have not dealt with before. They are coming into a system that they have seen fail so many other children. They are asking me why this is the case. It is not only that their child cannot get access to a special school place. The same children are on waiting lists for assessments of need, where the State is breaking the law in not providing a diagnosis, and waiting lists for therapies. The waiting lists are going nowhere. They are only getting bigger and children are waiting longer. That is the reality of what this Government has done. I do not know if the Ministers know the level of frustration and anger those parents have. They want the best for their child. They want an appropriate school place. They want their child to have the full developmental supports. They say to me that they are battling and battling the system every single day with no support. That is why we are here again today with our motion. We will keep coming back with motions until the Government gets it right and until children and families with disabilities are properly respected.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I make the point again that the whole fiasco in relation to SNAs was symptomatic of a wider attitude. An awful lot of SNAs and parents viewed it as the Department and the Government trying to pull a fast one, failing to recognise the manner in which the role of the SNAs has changed, even though it was apparent to everyone. It was entirely obvious to anyone who took the time to examine what an SNA how much the role has changed and how much more complex it is now, with the huge responsibilities they have now. The Government was trying to change the goalposts and doing things back to front, instead of evaluating correctly the current role. That is symptomatic. So much of this is back to front.

I want to take the opportunity to mention once again, and I know the Minister of State will be particularly aware of it, the issue in relation to Carrigaline special school. I welcome the additional resources but more is needed, particularly in terms of the multidisciplinary piece. Like my colleagues, I think many issues need to be addressed. The issues with therapies are enormous. The waiting lists are getting bigger and bigger and the CDNTs are absolutely buckling under pressure, in Cork particularly but also across the State. I know there are excellent, very committed therapists in all of them but they are under incredible pressure to try to keep up. We are here yet again debating the issue of school places. I do not know how it is, the way it has been an annual occurrence every April, May and June that we have debates of this nature instead of it being resolved at the start of the year. It is totally unfair on parents who are trying to figure out what is happening in September.

I will give one example of a girl, Tessa. I was speaking to her mother Jenna earlier. They have applied to eight schools, all of which refused or added her to waiting lists. They have since applied for three more. Her daughter is a flight risk and she is non-verbal. She is a single mother with two other children. She is under huge pressure and stress, trying to understand where her child is going to be. She is already in the system. She is in Sonas, a special education early years facility. She has two other children. She made the point to me that if they were missing for 20 days from school, she would be put under pressure but the State is not holding up its responsibility.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The existence of any school place is not the same as the existence of an appropriate placement. For autistic pupils, placements must be based on assessment of need, sensory profile, communication supports and the capacity of the receiving setting to provide a structured, autism-informed environment. Placing a child in an unsuitable setting can, as the Minister will know, lead to severe anxiety, regression in learning and school refusal. I have had many pieces of correspondence over the past week or so when people knew this motion was being put forward. I thank Deputies O'Rourke and Ní Raghallaigh for bringing this motion forward. I want to read out what I received from one teacher.

She states:

"As a teacher, a principal and a parent of a child with additional learning needs, Ireland has gone backwards when it comes to inclusive education in schools. The Government brandishes the words around but inclusion without resources is only neglect. Who usually receives the brunt of the disillusionment from parents of these students? Us teachers. Twenty years ago, a child with additional needs was allocated resource teacher hours. They were allocated SNA hours, given ICT, etc. Now everything is given under a general allocation model.

The scramble to create a cluster takes away the energy we have to condemn the miserable few hours we are presented with. SNA allocations have not changed for the next year. However, if like us you are screaming and begging for an increase in hours, you're told no can do. Will we still be begging this time next year? I want you to answer that question. I absolutely love teaching. I love the fun interactions with students in my class. I love watching children in my care progress even if that is slowly. I love the light bulb moments. I love the enthusiasm, the creativity. I love teaching but teaching has become more and more frustrating lately. We are implementing a brand-new curriculum starting next

September. The curriculum has become more vast and diverse. Trying to share so much knowledge is not going to work especially when you add a varied class of students in the mix. It is nigh impossible to cater for everyone single-handedly, especially in multilevel classrooms. We try our best.

I ask the Ministers to please listen to that teacher and parent.

Deputy Matt Carthy: As an elected representative, I can think of nothing more frustrating than every single year dealing with parents and families desperately trying to get what most of us take for granted, an adequate school place for their children. Every single year Ministers come to his House to tell us they are making changes and it will be better next year, but every single year, if anything, the situation gets worse. Every spring we are dealing with questions coming from not only parents and families, but also schools in many instances to get a clear image in terms of how many children are going to be catered for in each school, in each class, in each special school the following September. Invariably after all the turmoil and all the interactions, every September some children will be left behind. Every September and October we are still chasing either to get the SNA support or to get a place in the class that is appropriate to the needs of the children. It just has to stop and cannot go on.

We have heard enough of the rhetoric. I am sick of the press statements. I am absolutely sick to my hind teeth of the responses I get from the Department when I make representations on behalf of individual students, real children with real needs, and I get this bland response telling me about the extra SNA resources, the extra school places and whatever but no specific detail that the family needs. It has to change. There has to be a complete change of approach within the Department and within the NCSE. We need to realise we are talking about human beings here. They are asking for what most of us take for granted, a place in the school that is appropriate to the needs of their children.

I am asking the Government to support this motion but, more importantly, I am asking it to implement the provisions within it. We need to ensure that children get the education that they deserve and that they are entitled to.

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I welcome this evening's debate. It is important that we continue to shine a light on the area of special education to ensure that our children and young people with additional needs are supported in school to help them achieve their full potential. I appreciate and accept that some families and young people believe the system is not doing enough for them, but supporting young people with special educational needs is a priority for me as Minister for Education and Youth, and for my colleagues across government. Our track record is testament to that.

In 2026, more than €3 billion will be spent on special education. This is the highest ever annual provision and represents a 58% increase over the funding provided in 2020. Since 2020, we have almost doubled the number of special classes in our primary schools, going from 1,319 to 2,629. We now have more than twice the number of special classes in our post-primary schools, going from 517 to 1,112. Some 16 new special schools have been opened and four more will open for the next school year, 2026-27. Special school enrolments have increased by 20% since 2020. More than 40% of special schools have benefited from new or upgraded

buildings. We continue to invest in our special education teachers and SNAs, and there will be close to 22,500 SETs and approximately 25,000 SNAs in our schools by the end of the year.

We are progressing the establishment of a new education therapy service, which will be introduced in 45 special schools to begin with. The first of these new therapists will be in post in the National Council for Special Education next month.

Earlier this year, the Government also confirmed that there would be no reduction for any school in its allocation of SNAs for the coming school year. Separately, work is progressing to finalise a workforce development plan for SNAs, an SNA redeployment scheme and a new circular letter outlining the role of the SNA. Along with the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, I recently hosted a day-long engagement with SNAs and stakeholders on these issues and I want to see progress made on these matters as quickly as possible.

I know that an alternative circular on the role of the SNA is in circulation, and I appreciate the bona fides of those who have drafted it. However, it is important to note that any changes that I or my Department will bring forward in this regard will be made as a result of close consultation and co-design with the trade union Fórsa, the recognised representative body for SNAs, in addition to SNAs and relevant stakeholder groups. This consultation will be reflected in the three key documents relating to SNAs that I plan to publish shortly, documents which have been co-designed with SNAs working in schools across every community in the State.

Many more developments and initiatives are under way to support our children and young people with special educational needs and the Minister of State will speak to some of these in his contribution. It is worth highlighting that demand for education services has grown significantly in recent years, with 38,000 additional students added to the system in the past five years. Today, one in four children, or around 240,000 children, require extra supports. This has led to a very large expansion in special education services. Around 30,000 require specialist provision in special classes or special schools.

There has also been a major increase in the number of children with additional needs, both in Ireland and internationally. To ensure these children receive the supports they need and to meet increased demand, the Government this morning agreed to additional funding for the provision of special education services for children across the country. This money will fund SETs, additional SNAs, increased capitation, access to school transport for children in special education settings and start-up grants for schools opening new special classes and inclusive special classes.

For the balance of time remaining, I want to touch on two issues. The first one is to the forefront of the minds of many parents at present and that is the provision of school places for September. The second is plans for developing a more inclusive education system.

My Department and the NCSE have engaged intensively on an ongoing basis over recent months with schools and stakeholders to plan for the provision of more special class and special school places for the coming school year. As Deputies will be aware, budget 2026 provided funding for up to 433 new special classes and up to 400 new special school places. As of last week, the NCSE had sanctioned 432 new special classes, a number of months ahead of last year.

Utilising the additional funding secured at Cabinet, my Department and the NCSE will work to ensure that further new special classes can be confirmed as soon as possible. These new special classes will be mainly made up of regular special classes and some new inclusive special classes. These new inclusive special classes, five of which were announced last week, will receive the same level of resources and funding as regular classes and can support more children and young people to attend their local school with their peers. These new classes should also facilitate schools to support students to access mainstream classes for large parts of the day, something that is already happening in many of our schools, particularly at post-primary level.

The inclusive special classes are supported by management bodies from the post-primary sector. My Department and the NCSE met with special education advocacy groups and parent representative bodies to discuss these new inclusive special classes last week and a further engagement is planned for tomorrow. I ask schools that are opening new special classes to progress now to run admissions processes and offer places to students.

My Department's policy has long been to ensure that children's needs are met in the most inclusive school environment possible. For the vast majority of children and young people, this means they are supported to engage with education in mainstream classrooms every day.

However, some children and young people with complex needs require much greater levels of support. My Department and the NCSE have worked very hard to ensure there are sufficient places in special classes and special schools in order that those students' needs are met.

It is acknowledged that there is a significant body of work to do to ensure that greater opportunities are provided for inclusion for those students in particular. My Department is conscious, for example, of the obligations on us as a country arising from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This aligns with the previous policy advice published by the NCSE which challenges us to ensure the progressive realisation of a more inclusive education system. In that regard, a number of very significant developments will inform how a more inclusive education system can be developed. Following the review of the EPSEN Act, which was published last year, my Department has been finalising an implementation plan arising from that review.

My Department has also been working to finalise a roadmap for inclusion that has been prepared by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education on foot of a successful application to the EU's technical support instrument programme. This roadmap seeks to address the recommendations contained in the NCSE's policy advice on inclusive education. As mentioned earlier, my Department is also working hard to finalise and publish a workforce development plan for SNAs.

I now intend to establish a forum of key stakeholders, including parents, advocates, representatives from schools, unions, patrons and interested parties, to deliver a high-level action plan on the next steps. This plan will be led by our stakeholders and by those with lived experience. It is intended that this forum will be independently chaired to ensure it can deliver the reforms required in a way that will bring cohesion to the system and provide stakeholder confidence in a robust and child-centred process that can be delivered to meet the needs of children and young people with additional needs. I will provide further information on this forum in due course.

I appreciate that there is a significant body of work ahead of us, working together to agree a common consensus on the future of special education provision. To be clear, the Government is unwavering in its commitment to special education. It is committed to ensuring that young people with additional educational needs are helped to thrive and to prosper. Our track record and the next steps I have outlined are a testament to that.

Deputy Thomas Gould: On the 13th of this month a boy in my constituency turned six. Boys and girls his age organise parties, but there was no one to come to his party, only his family. He has been without a school place for a year. I contacted the NCSE about him last August and still he has no school place. It is nearly May and they still do not know whether he will have a school place in August.

He is not alone; there are hundreds of other children like him. Every single year children - boys and girls - are forced to watch their friends, their family and their neighbours go down the road in their school uniforms with their schoolbags on their backs while they are left at home. It is a sin. It is a sin on these poor children to be left at home without a school place. Not alone is it a sin; it is illegal. It is illegal what this Government and what Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been doing to these children for years. This did not happen today or yesterday. For six years I have come in here every year fighting for children. I see mothers who have to be like warriors outside the doors of Leinster House and who walk the streets of Cork and Dublin and every town and village looking for places for their children. How can that be right?

Every child has a right to an education. It states in the 1916 Proclamation that "all the children of the nation" will be treated equally. It does not say "except if you have additional needs", "except if you have a disability" or "except if you are autistic". Every child should be treated the same.

I come in here and listen to Ministers. The Minister's speech here in my hand outlines all the Government is doing. I will tell her what it is doing. There are children who have no school places, and that is the Government's responsibility.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: Before starting here, I taught in schools for 34 years, the last ten years in special education, but I have never seen things so bad in terms of the shortage of appropriate school places and SNA provision for those with behavioural, sensory, emotional or communication difficulties. The State is systematically failing these children, their families and the professionals I worked with. This week I have been contacted by school principals from the Wicklow-Wexford area, many distraught, with harrowing stories of struggles they face to get their children the education and the services they need and deserve. We have the new Gorey Hill School for students with special needs, which I know the Minister has visited. I met her there. That has a temporary building which is expanding into the grounds of the adjacent Gaelscoil, where I used to work, and that is now full. It will not be able to take a single student in September. It needs a new greenfield site for a bigger school. Some children cannot get school places in my area. Others may have to stay at home and wait another year, which is absolutely shocking, as my colleague pointed out. Public transport is a huge issue. Others said it would prevent them from actually going to school. The principal in Bearna Chlé, Johnstown, spoke of a shocking shortage of help in assessing assessment-of-need applications, with an allocation of just three hours per day. I also had a Kilmichael parent of three autistic children on to me. Another mother has to get a solicitor to get an assessment of need and had

to travel to Cork. How did it come to this? I have been working for the past year on transport and I feel we have Groundhog Day coming up this summer. I am working with parents from the Castletown, Camolin, Bunclody and Gorey Educate Together areas, working with the Minister's Department and working with parliamentary questions and everything else. I have a feeling we will be back to square one in a couple of months' time. Lastly, there is Our Lady of Fatima School in Wexford being re-designated in a very underhand way. This has to stop. I ask the House to support the motion and guarantee that anyone who needs additional support will receive it in September.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Across the State, we do not know how many children with additional needs are waiting for an appropriate school place for the coming academic year, and that is deeply worrying. I note that in the Minister's opening statement she did not give us those figures, even though she probably knew we would ask her for them. I urge the Minister and the Minister of State to provide us with these details. They are really important to plan for anything.

In the run-up to each academic new year I, along with other TDs, I am sure, get calls in my office from parents who have not received a school place, or, if they have, it is often in a setting that is not suitable for their child. It is wrong that parents must contact their local TDs on this matter. It is even more wrong that parents are compelled to take legal action to ensure that a child's right to an education is met. As we know, 22,000-plus children are waiting for an assessment of need alone. The Government looks at this challenge and opts out without appropriate consultation with disability groups to establish inclusive special education classes. There are simply larger classes with the same level of supports as previously, with no commitment to increase staffing. We have a broken system, and the Government seems determined to compound the failures in the system. The Government seems to be unaware that we face a crisis when the school holidays end. It seems that at every turn a parent of a child with additional needs must fight. It is battle after battle after battle. It is only a few short months ago that many of these parents rallied across the State in the Save Our SNAs campaign. Their advocacy forced the Government to change course.

The Joint Committee on Disability Matters, which I chair, recently published a report on inclusive education for persons with disabilities. I urge the Government to read that report and to look especially at the Sky is the Limit programme, which operates in Corpus Christi Primary School in Moyross, in my constituency of Limerick City. It is a programme that embeds counselling, therapy and family support services within the school environment, thus allowing pupils and parents to access help that would otherwise be difficult for them to navigate. It is a model that could be looked at as part of the needed changes to how we deal with the issue of special education. We cannot keep rinsing and repeating this tired and outdated approach to special educational needs. We need to do much better.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Every year, year in, year out, we are at this, where parents scramble for places for their children with special educational needs, and every year it becomes clearer and clearer that this State is abjectly failing in its duty to these children. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have repeatedly failed children with additional educational needs, their families and the professionals who support them. The Government says it is spending more. Of course it is;

our population is growing. An appropriate school place for children with additional needs is essential for their long-term development in order that they can become functioning adults.

The last time I was speaking about special education I spoke about how some of these children are ending up in prisons. I spoke about one person in particular in Kildare who did.

He is not costing the State any more money because the poor man is dead. He was denied the special education he needed and he ended up in jail. We have children who are travelling long distances to other schools outside their communities. Many children really struggle with this. I know of children from Meath coming to Kildare and *vice versa*. Children deserve to have their education in their local area, where they are making friends and they can go out and play on the road. Last year, we had a massive outpouring from parents who thought there was no other option but to sleep in tents on Marlborough Street, outside the Department of education. This is an absolutely desperate situation for these parents to be in. We have a great special school in Maynooth. I visited it recently and it is a great facility, but like most things the Government does it did not finish it. The car park is unsafe for the children. It is a gold-standard building, but it needs to be finished. The capitation grant does not meet the needs of children with special educational needs. Saplings Special School in Kill is struggling massively in its current premises, which is an old, dilapidated building, with toilets and sensory rooms that are well below par. Despite the fabulous staff, the schools are simply not fit for purpose. Toilet seats are broken and the capitation grant does not meet what these schools need.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: This Government and this State do not cherish all the children of the nation equally when it comes to education. We are here discussing appropriate school places, inclusive education and ensuring that children have the correct supports they require. Unfortunately, we keep having this conversation because there is a continuity of failure to deliver. I will start with one example, but we could all probably list 50:

Hi Ruairí, my name is Lisa, and I'm emailing regarding my son Matthew who attends an ASD class in a primary school in Dundalk. He's going to secondary school in September. I could not get him a place in an ASD class as they are so full he has to go to mainstream. My problem is that an SNA co-ordinator has told me that she can't promise him SNA access as they only have six between first and sixth year. Matthew is only coming 12 and still a flight risk. He can't even go out and play on the street without fear of him wandering off. He is a very trusting wee boy and would go off and speak to anyone. I don't think that he would be able to be left alone and go looking for classes or go to lunch on his own. He would wander off and would need constant supervision.

She was told to contact a TD. That is what everyone gets told to do because we are not delivering the service required. My son, Turlough, who I have mentioned before, would not have stayed in school in St. Joseph's or in Ó Fiaich College, where he is absolutely thriving, without that support.

I will also talk about another mother who has a seven-year-old child with Down's syndrome and autism who is non-verbal. I have been talking to the NCSE for the last two and a half months about the big issue that she has no appropriate place at present. She is too special for a special school, so that is a problem. Children are falling between stools all the time. We need

to get serious and we need to offer a solution across the board, and not an absolute disaster of Private Members' motions and then an absolute mess every September.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: The Labour Party will be fully supporting the motion. I thank Deputy Darren O'Rourke for tabling it. It is important to remember that behind all the statistics we discuss are children and families who are waiting, worrying and, too often, struggling to be heard. Special education is not an niche issue or an add-on to our system. It is a fundamental test of whether our education system is fair, responsive and genuinely inclusive. At present, that test is not being met.

We are facing unprecedented demand for special classes and special school places for next September. The Department is aware that approximately 600 new special classes are required. While it is welcome that just over 430 classes have already been opened, there remains a shortfall of roughly 170 classes. That is not a marginal gap. It represents hundreds of children who, as we stand here today, do not know whether they will have an appropriate school place in a matter of months. The reality behind that shortfall is stark. It is parents ringing school after school - often dozens of schools - searching for a place for their child. It is families being turned away repeatedly, left navigating a fragmented and inconsistent system with no clear answers. It is stress, uncertainty and a sense that the system is simply not working for those who need it most. That cannot be allowed to continue. When I raised this issue at the Committee of Public Accounts in February, the Department indicated that a memo would be brought to the Cabinet outlining how this situation would be addressed. When representatives from the Department again appeared before the committee last Thursday, the memo had still not been sent. This raises a fundamental question about urgency. For the Department this may be part of the process, but for families it is their children's future. Every delay matters and every week without a clear plan adds to the uncertainty parents are already facing.

We cannot simply remain in the cycle of criticism, followed by crisis response. What is required now is a shift in how we plan and deliver special education. We need to move from an *ad hoc* reactive approach to one that is ambitious, structured and forward looking. That is precisely what we have sought to do within the Labour Party. In our alternative budget, we proposed an additional €26.1 million in capital funding to accelerate the delivery of special classes and special schools. This is about ensuring that provision keeps pace with demand and that places are available locally at the start of the school year, not months into it. Alongside this we allocated funding for additional special education teachers and a significant number of special needs assistants, recognising that increased capacity must be matched with adequate funding and staffing.

However, investment alone is not enough if the system through which places are allocated remains fragmented. One of the most consistent themes we hear from parents is not just the lack of places, but the absence of a clear, co-ordinated process to access them. No parent should have to call 20 or 30 schools, let alone 40, simply to secure a school place for their child. That is not a system; it is a burden that has been unfairly shifted onto families. This is why the Labour Party is proposing the introduction of a centralised application system for school places, covering mainstream and special education provision. We already have an example of how such a system can work on this island. In Northern Ireland, school admissions are managed centrally by the education authority through a single online portal. Parents submit one application and outline their preferences, and the system co-ordinates the allocation of their

school places, including special provision. The value of that approach is not simply administrative; it is about fairness and clarity. It provides parents with a transparent process, clear timelines and confidence that the state is taking responsibility for ensuring their child has a school place. It also provides us as policy makers with real-time data on demand, allowing for more accurate planning and earlier intervention where gaps are emerging. We do not need to replicate that model in its entirety but we should certainly adopt its core principle: that the State, not parents should carry the responsibility for allocating school places. A centralised system in Ireland would allow for better co-ordination, earlier identification of demand and a far more efficient experience for families. It would move us away from our current situation, where those with more time, resources or knowledge are better able to navigate the system, while others are left behind. This speaks to the broader issue within special education. We are too often operating in a reactive mode. We respond when a crisis emerges, scramble to create additional places and attempt to resolve issues under pressure. What we need instead is forward planning, supported by robust data and clear structures, so that we are anticipating demand rather than chasing it.

That same principle applies when we consider special needs assistants. The recent proposals that would have effectively removed SNAs for some children based on revised criteria led to a significant public outcry and rightly so. Any approach that appears to pit one child's needs against another undermines the very idea of inclusion. SNAs are not an optional support. They are essential to ensuring that many children can access education in a meaningful way. In our alternative budget, the Labour Party has not only proposed to increase the number of SNAs, but also proposed improvements to their working conditions and professional development. This includes the phasing out of the 72-hour obligation, supporting SNAs to achieve QQI level 6 qualifications, and ensuring that workforce planning reflects the realities within our schools. If we want a system that works, we must invest in the people who deliver it every day.

We are also proposing the introduction of special educational needs co-ordinators as a formal post of responsibility within our schools at assistant principal level. One of the recurring challenges identified by schools is the lack of dedicated co-ordination for special education provision. Teachers and principals are managing increasingly complex needs alongside their existing responsibilities. A dedicated, co-ordinated role would improve planning, strengthen communication with parents and ensure that supports are delivered more effectively.

Finally, I want to address autism provision. There are significant concerns about proposed changes to the autism class model. Organisations such as AsIAM Ireland have raised legitimate questions about whether these changes risk diluting specialist supports. Inclusion is a goal we all share, but it must be meaningful and properly resourced. It cannot come at the expense of the tailored supports that many children rely on.

Labour's approach is to strengthen both inclusion and specialist provision. We propose an autism-friendly audit of every school building over a four-year period alongside investment in autism-specific training for all school staff and a full expansion of therapy supports, inclusive of occupational therapy and speech and language therapy, through the educational therapy support service for all of our schools. Education does not happen in isolation. Children must have access to the full range of supports they need to thrive. When we look at the system as a whole, the challenges are clear. There is a shortage of places, uncertainty for families and a structure that is too often reactive. The solutions are also clear, however. With proper

investment, better co-ordination and a commitment to forward planning, we can build a system that meets the needs of every child.

Ultimately, this comes down to responsibility. At present, too much of the burden is placed on parents, who are left to navigate an unclear and inconsistent system. That is not where the responsibility should lie. It is the role of the State to ensure that every child has access to an appropriate school place and the supports he or she needs. If we are serious about inclusion, we must move beyond *ad hoc* measures and short-term fixes. We must be ambitious in our planning, clear in our delivery and committed to building a system that works for families. Every child deserves not just a place in our education system but the opportunity to fully participate and to reach his or her full potential.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I agree with Deputy O'Rourke. He said that every week his office is contacted by parents who simply cannot secure appropriate special education places for their children. It is the same in my office. I had such a contact just an hour and a half ago. When parents cannot access local provision within Dublin Fingal West, they are told to go into Dublin or to the adjacent counties of Meath and Louth. I would love to see the emails the Ministers receive. I am sure that people around the country are in similar situations to those I hear about in Dublin Fingal West. It is simply not acceptable that parents are asked to put children with special needs on a bus for 90 minutes in the morning and in the afternoon just to access education.

Every child should have the right to attend school in their local area with their siblings and friends and in their own community. In my own constituency of Dublin Fingal West, parents come to me who are desperately trying to secure appropriate places for children with Down's syndrome. Parents were recently told there were three places available in one school but there were 57 applications. That is the stark reality that families are facing. I thank Ruth and Fidelma from Down Syndrome Ireland, who met with me on this issue last month.

I will try to put forward a solution. I raised this last year with the Tánaiste. Children in early education are in ASD pre-school settings where the access and inclusion model, AIM, is in use. Those figures can be used to plan ahead and ensure that supports are in place for primary schools. There is a clear two-year window there before the transition and it should be used.

Deputy George Lawlor: I will speak about the impact of the Ministers' proposals on moderate general learning disability schools. The future of children relies on schools like Our Lady of Fatima School in Wexford town. The Government's proposal to remove its MGLD designation threatens to dismantle the very support system that these children depend on. I am delighted to see Darryl, chair of the parents association, and his daughter, Grace, a student at Our Lady of Fatima School, in the Gallery this evening. People across County Wexford have said plainly that this proposal is misguided and will be harmful. It disregards the lived reality of families, the expertise of teachers and the needs of children, who deserve the specialised, consistent and compassionate education provided by Our Lady of Fatima and schools like it right across the country.

We must be absolutely clear about what this designation means. MGLD status is not just a label; it is a lifeline. It ensures that children with mild general learning disabilities receive tailored teaching, smaller classes, specialised resources and an environment built around their

strengths and challenges. Removing this designation does not modernise education or streamline services. Instead, it strips away protections that were put in place because the children in these schools needed them. Parents have said repeatedly that this school is not just a building but a community that understands their children in a way that mainstream settings simply cannot. Teachers have warned that removing the designation will scatter vulnerable students to environments that are not prepared, resourced or trained to meet their needs. On behalf of the children in Wexford and across the country who will be affected by the removal of these designations, I urge the Ministers to review and reverse this decision because it will have such a great impact on the affected children.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I believed the Ministers when they told me several times in this Chamber that they would work with me. I believed them when they said several times that they had the solutions. I believed the NCSE. I believed lots of people but that might be my political naivety. I am really disappointed. I have come to the Ministers several times both here and outside the Chamber, the committee has been on to them and I have submitted umpteen parliamentary questions. I have written letters pleading with them to do something on behalf of my constituents and people around this country, their children and the schools they work in. These people are coming to me because I am our education spokesperson. I have had the quickest grinds ever on the subject of how inclusive education works in this country. It is an omnishambles beyond belief. I do not normally get cross. I try to be very constructive. However, I really am pushed to the limits of my patience now. Those on the Government side constantly say that the Opposition does not put forward solutions. This is a solution. We have put forward several. I literally cannot ask the Ministers any more times for the things that need to happen.

In September, we had an issue with appropriate school places. We did not have enough of them. In November, the portal was closed and no one figured out what to do for those parents who were promised they were going to be able to notify the parental portal afterwards. The portal was shut and they were not able to make that notification. We had to contact the Minister individually. That is not an appropriate use of her time. This system should work properly. In January, another Department announced that there would not be assessments of need in schools. I do not know how schools are going to figure out what support services they need. That was done without any consultation with any education providers whatsoever. That is also an affront to the Ministers' Department.

Two things happened in April. Inclusive special education classes were announced. It is beyond me why those words were used. I do not know why someone would come up with that phrase. Does that mean that the rest of the classes are not inclusive? We then had the Relate document. It is an absolutely excellent document. It is not all bad news. I will give praise where it is due. The Relate document is excellent and that framework should be rolled out. It is now going to be rolled out to training for SNAs and teachers but through a "train the trainer" model. That was not decided in consultation with teacher unions or any other unions and it is also not acceptable.

I welcome my lovely colleagues from Scoil Eoin in my own constituency. It is a mild general learning disability school. I believe the Minister has visited. It is an absolutely wonderful school. The fact that its designation is facing death by a million cuts and what will happen to those children is actually frightening.

I listened to the Minister's speech in full. I was upstairs in my office. It was full of numbers, which is great. I like hearing numbers. However, I also think those numbers do not actually relate to the children behind them and where they are. I will ask one question. The portal was supposed to give the Minister a great deal of information. Did it actually tell her the needs those children had? If it did, has she addressed all of those needs? I hope she will tell me that it has. There is no point in collecting data and then leaving it on a shelf. With regard to those five inclusive special classes, is that specifically what those parents said they needed for their children through that portal?

Therapists are going to come into schools in May, one month before the end of yet another academic year. They should never have been cut in the first place. I do not know whose hare-brained idea that was. The idea that children with disabilities would not have therapists is just beyond me.

Today, the Taoiseach stood in his place and said the Save our SNAs campaign was a flawed campaign. What was flawed was the Government's approach to SNAs. The campaign has been fighting for years because SNAs were not respected. They have again not been respected. The Taoiseach has completely insulted a pile of people in this country. It is unfathomable. The reason they are so frustrated and that there is a difficulty with SNAs is that it has taken years for the Ministers' Department to get redeployment going, to undertake workforce planning and to get any idea of what the circular would be able to do.

7 o'clock

I asked the Minister if she would meet the group. She said "Yes" and that we could negotiate. I offered the NCSE. Deputy O'Rourke and I were part of that committee, and we asked if we could do it. We are handing the Minister stuff on a silver platter to make her life easier, so that intern can make the lives of those children easier. The EPSEN Act, which the Department reviewed last year, was written in 2004 and sat on a shelf for years.

I want to mention two things that I thought were really heartbreaking over the last while. Visually impaired and blind students came into the committee last week. One young person told us that he had applied for his Braille books when he was in transition year, and he got them a week before his leaving certificate. They were his senior cycle books. That is how we are treating a child who needs to have Braille books. I am speechless.

We are spending gazillions of euro. I do not even know the number. The Minister knows the number and she still has to go to borrow more money for the future next year due to the overspend the Department has. I know she is trying to do her best, but the reality is that it is not what is in the wallet but how it is spent. It is clearly not being spent properly if we cannot even get a child books in Braille for the leaving certificate. What is that saying to him as an individual? Is it saying we do not value him because we did not bother getting him his Braille books? It would not happen in another country.

I recently met with parents of children with intellectual disabilities who are becoming adults and are going to leave education and go somewhere else. What I heard was that there is no vision whatsoever for those young people. I know they are going to be adults, but there is no vision for what they will do with their lives in the future.

I met somebody from the Before We Die campaign this morning. I hope that campaign contacts every TD in this room and those who are not present also, and that we listen to them because waiting until someone dies and then figuring out what is going to happen to their adult child is just disgraceful.

I am sure that the Minister and the Minister of State have not heard me this annoyed before because I tend to come into this House quite balanced, but today I am afraid I am not. I am not able to listen to the constant complaints from people because the system does not work. I thought the Minister would believe me, and I know that is what parents in this country thought. They thought they could believe the Government before the last general election or local election - any election - that it would get this right, but it has not, and it is now going to have another talking shop that asks people this, that and the other. The information and answers are there. The Government does not have to make everything up. It works in other countries, so copy and paste from where it works well.

The education committee also went to Finland. We looked at what that would be like. There are so many solutions but, again, if we are not able to get it right for any child in this country, this is what the difficulty is. The Government has let people down. It has let people in this House down, it has let people outside this House down, and if there were another motion of no confidence, it would be about this issue, in my opinion.

Deputy Liam Quaide: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing this motion to the House this evening. Early intervention classes are a pivotal part of the continuum of support for children with additional needs and autistic children who are not yet ready to transition to a special class or into school more generally, yet an insidious pattern is emerging in the treatment of early intervention classes. They are being slowly but surely phased out under the guise of inclusivity.

A reply the Department recently gave to a parliamentary question of mine on this issue clearly shows what is happening. It stated that the Department of education and the National Council for Special Education are pushing for early intervention classes to be repurposed to meet wider special class demand. Incredibly, we are told that this is about inclusion and about meeting need. In reality, it means that one essential form of educational provision is being scaled back to meet need elsewhere - a classic case of robbing Peter to pay Paul.

The Government is getting away with this because it is happening gradually, under the radar, and because the group of children affected at any given time is relatively small. Presenting this as inclusivity is not just misleading; it is deeply cynical. A class that should be there for a new cohort of young children is instead being absorbed into the primary school system to patch over shortages there.

Early intervention classes serve a distinct purpose. They can be the bridge into education for children who need intensive support at the earliest stage. These classes can help children develop communication, regulation, routine and many of the core skills needed to engage with school life. Investment at that stage can yield enormous benefits later in a child's education and development, and I have heard that directly from primary school teachers and principals, who are deeply concerned by this quiet phasing-out of early intervention classes. Crucially, they are often essential for children who are not yet ready to transition into a special class. If we hollow out that provision, we will leave some of our most vulnerable young children without the support they need at the very point when early intervention matters most.

The national figures point in the wrong direction. After previous growth, the total number of early intervention classes fell from 157 in 2024-25 to 149 in 2025-26 and Cork shows that pattern very clearly. Instead of strengthening early intervention provision, there is a clear reduction over time, with six fewer early intervention classes now in Cork than existed in 2020. That trend needs to be reversed.

The Government should not preach about inclusive education while quietly reducing access to the early intervention provision that many children depend on in order to get into education in the first place. It is crucial that the Government acknowledges the distinct and irreplaceable value of these classes and commits to protecting them from routine redesignation.

Deputy Rory Hearne: There is a huge concern among parents of children with additional needs, autism and disabilities that what is happening now is an undermining of the minimal resourcing that is there already. The truth is we have created an education system that is more exclusionary than it is inclusionary, and we need to create an inclusive education system.

In my constituency, Finglas Parochial National School was promised autism classes that were to be delivered by September. It is now not clear if that will happen, although I know the Minister has been out to visit.

Similarly, I have been working with a parent for over a year whose child only goes to school for one and a half hours a day. A six-year-old child goes in for one and a half hours a day because the school cannot handle it as it does not have the resources, and the parents are taking the child home. This is a child with autism.

We are failing too many children, too many families, too many parents and I am very surprised at the Taoiseach's response to the SNA campaign. What is the Minister's response to the proposed circular from the SNA campaign? I have read it. I do not see what is wrong with it. It is actually excellent if you read through it. It states that the purpose of the SNA role is to enable access to the curriculum for the students, support participation, promote independence, support emotional regulation and facilitate communication and social inclusion.

To me, this new circular proposed by the SNA campaign is at the heart of creating an inclusive education, and I ask the Minister to seriously engage with them and to make the changes needed to create a genuinely inclusive education system for all our children.

Deputy Charles Ward: Every Member of this House knows that families are at breaking point, struggling to access supports for children with additional needs. Behind every policy discussion are parents trying to hold things together in a system that is not holding them. This motion is right: the State is failing children with additional educational needs and their families.

An upsetting example is how families are treated when they apply for the domiciliary care allowance. Picture a mother at the kitchen table late at night filling in the application. She describes her real life: constant supervision, safety concerns, emotional regulation and the exhaustion of caring every hour day in, day out. She sets this out hoping it will be recognised. Instead, a decision is made at a desk, and the conclusion is reached that the child does not have the needs substantial and in excess of what is expected.

In that moment, families are left with their reality and their reality is denied. Families are experiencing the lack of need and a system that does not translate into what they need - recognition. They feel rejection. They feel abandonment. In Donegal and across the north west, families are carrying even more due to the CDNT network's delayed services, yet this is not reflected in the decisions. Families are carrying everything, and they are being told it is not enough. This is injustice. We need to reform the domiciliary care allowance so the lived experience is properly weighed, decisions reflect the real care burden and families are not forced into costly legal battles they cannot afford.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I want to start with the Dublin 15 special education task force that was clearly set up to box the issue off the agenda during the general election. The report has not been released. It is becoming like the third secret of Fatima. Will the Government release it? Many parents had to take to the streets and we want to see the recommendations and what the Minister will do about them.

Who dreamed up the inclusive special schools the Minister announced? Why would the Minister announce a new model of special classes without talking to Inclusion Ireland, AsIAM, special education teachers, unions, SNAs or parents, that is, the people actually affected by this? The Minister only spoke to the managerial bodies of schools.

Is this model more inclusive because there will be more students in the classroom? The numbers will increase from six to 12. The Minister can clarify this point, but it appears that instead of an autism-specific or dedicated additional needs class, part of the day will be spent in mainstream classrooms of 30 where students will struggle and part of the day in a new special model the Minister has created. That will be considered to be the creation of a special class. It is a stroke to sort out the problem of waiting lists for special classes.

I have been told of 19 students in Dublin 15 who do not have secondary school places. What the Minister has proposed seems to be the solution to this, but children are entitled to what is best practice. They should not be pushed into a reduced form of education. I want to lend my support to the Save our SNAs campaign. I will raise the idea of an alternative circular at the education committee. I fully support the women fighting for this.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I am glad the Minister and Minister of State are here. The latest figures in County Laois for the number of children with special needs and disabilities under the age of 14 is 2,302. All of us have a responsibility to ensure they get the best possible education. New classes have been announced for Laois, which is well and good and I welcome that. However, we also need physical space in schools. In St. Francis School in Portlaoise, demand continues to far outstrip the availability of classrooms. The Department has washed its hands of Saplings, as has the Department of justice. It is regarded as a private matter even though it is a public school. It has a roll number and teachers paid for by the Minister's Department, but apparently the Department has no role in the school. I will come back to that on another day.

Our Lady's Meadow in Durrow is getting two new ASD units, which is excellent, but it needs three. I urge that one of the prefabs that are in a good condition is left in place. I have raised with the Minister and departmental officials the issue of Mountrath boys' national school, which is badly in need of an extension to incorporate ASD classrooms, sensory rooms, etc.

The numbers waiting at primary and second level in all counties are not published every year so that we can see them, and I cannot for the life of me figure out why. This information could be used to ascertain the level of need and the classroom space available, but this never happens. Why not?

On SNAs, the Government's definition was too narrow, which it has accepted. That is good. It is okay to accept that. The Government must now work with SNAs to ensure that the policy encompasses the full range of duties and responsibilities SNAs take on. It is important that the role of the SNA is properly fulfilled. I urge the Minister to ensure this consultation is done properly and to give SNAs their proper place in our schools.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The Government must stop failing children with additional needs. At the end of 2025, 20,209 children were on the waiting list for assessments of need. The majority have been waiting over two years and almost 95% have been waiting longer than the legal six-month limit under the Disability Act 2005. The Government is breaking the law every hour of every day. The Government threatened the Army on peaceful protesters, but it breaks the law willy-nilly.

The waiting lists for therapy are also horrendous. Well over 40,000 children are on various waiting lists for CDNTs, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and psychology. There is a chronic shortage of appropriate school places, some 170 classes short, representing hundreds of children. Many children are forced to accept school places outside of their communities. In my experience, children are travelling up to 25 miles to school. A special school in my constituency had 38 applications for eight places, meaning 30 disappointed children and 30 very frustrated and distressed parents. We must do better.

The recent announcement of inclusive special classes is not the answer and is another display of arrogance by the Government. There was no consultation with parents, children, disability organisations, teachers or unions. Inclusive Ireland and AsIAM have very serious misgivings about the proposal. It increases class sizes for children with additional needs without adequate or, indeed, any provision for additional special education teachers, SNAs or support and should be stopped. It must be subject to full consultation, consideration and evaluation by and with all stakeholders.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank colleagues in Sinn Féin for bringing forward the motion. In my constituency, Dublin West, we have seen sustained challenges over many years in respect of parents being able to secure appropriate places for their children in local schools. I know the Minister and Minister of State are aware of that. Right now, there remain children who I know do not have an appropriate place assigned to them for September at primary and secondary level. The Minister said on the radio last week that no child would be left without a place this September, but that deadline is getting closer and closer. The opportunity for these children to acclimatise to their new school setting is a transition that is often significantly more challenging for a child with autism. That opportunity has been lost. I appeal to the Minister and Minister of State to engage with the NCSE and make sure that necessary school places are delivered in Dublin West. Where schools are being asked to open new autism classes at short notice, they should be fully supported in doing so.

I want to raise the case of Hansfield Educate Together National School. An ANA review sought by the school resulted in no additional staffing being provided. The school has seen a significant increase in the number of students with the highest care support needs joining in September of this year, yet it has not received an equivalent increase in ANAs. The school management is desperately concerned about the ability of the school to meet the needs of existing students and the new students who will be joining the school in September.

When will the Minister and Minister of State publish the report of the Dublin 15 schools task force? It was handed over to their predecessors in July last year. We have now been waiting over eight months for the report to be published and for officials to deal with it. A huge amount of work went into it and more and more it appears to be the case that there is an effort to ignore or sideline the report's important recommendations. The Minister and Minister of State urgently need to publish the report.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: At a meeting of the budget scrutiny committee today, we were informed by the Department of public expenditure that there will be an extra €640 million for the education sector. Officials explained that was largely to do with special needs. To me, what that says is that were it not for the protests of school communities, including parents, teachers, principals and SNAs, the Government would, at a minimum, have given €640 million too little to special needs. It would have short-changed children in terms of their right to an education and the educational supports they need.

Of course, that is on top of the failure of the Government to deliver on assessments needed by children who are left on waiting lists. When they get assessments, they never ever get the services they need. The legal and moral rights of our children are not being honoured. Only because of a crisis and the protests of school communities has the Government been forced to find some additional money. It will almost certainly not be enough to address the issue. Extra money has been allocated because school communities revolted against the intent of the Government to implement swingeing SNA cuts in many schools.

We are not getting clear guarantees that everybody will get the special class places they should have in September. We are not getting a clear commitment that the alternative circular has been put together. It appears the circular that led to the crisis will be adopted by the Government. There will be serious engagement with the SNA campaign.

Parents, who are stressed and have to deal with all these hardships, had to go to all the effort of putting together an alternative circular on special needs because the Government had failed so catastrophically. Give the parents and children the commitments they need that they will have their places and resources and that the Government will engage with the circular and vindicate the rights of children to education.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing this motion forward. As I do not have much time, I will just touch on some of the requirements in this motion. It looks to me as if people with additional needs are always the people who are suffering in this country and fighting to get basic rights. Special needs assistants are being treated unfairly and families are paying the price. The current system is rigid, cold and completely out of touch with what is happening on the ground. In schools, children who need support are left waiting and SNAs are being pushed to the brink. That cannot continue. The Minister must engage properly with the

Save our SNAs campaign and implement a fair and improved circular that works for children, parents and schools.

SNAs are doing far more than they were ever originally employed to do. It is long past time their role was recognised through a proper redeployment scheme and a workforce plan designed with SNAs themselves. At the same time, the Government is bringing back exam fees and hiking school transport charges. It is the wrong decision at the wrong time. Bus fees for secondary students are being doubled and they are being hiked by a third for primary students, pushing ordinary families, who are already stretched, to breaking point. Education should not come with barriers like this. It should be fair, accessible and based on basic decency.

I wish to raise the pressures facing CoAction in west Cork and other communities and the families who rely on its services. CoAction supports hundreds of adults and children across west Cork, providing residential care, supported living, respite and vital disability services. Demand for these services is growing year on year, yet the organisation is being held back by chronic under-funding and uncertainty. There is a vacant residential bedroom that cannot be used because of a lack of funding to staff it. New residential respite developments are planned in places like Skibbereen, Bantry and Clonakilty but without guaranteed revenue funding, these projects cannot open, even when the buildings are there. Families are crying out for respite. Centres have capacity to do more but staffing, short-term funding and recruitment challenges are limiting what can be delivered. The lack of a multi-annual funding model is creating constant uncertainty for service users, their families and front-line staff. The Government must give providers like CoAction proper, secure funding so existing services can run at full capacity and planned services can open. People with disabilities and their families deserve certainty, not promises that depend on next year's budget.

There is one vital disability service project that deserves urgent Government backing. CoAction west Cork, working in partnership with the Kilbritten Tractor Run and the local community, has put forward a strong, well-planned proposal for a new respite and day service facility in Dunmanway. This project responds to a clear and growing need for autism-focused and intellectual disability services across west Cork. The proposal includes a purpose-built community hub, adult day services, respite centre and supported living apartments, all located within walking distance of Dunmanway town. This is about keeping people in their own communities, supporting independence and ensuring continuity of care as young people transition into adulthood. What makes this project stand out is that the land has been generously donated by local people, John and Mary McCarthy. Funding has already been raised by the community and the service model aligns fully with the national disability policy and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCPRD. What is needed now is certainty from the State. Capital and guaranteed revenue funding must be provided so this project can move from paper to reality. Families have waited long enough. This is the right project in the right place at the right time. It needs to be urgently brought ahead.

Deputy Jen Cummins mentioned the Before We Die campaign. I certainly do not need to be educated on it because I know all about it. I spent a number of years on the board of CoAction and I see the need for people to live independently. Parents are now getting to an extremely worrying time in their lives where they are growing elderly and are concerned about where their children will end up. There are no services available, nor is there a solution. People are being told that the disabled person said they are okay, but that is not a decision they can

make. We need to be looking at that. I was involved in a community project in Skull where we built 12 houses recently. Two people in CoAction were able to move into these houses, but I had some fight to get them in there. No one understands the situation. This can be a solution in many towns and villages. It needs to be worked on. I would appreciate if the Minister and Minister of State could help us along that line.

Deputy Paul Lawless: First, I support the motion brought before us today by Sinn Féin.

Every year there is a scramble for families of children with disabilities to access special educational places, which is their constitutional right. In Mayo, it is no different. Many families are panicking, chasing SENOs and ringing school principals and the NCSE. That is what it is happening. The level of anxiety is frightening. Such families attend my clinics, but what should I say to them? It is devastating. These are our most vulnerable children who are being forgotten about. It is so upsetting. The problem is not an information problem; the Minister and the Department have the data and statistics. The gaps are visible, yet every year there is a scramble.

The most recent reports outline that up to 1,200 children could be without a place. I urge the Minister to ensure that she has a workplace plan in place because, clearly, there has not been one in the Department. That is fundamental. The Department needs to get a grip of the data. It needs to ensure that it knows what is coming down the track for next year and the year after and plans and prepares accordingly. For the children entering school this September, it is quite clear that the Government up to now has no provision or plan in place. I urge the Minister to ensure that she gets a handle of the situation and the data. She must ensure there is a plan, rather than a scramble, in place for children this September, as well as those children starting in September 12 and 24 months from now. The Minister must be able to say to families that there is a place for them and that the Government will look after them. These are our most vulnerable children and if we cannot do that in this day and age, we should hang our heads in shame.

I will speak about the SNA situation. The current circular is completely outdated, restrictive and cruel. It is incredible that it took people - SNAs and families with disabilities - protesting outside Leinster House to make this Government realise what was happening. A review was being undertaken which would have seen on-the-ground cuts, essentially, and it took families standing on Kildare Street and raising their voices for this Government to realise what was happening. The same happened with the protests last week. I urge the Government to listen to the people. The people of this country should not have to blockade infrastructure or spend hours outside Leinster House to get this Government to wake up and listen. I am asking the Minister to ensure that the circular is updated, that the invaluable contribution SNAs make is recognised and that there is a move away from this restrictive model dictated in the 2014 circular.

I also ask the Minister to advance the SNA redeployment scheme. It is fundamentally important. It happens in a range of other professional sectors and for professionals across the country. It should also happen for SNA cohorts as well. SNAs are looking for increased continuing professional development, CPD. They want training as their role is expanding massively. They want to professionalise. They want job security and clear contracts. It is important the Minister ensures that happens.

Finally, I will raise the important issue of assistive technology for children with special educational needs. I ask for the attention of the Minister in this regard. The family and school of a young child who is in primary school have applied for assistive technology.

His occupational therapist and language therapist have outlined that he needs it. The report clearly states that this is essential for this child to access the curriculum. It does not state that this is helpful. It does not state that this is preferable; it states that this is essential. However, the application was rejected and refused by the Department. The refusal ultimately cites two things: first, insufficient evidence of a specific language disorder, despite the fact that the child has such immense difficulties; and, second, it appears that it is necessary for a child to have an IQ above 90. Here is the catch. The speech and language disorder is one route to access this under the 2013 curricular, but to be assessed for a speech and language disorder a child must have an IQ of above 90. This child's IQ is in the region of the fifties. He is not going to meet that threshold but two therapists have said that it is essential for the child.

Down Syndrome Ireland has confirmed to me that is not an outlier or unique case. I have submitted parliamentary questions to the Minister. She has stated that a review is under way. This is a review for a basic grant that is essential for a child to access the curriculum. What is going on? When will the review happen? When will this child be able to access assistive technology that he so desperately needs?

Deputy Albert Dolan: It is something that I have raised with the Minister. Roisin and Peggy from Down Syndrome Galway had a fantastic meeting with the Minister. I wish to reiterate the issue that exists in that circular regarding the special speech and language disorder classes and having accessibility for everyone to them. I will use my two minutes - not that the Minister is not aware - as a reminder of how important the role of education, and particularly the role that special education, plays. I know the work the Minister and the Minister of State put in and how hard they are working to see every child in this country have an opportunity. We had the Department of Education and Youth before the Public Accounts Committee last week. We were asking the officials about why almost an extra €500 million would be spent trying to ensure that we meet the need that exists. I encourage the Department to spend as much money as possible in this domain. As a country, we are not going to regret spending this money. This is something for our children and future. It is something that I will fully support so long as I am a Deputy.

There are three key priorities and focuses going forward for special education. The first is a guarantee of a school place for every child in the right school place and right setting that is fitting for the child. The second is a fast track for special classes. I compliment the Ministers. There are over 400 special classes set to open this year across the country. That is welcome. As the Ministers, all Deputies and I know, we need more. The third is to speed up the rate of which assessments take place so that supports can be unlocked and identified for those who need them. If we have not identified the need and not identified what is needed for people there, how can we ensure that they get the support they need?

Deputy Carol Nolan: I support the motion, particularly its call to establish a time-bound school building task force with a mandate to ensure priority delivery of special schools, and indeed, special classes. As a former school principal and teacher with a masters degree in inclusive and special education, I fully recognise, and I have seen first hand, the invaluable and

indispensable role that SNAs play in our schools throughout this State, particularly in preparing children in enabling them to access mainstream education, supporting them to thrive alongside their peers and dealing with their care needs and well-being. It is absolutely invaluable. Our SNAs are vital in our mainstream primary schools. They deserve to be respected and recognised for the great work they do.

I acknowledge that Ireland has built one of the most dedicated SNA schemes in the European Union. We are supporting over 23,000 SNAs in the current school year. However, the fact remains that demand continues to outpace supply. The rising diagnosis of autism, ADHD and complex needs have placed unprecedented pressure on the system. We also see that in the massive numbers struggling to access the children's disability network teams. I see that first hand in my constituency of Offaly. It has been a problem for years. It is unfair that parents have to fight all the time and battle for vital access to basic services. The recent NCSE allocation review, although paused, and the additional €19 million in funding, exposed the limitations of an outdated care needs criteria. Schools and families across Offaly and beyond experienced real anxiety at that time.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing forward the motion. It is the biggest wonder of the world when a baby is born to a loving couple. They look forward to raising the baby, bringing them up and giving that child the very best. Equally, it is devastating when they discover that something is the matter and that the child needs an assessment or whatever, and they have to wait so long. That is very hurtful for them because they have to fight for everything. They have to fight for primary school education and special needs teachers. When they move on to post-primary school, they have to do it again. Surely, the powers that be and the education system should recognise at that stage that they need SNAs and more of the same in secondary school.

Another problem arises that the Department says it has X number of SNAs places and that the country is covered. In many cases, they are not there. Long distances between schools and families create a huge problem for people. Many children with complex needs are still without SNAs and necessary school places. Parents all over the country are worn out from fighting for a school place for their children. They should not have to fight for the one basic right of education. It was very hurtful when the Department tried to take four SNA teachers out of Fossa National School in County Kerry. I am glad that the Department saw the light because these people are doing tremendous work. They should be allowed to continue. Some Department official went into that school, sat aside in another room and drew up the idea of taking away four SNAs. That is wrong. They did not see what was going on in the school.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Aontaím le go leor rudaí agus Teachtaí a labhair sa Teach seo inniu. Is gá go dtabharfaidh muid, mar Rialtas, an deis do gach uile páiste sa tír seo. Every single child deserves the chance to thrive. I welcome and thank the Minister for visiting schools across Dublin Bay North, including St. Michael's House Special National School, Baldoyle. St. Michael's House Special School Foxfield in Raheny would also love the Minister to visit. They are brilliant and hard-working staff. The Minister also visited Stapolin Education Together National School, which has run a very successful online campaign. Speaking to the principal of that school, they are being told that they cannot get a sanctioned modular building for a special education classroom. The NCSE is telling them that the Department is telling the

council that it cannot sanction the classrooms. There are clearly communication issues. I ask for that to be looked into because the school needs it. It has the staff and it is willing to open it.

Regarding SNAs across the country, I thank the hard-working men and women for everything that they do. I refer to the save our SNAs campaign. I welcome that there has been some engagement, especially with the Taoiseach confirming to me today in the Chamber that he will have no problem meeting with the campaign group. The alternative circular that they have developed is very good. It takes in all of the roles that SNAs perform in a real scenario.

I thank the Minister for visiting those schools and for the hard work she has done. I acknowledge that more than 430 special classes have been opened across the country.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy must conclude.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: She knows there is a lot more to do. I will continue to work with her as she does so.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: At its core, education is about providing opportunity and allowing every child to reach their full potential. This is no different for children with special educational needs. Across my constituency in Dublin Bay North there is significant demand for additional special classes in schools. One school in particular, Stapolin Educate Together in Baldoyle, has been working tirelessly to secure approval for an additional special class. I urge the Minister to impress upon the NCSE the very real demand that exists and to recognise the willingness of Stapolin Educate Together to deliver this class.

Since being elected to this House, I have had the privilege of visiting schools and meeting with teachers and principals in the constituency. Just yesterday I visited another school. Time and again, I hear the very same story of children with special educational needs being placed in mainstream classrooms that are simply not suited to their needs. The level of stress and anxiety this puts on families is unimaginable. These children need to be in an appropriate classroom with wraparound supports so that they can thrive.

I acknowledge the Minister's huge commitment to special education. Last year she visited a number of schools in our community and she heard at first hand the issues from principals, teachers and students alike. We are seeing progress, with more special classes and special schools being established. We need more special classes and more special schools and we need them urgently. The progress that we are seeing is welcome but it must continue and it must match the urgency on the ground.

Deputy Gillian Toole: The highest priority within the programme for Government is the whole area of special education, and the work that has been done to date by special needs assistants, special education teachers, the whole school community and indeed the parents and guardians supporting children throughout. It is fair to say that listening did need to improve and that is happening. It is of the utmost priority to find a way for SNA alternative circular to be integrated into the NCSE review of the role of the special needs assistant. The sanctioning today of additional budget for additional special education classes is most welcome as well.

I wish to highlight the work of the Joint Committee on Disability Matters. It is a number of weeks since we signed off on the report on inclusive education, which has been passed to the Departments of education and health and the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. Within that, there are 33 very strong recommendations that encompass most of what has been discussed this evening. Pivotal to that is co-creation and the co-ordinated long-term needs-based planning for children with additional needs as well as the establishment of the unit for future planning and multi-annual funding. Some tangible examples can be implemented perhaps with a more prudent use of funding, even for school meals and mindfulness, sensory and nurture rooms within schools. That could even be done in collaboration with the HSE through the use of alternative respite funding for integrative therapies. These are things that some CHOs already do around the country, particularly in the Limerick area and in CDNTs 5 and 7. Where it is known that children are on waiting lists for assessment, they could be allowed to access such facilities. I did it as a councillor with the municipal district allocation, and provided small amounts of funding for equine therapy and art therapy.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Gillian Toole: It can be done in the short term.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank the Deputies for the opportunity to speak in the debate. I thank everybody who has contributed so sincerely and genuinely this evening. They can rest assured that both the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and I will take due recognition of each and every one of the points that has been made.

The old Irish saying that it takes a village to raise a child is never truer than when a child has special needs. It takes an extraordinary school community to ensure that a child can flourish. I want to use this opportunity to put on the record of the House my deep appreciation for every school principal, teacher, SNA, bus escort, bus driver, secretary, caretaker, and other school staff members around the country who support children with additional needs and ensure they can flourish.

I meet every week with parents, schools, patrons, advocacy groups and other education stakeholders to discuss special education, both what is working and where there is room for improvement. Members mentioned that pinch points often arise at the transition points from early years to primary school, from primary to post-primary, and from post-primary on to life after school. This is something that comes to the fore when it comes to the provision of special education placements, whether in a special class or in special schools.

It is important to remember that the majority of children and young people with special educational needs are supported to access mainstream classes with their peers. Where children have more complex needs a special class can be provided and for children with the most complex needs a special school place can be provided. At the start of this school year, through the accelerated provision of new special class and special school places over recent years, we had 31,000 specialist places. For each of the past five years, we have provided approximately 400 new special classes with six places in each and 300 special school places. For the coming year, based on the additional funding approved by the Cabinet this morning, we will go well

beyond that in terms of provision for the next school year. It has been noted in the House tonight that more than 330 special classes have been approved this year, with more to follow in the coming weeks.

As Minister of State with responsibility for special education and inclusion, I continue to meet officials of the National Council for Special Education, along with senior officials in the Department of education on a weekly basis to track the progress being made in providing new specialist places. This work is ongoing. As always, the NCSE continues to monitor and review the level of need and how many children and young people are being offered places. There are many moving parts to all of this as our school admissions process happens at a local level. I pay tribute to the members of the council and the officials from the Department who work with me each Wednesday morning to make sure that we monitor the situation.

The motion refers to a wide range of issues. I want to touch on some of them now and the work that is being progressed. I have a deep appreciation for every single SNA who works in our school communities. When I meet them on school visits, I always say that we have built special education on their backs. I know full well the importance of the SNA to families and in particular to children to ensure they have access to education that allows them to flourish. In September 2026, we will have the largest number of SNAs, at almost 25,000, ever available in schools. Funding for approximately 500 additional SNAs is being provided. As previously agreed by the Government, all schools reviewed by the NCSE and allocated additional SNA resources will receive them. No SNA reduction will come into effect in the 2026-27 school year. The SNA redeployment scheme, the SNA workforce development plan and changes to a 2014 circular outlining the role of an SNA will be advanced before any further decisions are taken. As the Minister said, we did a full day of consultation on those key pieces - the SNA redeployment scheme, the SNA workforce development plan and the changes to the circular. Many Members offered opinions on them. We have been very clear in that regard. Ongoing work is at an advanced stage. We fully understand that has to be done as a priority.

The priority remains to ensure that the child-centred approach to the provision of special education is retained and enhanced in these policy developments. These policies will ensure special education into the future. In relation to the development of a circular on the role of the SNA, my Department has concluded a comprehensive review of the role of the SNA as part of ongoing work on the SNA workforce development plan.

This work was supported by working groups comprising a wide range of stakeholders, which have met a number of times over the past year or so, providing input from their perspectives.

The Department has also conducted significant focus group research, as well as a national survey of SNAs to ensure everybody in our school communities was given the opportunity to provide input. The result is a draft circular that provides a detailed description of the range of duties and responsibilities of the evolving SNA role and that is a product of meaningful collaboration with all those in school communities. Fórsa, the recognised trade union representative body of the SNAs, and the Department will continue to work and engage on this.

I am very pleased that, over the past 12 months, the Government took a decision to put the education therapy service back into our schools. This was committed to at election time. A huge amount of work has been done over the past year. I truly believe this will be a game-changer for children and young people with additional needs and also their schools and

families. This will supplement existing children's health and disability services. The initial focus is on educational therapists and speech and language therapists. In time, other disciplines, such as physiotherapy, will be included.

The first tranche, 45 special schools, has been announced and it is intended to roll out the remainder of the special schools over the 2026–27 school year. The NCSE recently completed a recruitment campaign for senior and staff-grade occupational speech and language therapists for the initial counties. Panels have been created for the first recruitment campaign and posts are currently being offered, with an expectation that the therapists will be *in situ* in May 2026. This education therapy service will provide a multi-tiered model of support for children, parents and school communities. The service will focus on education-relevant goals, supporting children to fully participate in their school environments and maximise positive outcomes.

During the debate, legal cases were mentioned. The Department's aim is to ensure no child will ever need to take a case against the State. Where it happens, the Department continues to work with parents to ensure solutions are found as quickly as possible and cases are settled before they go to court. It is important to continue to do that.

Over recent months, particularly since Christmas, we have worked nearly every Monday night. The Minister and I have worked collaboratively across government to ensure the best possible outcomes for children in September 2026. Owing to the portal deadline of 1 October, we have better sight of the number of children. Additional classes were announced months earlier than last year and work is continuing with the NCSE. The Department is continuing daily to ensure more classes will be sanctioned over the next while.

Inclusive special classes were mentioned, including the five announced last week. We are not cutting back on staff. We are supporting them and the ratio is exactly the same. It is a matter of encouragement and ensuring that, as far as is possible, inclusion is at the very heart of special education provision.

Many school communities, particularly at post-primary level, are doing an excellent job, as was evident in a number of places we visited. They are all saying that if they had the resources in terms of teachers or SNAs, they would be able to do more. Those resources have been put in place. We have to ensure we are embracing all models of education to have better outcomes for children. It will save us in the long run. The investment in special education that the Minister and I are presiding over and have fought for over recent months will make a real difference to children, families and society in the long run.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: One of the main issues raised in my constituency office is the lack of appropriate school places for children with additional needs. Every year, it seems to be getting worse, with more parents upset and worried about their children's future.

Recently we had the announcement of the new inclusive special classes, which appears to be a plan to increase class sizes without a similar increase in staff, funding and support. I find that very worrying.

I want to raise with the Minister the case of Strapolin Educate Together National School in my constituency. This school has been a leader in inclusive education. It has the space to accommodate additional autism classes on campus but it needs modular classrooms to do this.

The community is left with a bizarre situation: the NCSE has agreed there is demand for two additional classes, but when the latest list of additional special classes was released by the Department last week, they were not included. The school authorities say one of the reasons it has been told the modular units will not be sanctioned is that the school building is too new. Seriously, how can the age of a building have anything to do with the level of demand in our area? I urge the Minister and Minister of State to examine this case, in particular.

On the overall motion, let us be clear: we need to see this problem solved. Children need to be put first because this is an issue on which we cannot wait any longer. We need to see the additional funding and resources for September. In the long term, we need a comprehensive plan that will deal with staffing, SNA supports, class sizes and funding.

Deputy Mark Ward: I am aware that the Taoiseach said this morning a memo is going to Cabinet that will call for additional supports for special education. When will we see the details of this proposal? Many schools in my area are waiting for special education supports. Gaelscoil na Camóige, as I have mentioned a few times, has been operating out of prefabs for over 30 years. Currently, the building of the new school alongside the new school for Gaelscoil Chluain Dolcáin is progressing; however, the schools were notified that the ASD classes will not now be built. The ASD expansion was agreed and given the go-ahead in 2024. It is simply common sense for it to go ahead.

As we speak, Lucan Community College is holding a meeting. I cannot attend because I am here advocating on its behalf. One of its asks is that the agreed and much-needed special needs unit be provided. This would allow the school to open four special classes and it could be delivered on time if there were political will.

St. Kevin's Community College is earmarked to become a 1,000-pupil school but it is not being supported with the appropriate infrastructure. It is still waiting on a much-needed second ASD class and an upgrade to the current one.

Several parents of children attending Holy Family National School in Rathcoole have contacted me. Like many schools in my area, it does not receive the appropriate SNA supports.

I am really concerned that Sacred Heart School, Srulleen, did not receive a home-school community liaison officer despite demonstrating the need, so I must ask again when we can expect the details of the memo to be published. Will the likes of Lucan Community College, Gaelscoil na Camóige, Gaelscoil Chulain Dolcáin, St. Kevin's Community College, Holy Family National School and Sacred Heart School be supported on foot of the memo?

Deputy Dessie Ellis: There is a deepening crisis in the provision of educational facilities for those with special needs. This is compounded by a crisis in both teacher recruitment and retention, particularly in Dublin, which is one of the most severely affected areas in the country.

The most vulnerable students are impacted the most, especially when schools are unable to fill teaching positions. Special education teachers are moved from support roles to teaching mainstream classes. Additionally, the lack of sufficient funding for additional special needs classes means there will be a significant shortfall in such classes come September.

Every year, my office receives representations on behalf of parents who are seeking to place their children in a special needs class. Christian, a young boy in my constituency, will be seven this year. His mother, Holly, has been struggling in recent years to find a place for him in a school that would provide the educational supports he needs. She is at her wit's end as yet again she has no confirmed school place for him for the coming September. Christian has significant additional needs and has been recommended for a special school placement. Holly is a single parent with four children. She has made multiple applications to schools that could provide Christian with the supports he needs. However, to date, he has not been offered a place, leaving him without access to an education, which is his right. This has been deeply frustrating for both Holly and Christian. Having exhausted all avenues, parents like Holly feel isolated, forgotten and ignored.

8 o'clock

My constituency has also experienced unacceptable delays in the construction of urgently needed ASD units and special needs classes. It is very distressing for parents who expected that a special class or ASD unit would be open for the new school year to be told they have to wait another year before construction ever begins. To make a serious impact in Dublin North-West, resources and funding need to be sped up. The delivery of these badly needed facilities that are long outstanding needs to be sped up.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Reading through some of the messages and emails that I got before this motion, I was struck with the very real thought, namely, what exactly does the State have against children who require additional support? The fact that the Taoiseach called the Save our SNAs campaign flawed has done nothing but make that thought concrete in my mind. These are children who are denied school places and bused out of their own communities past their local schools for hours because the Government failed to plan. In Longford-Westmeath, families are exhausted. They are exhausted by a system that treats their child's additional needs as an inconvenience and exhausted by a special education system being redesigned by stealth. The Government has removed complex needs from a set of allocation criteria. This was not reform; it was rationing. The Government restricts SNA access through outdated rules. This is not efficiency; it is cruelty wrapped in bureaucracy. The Government announced inclusive classes that are larger yet have the same level of supports. That is not inclusion; it is dilution. The Government refuses to publish the true number of children who are still without places for school in September 2026. Why does it not do so? It is because the truth would expose the scale of Government failure.

Children and families do not need another announcement or review. They need accountability and action. The Government must establish that all-party Oireachtas committee on the future of inclusive education and bring parents, teachers, SNAs, therapists, school leaders and educators into a public forum. It must reverse the restrictions that block children from accessing SNAs, recognise SNAs and the roles they play, reverse the junior and leaving certificate fees because it is penny pinching, row back on the school transport scheme fare increases at a time when the cost of living is biting families and guarantee every child a real school place, real support, real therapies and real equality. There should be no more spin, no more cuts by stealth and no more hiding behind announcements and re-announcements.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank those who contributed to the debate. The Government is not opposing the motion but this is only welcome if it actually acts on the proposals contained in it. The reason we brought forward this motion is because of a failure to predict and respond to the demand for special education. There are ample examples of Government failure. This year, it was a case of establish a portal, close a portal and lock people out of the system. There was a supplementary budget, a supplementary to the supplementary budget and delays. Delays mean access denied.

We have a significant number of contributions of evidence and opinion, including the EPSEN review, the report of the Oireachtas Committee on Disability Matters, any amount of hearings of the Oireachtas education committee and the Department's own roadmap for inclusion. Fórsa and the teachers' unions know exactly what needs to be done. Across the board, and it is certainly my experience, we have a Department and Government that do not listen. If ever we needed an example of that, all we have to do is look at the Taoiseach. The last time we were here with a Sinn Féin motion talking about the SNA debacle of the Government's own making, the Taoiseach said we have to be careful if we look for extra SNAs. Today, he said that the Save our SNAs campaign was a flawed campaign. That is to completely deny the fact that communities across the country - families, parents, SNAs and school communities - know exactly what needs to be done. It is now time for the Government, the Department, the Minister and the Minister of State to listen.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Ambulance Service

115. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the steps she will take to avert industrial action among ambulance workers, the steps she is taking to meet the ambition of the ambulance service's strategic workforce plan and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28517/26]

Deputy David Cullinane: My question concerns potential industrial action by ambulance paramedics, particularly pre-hospital care professionals, which would include emergency medical technicians, EMTs, paramedics and others. They voted overwhelmingly to take industrial action, as the Minister knows, on 12, 19 and 26 May. I imagine that the last thing paramedics and EMTs want is to be on strike. A number of votes were taken in recent times, including one last year, on the roles and responsibilities changes that paramedics voted against, so clearly there are issues. These are votes of no confidence in the system and no confidence in action that should be taken being taken, so what is next? What action will the Minister take to avert industrial action?

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I do not think anybody wants to be involved in strikes of any kind. That is not how we do things, which is why we have the very comprehensive industrial relations architecture we have painstakingly built over some time. The HSE and my Department have engaged extensively, constructively and in good faith,

as have the National Ambulance Service representatives, for more than two years to address the issues raised within the National Ambulance Service. That engagement has taken place through the State's established industrial relations machinery, including the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, and the Labour Court, and within the framework of the public service agreement.

A comprehensive and independently brokered set of proposals emerged from that process. These included significant pay improvements for staff, of between 3% and 14% on top of the 9.25% pay increases already provided for under the public service agreement. Crucially, those pay increases were linked to agreed reforms and I can go through some of the detail of those reforms, which would generate a more comprehensive ambulance response service for everybody and an easier working life. The HSE and my Department accepted the proposals and the subsequent Labour Court recommendation in full, and both SIPTU and Unite recommended them to their members at the time.

The difficulty now is that the unions are seeking to secure all the pay increases while there has been a reluctance to deliver the accompanying reforms. Those reforms are essential because they deliver real benefits for patients and service delivery, including faster response times, more ambulances available through modern crewing arrangements, greater flexibility across the service, stronger assurance of ongoing regulatory compliance and the ability to treat more patients safely in the most appropriate setting.

Deputy David Cullinane: The problem is that the National Ambulance Service is massively understaffed. I put down a parliamentary question to which the Minister's office responded a number of weeks ago. In 2025, the HSE target was to have 4,162 whole-time-equivalent paramedics working in the National Ambulance Service. The number for this year is 2,657. By 2026, the target was to have 4,780. The number is estimated to be 2,920 by the end of the year. By 2028, it is meant to be over 6,000. At best, we are going to hit 3,500. We are somewhere between 2,000 and 2,500 paramedics short of what we need. That is leading to burnout and fatigue, which is why there has been vote after vote where paramedics, EMTs and others have said that they have had enough and cannot take any more. As far as I can see, they do not have confidence in the management of the National Ambulance Service because clearly if there are votes coming back all of the time where they are voting against recommendations and for industrial action, there is a problem. The problem is burnout and fatigue and can only be fixed by more capacity and better resources. I appeal to the Minister to do everything possible to support our paramedics and avert industrial action.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: It is important to acknowledge that there has been 30% growth in the staff of the National Ambulance Service, which is a larger proportional increase than the health service received overall. We have invested an additional €75 million in the service since 2022 and staff members have increased by 761 since 2022. The total workforce is now 2,500.

Further investment planned for 2026 will deliver 21 extra crewed ambulances at peak demand. I understand that 134 of 168 posts have been recruited, so recruitment is progressing reasonably well so far this year.

My overriding priority, of course, like the Deputy's, is the safety of patients and the continuity of the emergency services. It is important to discuss the reforms that have been suggested and agreed in the industrial relations architecture, and I can do that. However, we cannot just increase capacity anywhere without introducing reform as well.

Deputy David Cullinane: The paramedics that I have spoken to, and I have spoken to many, are all in favour of reform, but they also want to know that the Government has their backs and is putting in place the capacity. The Minister is right to say there has been an increase in the number of paramedics, but the objective was to double the number of paramedics over a five-to six-year period because that is what was estimated was needed. I gave the Minister the figure that, for 2026, the target is 4,780. The Department and the HSE are telling me that, at best, it will reach 2,920. We are going to be somewhere between 2,000 and 2,500 paramedics short.

In 2023, the Government cut the target response times for categories purple and red from 80% to 50% and from 75% to 45%, respectively, within the specified time period, but those targets are still not being met. The targets that were set are not being met in relation to response times, and the number of paramedics that we need is not being met. It is falling back on those paramedics who are in the system. They are clearly crying out to the Government, the Ministers and the HSE to say they are voting for strike action and voting no confidence in the management of the health service and the National Ambulance Service because they do not see the concrete actions that they need being taken.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am very invested in resolving disputes, and that is why we put so much effort into the industrial relations architecture that we have. It is important to highlight some of the models of the proposed reforms under the agreement reached between union representatives and State representatives in those structures, for example, a modernised pay and allowance structure, which replaces a complex pay arrangement dating back to the late 1970s with a simpler, transparent structure aligned to wider HSE norms. It standardises overtime arrangements to HSE rates and incorporates rostered working requirements, including weekends and night working, to core pay structures. These are important reforms.

It is important that we discuss reform in the health service because while we can set a target of 4,000, if we are at 2,500, the Deputy and I both know that we have to deal with the practicality of today. There are 134 already in place out of the 180 posts that were funded towards the end of last year. We are desperately trying to recruit into all parts of the health service. However, it is not a realistic conversation for the Deputy and I to say that we are going to go from 2,500 to 4,000 within six months. We have to recruit where we can, and implement the reforms to make sure that everybody is working in different ways, including in a much more modernised structure. We cannot stand over one that comes from a pay structure from the 1970s.

Hospital Transfers

116. **Deputy Marie Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the specific actions she has taken to radically reduce the record high levels of delayed transfers of care out of acute hospital

settings, as seen in March and April 2026; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28377/26]

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I want to ask about delayed transfers of care. As the Minister knows, there is an enormous number across the acute hospitals at the moment. On 23 consecutive days between March and April-----

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am sorry. I have this question as "not submitted".

Deputy Marie Sherlock: Is this question not related to delayed transfers of care?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is Question No. 116.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I do not have a Priority Question from the Deputy. I will try to get an answer for her, but we have this question as "not submitted".

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I believed I had resubmitted a Priority Question but, clearly, there was an issue with regard to it appearing on the Questions Paper.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: To be clear, the question is on the Questions Paper.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I will do my best to answer.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: On 23 consecutive days between March and April, the number of delayed transfers of care exceeded 500 across our acute hospitals, and again over the last six days. This has a major impact, not only on the people who are caught in hospitals who should no longer be there, but also on admissions. We saw that 129 people were waiting over 24 hours on Sunday night for admission to our emergency departments, 16 of them over the age of 75. It also has an impact on hospital activity, particularly with regard to the staggering reliance on surge capacity at the moment. What is being done with regard to step-down facilities across the health system at this point in time? There is a strong focus on the trolley numbers but, to my mind, insufficient focus on the step-down facilities.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: My apologies for the mix-up, whatever the source. I will get the Deputy a full and more official answer. Nevertheless, I will speak from my own experience.

The focus on delayed transfers of care is an integral part of the focus on trolleys - the whole thing goes together. What we are really talking about is patient flow. Hospitals that experience ongoing delayed transfer of care, DTOC, problems include Letterkenny University Hospital, for example, where the number was in the 40s, but is now down in the 30s and moving towards 25. Directly across the road, there is a 100-bed community nursing unit that will open in 2026 and take some of the pressure off.

It is also about the management of this. For example, in Galway, we have gone through a deliberate reset. This speaks to the Deputy's example. The last week in Galway hospital was

not good. It lost some of its private capacity for egress or transferring out of the hospital, and because that happened, the trolley numbers built up, and it has had seven very poor days. In the previous 25 days, it had only two red days, 22 green days and one amber day. In the 25 days before that, that was essentially inverted, and it was all red and maybe one green. Patient flow matters, and it matters all the time. It matters because of the impact on people in emergency departments, but it also matters to the hospital's ability to bring in inpatient day cases. As the Deputy highlighted, the use of surge means hospitals cannot do endoscopy investigations and so on. They cannot bring in non-time-critical electives. Of course, they bring in time-critical electives like cancer surgery, but not non-time-critical electives.

That is why the focus on urgent and emergency care, UEC, is important. It is a complete piece. There is no point in focusing on UEC without making sure they have a full awareness of what is available in the nursing homes. University Hospital Waterford does that particularly well. It has visibility in its patient control room of all of the passages out of the hospital. There are others that could do it dramatically better, such as Letterkenny University Hospital, and many of those have a DTOC problem, except for St. James's Hospital, which is a weird one that I will come back to.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: The Minister referred to beds and management. When I talk to a number of the hospitals that are experiencing some of the worst problems with transferring those patients, there is a huge absence of neurorehabilitation beds and dementia-specific beds. In particular, we know that in Cherry Orchard, two wards have been closed for almost the past two years, supposedly for fire remediation works. The Killarney Community Nursing Unit was ready a year and a half ago, but has yet to be opened. We know that at South Infirmary, there are beds closed that should be open. We know that at a facility that is due to open in Blarney, as I understand it, the governance is due to lie with the Mercy Hospital, which has no neuro responsibilities because they are with Cork University Hospital.

The question concerns the decision-making and the management. It makes no sense to me that the sole responsibility for this lies with the hospital itself. What is the community element? In particular, what is the IHA doing to try to address these issues?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Deputy is 100% right. It does not necessarily lie with the hospital management. For example, in Cork, with the IHA managers, there is no governance element to this. They are not CUH beds or Mercy Hospital beds, and nobody had better tell me that they think they are. They are beds for the south west, and they have to be managed from a single centre, which happens to be in CUH at the moment, but we will see about that. They have to have visibility over what is the situation in Blarney, Bantry, Mallow, South Infirmary and other places. It is their whole responsibility to be able to move people through.

As for the hospital managers' responsibility, I do not want to hear from consultants who say they cannot move X patient because they need to be in CUH instead of the very good care in Mallow. There needs to be an understanding that every hospital sits within a region, and patient flow works in that way. That is the only way this can possibly work. I am glad to hear the Deputy highlight that because it is the sort of reinforcement I need, particularly in the south west, to make sure that the patient flow experience is fully understood and that every bed is opened.

As regards the Killarney unit, I am told that will be in the next couple of weeks. There was a HIQA registration problem and there is engagement with the union but, frankly, it is not good enough that those beds and other beds have not been opened. Mallow's 24 beds were supposed to be opened in quarter 1. It will now be very shortly but it should have been done.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: When I look at the Minister's letter of determination to the HSE this year, or arising from the budget, I see the big emphasis on home care support and very little emphasis on the construction of new step-down beds. We know that the vast majority of those being constructed at the moment are replacement beds. I think there are many reasons there is a need for step-down beds. I know my colleague, Deputy Conor Sheehan, had figures with regard to those who were exiting into homelessness.

One other issue I want to introduce to the conversation regards under-65s with dementia and other acquired brain injuries in hospitals who have nowhere to go. When I asked the Minister's Department last week about care of the under-65s in nursing homes, I was told that this was not the responsibility of the Department of Health. If it is not the responsibility of the Department of Health - of course, the Minister sets the funding for the HSE - then whose is it? I do not accept that it is fully the responsibility of the Minister for disability because she does not control the HSE budget but we need to be very clear to those families out there who want an alternative to nursing homes for their children under the age of 65 who are adults.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I understand. For example, I visited a facility very like that. Please forgive me; I do not have the name in front of me but it is in the north of Dublin, an acquired brain injury-----

Deputy Marie Sherlock: An Saol.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: That is exactly it. Forgive me. It is looking to build the facility adjacent to the primary care centre.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: It is residential there.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Exactly. What we can do is work with an approved housing body, AHB, to build that residential. The HSE is for delivery of healthcare and we try to make it work as well as we can but here are the things we are not: we are not a transport company and we do not build homes. What we can do is partner with AHBs to make sure we are developing long-term residential that is adjacent and appropriate for needs of that kind.

On that site in particular, what we are looking at is what capacity we can have for people who need to come to that facility and that form of residential. We are trying to work with the sites we have adjacent to a primary care centre. I used that example because I happened to be there so recently.

The Deputy is right about acquired brain injury and dementia but the HSE has to focus on healthcare and partner with bodies like approved housing bodies that are experts in building housing.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: There is HSE money going to nursing homes. They are residential facilities.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I would rather it did not.

Healthcare Policy

117. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the model that the Sláintecare programme board will operate on following the appointment of a new HSE CEO and a new Secretary General at her Department; the reason her Sláintecare implementation plan for 2025-plus does not have year-to-year measurable actions for 2026 onwards; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28518/26]

Deputy David Cullinane: I am seeking an update, if I can, on the Sláintecare programme board and how that will operate, given that we have a new CEO of the HSE and, indeed, a new Secretary General in the Minister's Department. I wish to take the opportunity to thank Mr. Bernard Gloster and Mr. Robert Watt for their many years of service, two people I have worked closely with and have a very high regard for. I also want to wish Ms Anne O'Connor and Mr. Derek Tierney the very best as well. We obviously want them to succeed. They are two highly professional people who I have a lot of faith in and I know they will do lots of good things.

During the previous Dáil, the leaders of the Sláintecare programme board were the heads of the Department and the HSE. Will that continue? I also refer to the implementation plan, which I think ended in 2025. We need an updated implementation plan with clear timeframes and targets so that the new CEO and the Department head actually have a plan to work to.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy, and I join him in thanking the Secretary General, Mr. Robert Watt, and the previous CEO of the HSE, Mr. Bernard Gloster, who both did outstanding work in the Department of Health and the HSE in different ways. They have really stabilised and improved the service more broadly since 2022 in particular and I thank them for that. I also wish both the new Secretary General, Mr. Derek Tierney, and the new CEO, Ms Anne O'Connor, well in their new roles, which are very significant roles for everybody.

Notwithstanding those changes in personnel, there is no change to the programme of work. That needs to continue. We remain fully committed to the Sláintecare vision. The next meeting of the Sláintecare programme board will take place on 28 April. At that meeting, progress across all of the Sláintecare projects will be reviewed in respect of the action plan for 2026, the second of three action plans under Path to Universal Healthcare: Sláintecare & Programme for Government 2025+. The Deputy knows what they are. For quarter 1 alone, this includes 90 actions across 12 Sláintecare projects. In total, the programme board oversees 23 projects with approximately 400 actions. What does that mean? It relates to reforms being driven through, for example, with the enhanced community care programme, the public-only consultant contract, POCC, and, crucially, the implementation of the POCC, the digital health transformation and women's health. It is envisaged that the same structure will be co-chaired by the new Secretary General and the HSE chair, so there will not be a change there, which I think is very welcome. That is really the answer to the Deputy's question.

Deputy David Cullinane: I welcome some of what the Minister said but the problem is there are not clear deliverables and timeframes in the current Sláintecare action plan. That is something that has to change. I want to see, for example, changes to the medical card and GP card thresholds. There have not really been any substantial changes to medical card eligibility in a long time. The big reform that the health service needs, from an acute hospital perspective, is delivering the elective hospitals. If you really want to deal with waiting lists, then build the four elective hospitals as quickly as possible. I guarantee that that will give us capacity to deal with lots of the planned procedures that need to be done, separating scheduled from unscheduled care.

I am big believer in a seven-day-week health service.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I know.

Deputy David Cullinane: I know the Minister is. When she is pushing forward those reforms, I will be supporting them, as I did with the public-only consultant contract because we needed it. We have to get bang for our buck. I agree that we need reforms and efficiencies but we also need capacity. If we do not have the diagnostic capacity, the bed capacity and the staff in our hospitals, then it is more difficult to reach our targets and actually get the reforms. It is a combination of all of that, and all of that is obviously part of Sláintecare.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I agree and I thank the Deputy for his support on these reform programmes. He is right about the elective hospitals but before then, we have the opportunity with the surgical hubs, which will be delivered in 2026. The delivery of the surgical hubs is going to create all sorts of different waves. We are looking at what procedures need to go there immediately and what that will free up in the hospitals where they would otherwise have been done. How is that going to be staffed and when? I am looking at the National Treatment Purchase Fund, NTPF, buying capacity in our own hospitals but I am also looking at underutilised capacity in our own hospitals, like the endoscopy suite in Bantry. There are two of them. One of them is used a half a day per week. We have appointed additional people specifically to Bantry but how can that be, and why are we buying any endoscopy action in that area? Why is there endoscopy happening in Roscommon when there is a very good suite there that does not operate after a certain part of the day? How are we using our own resources and how are we going to collectively, as the political leadership in health here, make sure that we are using the assets we have as we build? The elective hospitals are entirely necessary but we have capacity that is not being used. There is room after room in different hospitals and we are not using them.

Deputy David Cullinane: I could not agree more. I have been saying this for a long time. I am a big supporter of the surgical hubs. There is one coming in my own constituency adjacent to University Hospital Waterford, so I know the difference that will make. I fully agree that we have to look at how to take pressure away from our acute and major hospitals, for example, more off-site rooms for outpatient activity where we can free up clinical space. I am in favour of all of that. I am fully on board with a seven-day-week health service. I want all of that to happen, but for the efficiencies to happen, there also have to be the resources.

While the surgical hubs will be a game-changer, I can tell the Minister for a fact that the elective hospitals will be an even bigger game-changer. I am saying that to her because there will be push-back from consultants. I have got it in relation to the elective hospitals. They want the low-lying fruit still in public hospitals. It is why insourcing was so profitable and something they were trying to protect. We have to protect public patients, get value for money and efficiencies but also reduce waiting times. I guarantee that if the elective hospitals are built, the Minister will see some of those wait times in orthopaedics and other areas come down rapidly. It will be the biggest reform that could be made in the health service.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I totally agree with the Deputy and I think we will get there with Galway and Cork much more quickly. I would like to discuss with all Deputies options around Dublin because clearly we have the option in relation to Connolly hospital. The Deputy may have noticed that we put in some high-dependency unit, HDU, beds in advance because that is really going to be an important enabler. We did that in the past number of weeks. We put the staff in to have significantly expanded HDU capacity in Connolly hospital with a view to where that goes for the elective.

It is well worth us considering constructively the best other use of brownfield space that is available within other Dublin hospitals, how we might consider that as alternative elective capacity and what we do with Crumlin. It is a useful open conversation that we should have. More than anything else, I need Deputies' help with the implementation of the public-only consultant contract and five over seven.

I cannot have the NTPF buying activity in hospitals from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. and not have consultants rostered at those times. That intersection is going to be really important between surgical hubs, the NTPF and the actual rostering. I am going to need Deputies' help.

Assisted Human Reproduction

118. **Deputy Pádraig Rice** asked the Minister for Health the timeline for the full commencement of the Health (Assisted Human Reproduction) Act 2024; to provide an update on the drafting of supplementary assisted human reproduction legislation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28695/26]

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I begin by welcoming the commencement of section 232 of the assisted human reproduction Act which took place yesterday, and the changes to the Children and Family Relationships Act that resulted. This provides a pathway to parentage for some donor-conceived children. I know there were celebrations in many households across the country who benefit from those changes, which are welcome. When does the Minister intend to commence the rest of the Act and what is the update on the supplementary legislation that is required?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy for his ongoing engagement on this. As he knows as well as I do, this makes a huge difference to families around the country. Much progress has been made now. The Health (Assisted Human Reproduction) Act 2024 was signed into law by the President in July 2024. I have a difficulty with a definitive timeline as to the complete commencement of the AHR legislation as there are a number of interdependencies

and considerations involved, not least the timing that I do not control over a Supreme Court case. On the full commencement of that and the full application of the legislation, there is an interdependency there that is outside of my hands. The others include the second Bill, the AHR amendment Bill being enacted, and the regulatory authority being fully operational. I can give the Deputy an update on what is happening with that, but there is also an important relevant Supreme Court judgment pending. I understand the case is due for mention on Monday, 27 April but it will be very difficult for us to get to Committee Stage without that having been resolved. That is really important.

As the Deputy is aware, our formal drafting of the AHR Bill is at an advanced stage. It is very substantive. It is on the priority list for publication. Department officials in my Department are scheduled to meet with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel tomorrow to discuss what is expected to be one of the final drafts and I expect to be in a position to introduce it to the Dáil this term.

Some administrative sections of the 2024 Act have been commenced, specifically to establish the Assisted Human Reproduction Regulatory Authority, as the Deputy knows. The Deputy mentioned that three subsections of section 232 of the 2024 Act have been commenced. It is complex and there are very many slightly competing and multifaceted perspectives to be considered. We are going to have to think about the sequencing of some of it but I hope to advance it as quickly as I can.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I thank the Minister. I welcome the commitment to advance it because the pace of change has been far too slow. It is now 26 years since the commission on AHR, four years since the Oireachtas Committee on International Surrogacy, and seven months since the health committee published our report providing pre-legislative scrutiny of the legislation. There is real frustration about the delays here. We need to see urgent progress.

In relation to the case, and I mentioned this to the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, when we debated this in December, the State's failure to legislate has resulted in these cases. In the absence of legislation, people had no option but to go to the court to try to vindicate their rights. This will continue. We will have more people going to the courts trying to vindicate their rights in the absence of legislation. We need to pass the Bill. I have no doubt that, in some cases, there are people threatening the Minister with legal action who would withdraw that, but it is the absence of legislation. We have created this mess by delaying the legislation and by not progressing it in the 26 years since the commission published its report.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Deputy is a practical person, as am I. If a court case is before the Supreme Court, then there is a court case before the Supreme Court and there is nothing I can do about that. I would be in breach of my own responsibility not to cross over in the separation of powers were I to do anything other than wait for the outcome of that. I do not have any discretion in relation to that. As for people threatening to take legal cases, people are entirely entitled to take legal cases if they wish to do so. That is the essence of being an Irish citizen. There is no *quid pro quo* in relation to it. I am dealing with what I am trying to get resolved now. The reality is that we are advancing the legislation. We will not be able to take it to Committee Stage until the Supreme Court case is determined. It is not that I wish to be in that situation; I do not wish to be. That is simply the factual reality of that situation.

There is nothing I can do about that but I will do everything that I can control as quickly as possible.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I do think it is a situation of the Government's making. People absolutely have the right to take cases but people do not want to go before the courts. These families do not want to have the legal costs and the stress imposed on them by going before the courts. I think the Minister would agree with me that we need to expand personal freedoms generally in this republic. We need to vindicate the right to procreation, the right to private and family life and reproductive freedoms. There is much work left to be done, in particular the rights of the child, the rights of their parents and greater equality more broadly. This is a key part of that. I really hope that we get this legislation enacted and commenced, and that we are not waiting and waiting because we have waited long enough.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I agree with the Deputy. Indeed, this is something I have been involved with in different ways since working in the Department of children and since advancing the Children and Family Relationships Act, as I did when I worked in the Department of justice in 2013. I have been working on this for a really long time and I share the Deputy's frustration. I want to see people having access to families where they can.

We need to speak about rights in totality, however. Yes, there is a right to family, a right to procreate and all of those different things. There is also a right, and we have an obligation as an outward-looking country, to make sure we are doing everything we can to protect everyone else. I am not saying this specifically to this but I do remember questions, when I started working here and we were dealing with, for example, adoption, the Hague Convention and the restrictions that were put in place because some of our actions at that stage were, frankly, exploitative or potentially exploitative. That was pulled back and for good reason. It changed the adoption rules for the future and they were very significant changes that were made. There were people who felt that they had a right in a particular way, but those rights always have to be balanced and because we are an outward-looking, humanitarian society, we have to take the rights of everybody into account. I know the Deputy will be at the front of that, having advanced looking at things through a human rights lens. There is more than one human involved in these and we have to be careful and balanced. I am not trying to limit anybody but I just have to say it as well.

Mental Health Services

119. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health to provide an update on the delivery of new outpatient mental health capacity and mental health beds, as previously announced in the HSE capital plan for Waterford and the south east; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28519/26]

Deputy David Cullinane: I am looking for an update on the replacement of the existing adult mental health 44-bed unit at University Hospital Waterford with a 50-bed single bed unit. I acknowledge the work of the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, in making sure this was on the current capital plan recently. I was criticised in one local newspaper for doing so.

Deputy Mary Butler: I heard that, too.

Deputy David Cullinane: I think the criticism was because there was frustration that developments can be glacial and it takes a long time for these projects to get over the line. There are other projects I want to talk about, which I will later. On this particular project, it is important to have timeframes as to how quickly we can expect this development might be delivered, which I think we all accept would be massive and a game-changer for mental health services in Waterford.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank the Deputy. The frustration that many people feel I have felt as well for quite a while. When it was announced initially in 2020 or 2021, we were in the middle of Covid. It was then held up for three years by the clinicians. At the time, I was very frustrated with them but I agree with them now. They did not want the new approved centre, the new department of psychiatry in UHW, to be, as was proposed, on the site adjacent but not connected to it. It is now going to be connected.

I have allocated over €40 million for capital projects this year, including for the next stages for the acute mental health unit at Waterford. The project will move to design feasibility this quarter when a design team will be appointed for the new unit. Most importantly, because of delays, we are now moving from a 50-bed unit to a 60-bed unit. There is going to be an extra ten beds for psychiatry of later life. We have an ageing population and it is really important for people who have enduring mental health conditions, as they age, that they would also be able to get those supports if needed.

It will be built immediately behind the Dunmore Wing, which the Deputy knows very well. He visited it with me previously. It will come out immediately behind the Dunmore Wing as part of the department of psychiatry that is there at the moment. The current car park will be lost but I spoke to the general manager of the hospital about that and he said it was a small price to pay for this new development. We expect it is going to cost in the region of at least €50 million. I met with HSE estates recently in St. Otteran's campus. I was visiting psychiatry of later life there and we went through it. We can discuss the other pieces shortly. The good news is that the design team will be appointed very shortly, I am hoping in the next few weeks, and we will finally make the progress. The funding has been provided.

Deputy David Cullinane: I very much hope that the new adult mental health unit will progress as quickly as possible. I agree with the location and I want to see it developed as fast as it can be. There was also a promise for a 96-bed ward block over five storeys at University Hospital Waterford, and a multi-storey car park. The Minister of State issued a press statement a number of years ago where she said there was a proposal for a two-floor vertical extension over the existing outpatients department, to provide an additional 36 consulting rooms, four treatment rooms, four measurement rooms and two virtual consultation rooms.

I do not know the status of that plan at the moment. I have been tabling parliamentary questions seeking updates on all of these projects. We need the additional 96 beds, we need the underground car park and we need the two-storey extension to the lab, but we also need the vertical two-storey extension that the Minister of State talked about and all that additional

space. The frustration is that these projects are listed in the capital plan, or maybe some of them are not now listed. People do not know if we are going to get them, if they are funded or how quickly they will be delivered. We all want the best for our regional and local hospitals. I raise these projects because they are really important in the context of University Hospital Waterford.

Deputy Mary Butler: The question the Deputy asked was about the HSE capital plan for Waterford and the south east in relation to mental health and mental health beds. I can speak to that. In relation to the other issues the Deputy mentioned, I do not have the relevant information but I discussed it when I had the meeting with HSE estates. On the two-storey vertical extension, the vertical overhang as it is called, my understanding is that the management at the hospital has made a different decision in relation to that and thinks that it should be a stand-alone building on the hospital grounds. I understand the new consultant-only contract is the reason for that.

I was delighted to secure funding for a ten-bed unit in the Wexford area. As the Deputy knows, since St. Loman's closed in 2010 or 2011, we have been getting patients from the Wexford area, which was a long journey for them. We are also looking at putting in a new ten- or 12-bed unit in Wexford.

Deputy David Cullinane: I raise these issues to illustrate the point that when announcements are made, people expect things to be delivered and then ask how quickly they will get them. If there is an announcement regarding additional health capacity, that is really good news. It is exciting, and people want it. When people hear about the announcement of an additional 60-bed ward block over five storeys at University Hospital Waterford but then do not see it and when I am putting in parliamentary questions and cannot get answers on the timeframe for it to happen, that causes frustration. There was a clear announcement of a proposal for a two-floor vertical extension with all of those consultation and treatment rooms to come with it. We are now being told there is a change to that. We still do not know what that means and when the facility will be built, which also leads to frustration.

It is the same with the multi-storey car park. In fact, it is the same with the mental health unit as well. I do not doubt that the Minister of State is pushing these issues; I accept that 100%. All I am saying is that there is frustration that when announcements are made by local Ministers or senior Ministers, they then seem to either fall off a cliff or take far too long to go anywhere. That causes frustration, particularly when we cannot get answers to parliamentary questions when we table them.

Deputy Mary Butler: It is important acknowledge the surgical hub. Earlier, the Deputy said he is a fan of surgical hubs. Some €90 million in capital investment is being spent on the surgical hub. I was delighted to be there last year, along with the Minister, to turn the sod on it, even though it was well under way at the time and will be open before Christmas, which is really important. Another piece of good news is that a site has been identified in Waterford city for a new ambulance base, which is also really important. I do not have any detail on the 96-bed unit the Deputy mentioned. I guarantee that I have also raised everything he has raised here. It is really important that we see progress.

I want to put this on the record of the Dáil. Improving capital infrastructure for mental health services a key priority for me. I was delighted to work with the Minister recently to secure an unprecedented €470 million in capital investment for mental health over the next five years under the National Development Plan 2026-2030. That has never happened before, and I think everybody will welcome it.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Ambulance Service

120. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health the number of instances in 2023 to 2025, inclusive, when ambulances in Cavan and Monaghan did not arrive within the targeted timeframe; and the longest period that a person waited. [28365/26]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Tá ceist Uimh. 120 in ainm an Teachta Carthy á glacadh ag an Teachta Bennett.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The Dublin North and East region, which includes Cavan and Monaghan, has benefited from recent investment, with 12 additional paramedics in 2025 and a further 12 scheduled for this year. Six additional emergency medical technicians are planned for Cavan. This will help to preserve front-line ambulances for emergency calls. I highlight this because the National Ambulance Service is focused on addressing areas where there is a clear need for greater resourcing. A particular emphasis is on targeting potential applicants in areas of need, including the Cavan-Monaghan area, where there have been challenges with recruitment in the past. That is the only reason I set some of that out. I acknowledge that there have been challenges with recruitment, notwithstanding our desire to recruit more people in the area.

The HSE has informed me that the National Ambulance Service's response performance in the region between 2023 and 2025 met the key performance indicator, KPI, targets in the HSE service plan. However, it is acknowledged that at times of high demand, some lower acuity patients have waited longer for a response. I also acknowledge that we would like the targets for purple and red calls to be higher in the first instance. I am not saying that KPIs are any sort of panacea; I am simply acknowledging that the performance in the north-east region has been better than the target. That is something, but we have a way to go to build on it.

The Government is committed to the continued development of the National Ambulance Service in the context of both capacity and strategic reform. Since 2020, we have increased the budget for the National Ambulance Service by 60%. We have increased the personnel by 30%. This year, as I informed Deputy Cullinane, we really are trying to recruit. We have a targeted recruitment campaign. We have posts available. I will speak more to that, because, as Deputy Bennett is aware, we need to have better response times,

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I welcome that additional staff have been employed. It is still not enough, however. More needs to be done. The National Ambulance Service used to make data available to help inform policymakers in coming forward with constructive solutions. Data

indicates that the number of people who died by the time an ambulance actually reached their homes was up 70% in the eight years prior to 2024. There were over 95,000 instances in 2022 of people waiting more than one hour. However, when Sinn Féin recently sought updated information, the National Ambulance Service told us that there is no operational imperative to do so and that there is little or no clinical evidence underpinning response-time targets. That is despite coroners having found evidence of ambulance service capacity being the root cause of a person's death. Does the Minister think this information is relevant and important and that it should be made available to Members?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: It is difficult to answer in light of some of the circumstances involved. The Deputy raised an individual case where somebody identified a specific reason. While I acknowledge that, in other cases it is not clear whether a patient, for example - it is awful to speak about it in this way - was going to die irrespective. I can understand the clinical constraints in providing broad data when dealing with many individual circumstances.

It is because of the increased response times and the availability that we are trying to recruit. The recruitment competition in 2025 brought the highest number of applicants ever with over 1,000 people applying. I take some comfort in that. It will help fill the additional 263 posts that we have in the National Ambulance Service this year. It will provide for 21 additional crewed emergency ambulances for new intermediate care services on a 12-over-seven basis and a range of other investments.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I find it hard to believe that there are 263 posts that we cannot fill. I do not know if this is down to how we are advertising these posts that they are not being filled. As stated, this information, which I asked for previously, is very important in order that we can inform policy decisions. We cannot fix what is not measured. In terms of what needs to be done in order that the right people across the State have the ambulance service that they deserve and need, however, a few things are apparent. Our dedicated and highly educated newly qualified paramedics need a clear pathway to permanent employment in the National Ambulance Service.

They are well needed because the service, by its own admission, is massively short-staffed by 2,000 workers. In Cavan and Monaghan, we need a 24-7 advanced paramedic. At a time when we have seen an overwhelming vote by National Ambulance Service workers for industrial action, up to strike action, will the Minister intervene on these matters?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I appreciate that the Deputy may find it difficult to see that we cannot fill posts but I assure her that it is true. Of last year's posts, there were 180, and 134 have been filled. I would like it to be 180 filled. This year we have provision for 263, which is obviously a considerable increase on last year, so the direction of travel in terms of our investment is very clear. This is not unique to the ambulance services; we have this difficulty across home support, we have it across recruiting into the medical profession generally and we have it with GPs. Across the board, we have posts that are unfilled and to which we are trying to recruit. I would welcome these positions being taken. As I said, there were 1,000 applicants. I take great comfort in that, that people want to do this, but it is also important to highlight that we are trying to have alternative care pathways as well. About 40%

of patients now do not require, because of that intervention, subsequent conveyance or subsequent transfer to an emergency department, so those pathways are working well and we need to invest more in that as well. There is emergency department in the home, for example and all the different alternative emergency pathways.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Could I just ask about the 24-7 advanced paramedic that was taken away from Cavan and Monaghan?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am sorry, that is not-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: Sorry. That is okay. I will table a parliamentary question to the Minister.

General Practitioner Services

121. **Deputy Joe Neville** asked the Minister for Health if her Department has considered introducing initiatives such as a refundable tax for set-up costs on new GP practices to address the current GP shortage and incentivise more GPs to open practices; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28453/26]

Deputy Joe Neville: I ask the Minister if her Department has considered introducing initiatives such as refundable tax credits on costs of new GP practices or extensions to GP practices to try to address the current GP shortage and incentivise more GPs to extend their practices; and if she will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy for his question. He has highlighted this in the context of the difficulty in new GP practices opening in his area. The region has had very significant population growth but not a corresponding rise in the number of GPs available for either GMS or private patients and I acknowledge that. I also acknowledge the efforts the Deputy is trying to highlight as to what we can do to support GPs to expand their existing practices and to open new practices. That is a very fair question because everybody in this House wants more GP practices to be able to be opened.

It is important for me to say that the State - I think people forget this sometimes - provides a significant level of financial support to GP practices. We work in partnership with GP practices both within the GMS scheme and more broadly. Among the more notable supports available are practice staff supports and subsidies towards the employment of a practice nurse, an administrator or a practice manager. The 2023 GP agreement increased the rates of those subsidies and introduced further staff supports. Specific supports are available for rural practices and, since 2019, in urban areas of disadvantage.

The strategic review of general practice, which is currently under way, is examining the ways in which this can be better and differently supported. We have reached agreements with GPs, for example, on chronic disease management, all of which is really improving people's outcomes. It is a different way of delivering care but it is also a financial partnership with GPs.

In relation to the Deputy's specific question about refundable tax for setting up new GP practices, that would be a budgetary matter for the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance, but I assure Deputy Neville that I will raise it with the Minister. I know he would like to see greater GP practices around the country, and this is certainly something I have heard from GPs that would be helpful.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Minister for her very positive reply. This has an impact especially in my constituency of Kildare North, where we see a huge need for more GPs, but I have also been very aware that it is not just commuter belt areas where we have this issue. There are also areas where there are rural sustainability challenges and indeed urban deprivation strategies. Analysis shows that it is in those three areas that we have the biggest issues. For the rural areas we have put in place a rural practice grant. For the deprived areas we have a deprivation grant. However, the one thing we have not really focused on as much is the need to help the GPs in the commuter belt. I look at the town of Maynooth. It had five GP practices 15 years ago. The population has expanded probably from about 11,000 to closer to 17,000. It now has only four GPs. That is why I am really focused on this for the commuter belt area. Maynooth is just a mirror image of what I see across the constituency.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The supports for newly establishing GPs are an important part of the strategic review of general practice, as surveys by the Irish College of General Practitioners have shown that concerns about the costs and risks of opening new practices are important considerations. Essentially, it is a matter of establishing a business and that is a challenging thing to do.

Whatever about new practices, however, we also have to think about how existing practices, which might make it easier for a new GP rather than having to establish their own practice and their own business, could work more easily within the capacity of an existing practice and how that can be expanded through the addition of better or bigger premises or through the use of satellite surgeries to enable local access.

The exact nature of these supports has not been finalised but it is under consideration. This could include supports with business education and training, provision of subsidies or grants, and potentially through the taxation system, as I have highlighted, subject to consultation with the Minister for Finance. Then there is also the growing network of primary care centres, from which GPs can practice. That is a really important part as well that may be complementary.

Deputy Joe Neville: There is a lot of information in the Minister's reply and I will take on a couple of the points. I have seen the benefit of the new primary healthcare centre in Celbridge, and we have one in Kilcock. It is about maximising the outputs we can get there. I am very conscious as well that in areas like Maynooth - and this is something we have mirrored all across the country - we might have seen a GP practice in the middle of a housing estate. That would have been very common years ago. Now the new GPs may be unwilling. Will they be able to set up a practice? Will they get planning permission? These are all serious complexities for those people. Extensions, as the Minister said, are really important. If we could get those extensions, that would be phenomenal because we could have more GP services, and it is probably easier. At the same time, I am just offering the opportunity to look across the board because the more GPs we can get back the better. I know that GP services are working really

complementarily with the Department and I get that feedback from them, but it is just about that chronic shortage we see in the commuter belt. We are putting in the housing, the wastewater and the roads, and it is just that social infrastructure of the likes of GPs to go with it.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Exactly, and it is a totally practical suggestion. We want to enable GPs to have their practice as quickly as possible. I have no view as to where they should practice necessarily. Of course, we would like to employ them into the HSE, but private practice is also so important. Whatever we can do to enable more GPs, it has come up again and again in this House, correctly, and I can point out all the new GPs that have been registered by the Medical Council, all of that work to clear the backlog of people looking to restore their practices and people looking to come to Ireland. If they do not have a place to work within the community that people can access, it is very challenging. I recall going to a GP practice. There was one or two in every big housing estate. It was a very natural thing and it was often a front room. Now it is a slightly different model, and that is true. There may be an opportunity to extend those premises. Just look at the changes we have made today, for example, in relation to planning permissions and so on and exemptions and what we are trying to do to encourage more and more use of space. This is a hugely important piece for any community.

I thank the Deputy for his suggestion. We will come back to it within the Department of Health but it is also an important budgetary matter for the Minister for Finance.

Question No. 122 taken with Written Answers.

Hospital Waiting Lists

123. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Health the targets in place for inpatient waiting times in 2026; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28345/26]

136. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Health the targets in place for outpatient waiting times in 2026; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28346/26]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Tá muid ag dul ar aghaidh go dtí Ceist Uimh. 123. Tá sé in ainm an Teachta O'Dea, ach tá an Teachta Daly á ghlacadh ar a shon.

Deputy Martin Daly: This fits in with the rest of the debate going on here. It is to ask the Minister about the targets for the inpatient waiting times. I acknowledge her focus on productivity and reform within the health service. Deputy Neville has pointed out that with all these things it is an ecosystem and they are interconnected. If you cannot have an efficient admission and discharge policy for both elective and acute, you will end up with long waiting lists.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I propose to take Questions Nos. 123 and 136 together.

Improving access to healthcare in our hospitals is an absolute priority for me. As the Deputy knows, we have very good outcomes in our healthcare system. Our challenge is making sure

we have access as quickly as possible. That is the focus, on making sure we are using our resources in the best way possible. We are focusing on a public healthcare system in which everybody has timely access to high-quality scheduled care where and when they need it.

I refer to the waiting time action plan for 2026.

9 o'clock

This used to be the waiting list action plan, until we all realised together that the length of time spent waiting is more important than the number of people on the list, obviously. This builds on the progress to date. It includes significant reductions achieved in the length of time patients are waiting. The plan takes a multifaceted approach in achieving it, setting out six overarching and interconnected targets focused on patients waiting the longest. The plan aligns with the national service plan, NSP, targets for planned care, including targeting increases in the proportion of patients waiting within Sláintecare maximum waiting times and outpatient and inpatient day-case waiting lists. Those targets represent steps towards our ultimate shared goal of all patients being seen or treated within the Sláintecare target times, namely, ten weeks for outpatient appointments and 12 weeks for inpatient and day-case procedures.

The devolution of responsibility to the regional executive officers is an important part of this reform. The REOs have complete visibility over what is happening with their acute hospitals, their model 4, model 3 and model 2 hospitals and everything that is happening in the community and in their primary care centres. There has to be a complete synergy between the different model hospitals and primary care to use this. We now have tools that we did not have before. We have the outpatient toolkit, which is showing what the actual room utilisation is in every hospital. There should be no resistance to the application of the outpatient toolkit. It is not tenable that some hospitals have room vacancy rates of between 4% and 9% during the week and 24% on a Friday afternoon. I have not yet seen what the room vacancy rates are on Tuesday evening or Sunday morning, but we do not need to build more capacity and more rooms until those rooms are filled and being used. They are being heated and insured. All of these things are there and available. The utilisation of the outpatient toolkit is, therefore, enormously important. It means that we are scheduling according to the most efficient use of time. We are not asking people to change the length of their consultations or change the nature of their medical practice. We are simply taking the length of time they normally use and reorganising so that things are done differently and delivered differently, including in primary care centres.

This really matters because we have opportunities between the outpatient toolkit and now the surgical hubs in respect of inpatient day-case procedures - or a certain proportion of those - and also freeing up the corresponding activity in the home hospital. The first real application of that, of course, will be with the Dublin north-east surgical hub. This is a huge opportunity to test how the public-only consultant contract is being used or not used, rostered or not rostered, how the five over seven roster is complementing that and how that is being used by all the different hospitals in the Dublin north-east region.

We have these different opportunities but it is important that they are delivered. I want to highlight the importance of clinical leadership in this. Every single person in this House is calling for and looking for the same thing. It has to be implemented and there is a responsibility on clinical leadership to stand up and make sure the clinical community is doing everything it

can to adapt and change its ways of working within the contractual parameters its members have signed and that have been set in agreements to make sure we are delivering for the patients of Ireland.

Deputy Martin Daly: There are brilliant people working in the public health service who do their work very well but we can acknowledge, and I think the Minister acknowledges, that there are some hospitals in areas of the country where that productivity is not apparent. I will speak about the HSE West and North West region. In the past, at the health committee, the Minister acknowledged there are issues around discharge and management of patient flows. The west and north west is the poorest region of the country, with the highest proportion of the population in receipt of disability payments and the highest proportion of the population in receipt of a full medical card. We have a situation where we cannot discharge patients from a level 4 hospital, namely, UHG because there are not any step-down beds and not enough rehabilitation beds or enough home-help hours. In addition, we have a level 4 hospital that is purporting to carry out all the services of a level 4 hospital without having that capacity. We need a commitment to a new hospital in the west, at UHG in Galway.

In addition, we have a situation where there has been an over-reliance on the private developer-delivered primary care centres and also an over-reliance on individual GPs to deliver that infrastructure. If we are completely serious about the interconnectivity of our health service, we need to get some of that investment into primary care. The vast majority of the very considerable investment by the State over the last five years has continued to go into hospital care and acute care and not enough has gone into developing primary care. We have the longest waiting lists for speech therapy, psychology, community physiotherapy and speech and language therapy in the community. Unless we fix that capacity in the community in tandem with the acute service, we will not see the end of these waiting lists.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I agree. That is what we are trying to do. On the primary care centres, we have 181 at the moment, with eight under construction and 21 more in early planning stages. However, if people do not use them and if they are not used for outpatient procedures to relieve pressures on hospitals, we are going to keep having the same conversation. There is an excellent outpatient centre in Merlin Park right beside UHG. It is one of the few that is being used on a three-session per day basis. Good work has been done in that primary care centre but a lot more can be done.

This is as much about how people are working as about where they are working. I have talked about the physical capacity increases that we have but we cannot keep building more physical capacity if people are not going to use it differently. There is no point in concentrating consultant work between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Monday to Friday with all of this additional capacity. I would rather spend money hiring more people to fill the spare space. However, how can we be sure that will happen if the clinical leadership does not make sure we are implementing the contract such as it is? We have to see evidence of that and the trajectory in relation to it.

I agree with the Deputy on all the fantastic people doing fantastic work but we cannot keep saying that in the knowledge that many of them also have to work differently to make sure we are using the space that we have all paid for by making it available for the benefit of patients. We cannot have primary care centres closing at 5 p.m. They have to be open and serving the

community until 8 p.m. or 10 p.m. That is what they are for. This is about building capacity, as it always will be with a growing population, but at some point we will reach a juncture where we have built so much capacity and if we have all of this evidence of it not being used or not being used in the most balanced way across the week, we will have to start asking ourselves decent questions about it.

Deputy Martin Daly: I have a case involving a patient who has critical ischemia of her leg. She is a hard-working woman in her 60s. Twice she has had to be admitted to hospital and twice she has been sent out. She needs a procedure done. She has now been sitting for two weeks in a bed in UHG because they cannot get theatre time to do the procedure she requires. That is simply not a productive system. We have people who have given up on certain specialties, such as dermatology, rheumatology and others, in the west because they cannot get access. I completely agree with the Minister and she has my full support for any productivity reforms.

We also need to deal with the fact that our health service has not been digitalised. We are off the record. The EU 2030 Digital Compass requires that patients will have fully digitalised records in every country in the European Union. Ireland is so far off that chart. Countries like Estonia, Malta and Lithuania can do this, and we cannot. We need to focus on enabling productivity.

The Minister is right that we should be using our physical resources insofar as we can. However, there is an issue with UHG, and we need a new hospital there over the next ten years in order to make sure it functions properly as a level 4 hospital. That is the type of specialty treatment that some people need but they are competing with people who go through the emergency room, elderly people who need care in the hospital setting and people who might be better cared for in a community setting. We have to deal with primary care. We need to get over the culture that because it is a contract-led service by GPs, the infrastructure should be borne only by GPs. If we are completely serious, we should be building State-led primary care centres and have five-year, rent-free zones to attract young GPs into those centres.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I agree. As I said, we have 181 primary care centres, with eight under construction and 20 more at early planning stages for precisely that.

Regarding the Deputy's constituent who could not get surgery, let us count up the different things we have said here.

It was said that they cannot get theatre time for her. There is a theatre utilisation project. I would very much like to know the nature of her procedure and to test this case against theatre utilisation across the hospital. The Deputy says that we need a new hospital. I remind him that we are building both a surgical hub and an elective hospital precisely to provide additional theatre time. Let us stay aligned to exactly what is going on, which is the delivery of full utilisation of all of the theatres in University Hospital Galway, a surgical hub and an elective hospital. Can the Deputy imagine the number of surgeons it takes to run those all of the time? If we are to run them seven days a week, how many surgeons would it take? How many surgeons does it take to run a surgical hub all of the time, recognising that they will not all be working all of the time and that there will be two or three shifts? How many are required to run an elective hospital and all of the theatres that are already in UHG? How many surgeons

does all of that take? I strongly recommend to the members of the Committee on Health who are here that they should invite the team that has done the theatre utilisation project and the OPD toolkit before the committee and interrogate them as to their findings and the use of theatres so that they can see this for themselves. We can then come back and seriously look at the number of surgeons it takes to fill six surgical hubs, four elective hospitals and every theatre in the country.

When we were doing the urgent project to deliver more endometriosis surgeries, I was looking for an additional 100 surgeries in the final quarter of 2025. One of the responses I got from a surgeon, who really is invested in this and who really is working hard, is that one of the barriers was that he had been told elective work could not be done after 5 p.m. in the theatres in the maternity hospital he was working in. I said "I am sorry, what? Says who?" These are some of the barriers we have to overcome. We have a lot of space. We have to use it.

Pharmacy Services

124. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the up-to-date position on enhancing the position of community pharmacies as health promotion and wellness hubs; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28384/26]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Pharmacies have a very strong position in their communities. They have close relationships with their customers and are very much trusted. They are the first point of contact for many people who want to discuss a health issue. There is a large network right across the country. They are found in almost every community. They are open long hours and are very much available. They are ideally situated for the delivery of health and wellness hubs. Will the Minister outline the efforts being made to expand the role of pharmacies into the area of health and wellness hubs?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I completely agree with the Deputy. They are a phenomenal asset and support and a major part of our health infrastructure. We need to think about them more as a fundamental part of our health infrastructure. Community pharmacies are right where people live. Some 85% of the population is within 5 km of a pharmacy. They are embedded in their communities. They are the first, and often easiest, place to go for trusted advice and practical support for patients.

Of course, pharmacists are medicines experts, but their role goes way beyond that now and we would like it to go further. They deliver prevention and public health every day. This extends to flu vaccines, Covid vaccines and school-based programmes. Of the 26% of children who got vaccinated last winter, 56% got their flu vaccine from a pharmacist, which is remarkable. I am delighted to say that, from May, pharmacies will provide pneumococcal vaccination for eligible healthy adults over 65 who have a medical card. Pharmacies deliver services like health checks, blood pressure management, weight management, and smoking and vaping cessation programmes and help people to live with long-term conditions. All of this demonstrates the ability and willingness of community pharmacies to be an essential part of health infrastructure.

A big part of the future is the 2025 community pharmacy agreement, which seeks to expand that role. This gives us the opportunity to expand the role of pharmacists in areas such as bowel screening, contraception, prescribing and medicines optimisation. Pharmacies also have an important role in improving access to contraception through the national condom distribution services. Crucially, they also provide a common conditions service, which I will speak about in my next response.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I acknowledge last year's community pharmacy agreement, which recognises the role of the pharmacy as primary care. I also acknowledge the commitment to advance the health and wellness hub side. There is a proposal, which is currently being moved on, with regard to three programmes that are to be rolled out as part of advancing these hubs. While I acknowledge these campaigns, they seem fairly limited. There is to be a week on men's health, a month on alcohol in pregnancy and a winter vaccination campaign, which many pharmacies would already be providing. I feel there is greater capacity and that there should be greater ambition. Has the Minister set out targets for the number of different campaigns that should be run or for the participation rate among pharmacists? Will she outline the rate of participation in the campaign running this month, which is on alcohol and pregnancy?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am sorry but I do not have that figure. I will get it and come back to the Deputy, if he will forgive me. As part of the community pharmacy agreement, the Irish Pharmacy Union has agreed to support the HSE health and well-being campaigns. The Deputy has highlighted three of them. Following a consultation between the pharmacy union and the HSE, three campaigns were agreed for activation across the community pharmacy network. The Deputy has outlined them. Of course, I would like them to be doing even more, recognising how important their role is.

One of the biggest changes in health is going to be the common conditions service and where we can go with it. As the Deputy is aware, 95% of pharmacists have signed up to it at this point. Community pharmacists will be able to manage eight common conditions, offering self-care advice and, where appropriate, prescribing prescription-only medications. That is a first for pharmacy in Ireland. I would very much like to see it succeed. I hope people will use it and that we can extend beyond these eight conditions to the next eight, whatever they might be.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Pharmacists have considerable knowledge and expertise. As the Minister has mentioned, this extends well beyond the pharmacological side of things, for example, into lifestyle. One would expect the wellness hub concept to expand into the area of lifestyle. Will further non-pharmacological campaigns be made available with regard to vaping, mental health, positive ageing, fitness and many other areas?

It is also vital that there be prior engagement with pharmacists to identify the kind of campaigns to be run and to prepare for their roll-out. Will the Minister outline the level of engagement with pharmacies, the IPU and the various different organisations in the preparation, identification and roll-out of campaigns to ensure they are successful and have a meaningful impact in communities?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: As the Deputy highlights, this is done through consultation and agreement between the pharmacy union and the HSE. My own Department engages regularly with the pharmacy union. I will ask my officials and the HSE about the nature of that engagement because I am not party to those detailed discussions. I will get a much better answer and provide it to the Deputy. The important point is that there is a measure of consultation and agreement in relation to it. Pharmacists are very excited about this expanded role and about working to the top of their professional medical training. That is what I want to enable. I want to make them a genuine alternative to a GP, where appropriate, as they will be in many, although not all, cases. I want it to be a really natural place to get a prescription and to expand the use of community pharmacies alongside every other part of our health infrastructure. I hope the Deputy will forgive me for not having a better answer than that for him at the moment but I will get him an appropriate answer.

Dental Services

125. **Deputy Pádraig Rice** asked the Minister for Health if she has considered the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health's Report on Dental Services in the Healthcare System; if she will commit to implementing its recommendations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28361/26]

Deputy Pádraig Rice: There is a deepening crisis in dental services. Last week, the Committee on Health produced a report setting out 19 recommendations as to how this crisis can be tackled. Has the Minister had a chance to consider the report? Will she implement the recommendations?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy and the Committee on Health for their work on oral health and I welcome their report. I have read it and it aligns with many of the frustrations being brought to me. I understand the frustrations of families and individuals who are experiencing this with the current service. To be really clear, the current position on dental services is not good enough. Too many people cannot get timely care and too many of those are children. We have to do two things at the same time. We have to take practical steps to improve access now and we also have to deliver lasting reform. The model of services we operate is largely rooted in the 1990s and it really needs to be modernised to meet today's needs.

While that reform is being progressed, however, I am determined to ease the pressure people are facing now. What that means is improving access through the public system, especially for children and adult medical card holders. My Department and the HSE are finalising a more focused two-year programme to attempt to do just that.

The plan is going to be delivered by a dedicated governance group with progress monitored closely and aligned to wider HSE and departmental priorities. It will aim to respond to sustained service pressures, workforce constraints and long waiting lists. It will focus on a small number of very clear priorities: cut waiting lists in the school dental programme and orthodontics, strengthen and expand the special access programme, review and improve the dental treatment services scheme, support recruitment, education and training, and then really lean into whatever innovations are appropriate for different ways to deliver care.

Over the next two years, our aim is to stabilise services, reduce waiting times and make access measurably better while at the same time laying the groundwork for longer term reform. This will be achieved by initiatives such as utilising the newly available capacity with the new surgical hubs. A small proportion of cases, but not all, will be suitable because some will require general anaesthetic. My Department and HSE officials have already initiated engagements on this with many of the stakeholders, but it is important that they brief the committee as well when the plan is better finalised.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I thank the Minister. It is welcome that progress is being made because it is now seven years since the national oral health policy, *Smile agus Sláinte*, was published and we still do not have that implementation plan. I was not impressed by some of the excuses we received from officials at the committee, one of which was to blame Covid-19 for the failure to do this over the last number of years.

We have been here before. Previous Ministers have promised an implementation plan, but it was never delivered. I hope that the current Minister does so, with clear actions, targets and timelines.

Crucially, we need a new dental Act. The Dental Council is currently toothless. It needs powers to investigate, inspect and regulate. We have heard of cases of an unregistered person convicted of a sexual assault who may be practising as a dentist, as well as an unregistered dentist offering dental treatments, including X-rays, from a sitting room in an apartment in Dublin. We have also heard about three unregistered dentists offering pop-up clinics in Munster. We want to see a new dental Act and for the Dental Council to be given the real powers that it needs and has been calling for since 2008.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: We are committed to updating the Dentists Act 1985, but we have spoken separately about the practicalities of some of those individual cases, some of which relate to legislative reform and some of which relate to completely different things. The Deputy is correct in relation to the need for a new dentists Act, but there is also a lot of policy development needed to underpin that.

A recognition of the length of time that it would take in real terms has led to an agreement with the Dental Council to bring forward interim amendments such as continuous professional development, CPD, for dentists so that reforms can commence sooner. However, we need to make measurable and meaningful progress. I would like to have the opportunity to finalise that two-year plan, to present it and to have an implementation plan for it. This is not about planning for something in perpetuity. Rather, this is in recognition of very meaningful problems for a number of individuals who need a very specified intervention.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Children in particular are being failed here. Too many children are leaving primary school without receiving a screening. We know that children should be screened in second, fourth and sixth classes. Some of them are not being screened until fourth year in secondary school or later. We know that, in 2023, only 104,000 out of an eligible 208,000 children were screened, so half of them were not screened that year. There are real issues with workforce planning and having adequate staff in place to do that. It is a real failure by the State that we are not providing those services to children.

Equally, the medical card scheme is not working. Dentists are leaving it. The number of dentists in the scheme has halved over a decade, which is a real signal that there are failures in this scheme. It is too limited, with a limit on the number of fillings but no limit on the number of extractions. There needs to be engagement with the Irish Dental Association to develop a scheme that works for patients, dentists and the public purse.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I will point out that the fees were increased by an order of 40% in that scheme. While I appreciate what the Deputy is saying, the fees were also increased by 40% and there is more complexity. I attended the dental association's conference. There is more complexity to the full range of practice that many dentists are engaged in and the other routes of practice, including aesthetics. I do not just mean aesthetic dentistry, which is important and was well defended at the dental association conference by its president. I just needed to make that point as well.

The Deputy highlighted schoolchildren, who are a particular concern of mine. We have engaged with the dental association, the Irish Dental Hygienists' Association and the Dental Council to look at how we are going to deliver near-term improvements in the school programme in particular, how we can use the complete workforce, including hygienists and dental nurses, and how we can broaden the ways in which they are trained. We are engaging with the Department of further and higher education on that so that we can get the best out of our complete dental workforce.

Question No. 126 taken with Written Answers.

Youth Services

127. **Deputy Catherine Ardagh** asked the Minister for Health if there are plans to increase support for the Planet Youth model in light of the insights it provides into adolescent behaviour, physical activity and mental health. [28355/26]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Tá ceist Uimh. 127 in ainm an Teachta Ardagh á glacadh ag an Teachta Daly.

Deputy Martin Daly: I would like the Minister to reflect on the support for the Planet Youth model, which covers about five different regions in the country and dwells on youth mental health, well-being and the maintenance of that well-being, including through repeated surveys of youth to find out what makes them tick.

Deputy Mary Butler: I am taking this on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor. She sends her apologies. I thank Deputies Ardagh and Daly for their interest in the prevention of drug use among young people in Ireland and for the opportunity to provide an update to the House on this very important work.

As Deputy Daly will be aware, the Minister of State published the draft national drugs strategy in early February. The successor strategy will seek to further the progress made under the previous drugs strategy and emphasise the importance of effective and evidence-based drug prevention. Significant support is currently being provided for drug prevention. In 2023, a

first-of-its-kind funding programme to support evidence-based drug prevention initiatives was launched, providing €1.5 million to date. This funding has supported five programmes and represents a significant step in developing our approach to drug prevention in Ireland.

As Deputy Ardagh will be aware, the first strategic pillar in the draft strategy prioritises prevention. It will seek to protect individuals, children, families and communities from the harmful effects of drug and alcohol use and will contain several actions aimed at preventing the onset of drug use among our citizens, with a particular focus on young people. Upon publication of the finalised strategy, these actions will provide targeted responses to groups that are faced with high levels of risk, such as children living with parental drug use and experiencing hidden harm. Any new initiatives on drug prevention will be considered in the context of the finalised strategy, which will develop a coherent, co-ordinated and quality-based national drug prevention system.

The health and well-being of all citizens is of vital importance and reducing health risk factors for our young people is a priority for this Government. I will speak about Planet Youth in my next contribution.

Deputy Martin Daly: I am glad that the Minister of State recognises the value of the Planet Youth project, which is based on the Icelandic model of intervening early to try to identify the reasons young people may fall into lifestyles that will be deleterious to their health.

One of the Planet Youth reports, which came out from Galway, Roscommon and Mayo in 2024, identified the fact that things such as unsupervised time for young people on the street gave them nine times more risk of smoking cannabis. Being unsupervised in a friend's home makes a young person five times more likely to engage in drinking at an early age. Other things that came out included that 18% of young people under the age of 13 had viewed pornography. These are really important pieces of data that allow us to target schemes at those young people to try to prevent them from getting into trouble.

Deputy Mary Butler: Planet Youth Ireland is an initiative to promote, as Deputy Daly said, well-being among our children and adolescents. It takes a ground-up approach whereby local regions enter into a process that researches local government agencies, the education sector and young people themselves. Planet Youth is not an intervention, though, rather a data collection exercise that provides evidence to inform interventions.

The Icelandic prevention model refers to efforts made in Iceland to address adolescent drugs and alcohol use.

Iceland has also significantly invested in professional parent councils and networks. It has expanded that out. Officials from the drugs policy, tobacco and alcohol control unit and health and well-being unit met representatives of Planet Youth Ireland from across Ireland on 9 March in departmental buildings.

Deputy Martin Daly: The value of having repeated data collection means you get an evolving picture of how things are on the ground. In the Ballinasloe area, for example, if your parent had an alcohol problem, you are something like five times more likely to have taken alcohol by the age of 14. If your parents were permissive around the use of alcohol, the risk of

having a problem with drink in later life is three times higher. These are important parameters that allow us to plan health services based around health and well-being and working upstream so that we avoid the problems that develop in later life. Alcohol, drug abuse and the viewing of pornography lead to unsafe and sometimes dangerous practices for young children and adolescents. Data allows us to intervene earlier with measures that will prevent future problems.

Deputy Mary Butler: Planet Youth Ireland communicated that it intends to discontinue its links with Planet Youth as it was felt the work done by Planet Youth could be done in Ireland at a lower cost. Planet Youth Ireland is separating from Planet Youth while continuing to do the work. For example, a number of regular surveys capturing information on youth drug and alcohol use patterns, risks and protective factors have been implemented in Ireland. These include European school survey projects on alcohol and drugs every four years, with the last wave of findings being published in 2025, the health behaviour of school-aged children, which monitors the health behaviours, health outcomes, drug and alcohol use and social environment of school-aged children every four years, and the Growing Up in Ireland study, which includes research on drug and alcohol use. The model is still being used, but Planet Youth Ireland has separated from the cost factor and is investing the money saved in drug prevention instead.

Hospital Inspections

128. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health her plans to invest in Navan hospital in view of the recent HIQA report, details supplied, and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28366/26]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Will the Minister to outline her plans to invest in Our Lady's Hospital in Navan in view of the recent HIQA report and will she make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Deputy. I reaffirm that the Government is committed to investing in Navan hospital. Since 2020, the number of whole-time equivalent staff has increased by 17.5%. During the same period, the budget increased by 51%. Under the acute hospital bed expansion plan, a total of 46 new and replacement beds will be delivered at Our Lady's Hospital in Navan by 2031, which includes 31 beds delivered between 2021 and 2024 and another 15 beds between 2025 and 2028. A new minor injuries unit is planned for Navan hospital. I am advised by the HSE that this is progressing through the detailed design and procurement phases. Construction is expected to commence in quarter 4 of 2026, with an indicative operational date of 2027, which is good for the area.

As part of its statutory role, HIQA conducted unannounced inspections of Our Lady's Hospital in Navan in June 2024 and November 2025. It is important to note that, at the follow-up inspection, HIQA recognised that the hospital had made progress since 2024, even where the formal compliance ratings did not change. It is important that I state that.

I would also like to outline the suite of service and safety enhancements being implemented in Navan hospital. I am informed by the HSE that additional staffing across primary care and older person services has enhanced the management of chronic conditions. Consultant-led

chronic disease teams for respiratory and cardiology services will be developed in 2026. The new Navan patient quality and safety board was established last year to provide enhanced oversight of the safe and effective transition of care between Navan hospital and the HSE Dublin and North East region generally, as is the case for many hospitals. That led to the development of different and robust policies and procedures which will be further improved this year.

Several risk mitigation strategies have also been implemented, including the utilisation of the orthopaedic unit during periods of high activity and the implementation of surge capacity. In addition, acute surgical services are maintained to allow for patient stabilisation prior to transfer, as is the case in many other hospitals, along with integrated bed management solutions which link community and acute bed services. There are also ambulance bypass protocols, to which I will come back.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome every euro invested in Navan hospital, as does the entire community in the county. The national standard 3.1 states that service providers protect service users from the risk of harm associated with the design and delivery of healthcare services, and the hospital was non-compliant in that regard in June 2024 and November 2025. Essentially, what management said at a follow-up inspection was that decisions regarding the transformation of the hospital on a national level were still outstanding and the hospital continued to operate as a model 3 hospital without the provision of acute on-site surgical services. That is stating that it is a model 3 hospital in name. In effect, it is a model 2.5 hospital because it does not have on-site surgical services. Is the Minister satisfied that the investment plan she has will address the risks identified in the HIQA report?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: On the HIQA report, of the 43 actions in the compliance plan, I understand 18 have been completed and the rest are under way. It is important to highlight that. I want to look at the region in a very interesting way because it is a region that will have a new surgical hub opening shortly. It is a region where we are planning an elective hospital, in Connolly. It is a region where the hospitals are geographically concentrated. I am not yet convinced what all of the different pathways are and what the different specialisms are and how they intersect. It is a region of particular opportunity and Navan has a strong role to play within that.

On the immediate safety issues, ambulance bypass protocols are in place to ensure that patients receive the right care. For example, patients are stabilised and, if necessary, transferred to other hospitals. Patients classified as categories 1 and 2, including cardiac and stroke patients, are not brought to Navan hospital by ambulance. Beaumont and the Mater, which are specialist centres for both of those cohorts, are very close. That is what I mean by looking at the region in a different way.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I am certainly open to that. It would be welcome. It is an argument we have made. The starting point is that we have to protect our emergency department at Navan hospital. There has been a significant increase in population in the region. If there is an opportunity in terms of a surgical hub, the population base, infrastructure and potential are there for enhanced services at Navan hospital. That could work alongside Connolly, Our Lady of Lourdes, Beaumont and the Mater. There is potential there. The HIQA

report needs to be the basis of increased investment and addressing the risks that may be present.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Of course the HIQA report needs to be implemented. Where there are issues within the control of the hospital, the HSE is required to deliver sustained improvement. Where risks relate to the broader intersection of the region, that is what I am trying to work out at the moment.

On 17 February, I met the regional executive officer and regional clinical director for the HSE Dublin and North East region and the integrated area healthcare manager for Louth and Meath to discuss the overall demand profile for the region, the pressures in Navan, the pressures on neighbouring hospitals, the different specialisms and their interoperabilities, and the ideal design of all of those hospitals, recognising the elective hospital, surgical theatre and capacity that that frees up. We have possibly examined this in a way that has been too individualised as regards the different hospitals. I am interested in the best interoperability and how we achieve that while, at the same time, implementing the compliance requirements identified in the HIQA report.

Medicinal Products

129. **Deputy Marie Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the steps her Department is taking to urgently regulate the administration of dermal fillers as committed to in the programme for Government; when such regulation or legislation will be introduced; if she and her Department will engage with stakeholders regarding the best way to protect the public; if her Department received research from the Health Research Board on international best practice; if so, when she will publish same and her Department's response; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28374/26]

Deputy Marie Sherlock: My question relates to the regulation of the administration of dermal fillers in this country. Obviously, millions of euro is spent each year on beauty and cosmetic treatments. The vast majority are topical external treatments, but some are medically invasive. Unfortunately, there is something of a wild west out there in terms of who can administer these treatments.

The incorrect administration, particularly of dermal fillers, can literally be the difference between life and death. Certainly, we have a lot of stories coming to us of people developing sepsis, permanent scarring and other impacts. What is the Government doing to regulate and protect people accessing these treatments?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: In the short time that I have, I will say that dermal fillers are regulated as medical devices. There are rules to ensure that devices placed on the market are safe and perform as intended. That means a dermal filler must have a CE mark before it can be legally sold anywhere in the EU.

It is important to be clear about what current EU legislation does not do. While it regulates the product, it does not regulate who can administer it. The Government recognises there is a need to strengthen regulation in this area. That is why it is in the programme for Government

that we will only allow this to be undertaken by trained healthcare professionals. Work is under way in my Department on the options to strengthen controls on the use of dermal fillers.

The Health Products Regulatory Authority, HPRA, as the competent authority, previously provided my Department with a policy paper setting out the different options. In addition, we have commissioned research through the Health Research Board to look at the national policy and legislative and regulatory measures used in other countries. We expect that report in the coming period. We will engage with stakeholders to try to bring this piece of work forward. The final regulatory policy determined will be informed but all of those important pieces of evidence. We will progress it as quickly as we can thereafter. I recognise what the Deputy is saying.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: There seems to be a legal lacuna in this regard. The HPRA does not regulate the administration of clinical practice, and HIQA is obviously not looking at this either. I am conscious there are people out there – many of whom are in my constituency – accessing these treatments for a little as €60, whereas other practices charge in excess of €250. A lot of people are being lured in by the prices. It is a potential question of life or death or of serious injury. We need to see the report. It was commissioned in 2025 and I have been submitting parliamentary questions about it. I ask for a bit of urgency in publishing that report.

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

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): 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 Emer Currie - To discuss the need for a competitive funds industry in Ireland.

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

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

Deputy Michael Collins - To discuss the delay in publishing the short term letting and tourism Bill 2025.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea - To discuss the provision of bus connections to and from Charleville train station.

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

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher - To discuss the inclusion of a side-by-side construction option in the revised defective concrete block scheme schedule.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss the need to promote an increase in the uptake of flexible work practices.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the planned new Courtown Coast Guard building.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the need for out-of-hours GP services for Fingal West.

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

Deputies Natasha Newsome Drennan and Conor D. McGuinness - To discuss the challenges facing front-line youth workers.

Deputy Rory Hearne - To discuss the number of affordable purchase homes delivered in Dublin city.

Deputy Joanna Byrne - To discuss the exclusion of schools in disadvantaged areas of Drogheda from the DEIS plus scheme.

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss Mayfield library and community centre.

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

Deputies Seán Crowe, Paul Murphy and Ciarán Ahern - To discuss challenges facing Scoil Maelruain JNS and SNS.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe - To discuss the provision of ambulance services and response times in Dublin North-West.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss delivery of a permanent school building for Owenabue ETNS, Carrigaline, Cork.

The matters raised by Deputies Emer Currie, Pat the Cope Gallagher, Natasha Newsome Drennan and Conor D. McGuinness, Michael Collins, and Pádraig O'Sullivan have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Youth Work Supports

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on the vital work that Youth Work Ireland is carrying out in communities across the south east. This is also a time to speak on the pressing challenges facing youth workers. Youth Work Ireland represents 20 youth services across the State. They are our front-line services. They are in our communities working as mentors and positive role models in the lives of children and teenagers who are missing those crucial factors. They tackle the root cause of antisocial behaviour rather than simply punishing it. This is the principle of diversion in action, that is, giving a young person a second chance rather than a criminal record.

Despite this vital work, these groups are left scrambling for funding from left, right and centre, year after year. How can any group effectively plan for long-term development when

working off 12-month funding cycles? The Government needs to stop viewing youth service as a cost or expenditure. It must view it for what it really is; an investment. It is an investment with significant short-term supports but enormous long-term returns. It builds social cohesion, reduces antisocial behaviour, guides young people towards contributing positively to the community and reduces the burden on An Garda Síochána and the fire services.

I will use Ferrybank, not far from my home, as an example. Last summer, the fire service was called out almost daily to deal with antisocial behaviour activities. I do not need to remind the Minister about how stretched our front-line services are. Whatever we can do to ease that pressure must be explored. Proper funding to deal with rising costs and a statutory pay scale for all State-funded youth workers are two measures that would make a meaningful impact. Has the Minister's Department looked at these proposals? Is she willing to implement them?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Front-line youth workers are being asked to carry more and more of the burden with less and less. They are dealing every day with the real pressures facing young people, such as mental health challenges, online harm and misinformation, social isolation and increasingly visible antisocial behaviour. In Waterford, we are seeing that play out in very real terms with the lighting of fires in parts of Waterford city, and most recently in the Gallowshill area of Dungarvan, along with the growing misuse of nitrous oxide, an issue that is being consistently flagged by my colleague, Councillor Kate O'Mahoney, and Deputy Mark Ward, who has moved legislation in this regard.

These are symptoms of a deep failure by a Government that frankly no longer gives a crap. Youth work is one of the most effective tools we have to intervene early, build trust and empower and equip young people with the skills and confidence to navigate the world they are growing up in but it is being undermined by Government failure. Recruitment and retention is now a serious problem. Skilled, committed youth workers are leaving because pay and conditions do not reflect the value or demands of the role. That is not sustainable. Services are also struggling under chronic underfunding. Rising costs, increased demand and the uncertainty of funding streams are making long-term planning almost impossible.

There is a clear deficit in infrastructure. Too many communities do not have proper youth spaces and that has been allowed to persist for years. Youth Work Ireland set this out clearly when I and many other Deputies met it last week. Proper funding, fair pay through a statutory scale and a capital programme for facilities are needed. The Minister will no doubt point to strategy in her response but strategy without delivery or funding does not support a single young person. We need investment, certainty and a recognition that youth work is not optional. In fact, for many of the communities that I and many other Deputies in this House represent, it is utterly essential.

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I thank the Deputies for raising this issue. Supporting youth work is a critical aspect of what we do as a Government to support our young people. I thank both Deputies for the opportunity to set out the position with regard to youth work provision and funding provided to Youth Work Ireland from my Department.

Youth work services deliver high-quality youth work and non-formal developmental opportunities to young people aged between ten and 24 across Ireland every year. Approximately 450,000 young people participate in youth work services annually.

Since 2020, Government investment in youth services has risen from €62.3 million to €90.1 million in 2026. Under the national development plan, €4 million in capital funding will be allocated annually to youth services from 2026 to 2030, providing multiyear certainty for the first time. This allows better long-term planning, investment and value for money.

Youth Work Ireland is a key organisation in the sector. It provides youth work to tens of thousands of young people across the country. Its importance is reflected in the support provided by the Department of Education and Youth via multiple funding streams. Over €2.8 million has been allocated to Youth Work Ireland under the youth services grant scheme in 2026, representing a 28% increase since 2020. Youth Work Ireland has also received funding for specific projects under the youth climate justice fund, the volunteer activation fund, and the youth services capital fund.

Youth Work Ireland and its member services play a key role in the delivery of targeted youth work interventions. Over €12 million has been allocated to Youth Work Ireland member organisations to deliver targeted youth work in 2026 under the UBU Your Place, Your Space scheme.

With this funding, the Department of Education and Youth continues to support existing youth services and youth organisations, including Youth Work Ireland, while also enabling the expansion of both targeted and universal services for young people. Youth workers and volunteers are essential to the delivery of quality youth services. The Department is also progressing a workforce development strategy in recognition of the need to support the workforce and the youth work sector to ensure that they can continue to provide high-quality, accessible and inclusive youth work opportunities for young people.

I sincerely thank youth workers and employers for the high level of participation in the workforce survey process. The analysis and responses will be extremely useful in informing the strategy's development. Consultations are scheduled to take place in multiple locations around the country during May and June to engage further with youth workers and employers in order to build on the data available through the youth workers and employers survey. Just this week, my officials presented some top-level findings from the surveys at the Inspiring Future Youth Workers seminar that was organised by the National Youth Council of Ireland and funded by my Department under the Bonn process.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: There is a double standard in the area of youth work that cannot be ignored. In Dublin, staff are on a far better wage agreement. Youth workers outside Dublin are being left behind despite doing the same job, often in more isolated areas and for significantly less pay. Many are trained up by the local services only to leave for other agencies because of better pay standards. How can the Minister stand over this double standard and treatment? If someone is doing the work, they should be treated and paid equally, regardless of where they are based. Instead, many outside of Dublin receive increments only once every three years if they are lucky. Will the Minister commit to ending this geographic double standard?

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I note the Minister's response and thank her for it. The difficulty is not the absence of strategy, it is the absence of delivery. We see the results of the workforce survey. There is also the workforce development strategy that is taking place at the moment. This is another case of too little too late. The issues in terms of recruitment and retention are not new. In many cases, they have always been thus. However, they have accelerated and worsened since the economic crash in 2008 and 2009 and the years of austerity that followed. Youth services have never fully recovered from all the cuts that were imposed by successive Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael-led Governments since then. What we need to see now is parity between the remuneration offered to youth workers working in the community in voluntary organisations and that of employees doing similar work, and, in many cases, with similar qualifications and similar demands on their time, in the public sector. That is a method we can use to maybe keep people in jobs where they are at the coalface and are doing front-line work that is so valuable in all our communities.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I thank the Deputies for raising those issues. Youth workers are employed directly by individual youth organisations. They are not public servants. Their terms and conditions, including pay, are set by those organisations. My Department provides grant funding for the provision of youth services to the organisations in question to meet the needs of young people. It does not directly employ youth workers or set the terms and conditions of employment.

My Department is aware that pension provisions across the sector are inconsistent. Some youth organisations have established pension schemes but others have not. The additional current funding that is being provided as part of budget 2026 will help youth organisations to manage the pressures on them, including the costs arising, for example, from pension obligations. Current funding of €90.1 million will be available this year. That represents a 5%, or €4.5 million, increase on the 2025 allocation.

The results of the survey will be analysed. My Department is progressing the workforce development strategy in recognition of the important work that the workforce does within the youth sector. There is also a fund relating to volunteerism, and there is the activation fund. There is €20 million in capital funding allocated to youth services as part of the national development plan. My Department is working with other Departments, including the Department of Children, local authorities and the ETBs, in the area of capital projects.

The workforce survey will be really important in the context of informing our work. The consultations will form a key part of that work. I assure the Deputies that this is a key priority. We have increased capital and current funding. I want to continue to do that and to work with and listen to the sector. I know the importance of youth work across the country.

Fiscal Policy

Deputy Emer Currie: Over recent months, I have been vocal in this House and elsewhere in supporting the Government's proposals for personal investment accounts and calling for further tax reforms to ensure that existing investors will not be not left behind. I have pushed the need to abolish the deemed disposal rule. As long deemed disposal exists in Ireland, it will discourage international funds, including many domiciled in Ireland, from being offered to

Irish retail investors. This is because funds would have to create a complicated additional layer of accounting to make their offerings available to Irish investors.

I want to talk about the industry we have in Ireland and the one that we could have. It is nearly 40 years since the International Financial Services Centre, IFSC, which has been a phenomenal success, was established. It was not just about the small geographical area off the docklands that we call the IFSC; the whole country benefited from the spirit of the centre. The Irish funds and asset management sector currently employs 20,000 people in every region of Ireland. Forty years on, we should not be complacent and take Ireland's historic attractiveness to international finance and investment for granted. One of the main things that made Ireland attractive was its dynamic, legislative and regulatory framework that promoted innovation and fostered competitiveness and growth.

As the EU is pushing for greater market integration, Ireland must work even harder to stay ahead of the curve in order to remain attractive and have offering which is compelling. It is only by doing this that we can protect and grow Irish jobs. There is a need for urgency in this regard. The updated Ireland for Finance offers a timely opportunity to deliver on the urgency needed on two fronts in particular. First, greater proportionality in how the State integrates regulation and supervision, with a focus on competitiveness and innovation. Ireland's financial rule book must be at the cutting edge of supporting the development and issuing of innovative new products. The principle of proportionality is embedded within EU financial services legislation. We must ensure that Ireland, therefore, does not fall behind other EU states that are subject to the same rules but that manage to move faster, avoid gold plating and overlapping regulation and, quite simply, offer a more compelling ecosystem within which to operate and innovate.

Second, there is a need to update legislation and regulation to keep pace with the digital transformation which is occurring in international funds management. Digitalisation is a key Government priority, yet I fear that Ireland could fall behind other countries when it comes to the establishment of digital fund structures, also referred to as tokenisation. There is an urgent need for clarity and certainty on the legal basis under which tokenised funds and other digital fund structures can be established and operate in Ireland. If changes are needed, they should be expedited. Why is this important? It is important because it will ensure that Ireland's funds offering and ability to deliver solutions digitally, which is the direction of travel across the economy more generally, keeps us in the game.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Thomas Byrne): I thank the Deputy for raising this issue at a time when Ireland's contribution to the global financial ecosystem has never been more vital or more visible. I welcome the opportunity to discuss the importance of the funds industry in Ireland and the need for competitiveness.

I apologise; copies of my script are on the way. We thought they had already been sent down.

10 o'clock

The latest estimate from IDA Ireland and Enterprise Ireland indicates that just over 20,000 people are directly employed in the funds sector. Furthermore, in terms of those working in

the financial services industry - domestically and internationally focused - in Ireland, there are over 120,000 people employed, and these jobs are regionally spread throughout the country, employing highly skilled workers in almost every county. We know how important this sector is to our economy.

Work is under way on a successor strategy to Ireland for Finance, the whole-of-government strategy for the development of the international financial services sector in Ireland. Anticipated for launch later this year, the new strategy will be informed by a wide range of national and international stakeholder engagement, public consultation and research. The funds sector will be a key aspect of this new strategy.

The Department of Finance undertook a review of the funds industry in 2023 and the resulting funds review 2030 was published in October 2024. The review issued 42 recommendations to continue to grow this important sector of our economy. An implementation plan was published in October 2025. This includes a full breakdown of the recommendations and those responsible for their implementation. Of the 42 recommendations, the most substantive were categorised into four cohorts. The first was to grow exchange-traded funds, ETFs; the second was to grow private assets; the third was to grow retail investment; and the fourth was to address the risks and enhance transparency in structured finance.

The recommendations to grow ETFs have been delivered by the Central Bank. The recommendations to grow private assets involve legislative, regulatory and tax changes. These are on track for completion this year. There is ongoing engagement in train with the industry and the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment on changes sought to the Limited Partnerships Act.

On retail investment, the Tánaiste has announced the Government's intention to introduce the legislative framework for an investment account this year. We want to make investing simpler, clearer and more accessible for ordinary people and to help their hard-earned money work harder for them over time. The aim is to legislate this year to allow accounts to be offered next year.

In budget 2026 we provided for a reduction in the rate of taxation on returns from Irish and equivalent investment funds and Irish and certain foreign life assurance policies from 41% to 38%. This took effect from 1 January this year. In addition, in the same budget we committed to publish a roadmap in 2026, setting out the intended approach to simplify and adapt the tax framework to encourage retail investment. The roadmap, which will be published in the coming months, will take into consideration developments at EU level in respect of the savings and investments union. This is a major project for the Presidency this year.

As home to the second largest funds industry in the EU and the third largest in the world, Ireland does not just facilitate capital flows, we help to shape the architecture of the EU's savings and investment future. This is all-the-more crucial given the current challenges faced by the EU. These funding demands will continue to grow as we look to address our common goals, including security, competitiveness, digitalisation and a just and equitable green transition. It will be our responsibility to ensure we have the tools required to meet these challenges and continue to thrive.

Deputy Emer Currie: I thank the Minister of State for his comprehensive response, including the reference to growing exchange-traded funds, which is something I want to see. I welcome the reduction in the exit tax, but the issue that remains is the deemed disposal rule and taxing unrealised gains, which interrupts compounding and undermines long-term savings behaviour. That is something the Tánaiste is looking at. The Minister of State spoke about it earlier.

I also note that new polling by Amárach highlights the resounding public support for Ireland's investment industry, with 90% saying it is important that Ireland remain competitive within the EU investment industry. The people of Ireland understand the value of attracting high-quality, regionally dispersed international jobs and investment. The funds sector has been one of Ireland's real success stories in terms of exports. I ask the Government to commit to action to support and protect this important sector.

Further to recent parliamentary questions I tabled, will the Minister of State provide an update on the transposition of the EU alternative investment fund managers directive in Ireland? This is particularly important in enabling the funds sector to continue to evolve and to develop new retail investment products for Irish savers. If he does not have an update on that now, perhaps he could seek one. In practical terms, Ireland's regulatory system has meant we have the products and solutions investors need and the environment for companies providing these to operate to high standards with commercial success and agility. This has helped transform Ireland into a leading funds management centre in Europe, supporting the export of Irish domiciled funds around the world. This was hard won and is the envy of many other countries.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: On the alternative investment fund managers directive, the UCITS directive, the transposition was due to be done today but I am very sorry to say that this was not done by the Minister today. There will be a slight administrative delay. Work is continuing to finalise the draft statutory instruments. We hope the delay will be short and they will be ready for signature in the coming weeks. Everybody has to take responsibility for late transposition because it is a legal obligation on the State to transpose directives. One of my functions as Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs is to encourage Ministers to transpose directives on time. It is disappointing that this has not happened. The industry is rightly frustrated with this delay. I am grateful that Deputy Currie raised it. I agree it is essential that this directive is transposed as soon as possible. I will personally take that up with the Minister for Finance in the morning.

A lot of people are starting to realise and be concerned about the issue of the deemed disposal rule on ETFs, which was also raised by the Deputy. That is something the Government could do. I have no doubt the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, and the Tánaiste will work towards that. I strongly encourage people to examine ETFs on the basis that perhaps Governments will look at this in the coming years and certainly within the relevant period from now. It is something the Government wants to do, as the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, and the Tánaiste have said.

Our position in Ireland at the centre of the European funds ecosystem is a privilege and responsibility. By working together to support innovation and embrace opportunity while

ensuring that our frameworks are robust, we can be confident that Ireland will remain a driving force in Europe's capital markets going forward.

Defective Building Materials

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: I am pleased to have the opportunity to discuss the issue of side-by-side housing within the defective concrete blocks remediation scheme, particularly in light of where we now stand with the legislation having been progressed. We had amendments towards the end of last year. We had regulations on the increase from €420,000 to €462,000 and the extension of time to 130 weeks but, lo and behold, there were no regulations to deal with side-by-side buildings. What is that? It is not simply an optional extra, it is an essential support for many families, particularly for those who have a person with a disability who requires specialised equipment within the home. For these householders the prospect of vacating their home during demolition and reconstruction is just not viable. It is necessary to allow them to live in their defective homes and to build a new home side by side and then to transfer the necessary equipment into the new home. Those people could not go down the town and find a house where this equipment could be provided. It is crucial that the scheme is inclusive and reflects the full spectrum of disability, not only physical disability but intellectual disabilities, and also neurodivergent conditions such as ADHD, which can significantly impact a person's ability to cope with disruption, displacement and changes to their environment. For that reason, there must be sufficient flexibility within the regulations that will underpin the scheme. A narrow or overly rigid approach risks excluding families who genuinely need this option. That cannot be allowed to happen.

I warn the Minister of State to ensure he speaks with his officials as the regulations are due in a matter of days. Let there be flexibility.

The measures must be practical, compassionate and grounded in the lived realities of those they are intended to support. This is now a matter of urgency. This should have been done months ago.

A number of families are currently unable to move forward due to the ongoing delays and they remain in limbo. They are facing continued stress, uncertainty and disruption to their daily lives, not to mention the psychological effects of all of this.

I acknowledge the ongoing commitment of my local authority, Donegal County Council, and the crucial role it plays in the defective concrete blocks remediation scheme. What is required now is delivery. The signing off of the regulations must be finalised without delay and the legislation must be signed off so families can finally move forward with certainty, security and dignity. These families have waited long enough. What they need now is action.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I thank Deputy Gallagher for raising this issue in the House. He represents a constituency and county that was very badly impacted by defective blocks. He has championed and represented the people in his constituency for many years, fought for the remediation scheme and continuously fought for the side-by-side construction amendment.

The good news is that the regulations on side-by-side construction are in the final stages of drafting. We should see the completion of the drafting of the amendments within the coming weeks, after which they can be implemented.

As the Deputy is aware, the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks (Amendment) Bill 2025 was initiated in Dáil Éireann on 2 December 2025, passed in both Houses of the Oireachtas and subsequently signed into law by the President, thereby becoming an Act, on 23 December 2025. A number of amendments came into operation on 25 February 2026, with related regulations also adopted on the same date. These changes provided that the increase in the grant scheme cap and rates from October and November 2024 can retrospectively benefit certain homeowners and they extended the period that applicants have for completed work from 65 to 130 weeks, along with reducing the time within which an applicant may apply for an extension from 12 to two weeks.

The second set of regulations is currently at an advanced stage of drafting in relation to additional scheme improvements contained in the 2025 Act. These include the amendment that provides for an application for an adjacent remediation option in particular circumstances. Those are the ones Deputy Gallagher outlined so well.

It became apparent that certain relevant owners who had received an option 1 demolition determination from the Housing Agency and who previously had their homes specifically adapted for use by persons with a disability were facing severe difficulties in finding suitable alternative accommodation that met their specialised requirements. The 2025 Act and forthcoming regulations will provide a possible remedy to this situation. Where the approved remediation option is the demolition of the relevant dwelling and its reconstruction, a relevant owner may be able to avail of funding under the scheme for the building of a home adjacent to the existing dwelling. Relevant owners can apply to the designated local authority for approval to construct a new dwelling in the curtilage of the relevant dwelling to replace the approved remediation option, subject to certain eligibility conditions. As this provision is an exemption from the normal rules of the scheme, which is fundamentally a scheme to remediate existing homes, the Deputy will appreciate that consideration had to be given to its drafting. This has meant some additional time was required to finalise the regulations.

Local authorities have responsibility for the administration of the scheme and will process the applications. On the Deputy's point and question, we are in the very final stages of drafting the regulations. Drafting will be within the next couple of weeks, after which implementation can proceed.

Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher: I thank the Minister for the response but all that is new in it is that the regulations are in the final stages of drafting and will be available to the Minister to sign within the next couple of weeks. Back in committee last year, I was told completion would be in quarter 1, but it is now quarter 2. I was told completion would be in the middle of April. This is not what my constituents want to hear. I want something definite. I appreciate that officials will be drafting but all hands have to be on deck over the next couple of weeks. By the end of this month, or certainly by the early days of May, the regulations have to be finalised. It does not mean that those who have already received planning permission for a side-by-side build can start immediately. They have to make the application. Somebody will decide who qualifies and who does not.

There has to be flexibility. It is not just about a physical disability alone. Other factors have to be taken into consideration. I hope we are not back in the House on the second week of May debating this. I plead with the Minister of State to impress upon the officials that this matter is vital to the individuals concerned. It is urgent because families cannot progress without the provision being signed into law. They are left in limbo and they are waiting for clarity. The ongoing delays are causing stress, uncertainty and disruption to their daily lives.

This has already been a multi-year issue. I hope this is the last time it will be discussed in the House. I hope that when the guidelines and regulations are signed off, we will not be back here again requesting that they be amended. They should be all-encompassing and cover all individuals I have referred to.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I thank Deputy Gallagher again. I absolutely take his point and I appreciate the urgency of this. The families and constituents the Deputy represents right across the board have been severely impacted by defective blocks. They have had their lives turned upside down and have experienced significant upheaval.

Regarding the amendment we are talking about and the regulations we are introducing on side-by-side construction, there is another layer of complexity and difficulty when it comes to those who may have had their houses formally adapted for mobility and the fact that it is not as straightforward as upping sticks and going to another home that is not adapted, as the Deputy quite rightly outlined. The latter is just not a possibility, which is why we agreed recently to introduce the amendment to change the existing arrangement. However, there are complexities. Drafting was not straightforward and simple. It is not something that can be done overnight. However, I absolutely take the Deputy's point that there is urgency. The Deputy wants to be able to go back to constituents in Donegal and say that what he is requesting is happening. However, I am here with good news: the regulations are in the very final stages. I cannot give an exact date as that would be unfair, but within the next few weeks the regulations should be signed by the Minister and, therefore, implemented. I sincerely hope this is the last time the Deputy has to raise this in the Chamber. I cannot give a date but the regulations are in the final stages.

Tourism Policy

Deputy Michael Collins: I want to raise serious and growing concerns regarding the proposed short-term letting and tourism Bill, and in particular the manner in which it is being progressed. The Bill has not yet been published, yet significant changes have already been signalled to thousands of small operators, family businesses and rural communities. Can the Minister of State clarify when the legislation will be published in full and why stakeholders have been asked to prepare for compliance in the absence of clear statutory text? Second, will he outline whether the Government intends to allow proper pre-legislative scrutiny and meaningful engagement with affected groups, or whether the intention is to fast-track or rush the Bill through the Houses, despite the scale of its impact on tourism, rural employment and local economies?

Many of the concerns being raised are coming directly from the grassroots, small accommodation providers, self-catering operators, mixed-use homeowners and rural hosts, who are telling us very clearly that the approach is not going to work.

Does the Minister accept that legislation without clarity, buy-in or realistic implementation timelines risks repeating the mistakes we have seen with poorly handled policy roll-outs, where public anger and non-compliance followed instead of constructive outcomes?

There remains a complete lack of clarity around development and planning. Will the Minister explain how the proposed registration system is intended to interact with planning law, particularly in circumstances where properties were never intended for long-term residential use, where planning permissions were granted decades ago or where accommodation consists of cabins, extensions, converted outbuildings or holiday units? Will the Minister confirm whether people will be required to seek retrospective planning permission, what criteria local authorities will apply and whether national planning guidelines will be issued in advance of any enforcement? At present, constituents are being told they may not be able to trade but nobody can tell them what rules they will actually be assessed against.

Will the Minister explain how this Bill is expected to support tourism policy, particularly in rural and coastal areas where hotels and large-scale accommodation simply do not exist? What assessment has been carried out regarding the impact on local jobs, seasonal employment and the viability of tourism outside major urban centres?

Will the Minister commit today to publishing the legislation in full, ensuring adequate scrutiny and providing clear guidance on development and planning, and genuinely engage with those affected before asking them to comply? People do not object to regulation. What they object to is uncertainty, unfairness and being kept in the dark. Will the Minister address it? It has been well over 12 months or more since this legislation was first discussed. These are genuine people who are from all over my constituency. My mother ran a bed and breakfast in the 1970s so I know well the benefit it brought. It basically fed us. Those are the basics. These are hard-working people, mainly women. These are hard-working women who work at home and can run an Airbnb. The legislation as it was meant to be brought before us was scandalous. I attended the Oireachtas Committee on Enterprise, Tourism and Employment and I heard the planners inside saying "tick away the box that you have no planning and don't worry at all". When I asked them whether they would put that in writing so I could hand that out to my constituents, they would not do it because the Minister of State knows as well as I do. Regarding anyone telling me or the Minister of State here to tick a planning box and then they will say we are fine if we are not complying, the bottom line is that all these people's businesses have survived down through the decades with the planning that was there already. What we're saying is that there should be registration but no planning guidelines are needed for anyone unless he or she is a new Airbnb operator setting up tomorrow morning.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: In April of last year, the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment obtained Government approval for the general scheme of the short-term letting and tourism Bill. Once enacted, this Bill will provide a statutory framework for regulating the short-term letting sector, including the establishment of a national register. The register will operate in compliance with the EU Short-Term Rental Regulation (EU) 2024/1028, which comes into effect on 20 May 2026. The register will be operated by Fáilte Ireland and will

commence following the enactment of the necessary legislation. While the Minister is charged with the establishment of the register, the planning elements and requirements fall under the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Tourism is a vital part of the Irish economy, supporting 227,000 jobs and generating €6 billion in 2024. I fully recognise concerns about the impact on rural tourism and local economies of reducing short-term let, STL, availability. Fáilte Ireland estimates that approximately 34,020 STL properties were advertised online in the State in October 2025 based on screen-scraped data from four major booking platforms. Up to 64% were listed as entire houses or apartments. This represents a 26% increase from an estimated 26,960 units in October 2022. In Cork, around 3,300 STL units were listed in October 2025, of which 63% were advertised as entire properties. This represents a 22.6% increase from an estimated 2,690 listed in October 2022.

On 9 February last, the Cabinet committee on housing agreed planning conditions for short-term letting activity as part of a broader Government strategy to tackle the housing shortage. This agreement provided that, following the introduction of the short-term letting register, accommodation providers based in towns with a population of 20,000 or less at the last census based on the census town boundaries defined by CSO will have two years to meet planning compliance requirements, and accommodation providers based in towns with a population of more than 20,000 at the last census will need to confirm planning compliance on registration with no further lead-in period if they wish to register with Fáilte Ireland.

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is finalising a national planning statement under the Planning and Development Act 2024. This will be brought to Government shortly and will provide a clear overall policy approach both at national and local authority level to enable planning authorities to determine planning applications for short-term lets across the country.

Deputy Michael Collins: The Minister of State is saying here that people will have to have complied by 20 May 2026. I spent the past seven or eight weeks in the Dáil trying to bring the Minister before us. I mean no disrespect to the Minister of State. He is not the correct Minister to be here because he has nothing to do with tourism. I am not disrespecting the Minister of State. He has to do it. He is busy enough without being dragged into this. It is a disgrace that a Minister for tourism in the course of seven or eight weeks has failed to come before the Dáil to talk about something that affects tens of thousands of people's lives in this country and that has to be signed up to by 20 May. It is outrageous. That is what it is. The Minister of State cannot be carrying the can for it but he is certainly being forced to carry the can.

Is this a tactic the Government is using now and is it another attack on the people of rural Ireland? I have mentioned it several times in the Dáil and the Taoiseach has said to me there will be no problem at all, not to worry at all and that it is all in my head. God almighty, what the Government is going to do is down here in a document. People are being given two years to be planning compliant. That is wipeout in two years. It is a case of kick the can down the road for a few months - that is all it is - instead of understanding the crisis we have at present, which is that the Government is going to wipe out tourism. We got two years out of it and that was a hell of a struggle, but that is not good enough.

I pay tribute to Sarah Cronin. We have held public meetings on this with rooms full of people who are seriously concerned about the little bit of side income they had but the Government never listened and never sat down with them. The Government did not give a damn, basically. I live in an area that totally depends on this income. I spoke to the Taoiseach here about the lady in Courtmacsherry and others who walked out because they could not cope with the pressure being put on them. There would have been no need for that if the Government had sat down and spoken to the people who were running the businesses down through the years and come up with a solution, but not this, which is a can-kicking exercise and then ruin in two years' time. That is basically what is written down here. I do not do Airbnb but the Government knows damn well that if I had to get a planning officer to come out for compliance, it could cost me €100,000, €150,000 or €200,000. The Government is going to wipe out the industry.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I set out the position and the increase in the number of short-term lettings, even since 2022. The regulation the Deputy mentioned does impose obligations on the State to provide a register. That was passed with almost nobody voting against it in the European Parliament. Nearly 500 members of the European Parliament supported that.

As set out in the A New Era for Irish Tourism document published last December, the introduction of regulatory controls for short-term letting is intended to ensure that tourism develops in a manner that recognises and complements the broader economic and social needs of local communities. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is currently finalising the national planning statement on the Planning and Development Act for short-term lets. That will establish a clear and coherent policy framework at national and local level.

There are currently 34,000 short-term lets in Ireland, which is a huge increase since 2022. I acknowledge what the Deputy is saying about the income dependency in certain parts of the country. The Government has acknowledged that but there has been massive growth in the sector in the past three years, so it is necessary then to use regulatory measures to provide appropriate oversight and to ensure a balance between the needs the Deputy is rightfully describing and the needs of the long-term rental market.

The Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment recognises that short-term lets play an important role in the tourism sector, especially in regional and rural areas where there is limited accommodation for tourists - we get that - and where the development of accommodation at scale might not be economically viable. The Deputy mentioned properties that are not suitable for long-term letting. We know that, but the Minister is continuing to work with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to ensure clarity can be provided and a lead-in time for operators can be agreed to so that we get that balance between the needs of the people the Deputy is talking about, whom we all represent, and obviously the needs of people who are looking for long-term housing in the country.

Childcare Services

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister of State for attending. I know this does not involve his own area, so I appreciate him taking this Topical Issue. As the Acting Chair

said, I want to speak about childcare. It is probably one of the top three most prevalent issues in my own area of the city in Glanmire. If the Minister of State is not sure where Glanmire is or does not know much about it, it is a strong, growing suburb.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I was there with Deputy O’Sullivan at least twice.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: You have, to be fair. It was after the flooding. The Minister of State is familiar with it. In the last 15 or 20 years, there has been unprecedented development of residential housing there. In the current city development plan proposals, further residential zoning is earmarked. Recently, the Minister, Deputy Foley, announced €135 million for State-led early learning and childcare services. It is a very welcome scheme and, in time, will prove to be a landmark announcement if we build upon it.

I stand here today to make the case for Glanmire and why it needs to be among the first tranche to benefit from the announcement. As I said, Glanmire is rapidly growing. Over the past decade, it has seen significant growth and, with recent zoning, the population is forecast to double in the next ten years, yet its childcare infrastructure has not kept pace. In Glanmire, I can count at least four premises that were designated for childcare services that were never delivered, specifically because of the non-enforcement of planning conditions by the local authority. More recently, we face the further closure of another two settings, which exacerbates problems locally. This is a barrier to work in some cases but, most importantly, it is detrimental to the well-being of our children.

The Government's forward-planning unit has acknowledged the need to focus on areas where childcare places have not kept pace with housing development. We have built 157,000 homes nationally since 2020, but the community in Glanmire is feeling the strain of that housing development. The State-led programme will step up and step in where the need is greatest targeting areas with unmet demand and low levels of existing childcare. Glanmire ticks that box. It has growing demand, limited existing community provision and families who would benefit enormously from an affordable, high-quality facility run on a not-for-profit basis. Again, Glanmire ticks that box. The initial phase of the programme will acquire and refurbish places that can provide in excess of 100 childcare places and facilities that can open in late 2026 or early 2027. Again, Glanmire ticks that box. I recently brought Cork City Childcare to Glanmire, with the owner of a proposed building and a proposed proprietor. It reckons that it can deliver up to 150 affordable childcare places in that building.

The majority of the criteria were laid out in the Minister’s announcement some months ago. Glanmire ticks the majority of the boxes. I am sure that other Deputies will make the same pleas over the coming months in pitching for this €135 million fund. I know we will not be able to satisfy everybody's demands, but I am trying to put forward the case for Glanmire. I heard initial feedback that it is expected the scheme will be oversubscribed. In many ways, that is indicative of the demand that is out there. However, we are talking about hard-pressed, working families, especially in the context of the last few weeks, many of whom feel disenfranchised and feel that we could do more for them. This is particularly the case where young families are just trying to send their children to affordable childcare while they go about their daily business. As I said, I believe Glanmire can put its best foot forward. I hope it is given due consideration in the coming months.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I will not forget my visits to Glanmire. The Deputy will remember that I was quite active on the issue when the Sarsfields Hurling Club suffered a disaster. In that case, we established a unique fund so that Sarsfields and other clubs got funding because of the flooding disaster. Another project in Glanmire, unfortunately, escaped my abilities to sort out although, as the Deputy said, it was not my responsibility but that of another body. I am certainly very familiar with Glanmire. I would be only too happy if I were in a position to deliver what the Deputy is looking for. I am sure the Minister, Deputy Foley, will do her best. Unfortunately, she cannot be here tonight, and I am here in her place.

Improving access to quality and affordable early learning and childcare remains a key priority for the Government. Based on the data available from the annual early years sector profile, the estimated number of enrolments has increased by 25% over the last three years. While the supply of places has increased, there remain indications that the demand, especially for younger children, is higher than the available supply in certain parts of the country. Living in the commuter belt myself, I know only too well the situation.

The Department continues to support the ongoing development and resourcing of core funding, which has given rise to a significant expansion of places since its introduction in 2022. Now in its fourth programme year, core funding funds services based on the number of places available. Core funding provides stability to services and reduces the risk associated with opening a new service. The increased investment in core funding will allow for the natural growth of the sector driven both by new services joining the sector and existing services increasing their hours.

A forward-planning model has been developed and will be central to the Department's plans to achieve the policy goals set out in the programme for Government to build an affordable, high-quality, accessible early childhood learning and childcare system, with State-led facilities adding capacity. The model quantifies the nature and volume of different types of early learning and childcare places across the country and assesses alignment with the number of children in the corresponding age cohorts at local area level.

The Government is also supporting the expansion of capacity through capital funding. The building blocks extension grant scheme is designed to increase capacity in the one- to three-year-old pre-ECCE age range for full daycare. Core funding partner services could apply for capital funding to physically extend their premises or, in the case of community services, to construct or purchase new premises. The scheme will deliver up to 1,500 full daycare places for one- to three-year-olds. Four applicants from Cork were approved for funding under the scheme.

Following on from the success of that scheme, the Minister today launched a new capital scheme, the building blocks extension grant scheme, phase 2. The scheme will make available €10 million. It will open for applications this year and will focus on offering community and private providers funding for extensions to their existing premises. The Minister also recently announced €135 million in capital investment in buildings for high-quality, accessible State-led early learning and childcare. The process will begin in 2026, with investment in buildings in what will be a groundbreaking initiative for the Government. Capital funding will be used to acquire and-or fit out the building, depending on requirements. There will be a particular focus in the new State-led facilities on providing places for one- to three-year-old children because this is where the need is greatest, with scope for these children to progress in the service

until they start school. A suite of appraisal tools has been developed, including a forward-planning model, in order to select projects that align with our objectives.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: It was remiss of me to forget that the Minister of State was in Glanmire when people were in the depths of despair after that flooding incident. I know they were most grateful at that time. They were also grateful to the Taoiseach and the then Minister, Michael McGrath, who was also there at the time. It was remiss of me to forget that, but I know the community in Glanmire certainly will not.

In the brief time that I have, I want to make the case again. There will be dozens of these projects across the country. We will all have them in our constituencies. We will all be putting our best foot forward to try to get one of these over the line in each of our areas. I want the Minister of State to relay the message to the Minister, Deputy Foley, that Glanmire is unique in many respects, especially on the northside of Cork city. It is probably the single biggest area where new housing developments are being built on the north-eastern side of the city. There has been a large influx of young families but, unfortunately, many of them have nowhere to send their children locally and they are sending them further afield.

In the last couple of weeks, an announcement was made to close one of the naíonraí, which is one of the only language provision childcare facilities that we have. Many of those parents have to go to Mayfield and other parts of the city to avail of childcare. That discommodates people because it might not be part of their normal route to work and given the traffic and having to ferry children left, right and centre across the city, it is often difficult to make the journey. In one fell swoop, we can secure 100 to 150 childcare places, which would be a massive boost for an area where primarily young, working families are situated. The building owner is on board and Cork City Childcare is supportive. It is one of two applications that have come forward from my side of the city. I am pleading with the Minister of State to take the message back to the Minister that Glanmire needs its slice of that €135 million.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I will bring it back to the Minister. Up to eight buildings will be selected this year for the State-led initiative.

That will provide places. The level of investment will ramp up during the lifetime of the Government. The initial approach is to purchase and refurbish buildings, given that that is a faster route to delivery, while the option of building new facilities will also be considered. Services will be offered on a not-for-profit basis by third parties.

Where a project is being considered without an operator already in place, the Department will run a process to identify an appropriate not-for-profit operator with capacity to operate a high-quality service, where works are required to manage a capital project. The Department is assessing sites and buildings and, where required, will seek expressions of interest from operators to deliver these services. Local city and county childcare committees will be supporting the development of projects, so in the first instance, community early learning and childcare operators, local authorities, developers and others who might have suitable premises and projects should contact their local committee.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 10.41 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 22 Aibreán 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.41 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 22 April 2026.

