



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoín, 23 Aibreán 2026

Thursday, 23 April 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

School Admissions

1. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the number of children in Dunshaughlin, County Meath on waiting lists and still without an offer of a junior infants place for September 2026; the measures she will take to provide additional places, including with respect to language and ethos preferences; the date on which she will meet with Meath East TDs and local principals to discuss possible options; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29467/26]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I want to ask the Minister the number of children in Dunshaughlin, County Meath, on waiting lists and still without an offer of a junior infants place for September 2026, the measures she will take to provide additional places, including with respect to language and ethos preferences, the date on which she will meet with Meath East TDs and local principals to discuss possible options, and if she will make a statement on the matter.

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The provision of school places to meet the needs of children and young people at primary and post-primary level, including children and young people with special educational needs, is an absolute priority for me.

Recognising the potential for school place pressures, my Department has been engaging on an ongoing basis with the primary schools in Dunshaughlin and has assessed application and admissions data provided by those schools.

In response to the identified need, my Department has engaged with the patron of Dunshaughlin Community National School and has sanctioned the opening of a second junior infant class at the school for 2026. Department officials have been advised by the school that

offers have now been made. Parents can be assured that all pupils in Dunshaughlin will have a place available for September.

It is important to note also that construction work on the new school building for Dunshaughlin Community National School is progressing well and is scheduled to be completed by early 2027.

My Department's responsibility is to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all pupils seeking school places in that area.

With respect to language and ethos preferences, parents have the right to choose which school to apply to. However, in schools where there are more applicants than places available, a selection process may be necessary. This may result in some pupils not obtaining a place in the school of their first choice.

Each year, 140,000 children and young people enter a new school, mainly at junior infant level and at first year in post-primary schools. On the whole, admissions processes run smoothly each year. My Department is required to engage with schools and patrons in only a handful of cases to make additional class capacity available.

The annual enrolment process for new junior infants classes at primary and first year at post-primary is a large-scale operation. As the Deputy will be aware, there are close to 4,000 schools in the country and there are 140,000 new pupils involved.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I take from the Minister's response that it is her understanding that the extra class at Dunshaughlin Community National School will accommodate all the additional children who were on waiting lists. It is my clear understanding that this is not the case. There are children who are still without an offer and children who are not on waiting lists and there are certainly children - in the region of 30 - who do not have an offer of the Irish-medium school place that they want. In the first instance, I understand there were 26 additional places at Dunshaughlin Community National School. Today is the closing date for acceptance of offer. My understanding is that there are a number of children who are still without an offer. Does the Minister know what that number is? What are her plans to accommodate them?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: There is ongoing engagement between the Department and the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, with the schools. In relation to the Gaelscoil, because this is related and it is within the area, my Department has been in ongoing contact with the school. As of 14 April, there are 30 pupils remaining on its waiting list. It is important to note that some of those pupils may have accepted a place elsewhere in the area. The school has contacted all families on the waiting list to confirm whether they wish to remain on it and these 30 pupils have confirmed that they do. There is some duplication between waiting lists for the community national school and the Gaelscoil. Once acceptances have been confirmed by children on the waiting list for the community national school who are being offered places in the newly sanctioned class, those on the Gaelscoil waiting list will be advised of its remaining places.

It is the Department's responsibility to make sure there are places within a catchment area. An ongoing extension project for the Gaelscoil will provide two mainstream classrooms, two

special education tuition rooms and two special education rooms. The project, as the Deputy may be aware, is currently at stage 2b, detailed design.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I will speak frankly here. This is an incredibly frustrating process. I have to say that today feels like more of the same. We are in a situation in Dunshaughlin where, taking into account the additional places at the community national school, there will still be children from Dunshaughlin without an offer of a school place. That is where we are going to be at the end of today and into tomorrow.

There are a large number of children who want Irish-medium education and they are being denied that opportunity. There is a clear solution here, and it was set out outside the Dáil when parents came up to protest. The much-needed additional capacity at the community national school is very welcome but also additional capacity and extra places are also needed at the Gaelscoil. There is a proposal in that regard. Will the Minister meet the principals and local TDs? As suggested by her Government colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne, will the Minister meet them to discuss possible solutions to advance this and ensure every child has a school place?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I reiterate that I am in ongoing engagement with Oireachtas Members, including the Deputy today and other colleagues. My Department is engaging on an ongoing basis with Dunshaughlin Community National School. As I said, parents can be assured that all pupils in Dunshaughlin will have a place available for September. The construction of a new school for Dunshaughlin Community National School is progressing. That is well under way. That will be completed in early 2027.

In relation to the Gaelscoil, two mainstream classrooms, two special education tuition rooms and two special education rooms are at stage 2b and planning permission was granted in February of this year. We are aware of the demographics and demands in the area. As I said, we were in contact with the Gaelscoil in relation to its waiting list and it is working through that. There is ongoing engagement. The Deputy can be assured that for parents - I know this is the main concern - we will work intensively to make sure children have a place in the area for the new school year.

Special Educational Needs

2. **Deputy Eoghan Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Youth if a memo has been sent to Cabinet in relation to the way in which her Department plans to deliver enough special class places and special school places to match the level of demand; the number of children who await a special class or school placement; the number of children who made an application for a special class or school placement; the number of classes that will be needed to match the level of demand, outside of the current 400 already budgeted for in budget 2026; the number of classes that have been opened to date; if every child will have an appropriate school placement for the coming academic year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28882/26]

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The National Council for Special Education has verified that 7,860 children and young people notified to it by 1 October 2025 meet the requirements for a

special class or special school place for the 2026-27 school year. Further children have come forward after this date, and this will continue right up to September 2026. Approximately 7,000 of the 7,860 children and young people have a diagnosis of autism. There is generally an adequate number of available places for children and young people with other diagnoses. The focus, therefore, continues to be on new places for children and young people with autism.

This data continues to be reviewed and analysed by the NCSE, which continues to engage with families. It is the experience of the NCSE that some families who contacted it may decide not to apply for a special education place. This may be where the place is not in a particular school of their choice where a student is already being supported appropriately in his or her existing school.

Data available to the NCSE shows that approximately 75% of the children and young people who came forward by the 1 October deadline are already enrolled in school. As in previous years, the priority group for access to specialist placements for the 2026-27 school year are for those without a school place, namely, children moving into primary school for the first time; children moving from primary to post-primary school; and children without a school place such as those who might have moved into an area or where their previous placement has broken down.

Budget 2026 initially provided for 3,000 new places. There are over 2,500 places also available through the normal annual movement of students from primary to post-primary and finishing school. The funding approved by the Government earlier this week will allow to provide for further new special classes and special school places over and above the 3,000 new places already budgeted for. That work continues and the new special classes will continue to be confirmed over the coming weeks.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: At the Committee of Public Accounts in February, the Secretary General of the Department of education told me that a memo would be sent to Cabinet in relation to how we are going to deal with the exponential growth in the level of demand for children who require school places. Last Thursday, the Secretary General told me that the memo is set to be sent to Cabinet. Has that memo on how we are going to deal with this exponential growth been sent to Cabinet?

The Minister cited a figure of 7,860 children who had been notified before the October deadline. The Taoiseach has already clarified that there has been exponential growth following the deadline in October. I know the Department of education has the figure on the number of children who require a school place because the NCSE gives the Department a figure every Friday. That has yet to be revealed.

I want to know how many children still require a school place for the coming academic year and whether a memo has been sent to the Government on how we are going to deal with the exponential growth. It is more than likely that extra funding will have to be made available. Is it the case that we will need at least 600 special classes for the coming academic year? Are we still approximately 170 classes short?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: Many of the 2,700 new special education places provided for in the 2025-26 school year are in special classes, which means there are now 3,741 special

classes in our education system. Budget 2026 provided €3 billion to support children with special educational needs and that allowed for 3,000 new special places for the 2026-27 school year, with 1,700 special needs assistants, SNAs, 860 special education teachers, €16 million for education therapy services, extra special education teacher hours for transition and co-ordination and a special school package increase in capital funding for these schools.

This week, a memo went to the Government under which I secured additional funding for the whole education budget, not just special education, because there was a structural deficit in the Department. Already to date, well in advance of previous years, we have sanctioned more than 400 special classes and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and I have continued to announce these. We want to do more of that. Work is ongoing with the NCSE and schools because there will be parents who may not yet know that their child needs a special class.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: There are also a lot of parents who know their children need a special class or special school placement and they do not know whether their child will get a school place. The memo sent to the Government did not only relate to special education, but it must have included the number of children who require a special class or special school placement. The Department knows that figure. The NCSE has told me that every Friday it informs the Department of the number of children who still require a special class or special school placement. Does the Minister know that figure? Does she know how many classes will be needed for the coming academic year? At the end of the day, there are parents outside the Chamber who are contacting every TD's office saying they have contacted 20, 30 or 40 schools about a school place for their child. This is an extremely important issue for their children. It needs to be put on the record of the Dáil that the Minister for education is aware of the specific number of children who require a special class placement, the number of classes that will be needed for the coming academic year and whether the Department will match the level of demand.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: As I said, 7,860 parents were notified to the NCSE before 1 October. There are more who are still engaging with that process so I secured extra funding for the roll-out of further special classes. Some parents are still waiting for reports or recommendations and some parents might not be aware that their child may require a special class. However, I reassure those parents and families that they will be supported in seeking a placement in a school.

Some 240,000 children who have additional needs are supported in mainstream settings. The Deputy will be aware that the NCSE began sanctioning new special classes in January this year, which was several months earlier than last year. Some 427 classes have been sanctioned to date, with an additional five inclusive classes. In addition, there are 139 special schools, including seven schools attached to hospitals and three schools attached to CAMHS units, with approximately 9,817 pupils enrolled in those 139 schools. These numbers will evolve over the next few months. If parents engage with the NCSE, it is the role of the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and I to ensure they have-----

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

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: -----school places and are supported in those settings.

Schools Building Projects

3. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Education and Youth if her attention has been brought to the long and complex planning history of a new school building project (details supplied); that ten-year planning permission for the new school building project will expire in August 2026; the measures she will take to ensure this project is advanced before planning expires, or the steps that will need to be taken to advance the project as quickly as possible thereafter; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29468/26]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Has the Minister's attention been brought to the long and complex planning history of a school building project in Dunboyne, County Meath?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: The school building projects for Dunboyne junior and senior national schools will deliver a new 24-classroom primary school for the senior school and an eight-classroom extension and refurbishment project for the junior school. Both school projects will also include classrooms for children with additional needs.

I am aware that there have previously been procurement difficulties with this project and that an opportunity was taken to request the design team to do an element of redesign to include in the scope of works decarbonisation measures for both schools, and a fabric upgrade for the primary school. The revised stage 2b report for the senior national school was submitted in June 2025 and is currently with the Department for review. On completion of the junior national school's stage 2b report, the design team will be authorised to re-engage with the local authority regarding the planning permission.

In January this year, my Department published its sectoral national development plan, NDP, implementation plan, which included a list of 105 prioritised projects to proceed to construction or tender in 2026 and 2027. A Department-led prioritisation process will continue over the course of 2026 and 2027 to assess and evaluate the progression of individual projects through the design pipeline, including projects at stage 2b, such as Dunboyne junior and senior national schools. They are not part of the initial tranche of 105, but this will ultimately inform the next tranches of the programme roll-out to tender.

Officials will continue to engage with Dunboyne junior and senior national schools on their accommodation needs, including any interim arrangements that need to be put in place. Since 2020, the Department of education has provided €473 million in capital funding for Meath schools and, during this period, a total of 62 schools have been upgraded through the provision of a new school building, a large-scale extension or provision of modular accommodation. Currently, 13 school projects in Meath are under construction, seven school projects will go to tender or construction this year and next year, and ten schools have been approved for the summer works and climate action summer works schemes.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: There are other questions on the Order Paper today about the same issue. A question being asked in every corner of Ireland is how are schools selected for prioritisation and how, in all that is reasonable, were other schools left behind. With the state of deterioration, dilapidation and condition of the school, that it is intended for this school to provide additional special education places and improved accommodation for a growing

population and that it has essentially been at tendering stage on two occasions before now, the Minister will be able to imagine the extreme frustration of the school that there is a significant question mark over how long it will take to get a new school.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The Deputy will be aware there are a number of factors. This is a general statement about the NDP and projects to be prioritised. Demographic pressures in an area, enrolments in the wider catchment area, special education provision and that schools do not currently have a home are all factored into the prioritisation.

On the school in question, we absolutely recognise the need for prioritisation here. This is a five-year NDP programme. The first tranche has been announced. Due to the project being re-tendered, the design team is currently carrying out a pre-qualification for a main contractor and reserved specialist. The project is now at an advanced stage of architectural planning, stage 2b - detailed design. The design team submitted an updated stage 2b report for the senior school in June last year. The amended design was to ensure decarbonisation measures were included and it included a new scope. In the interim, the Department has agreed the temporary accommodation for the junior school site. That will be replaced as it is no longer fit for purpose.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Minister will appreciate two significant considerations. One is the lapsing of the planning permission and having to go back. I met Meath County Council about this. There is a new county development plan. Significant work will have to be redone in terms of submissions and there is concern that will delay the project further. I appreciate what the Minister said about pre-works and so on, but can she give any assurance about that question? Will the lapsing of the planning permission delay the project further or can the two processes happen at once?

I repeatedly hear about a Department-led prioritisation process. What opportunities are there for individual schools or boards of management to engage with that process?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: Where planning permission has previously been secured but is due to run out before the project can be delivered, there are mechanisms.

My Department is very aware of this and would have a lot of experience in relation to it. The Department examines projects on a case-by-case basis to determine the best course of action. One approach might be engagement with the local authority to request an extension to the existing planning permission, for example. I am just speaking in the general here. This would be applicable, for example, where a project has substantially commenced on site before the expiry date of the planning permission. In some instances, a new planning application may be required and in cases where that is necessary, the Department will avail of the opportunity to review, and, where appropriate, update the scope of the project. Officials from my Department, along with the school's design team, engage with local authorities on this as a matter of common practice.

Special Educational Needs

4. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education and Youth whether she will implement the alternative circular drafted by the Save our SNAs campaign group (details supplied) to ensure that all school students have supports appropriate to their needs. [29532/26]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is only a few weeks since the Government caused fear, panic and stress among parents of children with special needs, school communities and SNAs by threatening swingeing cuts in SNAs in many schools. That was all because of a circular from 2014 which had failed to recognise the evolution of the role of the SNA and the needs of our children with special needs. An alternative circular has been put together by the Save our SNAs campaign group involving parents, SNAs and others. The group wants to know if the Government is going to support and adopt this new circular about the role of the SNAs in our schools.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank the Deputy for the question. The Department of education recognises the value of the special needs assistant, SNA, role in the successful inclusion of students with additional and significant care needs in schools to enable them to achieve their best outcomes and reach their full potential.

I am also aware of the contribution that SNAs make to the educational experience and overall well-being of students in our schools. I recognise that SNAs demonstrate a deep commitment to their roles and the students they work with, providing a range of supports, including for behaviours of concern, assisting students with regulation and fostering independence.

Currently provisions on the role of the SNA are set out in circulars 30/2014 and 71/2011. The policy and the process for allocating SNAs has been in place since 2014 and the NCSE continues to respond to increasing demand for SNA support, as is reflected in the growing SNA workforce. By the end of this year, there will be almost 25,000 SNAs in our mainstream classes, special classes and special schools. Since its publication, circular 30/2014 has facilitated unparalleled growth of more than 13,200 SNAs, more than doubling the SNA workforce.

The Department has concluded a comprehensive review of the role of the SNA as part of ongoing work on the first SNA workforce development plan. This work was supported by a working group comprised of a wide range of stakeholders which met on 15 different occasions in recent times, providing input from a number of perspectives. These stakeholders included school management bodies, Fórsa, the recognised trade union which represents SNAs, the National Parents Council, and the Children's Rights Alliance. All of these organisations, through their representatives, participated in the dialogue, exchanged views, provided suggested wording and ultimately influenced the final text of the circular. My Department has also conducted significant focus group research as well as a national survey of SNAs to ensure everyone in our school communities was given the opportunity to provide input.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Minister of State has not really answered the question. Let us remember that we had a massive revolt because of the anxiety, stress and fear induced by the Government's attempt to cut SNA supports in many schools, based on an outdated

circular that failed to acknowledge the evolution of the role of the SNA and the rights of children to the supports and resources they need. What I have heard the Minister of State do is quote figures but the whole point of the new circular being put forward by parents, SNAs and school communities is that it is not about figures but about the needs of children. It is about a reaffirmation, as they say themselves, of the obligations of the Government under the UNCRPD and the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs, EPSEN, Act, and the rights of children to full and equal access to education. It is also about a recognition of the evolution of the role of the SNA as being somebody who removes the barriers and provides the supports necessary for children to have full and equal access to education at all levels. They want to know if the Government will engage with them on this circular, adopt it and issue it as the circular that is needed.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The outcome of the consultation we have had with the various stakeholders, including SNAs, Fórsa, the National Parents Council and the Children's Rights Alliance, is a draft circular which provides a clear and detailed description of the range of duties and responsibilities of the evolving SNA role. The Minister and I fully understand the evolving role, which is a product of meaningful collaboration with all of those in our school communities. We met with the SNAs and other stakeholders last month in a day-long engagement to discuss work being carried out by the Department on the plan, including the comprehensive review of the SNA role. It is intended that a new circular and associated guidance documents on the role of the SNA will be published in quarter 2 of 2026.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Government really needs to realise that we have had revolts on a number of issues because it does not actually listen to the people on the front line. The Minister of State has not responded on the actual circular that has been proposed by the Save our SNAs campaign. It comes from the horse's mouth and is about what SNAs, parents and others believe is required to ensure that their children have the opportunities, supports and resources necessary to reach their full potential and to vindicate their rights to education and full participation in society. Is the Minister of State going to engage with the people who put this circular together? Is he going to engage with the circular? Does he agree with the principles set out in it? He is not really answering my question. He said that he has talked to this person and that person but is he going to respond to this circular and engage with the people behind it? I suggest he meets the people who put it together to discuss what is in it. It is not clear, otherwise, that the Government will not make the same mistakes that led to the crisis we had only a few weeks ago.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: We have had a considerable amount of engagement on this and work has been ongoing for a number of years on the SNA workforce development plan, redeployment and on the circular. A lot of work has been done in relation to the circular going back a number of years at this stage, involving consultation with those across the education partners, parents groups, children's advocates and SNAs who are central to advising on the challenges and the evolving role. It is important to note that we have been engaging extremely well to bring a new circular into the system. A huge amount of work has been done in terms of consulting with the people who are at the coal face. There are almost 25,000 SNAs and we have no intention, as a Government, to deplete the SNAs. The SNAs are a hugely integral part of the education experience for children with additional needs and they are the foundation of

what we are doing. We want to ensure we have the right tools in terms of circulars, the workforce development plan, and redeployment in place to ensure SNAs are valued and the role they play is updated in the new circular.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Minister of State did not really answer the question

Question No. 5 withdrawn.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Special Educational Needs

6. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Education and Youth when the report of the Dublin 15 special education task force will be published; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29032/26]

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy for his question. In 2024, the then Minister of State with responsibility for special education and inclusion established a task force to support the forward planning of special education provision in the Dublin 15 area. I thank all of the task force members, including parents representatives, school principals, school patron representatives and representatives of the HSE, the NCSE and officials from the Departments of children and education, for their work through the school year 2024-2025 in discussing the key issues relating to special education provision. The task force met on ten separate occasions. The key aims of the task force were to advise on how to better plan for the provision of special education places in Dublin 15 for the 2025-2026 school year and beyond, examine better ways to establish the level of need in the area, advise on how special education places can be provided and to examine how a common application system can be established to reduce the burden on parents applying to multiple schools.

The task force that supports forward planning of special education provision in the Dublin 15 area submitted its report late last year. The report sets out 21 key recommendations. I am happy that work is progressing in relation to meeting some of the key recommendations of the task force. A new education therapy service is being established. Additional funding has been secured for capitation for schools, with a particular focus on special schools. The State, as set out in the NDP launch earlier this year, is making significant capital funding available to our schools. I am happy to confirm that the report will be published very shortly.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: There is real anger about the fact that this report that was handed over to the Department in July still has not been published. The Minister was involved in the establishment of this task force, so I do not need to go into the entire history. Before the 2024 general election, when there was a real crisis in Dublin 15 about lack of places for autism classes and in special schools, the Government, which I was a part of, made a decision to establish the task force to address the issue. The Minister of State set out the huge amount of work that was done by State bodies, but particularly by the representatives of parents and schools in the area. The recommendations are relevant to Dublin 15, but they are also relevant to the wider country. It is not good enough that we still do not have a date for the publication.

I thought the Minister of State was going to give me some news there, but we need a specific date for publication and an understanding of how the Department is going to respond to each of the recommendations.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I assure the Deputy that we will be publishing it as a matter of urgency. On the key recommendations, a task force outlined the challenges that were being faced in a particular part of Dublin 15, but it is also representative of the challenges that are being faced across the country. The recommendations that are in it are in relation to investing, understanding the challenges and the need within the communities and to make sure that the whole of the Government and the Department are focused on ensuring that there is provision for special education. An awful lot of work has gone on over the past to ensure that we have school places for children who have special education requirements and to ensure that we have the supports across the country and in Dublin in particular, where there was a huge challenge. A spotlight was put on that area because of the difficulties that were there a couple of years ago. I assure the Deputy that we are looking at the key recommendations in it. The report will be published very shortly. I also assure the Deputy that the recommendations that are in it have been taken on board. We in the Department are working meticulously to make sure that those are implemented.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: In Dublin 15, it has been parents and educators who have provided the leadership when it comes to special education. Danu Community Special School has a large number of autism classes. It was driven forward by the Dublin 15 autism group. The common application system, which is where, for the first time, a family only has to apply in one location and that application is sent for autism classes across 18 primary schools was driven forward by the Dublin 15 Principals' Network and Helena Trench in particular. That is why it is so frustrating that these groups gave a huge amount of time to the task force to bring forward these recommendations, which, as the Minister of State said, were put forward in the context of Dublin 15 but have city-wide and national application as well, have not been brought into the public light yet. It is urgent that the report is published. I urge him to do it as quickly as possible and to respect the work that was put into this report.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I give the Deputy a commitment that we will publish it as a matter of urgency. I acknowledge hugely the amount of work that is being put in by the people into the task force by each and every one of the education partners across the sector. The Minister and I have been working since Christmas. Most Monday nights have been spent in meetings in relation to moving forward the education and special education component of it as well to ensure that we are listening to the challenges that are out there. We are taking on board the challenges right across the sector whether it is the SNAs and the school communities, but particularly families and communities that are looking to have the best possible education facilities and educational experience for children with additional needs. I will give a commitment to get that published as a matter of urgency. I reiterate that the recommendations in the report have very much been taken on board by the Government to make sure they are implemented for the best possible education system for children with additional needs.

Special Educational Needs

7. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the level of engagement her Department has had with the request by a school (details supplied) for modular accommodation that can facilitate the opening of two additional autism classes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29156/26]

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Inniu táim chun caint faoi scoil a mbím ag caint fúithi i gcónaí sa Teach seo, Stapolin Educate Together National School in my constituency of Dublin Bay North. I have raised it a number of times. It is a fantastic school with dedicated staff who are watching this at the moment. I had the pleasure of visiting it, as did the Minister of State earlier in the year. He saw how hard-working the staff members are and the exemplary example of the education they are providing for their students. The issue is that they need a special class. They do not have room and they need modular additions for that to happen.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The Government is committed to the continued accelerated provision of additional special classes and special school places for 2026-27. The National Council for Special Education is the statutory body tasked with sanctioning new special education provision in our schools. The NCSE has sanctioned 432 new special classes nationally, including 102 new special classes in Dublin, for the next school year 2026-27, with more to follow in the coming weeks. This is a number of months ahead of last year and provides for greater certainty for families and more time for schools to plan for the establishment of new special classes. I commend every school, including the school referred to by the Deputy, that expresses an interest in opening a new special class. As the Deputy knows, I visited the school last year and I know the good work the staff do in supporting children with additional needs. This school is already supporting three special classes. The focus for the Department and the NCSE is working to provide new special classes in medium and larger primary schools with none or just one special class.

The school received a new building comprising 16 mainstream classrooms and a two-class SEN base in 2023. A recently received application for two special education needs modular classrooms under the additional school accommodation, ASA, scheme is currently under consideration. However, as this is a relatively new school building, the Department expects the school to prioritise utilisation of all existing capacity in the first instance. Resources are available to support schools who have children who have needs beyond those catered for within the special classes. I ask the school to continue to engage with the NCSE on accessing those supports. The council is also engaging with parents in the locality and in the surrounding areas to ensure there is a range of provision available, including in Stapolin National School. My Department and the council will continue to keep the matter under review.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I visited the students in the school again last week. They need this to be given to them. One of the students, Esmail, also asked for a pink castle, if the Minister of State could do this for her. He said the NCSE is reviewing it, but from speaking and listening to the principal, the NCSE is saying that the Department will not give the modular building, so there is miscommunication there. All five TDs in Dublin Bay North have brought this up. It is needed. All of the local TDs are pushing for it, as are local councillors. Other schools that are not asking for special classes or for modular buildings are being offered them but this school, which has a clear demand with data - 64 children are waiting in this area that I represent

- to support the need for a modular building to be put in and they will be able to do it. It has an exemplary example of how it should be done. It has hard-working staff. I would really appreciate if it could be reviewed.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I know the school community is extremely dedicated and capable. It has been engaging with all the public representatives, including the Deputy. He has mentioned it a considerable number of times in the House. There is a number of issues. We are trying to make sure that we have the best possible provision across the Dublin community. Dublin continues to be a challenge in terms of special education, both in special classes and in special schools.

There is a huge amount of work going on. This school is a new building, comprising of 16 mainstream classes. We are looking at other school communities to make sure we have a balance right across the system in it. Deputy Heneghan has raised it a number of times but I assure him that we are looking at every single piece and at all school communities. We are looking at how best we can support children with additional needs right across the city of Dublin and right across the country. It is fair to say that it is a relatively new school and it is important the school prioritises utilisation of all existing capacity in the first instance.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: It is a new school but it was not built big enough and there are more houses going into that area, which I represent. They need modular additions and I would appreciate if the Department could clarify whether it has assessed the situation.

I was speaking to one of the parents who is waiting for a school place. It is the case of James Field, who is currently without an appropriate special school place since September, despite the endless determination from his family. His mother, who was a councillor with me in the Clontarf Ward, has reached out to me. She said:

If James has no appropriate space by September, the years of progress will turn to regress day by day. James does not have play dates or friends coming here. School is essential for James to learn the basic life skills and social skills.

I have met James. He is a fantastic young man. Councillor Ali Field deserves for this case to be looked at. She has raised it through all of the TDs. She said:

If it was my child, how would you feel? You should be ashamed doing this to a 12-year-old, vulnerable little boy.

I would appreciate if the Department could look at that.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I appeal to James's family and the councillor to make sure they are engaging with the NCSE, like we have over many years within the NCSE. We are building up the expertise within the council to liaise with families. It is hugely important that we have what is needed on the ground dealing with families and challenges within the school communities. However, in the first instance it is important that James's mom is engaging with the council because it is the important conduit between the families and the school communities. It is always easier to give the *carte blanche* but this is a very challenging question the Deputy keeps referring to. It is important that the Department and the NCSE keep the matter under review but the school community should listen very carefully as well to the

guidance they are being given and that they should utilise everything within the new school building at Stapolin Educate Together National School.

School Transport

8. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Education and Youth for an update on the expansion of the school transport service to reduce the distance criteria to recognise feeder schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29143/26]

Deputy Edward Timmins: As part of the programme for Government, we set out to implement the terms of the school transport review to reduce distance criteria and expand eligibility. I want to raise the importance of recognising feeder schools as part of this criteria.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The school transport system scheme, which Bus Éireann operates on behalf of the Department, has expanded significantly over the past six years. In that time, the number of children and young people using the service has grown from under 120,000 in 2018 to over 181,000, including over 24,000 pupils with special educational needs in 2025, which equates to an increase of over 50%. Since 2018, investment in the scheme has more than doubled from €200 million to €537 million in 2025. The growth in school transport has been especially marked in the area of special educational needs. This now represents almost 60% of the scheme's total costs, while serving around 13% of pupils.

The School Transport 2030 report was published in early 2024. The recommended changes to the schemes include expansion of the current eligibility criteria, addressing current operational challenges and moving towards better integration with public transport to ensure the better value for money to the Exchequer. It was outlined at the time the review was published that the proposed changes to the eligibility criteria would further increase demand for the scheme so it was considered prudent to implement the changes on a phased basis.

As part of this phased rollout, 14 school transport pilots commenced in the 2024-25 school year. A further 11 pilots were approved for the 2025-26 school year. For these pilots, the distance criteria for pupils were reduced to 2 km for primary and post-primary and the need for a pupil to be attending their nearest school was removed. All pilots are being monitored, and a further evaluation will take place at the end of the current school year. Findings from these evaluations will guide the planning and implementation needed for a national rollout of a revised school transport scheme. Implementation of the recommendations of the review will continue to be planned subject to resources being available to meet the increased demand.

Deputy Edward Timmins: In west Wicklow, St. Brigid's National School in Manor Kilbride is a feeder school to Blessington Community College. Some families attending Manor Kilbride school are told they cannot receive bus tickets to Blessington. This is because five other secondary schools in County Dublin are closer but they cannot get into those schools as it is not a feeder school to those schools. This is a crazy anomaly.

It is important that this criterion be reviewed. Many families have been left relying on the concessionary ticket system, which creates uncertainty. This distance calculation is also

sometimes done on roads that may not be safe or suitable for a bus carrying students to travel on.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The school transport system is a hugely valued piece by families right across primary, post-primary and special education. Since the start of the school transport system in the late 1960s there have been many changes along the way. We had the recommendations of the report. The cost of the school transport has grown hugely over the past number of years to try to meet the needs.

Last September or October, there were over nine hours of discussion in the Dáil, Seanad Éireann and committees in one week on school transport and that goes to show the respect there is for school transport right across the system. The Deputy made a point in relation to feeder schools and the anomalies within the school transport system. We are evaluating some of the pilot schemes that have been done over the past two years. Those evaluations will be done after this school year to inform us how best we can meet the various challenges within the system.

Deputy Edward Timmins: School bus services in County Wicklow are critical, especially in west Wicklow where public transport is limited. Some schools are on narrow roads with limited parking and no footpaths. School bus travel is essential and will make school drop-off and collection time safer, reduce traffic congestion and will be more environmentally friendly. It also allows parents to continue working, as many have given up employment or reduced working hours due to the logistical challenge of getting children to and from school where transport is not available. It is also important that the process considers the community links for students choosing to attend a particular school.

The full implementation of the 2030 review is required to permanently fix the eligibility status for families, whose nearest school is not their feeder school. This is an anomaly. They are being refused tickets because they are not the nearest school, yet it is a feeder school and the only option they have to get in because they are not feeder schools of other closer schools. A feeder school should automatically qualify for the ticket.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: There are pinch points across the country. There are always issues in relation to school transport in Wicklow. The school transport scheme was initiated in the late 1960s because a huge number of people did not have transport themselves. The school transport system was to get people to post-primary in particular, and to primary school as well. Now, because of work patterns, it is a crucial piece for families, in rural Ireland in particular, to make sure they have access to education.

Regarding the issues around the feeder schools, we will evaluate the data that will come forward at the end of this year on the pilot schemes. The cost of the scheme to the Exchequer has grown hugely over a short number of years, but we have to meet the demand as well. I will keep the points the Deputy made under review.

Question No. 9 taken with Written Answers.

Teacher Training

10. **Deputy Ryan O'Meara** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the training available for teachers to support them in their AI literacy skills; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29161/26]

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: A comprehensive suite of professional learning to support teachers in relation to artificial intelligence, AI, for teachers is being provided by Oide technology in education, Oide TIE, which is the Department-funded digital teacher professional learning service that has been rolled out across the country. This work recognises both the opportunities and challenges presented by AI in schools, including its potential to enhance teaching and learning and assessment, alongside considerations such as ethics, responsible use, data privacy, algorithmic bias and assessment integrity.

In this context, the AI in schools external advisory task force will hold its first meeting on 14 May 2026. This task force will be set up and will support the Department in developing a coherent national approach to the safe, responsible and effective use of AI across our school system. At my request as Minister, the task force will report to me quarterly with reports on its emerging findings.

Through Oide TIE, general support is provided on the use of AI, particularly generative AI, in education. A dedicated AI hub on the Oide TIE website is available for all schools. This is a carefully curated digital space to support school leaders and teachers in considering the use of AI. It promotes the practical implementation and ethical application of AI, ensuring that schools adopt AI technologies in a thoughtful and effective way. The AI hub provides resources for teachers, including an introductory online course, AI for Schools. It also helps educators to understand AI. Documents are published in relation to guidance on AI for schools and the ethical considerations involved, as outlined in the digital strategy for schools.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I would like to focus briefly on the additional assessment components, AACs. These are being rolled out fully but they exist already in some subjects. This time 12 years ago, I finished my research study report as part of leaving certificate history. I did that report on the Modreeny ambush, where the north Tipperary flying column ambushed the Black and Tans between Cloughjordan and Borrisokane during the War of Independence. I had to look at Ernie O'Malley's *Raids and Rallies*, the late Roche Williams' book, *In and Out of School - In the Home of the MacDonaghs*, and research done by the Cloughjordan Heritage Group.

This morning, I was able to just google the Modreeny ambush and get a full overview, with the date and time, the number of casualties, their names and everything else. My concern is around the way in which students are so easily able to access all that information now and how it impacts on the additional assessment component. I am glad to hear that the external advisory task force is being established. That will be needed for teachers and for external examiners as we continue to grow what I see as the very important additional assessment components.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The Deputy raises an important issue. In relation to the additional assessment components, coursework rules were published by the State Examinations Commission, SEC, last November. They addressed the use and misuse of artificial intelligence. Additionally, the SEC has also commissioned research by the University of Limerick, which is

due for completion in December 2026. There are very clear rules online, through the SEC, in relation to the use of AI for examinations. As the Deputy and I will remember from when we were at school, if somebody else's work is being used, then it has to be referenced. We have to quote it. It is very clearly laid out for teachers and students. Students have a responsibility as well.

There is the AI task force, which has key educational stakeholders and experts in this area on it who will report back to me. It is not just us doing the work here nationally. We are also working with our European counterparts, looking at the evidence and best practice coming from an EU level, and constantly updating our own AI research and guidance to schools. The SEC has clear coursework guidelines in this regard.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: It is important to acknowledge the many positive benefits to AI as well. It is not all negative but it is essential that this advisory task force is up and running and doing that work. AI is moving so quickly compared to what we would have had only a number of years ago, let alone what I would have had in technological assistance doing my leaving certificate 12 years ago. There are so many benefits there to enhance students' learning experience and to enhance their ability to dig down into information but it is about all those mechanisms the Minister mentioned and possibly more, including working with European counterparts, that will be so important to ensure this technology does not take away from the ability to teach students the skills of critical thinking, research and analysis and investigating primary and secondary sources in whatever subject it might be. A huge body of work is needed and I am delighted to see the Department advancing it.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: The Deputy very eloquently expressed the situation in relation to the role of the teacher and teaching and learning, which is very important. There are lots of positives for AI, as well as lots of challenges, including its ethical use. Teachers and school leaders play a central role in developing students' digital skills, including AI literacy. To support them, we have the AI schools hubs, acceptable use policy, bespoke in-school supports for teachers and Oide. We are also working at EU level. An international AI pilot is exploring data literacy, the ethical use of AI and generative AI. That information, the feedback and learning from that pilot, will feed into our guidance for our schools. We are constantly working and evolving, and working with our European counterparts and on national research here and on best practice to ensure we are rolling this technology out in a very safe and ethical manner. My Department has adopted a whole evidence-informed approach to AI, and that task force will be instrumental in these ongoing efforts. This is a living document and an evolving situation, and we need to make sure we are keeping ahead and working with European counterparts to make sure our young people are prepared for this digital world.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Deputies have asked to switch Question Nos. 11 and 12 around to allow for attendance at committees. We take Question No. 12 next.

School Transport

12. **Deputy Keira Keogh** asked the Minister for Education and Youth if her Department has considered the particular challenges associated with the current school transport criteria in rural areas such as County Mayo, including the local nuances associated with feeder schools and geographical distances; the measures her Department is taking to address these challenges; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29062/26]

Deputy Keira Keogh: Go raibh maith agat to my Vice Chair who is allowing me to swap to let me make it in time for a committee. Has the Minister considered the particularly nuanced challenges around current school transport, especially local traditions in relation to feeder schools versus kilometres, especially in rural counties like Mayo?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy for the question. The school transport system is operated on behalf of the Department by Bus Éireann and it has expanded significantly over the past six years. In response to previous questions, I said the number of pupils using the service had increased from 120,000 years ago to 181,000 now. That is more than a 50% increase in a short time. The investment by the State has increased from €200 million to €537 million in 2025. There has been a huge increase in the special education requirement aspect of it as well, which now accounts for almost 60% of funding in the scheme.

The Deputy mentioned the feeder schools. At various points, we can see that the school transport system is encountering challenges across the country. There are challenges in relation to areas of the country where the feeder schools are going to one particular school and the nearest school is going to other schools. Those have been recurring for some time. In fact, going back a number of years ago, it was changed from the catchment area to the nearest school to try to alleviate the pressures in the school transport system and to modernise it. A number of pilot projects have taken place. There were 14 in the previous school year and 11 in the current school year. This data is being collected right to the end of this school year to ensure we have a proper glance at where the challenges are. In the programme for Government, we are committed to further expanding the scheme. Indeed, the 2030 report also talks about it.

A lot of the questions that have come from the Deputy, and from other Deputies, concerned feeder schools, the criteria involved in this context and how that marries into how we operate the school transport system in future. County Mayo has been mentioned a few times, and we will certainly review the situation, but it will be based on the data we have from the pilot schemes.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I welcome the huge investment in school transport and the huge increase.

It is almost a year to the day I spoke about Sancta Maria Secondary School in Louisburgh that has two buses going every single day from Westport at a cost of approximately €850 to the parents. Traditionally, kids from Westport have either gone to Westport or Louisburgh schools. I even know of kids from Newport who will either go to school in Westport or Achill, but Castlebar schools could be considered their second nearest option. I understand there might be pilots going on, but a year later there are still parents paying €850. We do not have many children going from Westport to Castlebar, but traditionally we have two buses going to Louisburgh. That is data. We can look back over the past seven or eight years and there are

two buses every single year going from Westport to Louisburgh. The Minister of State will agree, €850 is a huge cost to parents.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: We have looked at the different challenges with feeder schools and where the clusters or noise is within the system. Last year, we had a weekly meeting with Bus Éireann and the Department to monitor the situation and this year we have brought forward a closing date from June to 8 May to ensure we can do better. We probably will have the same challenges in August or September but we want to have better sight of what is needed and what are the applications. The issue in relation to feeder schools is continuously raised with us whether in the Deputy's area or other areas, and how the figures are with parental choice and what the norm is in those communities. It is something that if we had an endless purse we would love to resolve but we are constantly keeping it under review. Going back a number of years, it was the catchment areas which were drawn up in the late 1960s. We removed that. It is something that is constantly brought in with feeder schools and it is constantly under review.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I can see why in places like Dublin, Galway or bigger areas, the catchment area could be confusing and there are a lot of schools. However, when we look at really rural places, it seems it would be much easier to engage with the schools themselves. The primary schools can tell the Department where all the students are going. If the primary schools in Newport are saying their students are either going to go to Westport, Achill or Louisburgh, why is Castlebar down as their nearest school? It might geographically be the second nearest or nearest school, but if kids from an area are not going there at all, it is crazy that the system would look at it that way. If there is any way there is a pilot that could be looked at for rural areas to see if the Department could engage with primary schools first and foremost to assess the nearest and second nearest schools based on where kids are going rather than on kilometres it would help, because there could be a school nearer by kilometres. For example, for students in Glenhest, there is a 0.5 difference in kilometres, but the kids are not going to Castlebar, they are going to Achill, Westport or Louisburgh.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I talked about if we had endless funding in the Department, one issue would be traditional feeder schools and the policy there. We have to work within the parameters we have.

In relation to the evolving of the school transport system, it is hugely valued within rural Ireland because it is an enabler to get the children to and from school and the different work patterns parents have. As I said earlier, one week last September there were nine hours of debate on school transport within the Houses of the Oireachtas which showed the level of interest in relation to it. One of the issues the Deputy's colleagues raised earlier in relation to another part of the country was feeder schools. There is no question we have challenges in relation to this because of the huge growth in the school transport system in the past number of years. We are continuing to invest in it, but it is one of the key pieces we have to do more work on.

Schools Building Projects

11. **Deputy Aisling Dempsey** asked the Minister for Education and Youth to explain the process around School Building Projects; the project process and if there are currently delays in the process. [29148/26]

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: I ask the Minister about the school building project list for schools which are either new builds or seeking extensions, and when they get on to that list how they work through the process and what delays they might face.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I thank the Deputy for her question. My Department's process for delivering a school building project under the large-scale programme or additional school accommodation programme involves five core stages. These stages are reflective of the capital works, management framework and infrastructure guidelines. The stages range from preliminary design to completion and handover. My Department's design team procedures set out the requirements to be followed at each stage of those processes. These procedures are available on the website.

At a high level, the work progressed at each of the key stages is as follows: stage 1 includes reviewing the project brief information and analysing all the site factors which may impact on the project's viability; stage 2(a) includes the development of the design, cost planning and preparations to lodge the statutory approvals; stage 2(b) includes obtaining all the statutory approvals, preparing the tender documents and pre-tender cost plan; stage 3 includes running the tender process, assessing the tenders and awarding the project contract; stage 4 refers to the construction. Finally, stage 5 includes ensuring quality completion and timely project handover along with the final account.

In order for a pipeline project to move from one stage to the next, confirmation is always required that the project is compliant with all the relevant technical and cost requirements. Other factors which influence the timing for progress include relative prioritisation of the project and the timing affordability within the national development plan funding parameters, taking account of the overall programme requirements. Delays can occur on occasion due to factors beyond the Department's control, for example, challenges in acquiring a site, planning permission issues, procurement difficulties or adverse weather while the project is at construction. Some of these issues are not unique to the school building programme and the Department manages challenges as they arrive. Overall, my Department endeavours to manage the school building programme across the estate of over 4,000 schools to ensure that projects are delivered to meet the most urgent needs in the shortest possible timeframe. This year, will see at least 1,000 projects under construction across a range of programmes.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: I thank the Minister for that clarification. I will use Boyne Community School in Trim as an example. It has been on the school project building list for over 15 years for works and an extension. Some 24 prefabs have been added to that site which is a recognition that the Department is aware how important extending and improving the school is. The local demand for this school is huge. It is the only secondary school in Trim that caters for boys. Engagement with the Department was lacking for many years, but a full redesign was completed recently. However, it still remains in stage 2(a) behind Scoil Mhuire and our local Gaelscoil which only got onto the list in recent years.

I understand emergency school building works will arise and sometimes projects will have to be leapfrogged, but Boyne Community School should be on a transparent, public list with works completed as quickly as possible, in the order it went on the said list.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I think the Deputy. In the national development plan, of the 105 projects published earlier this year, seven are in County Meath, two of which are in Meath West, St Ultan's School and Ard Rí Community National School, both in Navan. Additionally, ten schools, including six in Meath West are approved to undergo works as part of the climate action summer works programme this summer. These projects are in addition to the €473 million investment in capital funding since 2020 for schools in County Meath. Some €216 million was for Meath West schools. Over that period, a total of 62 schools have been upgraded either through the provision of a new school building, large-scale extension or provision of modular accommodation which includes 24 schools in Meath West. There are also 13 school projects in County Meath under construction, of which five are in Meath West. In addition, since 2020, a total of 125 special classes have been opened in County Meath of which six were sanctioned in Meath West for September 2026. I will come back in.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: Boyne Community School is a DEIS school. It is on a fantastic site and is a lovely, historical building, but it is not fit-for-purpose as it stands. The type of building it is causes complexity in design and cost but we really need to overcome that. It was acknowledged 15 plus years ago that this work was needed.

I have concerns around the 24 prefabs. Incredibly, having looked at them and the classrooms in the school, they provide better facilities for the students.

10 o'clock

It is putting some pupils at a disadvantage. It is almost creating a two-tier education system within the one school community. With the new and improved curriculums which focus on continuous assessment and practical matters, we need to provide these much-needed facilities. We cannot continue to disadvantage the pupils in Boyne Community School.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: First, to reassure people, the NDP is a five-year plan but I know there is urgency. When you are on the list, it is great but when you are not on it, there is disappointment. This is the first tranche of a five-year national development plan programme for the country. It is €1.6 billion for those that are going to tender and construction this year and next year. My Department is also carrying out a prioritisation list. I know that school is moving through the process but it is looking at the energy and conditions of all the school estate across the country. That will feed in to prioritisation. There are some school which do not have a home at all - they might be working from a sports club, for example - and special education is a real priority for us. Also schools which have space to provide extra special education classes in their existing footprint are a priority as well. I know the Department will be working with that school to move it through the different stages of the process.

Questions Nos. 13 to 15, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Question No. 17 taken with Written Answers.

Schools Building Projects

18. **Deputy Eoghan Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the rationale her Department has in choosing particular schools for priority building lists, to outline the denomination of each of the 105 schools chosen by category; if schools that are currently at stage 2b will be progressed over the next two years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28885/26]

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: In January this year, my Department published a comprehensive national development plan implementation plan for the education and youth sector. That included 105 school building projects to proceed to construction and tender in 2026 and 2027. That list included 80 large-scale and additional school accommodation projects along with 25 modular projects. The number of modular projects has now increased to 31.

The first tranche of projects was selected with a view to facilitating projects already at stage 3, that is, at tender stage, to progress to construction as smoothly as possible. The prioritisation of projects at stage 2b focused on projects which had achieved planning permission where therefore there is an appropriate stage of readiness for progression to tender.

Within the cohort of stage 2b projects, projects at special schools were afforded a top priority. Other projects included schools that did not have a permanent accommodation and had ongoing demographic pressures, projects providing significant special education capacity as well as projects progressing demographic pressures or had major condition issues.

There is a Department-led prioritisation process which will continue over the course of this year and next year to assess and to evaluate the progression of individual projects through the design pipeline, projects at stage 2b, that are not on that 105 list. This will ultimately inform the next tranches of the programme roll-out.

This is a five-year programme out to 2030. Where appropriate, the Department will also assess opportunities to undertake advance enabling works for the most urgent and complex projects to facilitate that smooth progression to construction in 2028 and beyond. It is important to note that of the 105 projects to move to tender and construction that represents a subset of all projects currently being progressed so in total 1,000 school buildings are projected to be under construction this year alone.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I want to reference one school in particular. I taught in Coachford College for a year. The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, will be acutely aware of Coachford College. I know he has engaged with the school on a consistent basis as it represents a number of his own constituents. Coachford College is a fantastic school with around 900 pupils. It has a huge offering of subjects. However, Coachford College has been waiting a number of years for a new school building. It is not part of the 105 school building projects list despite the fact it has been waiting so long. It is absolutely appropriate that the Department of education would communicate with schools like Coachford College on an ongoing basis so that they have an understanding on whether or not they will move to the tender process over the next two years. Will the Minister also clarify the date on which the new tranche of schools will be announced? Will it be 2028?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: There is ongoing engagement between the Department and schools and school patrons. That is happening all the time. The list of 105 projects includes 12 projects in County Cork, of which five are in Cork North-Central. One of these schools, Scoil Íosagáin, moved into stage 4, which is construction, in February. Additionally, there are 35 schools, including eight in Cork North-Central, that were approved to undergo works as part of the climate action summer work scheme. These projects are in addition to the €785 million in capital funding since 2020 for schools in County Cork, of which over €199 million was for Cork North-Central schools. Over that period a total of 158 schools have been upgraded either through provision of a new school building, a large-scale extension or provision of modular accommodation. There are currently 20 projects in County Cork under construction, of which three are in Cork North-Central.

A prioritisation list will be worked on by the Department - that is the energy and condition survey. This is the first time this work has ever happened and it will give a real picture of our schools across the school estate. The Department will be working with schools through that and that will feed into the next tranche. I do not have a date *per se*.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I was in communication with the Department last Thursday at the Committee of Public Accounts. We have moved to a modular accommodation style of building works. While we are still building traditional school buildings we have significantly moved towards modular accommodation on which a significant amount of money has been spent over the past five years. I am not saying at all that modular accommodation is not welcome. I am sure it is welcome the majority of school grounds across the country but exact clarification must be given to schools like Coachford College in relation to when they might possibly see a new school building. A significant number of students in the likes of Coachford College who have gone through their whole six years without ever seeing a new school building. It is a fantastic school. It covers a huge area as the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, knows. There are a number of primary schools in the whole area of Duhallow. It is essential that schools like Coachford College would have some sort of an understanding of when they might see shovels in the ground for new school buildings.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: In the past we might have thought of as modular as prefabs but these are not prefabs. These are state-of-the-art, very modern buildings. The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and I have walked into many of them. You do not realise they are modular. They just look like an extension to a school. The spec is of a high quality.

The Department is working with schools and engaging with school stakeholders. That prioritisation process is ongoing. Work is under way in the thousands of schools across the country that are currently under construction. This is the first tranche of a five-year plan. That energy and condition survey will feed into that. There will be that ongoing communication with the Department and the schools in order to prioritise the next tranche.

The timing of a pipeline project, moving from one stage to the next, requires careful planning. It is determined by a number of factors, including confirmation that any existing or emerging school capacity in the area is being well optimised - we have to make sure we are getting value for money for that - and that there is compliance with all the technical and cost requirements. The outcome of that prioritisation assessment will feed into it as well as affordability around the funding through the NDP.

School Facilities

19. **Deputy Noel McCarthy** asked the Minister for Education and Youth further to Parliamentary Question No. 211 of 12 February 2026, the progress made to date in ensuring the use of a green area by schools (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28762/26]

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I ask the Minister for Education and Youth, further to Parliamentary Question No. 211 of 12 February 2026, the progress made to date in ensuring the use of a green area by schools at Carrigtwohill School campus and if she will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I am very aware of this issue. I recently met Scoil Mhuire Naofa and the local representatives, including the Deputy, on the matter. A campus project was delivered for three schools - Carrigtwohill Community College, Scoil Mhuire Naofa Carrigtwohill, and Scoil Clíodhna Community National School - as part of my Department's design and build programme. The project was completed in quarter 4 of 2023.

The schools on the campus have sought to use a green area, which forms part of the site for recreation purposes.

The area in question, as the Deputy knows, is not suitable for a formal playing pitch, because it is required as an attenuation basin under the flood management system for the campus. However, the Department is pleased to support the schools' access to this green area as an informal recreation space. Planning permission was granted by Cork County Council for an entrance and access way to this green area, as a standalone planning application.

The scope of works and associated costs to provide the entrance and access way is being reviewed by the Department and officials will update the schools upon completion of that review. In addition, there is an area of about 1.9 acres to the north of the campus in my Department's ownership. The Department has agreed that this can be used as a recreation area by the schools on a licence basis. Officials from my Department are in contact with the relevant stakeholders to progress this. Should the land be required to support school place expansion in the future, its use as a recreation area will cease. My Department has had positive and productive engagements with the three schools and their patrons throughout all stages of this project and will continue to support the schools on the new school campus.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her response. I thank her and her Department officials for recently meeting councillor Anthony Barry, Rory Cocking and me to discuss this matter. It is encouraging to hear at first hand from the Department that the expectation remains that access to the green area will be granted to all campus schools for recreational purposes. Entrance and access works to the green area have been approved, as the Minister said, by Cork County Council, but these works have yet to be completed. We are now nearly in May and it would be highly beneficial to all if these works were undertaken to ensure that access to the green area is in place for the upcoming school year in September. With this in mind, will the Minister confirm whether she has had any further recent engagement with the ETB and the schools on the matter and the status of the access works to be completed?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: A scope of works and associated costs for the green space have been received by my Department for the proposed works to provide access to that green area. On initial review, it is the Department's recommendation that a cost-effective solution be considered and resubmitted for further consideration. Once the scope works and the cost to provide the access and entrance are agreed, procurement of a contractor to complete the works can be undertaken. Until the scope works are agreed, it is just not possible to give a timeline for completion, but the commitment is there to work with the schools on this. On completion of the works, my Department intends that the lands will be handed over to Cork Education and Training Board to be managed and maintained.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her positive response. It is good to hear that work will be undertaken as soon as the scope of work and cost is in. This is an easy win for all concerned. The green area is a flood attenuation area that is currently locked and lying idle despite being approved. It would make perfect sense that students of all ages would be able to benefit from the use of such a large green area close to their schools. There will be no pitch markings or changes of any description, just a green area that will be cut regularly and used for recreation. I therefore again ask the Minister to address the need for her and her Department to do everything within their power to ensure that the area is open to all local students as soon as possible. I thank the Minister for her positive response.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I thank the Deputy. The original planning permission for the campus development at Carrigtwohill included the green area lands to the south of the school building infrastructure, so the green area was always included in the development as a flood attenuation zone, which forms part of the campus flood mitigation strategy. The campus development was delivered according to the schedule of accommodation, which provided three general purpose areas, a PE hall in the post-primary school and a total of 13 ball courts across the three schools. As the function of the green area is primarily as a flood attenuation area, once the access and entrance are delivered, the area of green space can be accessed by the schools for recreation purposes and can be used when the weather and ground conditions permit. As I say, there has been ongoing engagement with my Department about this. At our meeting, we gave the commitment for this to proceed. The scope of works and associated costs were received by the Department, so the Department is asking the schools to come back with further information, and we can work with them.

Question No. 20 taken with Written Answers.

Education Costs

21. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Education and Youth in light of the cost-of-living crisis and cost-of-doing-business crisis, if she will reverse the reintroduction of leaving certificate and junior certificate fees, and increases in school transport fees; and if she will engage with school transport operators to ensure that they are adequately supported with the increased cost of fuel. [29045/26]

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: As part of budget 2026, the Government confirmed that examination entry fees will be reintroduced for the 2026 State exams. These fees are being

restored at their previous levels, which are unchanged since 2012. It is €116 for leaving certificate candidates and €109 for junior cycle candidates. Not all families are liable to pay examination fees. Any student with a full medical card, or covered under a parent's or guardian's card, will continue to be fully exempt from that fee. This approach strikes a fair balance, maintaining support for those who need it most while restoring a long-standing contribution towards the cost of running the examinations system.

I am advised that approximately one third of candidates who have engaged with the process to date are exempt from the fees. The process is straightforward, transparent and well signposted, and full details are available on the State Examinations Commission's website. Phone and email help desk services are available to school authorities and families who need assistance. A recent review of the school transport scheme found that having a fee helps make better use of resources and prevents seats on school buses from going unused, helping to protect and sustain the scheme for all families who need it. The school transport scheme remains heavily subsidised by the State, with over 92% of the overall cost covered. Transport, too, remains free for eligible medical card holders and pupils who are eligible for the special educational needs transport service.

The Department appreciates the concerns, given the recent global events and the impacts already being seen in increased fuel prices in Ireland. That is why a support package of measures has been approved by Government, providing targeted relief to transport operators, because this was a key concern for those operators. The details of these supports are being finalised.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: We cannot separate these increases in cost. To that repeated line about the review of school transport fees, there are already fees. It is not the case that there were not fees. The issue is that they are being increased significantly, by up to 100% in some cases. The Minister might say they are modest increases or a reintroduction of leaving certificate and junior certificate fees that were there before, but she cannot strip this away from the cost-of-living crisis. Parents are dealing with uniforms, transition year fees, voluntary contributions and digital devices. It is a major burden on families at a time when they need relief rather than additional costs being heaped on them. Will the Minister review and reverse these decisions?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: A recent review of the school transport scheme found that having a fee helps to make better use of resources and prevents seats on school buses from going unused. The fee for a primary school student is 55 cent per week and it is 60 cent for a post-primary school pupil, or €1.32 per week for a family. The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and I are also acutely aware of the school transport system and getting better data about usage of school buses across the country. We are working with the Department of Transport and Bus Éireann, which roll this out, to get that data. We absolutely appreciate the importance of school transport, especially around special education children, who get this free of charge. We want to be able to roll that out but we also need to make sure that we are getting good value for money and, where there are vacant seats, that they can be used. For example, there might be students who are taking the bus in the morning and not taking it in the evening, or *vice versa*, or not taking it on a Tuesday or Wednesday. We need to get that data because we

also have calls from TDs here who are saying that their constituents cannot get access to school transport.

That is the work we are doing in the Department to make sure we are getting good value for money for what we are investing.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I think I speak on behalf of every TD in the Chamber in saying that come the middle of August, we will be in contact with the Department about children who have not got access to the school transport system. The Minister can take that as read - unfortunately.

I want to ask the Minister about a related point. My contention is that all of this happens in the same households on which there are demands to provide for the cost of sending children to school. On the one hand, I welcome the free books scheme. The Government is happy to remind people of that. On the other hand, a significant number of schools are demanding digital devices for every child, at a cost of hundreds of euro each. We saw media reports in recent days and weeks about Sweden and other places that are stepping away from this type of technology. Is this something the Minister is looking at? Is she concerned about the direction of travel in schools in Ireland, in particular the costs for parents?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: We have introduced a number of cost alleviations for schools and parents. The free school books is one example of that. We are providing solar panels for schools as well to reduce their energy costs. There has been a hugely positive uptake from schools across the country in relation to that. The school transport system costs 55 cent per day for primary school pupils and 60 cent for post-primary students. When we compare that to public transport costs there is a big reduction in the cost.

We give guidance to schools on ICT to ensure that in every way possible they minimise costs for parents. We also give them advice about uniforms. The financial services unit in the Department advises schools on their own costs and how they can make savings. There is also an onus on schools to ensure that, where possible, they reduce those costs. We also have ICT grants for schools. Millions have been invested in that. This is ongoing. We will work with schools in that regard.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): With the permission of the House, I intend to go back to Question No. 16. This is the last question of the morning. Is that agreed? Agreed.

School Transport

16. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the progress made to date in relation to the introduction of e-ticketing as part of the school transport scheme; if there are plans to expand e-ticketing to other schools for the 2026-27 academic year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28771/26]

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The school transport 2030 report was published in early 2024 following a comprehensive analysis and review of the scheme as it currently operates. The

recommended changes to the future operation of the scheme include expansion of the eligibility criteria, addressing current operational challenges and moving towards better integration with public transport to ensure we have better value for money for the Exchequer.

As part of the review, it was also recommended that the Department and Bus Éireann continue to explore and implement improved technology. The Department is currently progressing a number of technological improvements to the scheme, including the planned introduction of e-ticketing. Not only will e-tickets replace the current printed paper tickets but they should also provide accurate information on ticket utilisation, which is currently not readily available. Better data will inform future route planning and maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of the system.

A technology working group has been established between the Department and Bus Éireann. Work is progressing on several projects, including e-ticketing, and the Department continues to engage with both the Department of Transport and the National Transport Authority on these matters. A phased implementation of the review's recommendations began at the start of the 2024-25 school year alongside the Department of Transport and Bus Éireann.

A total of 14 pilot projects took place and a further 11 pilot projects were approved for this school year. All pilots are being monitored, and will be evaluated in the future to better inform us. The e-ticketing pilot project is a hugely important piece of data collection for us and will make the best possible information available to us when we are planning the future direction of school transport. This morning a number of Deputies were looking for additional services in their communities. It is also important that we have the data on the utilisation of the current system, which will make sure we are putting the State resources to the best possible use.

Deputy Colm Burke: I welcome the Minister of State's reply. The e-ticketing pilot data is extremely important in respect of the use of school transport. Every week we all get complaints about seats being vacant on school buses, while the children who would use them do not have access to the buses. E-ticketing is extremely important in making sure that there is full utilisation and that the people who have been unfortunate in not being able to get on the school transport system can use those vacant seats. What is occurring in parts of the country is that people agree to take the transport offered but then do not use it for various reasons, or they may use it some days of the week but not every day. It is important that e-ticketing would give us the correct data on the usage of school transport.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: E-ticketing and the collection of data on school transport are hugely important. We have seen an increase in the State funding being provided, from €200 million to €527 million currently. Demand is growing in terms of the number of people who are looking to access the school transport system. Since 2018, the number of students travelling on it has grown by 50%.

Deputy Burke is aware, from people telling him about challenges in regard to buses, that some of the buses do not have full occupancy. We are constantly being asked if we have data on this. E-ticketing will help us to know whether an allocated seat is being used three days a week or five days a week, mornings and afternoons, and what the data is in that regard, to ensure that the scarce resources we have are being best applied.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): We have gone well over time. Deputy Burke can have 30 seconds.

Deputy Colm Burke: Will the Minister of State clarify if there is a target date for e-ticketing to be available across the board in all school transport systems?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The work is ongoing with the National Transport Authority, the Department of Transport and Bus Éireann. We have to implement the reform and get the data. There is a huge body of work to be done but we intend to do it as soon as possible.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Disability Services

121. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the number of staff assigned to each regional single point of access referral pathway for children's disability and mental health services, including primary care; the number of single point of access units established to date per health region; the disciplines represented on each; and the governance arrangements in place to adjudicate contested cases. [29469/26]

Deputy Liam Quaide: The Taoiseach told us this week that the single point of access initiative is being rolled out across child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, children's disability network teams, CDNTs, and primary care so that young people are not languishing on one waiting list after another. There is serious concern, however, within the services that buy-in to the single point of access is not consistent across all parts of the system, including psychiatry, and that there is an absence of a clear adjudication mechanism for contested cases. What procedures are in place in each region to make this work on the ground?

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): The Government and I recognise the importance of early intervention for children with disabilities and ensuring they receive the right services at the right time.

The HSE has been developing a single point of access, SPoA, referral model. As Deputy Quaide has said, this will ensure that children are referred to the appropriate healthcare service, whether that is primary care, disability services or child and adolescent mental health services at an early stage. As a result, children will not be put on multiple waiting lists or be passed from one service to another. I am sure the Deputy has had the same feedback from parents and families, as I have from constituents. Sometimes parents feel they get to the top of the waiting list and they are told they are on the wrong referral path and they go to the bottom of another queue. This is to solve that problem because we know that is not fair.

The roll-out is expected to commence on 24 June and will continue throughout this year. The SPoA model will be supported by the Health Service Executive's community care record at that time as a key enabler for the administration and delivery of services. A national oversight group and six regional implementation groups are leading the programme.

The single point of access referral model across all six regions will be achieved through resourcing, partnership and collaboration, and the design and development of a single integrated pathway and streamlined referrals process. It is not expected to give rise to an additional staffing requirement but local areas will deploy existing resources in a way that best suits the needs of their area. A standardised, online, publicly available children and young people's services referral form has been finalised by the HSE and that single form will replace over 20 manual forms that have been used until now. It is now being digitised to optimise the referral pathway and timelines for signposting each child to the service or services most appropriate to meet their needs.

Following the receipt of a digital referral form and engagement with the person who made the referral, the referral will then be reviewed and triaged, and this triage will continue to be locally led.

Deputy Liam Quaide: The single point of access is a sound concept and I fully support it. Young people are, as the Minister of State said, getting passed from one waiting list to the next and that is happening mainly because services have been understaffed for years and they respond to this by becoming more rigid in their gatekeeping of referrals.

There is also an issue of power imbalances that we need to focus on. For instance, it is very difficult for a basic grade speech and language therapist or a basic grade occupational therapist to hold the line with, for instance, a consultant psychiatrist, that CAMHS is a more suitable service for a young person even when, objectively, that is clearly the case.

I am hearing of concerns within services that psychiatry has not fully bought into the single point of access model in each region. I ask the Minister of State again whether there is an ongoing dispute between CAMHS, primary care and CDNTs about which service best fits a young person's needs. Who has the authority to make a final decision in that instance? Is there a named adjudicator? Is there a formal escalation pathway? Is there a timeframe for determination?

Deputy Emer Higgins: The Deputy is right that more complex cases will often require further clinical interventions or reviews to ensure the most appropriate pathway of care. Decisions on how this is managed will continue to be made at a local level. Once the work for a single point of access is complete, the outcome of the referral will be communicated to the referrer, and the child will then be assigned to the appropriate service.

In recent weeks, the HSE access and integration team, which is leading the single point of access programme, has developed a high-level standard operating procedure, SOP. That sets out the core processes and requirements necessary to deliver on the single point of access commitments. This is currently under review by the six regions. It has gone to the six regions for their input and based on their feedback, regional implementation plans, which were developed in late 2025, may require further refinement to ensure full alignment with the agreed national approach and with the supporting digital infrastructure.

Ultimately, and this is the important bit and goes to the nub of the Deputy's question, clinical governance for each area will remain under the remit of the regional executive officer. Local

areas will continue to exercise their clinical and professional judgment to manage and find resolutions to cases in line with existing HSE policy, practice and procedures.

Deputy Liam Quaide: The HSE has repeatedly told committees in the Oireachtas that the single point of access will stop children from being moved around the system, between primary care, CDNTs and CAMHS. It is still far from clear how this is meant to work when services fundamentally disagree. That disagreement continues about responsibility for a young person and that is the real test of this reform. Will the Minister of State now set out whether the Department or the HSE has formally engaged with the College of Psychiatrists on the single point of access, whether the college has indicated full support for the model and whether it has expressed reservations, particularly around disputed referrals or contested cases, and whether she will publish the governance and adjudication arrangements that are meant to operate when these disputes arise? It is not realistic to expect a basic grade occupational therapist to make a referral to the regional executive officer. Without that clarity this risks becoming another reform that looks nice on paper but leaves clinicians arguing and families stuck in limbo. It is fair to say that all this is happening against a backdrop of services remaining severely compromised by a long-standing failure to engage in proper workforce planning and comprehensive recruitment to disability and mental health services.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank the Deputy for saying he feels that the single point of access is a sound concept. It is something I am very much committed to and I know it is something the Ministers, Deputy Foley and Deputy Carroll-MacNeill, are very committed to also. The HSE has done a huge amount of work on this. Ultimately, the rollout of a single point of access will be supported by the HSE community connects ICT system and by the regional implementation plans, which are now with each region so they can be fully refined. We expect this to be implemented soon.

In terms of the HSE and the College of Psychiatrists, if the Deputy would like to suggest to the college to write to me or the Minister, Deputy Foley, we would certainly take on board its feedback and be a conduit to the HSE if it feels there are any roadblocks there. Ultimately, what we all are committed to - the HSE, our Department and every person working in our CDNTs across the county - is ensuring families receive the supports necessary to meet their children's needs. Systematic changes have to happen in order to do that and the introduction of the single point of access, along with the 19% increase in the HSE's disability budget for this year to more than €3.8 billion, are clear steps that show we are very serious about this.

Mother and Baby Homes

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): With the permission of the House we will revert to Question No. 120 in the name of Deputy Claire Kerrane. Is that agreed? Agreed.

120. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality if she will include additional institutions to the mother and baby institutions payment scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28696/26]

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I want to ask the Minister about the landmark High Court ruling made in February of this year. It specifically examined two institutions, Temple Hill and St. Joseph's, that are excluded from the mother and baby institutions payment scheme. The judge at that time directed the Minister to consider adding these institutions to the scheme and I would like to seek an update on that direction please.

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): I thank the Deputy. As she will be aware, the mother and baby homes institutions payment scheme provides payments and health benefits to people who spent time in any of the mother and baby, or county home, institutions. These were institutions that were identified by the mother and baby homes commission of investigation as having a main function of providing sheltered and supervised ante- and post-natal facilities to single mothers and their children. The institutions covered by the payment scheme are set out in Schedule 1 of the Mother and Baby Institutions Payment Scheme Act 2023. Chapter 2 of the social history section of the commission of investigation detailed the different types of institutions that existed and whether they could be considered mother and baby institutions.

While the 2023 Act lists all of the mother and baby institutions identified by the commission, section 49 of the Act further provides that, if it were to come to light that an institution in which the State had a regulatory or inspection function fulfilled a similar function with regard to single women and their children as those included in the payment scheme, the then Minister, with the consent of the Minister for public expenditure, may insert an additional institution into the schedule. The Government recognises there are people who suffered stigma, trauma and abuse in other institutions.

It should be noted that the payment scheme is just one of a large suite of actions being undertaken to respond to the legacy of these institutions under the action plan for survivors and former residents of mother and baby and county home institutions. The current programme for Government has underlined a continued commitment to its ongoing delivery. Of the seven major commitments set out in the action plan, six are now delivered and in place while the seventh is actually under way. Key initiatives in the plan include access to birth information, the services of a special advocate and counselling support, which are all already in place, as well as the ongoing development of a national centre for research and remembrance. The Birth Information and Tracing Act 2022, which commenced in October 2022, has seen more than 17,700 applications for information completed to date since services opened. The Institutional Burials Act 2022 and the establishment in 2023 of an independent office under the Act led the intervention at the site of the former mother and baby institution at Tuam. The Deputy is aware that work is under way there. There has been the appointment in 2024 of a special advocate for survivors, the provision of counselling services and out of hours counselling for survivors, and the administration of a commemorative grant scheme for survivors who wish to hold events.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: The Minister will no doubt acknowledge the ruling of the court and the views and comments made, most especially by Judge Alexander Owens about the exclusion of the institutions, particularly of Temple Hill and St. Joseph's, because they were the cases brought before him by survivors of both institutions. I have raised the case of Michael Grant in this Chamber and in committee many times. He spent the first year of his life in Temple

Hill. He was a healthy child and his mother paid rent for him to remain there for the first year of his life before he was fostered.

Temple Hill appears to have been identified as a hospital. I do not know of any hospital in the State where you pay rent to keep a child. I think that is an omission and that is the ruling and the finding of the judge who considered both Temple Hill and St. Joseph's so carefully. The Minister mentioned a shelter for children. That is exactly what Temple Hill was for Michael Grant. Will the Minister give me any information about the direction she has been given?

Deputy Norma Foley: Specifically, in relation to the case, I acknowledge that the Department of children is responsible for overseeing the administration of the mother and baby institutions payment scheme and it must do so in line with the legislative scope and the intent of the Mother and Baby and Institutions Payment Scheme Act 2023 as enacted by the Oireachtas.

There has been considerable consideration of the legal advice that has been rendered. The Deputy is correct in seeking two institutions to be added to the scheme but I am obliged to take the advice of the Attorney General. The advice is unequivocal on the need for an appeal of the High Court and recognising that as a necessity. The reason is the grave degree of uncertainty generated by the judgment in terms of the interpretation of the Act and the related scope and parameters of the scheme. In a very detailed and comprehensive judgment, the State's position on a number of relevant matters was agreed with but there was also an indication there had been an error in law in one issue.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I acknowledge a review is coming up. I understand the review is quite niche but I hope the Minister might be able to confirm that the review towards the end of this year will look at the institutions. The special advocate who has been put in place to do a job has been clear in seeking the urgent expansion of this scheme. Having met Michael Grant and his daughter Rachel, my genuine fear is that he may not live to see such an expansion to institutions like Temple Hill. There are other survivors in that situation as well. We need to do right by them. Will the upcoming review look at institutions that are excluded and will it look at exclusions to the scheme as is?

Deputy Norma Foley: I do not at all take away from the individual cases the Deputy referenced. I have to say in sincerity that I am obliged to accept the legal advice presented by the Attorney General and the legal teams. The legal advice that I have received is quite categorical in that it proposes that the decision as it stands would create a number of significant unintended difficulties. That is the clear-cut legal advice.

In terms of the scheme in general, more than 7,000 applications have been received and 6,500 notices of determination have been issued. Over €78 million has been paid out. Approximately 2,800 people have qualified for health benefits. The scheme is open for five years until March 2029. I acknowledge as well the UK Government's recent announcement on disregards they will allow when people who are in the UK are being assessed for social welfare benefits in the UK.

We want to see more people applying for this scheme. To date, over €1.8 million has been spent on advertising. The Deputy is correct that there will be a review before the end of the year. It is very much meant to be a technical review.

Guardians Ad Litem

122. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality if she is aware of serious concerns raised in relation to the new national service for guardians ad litem; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28697/26]

Deputy Norma Foley: I appreciate the Deputy raising the question and I acknowledge that she has raised it previously. The guardian *ad litem*, GAL, service is a nationally organised and managed service established to ensure that children's voices are heard and their best interests are independently presented in childcare proceedings by an appointed guardian *ad litem*. The target is 23 June for commencement of Part 7 of the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2022. The Department is continually working towards this launch date. The commencement of the national service marks a significant transformation of the sector. Children and their best interests are at the centre of the guardian *ad litem* national service. The need to reform the guardian *ad litem* rule under the Child Care Act 1991 had been highlighted for many years. The lack of defined qualifications, role and status, as well as an absence of appointment procedures for the guardians, has been widely acknowledged for many years. The new national service will create a national, professional and highly qualified service that better serves children in the courts.

I am aware of the issues that have been raised by the Association of Guardians ad Litem in Ireland, AGALI, in relation to the new GAL national service. I received correspondence from AGALI on 30 January setting out their concerns. I met with their representatives on 24 February. Specific issues raised by them were referred to the Office of the Attorney General. Department officials have engaged with key stakeholders including: court services; the Judiciary; AGALI; Empowering People in Care, EPIC; the Irish Foster Care Association, IFCA; the NGOs; the Ombudsman for Children; Tusla; and care experienced young people. As part of the establishment of the national service, the Department hosted two policy consultations in Cork and Dublin to discuss professional standards, complaints and the code of conduct. We also hosted a townhall event with stakeholders, including guardians, in Miesian Plaza in June 2025. The executive office will issue further invitations and consultations online from 11 May. These consultations will provide current guardians with the opportunity to provide feedback on the appointment procedure, the training and the supervision policy, and the practice of audit procedures under the new national service.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: If anyone wondered about the value of guardians *ad litem*, they only had to watch the "RTÉ Investigates" programme last night. We saw and heard from guardians *ad litem* who are powerful voices for the children that they look after, speak for and very much support through what can be a very challenging State care system. We also heard from Judge Dermot Simms, who I had in here last month for a briefing along with GALs to speak to the very serious concerns they have and he has for the national service. On a number of occasions the guardians *ad litem* have to, for want of a better term, go up against Tusla in a

courtroom to speak for and advocate for a child. I cannot fathom how we can retain the independence of GALs as they go up against Tusla while both are under the one Minister and the one Department. That is where the question mark is over independence. The Minister will know of the issue I have raised many times in terms of the legal representation. I cannot understand how that cannot be maintained in terms of guaranteed legal representation.

Deputy Norma Foley: I do not for a single second underestimate the importance of the powerful advocacy of guardians *ad litem*. They are hugely important. This process is to ensure that they have the appropriate supports, the appropriate regulation and that everything is as it should be. I reiterate that for many years there have been calls to examine this system to see how we can do better and to ensure that the voice of the child is very much at the centre. They are a very powerful resource. I do not take from that in any shape or form.

The Deputy raised the legal representation. There has been, and there will be, no question in terms of access to legal representation. Advice will be available at all times and a head of legal has recently been appointed. If the guardians are party to a case, are bringing a case or it is a special care application, they will automatically also have legal representation. With regard to their independence, there are many examples of bodies under the aegis of one Department but being entirely independent. I want to be clear that the purpose here is to ensure it is a service that does as it sets out to do and the voice of the child is heard. We are doing all we can to ensure this would be the case.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: When I hosted AGALI and Judge Dermot Simms last month I asked them to share one example case with me at that briefing. They spoke about two children under the age of 16 who were received into care for the first time and placed in a special emergency arrangement, SEA, which we saw much of in last night's programme. This was the first time they were placed into care and there was nothing else available. Tusla reported on the SEA over several months and they noted the staff were engaging positively with the children every day, that the children were comfortable and settled and that the placement was being overseen by an allocated Tusla SEA supervisor. When the guardian *ad litem* met with the children directly, the parents, the school and with Tusla and the SEA staff, they uncovered that the children were not being offered breakfast under the SEA. They were in school early enough to avail of the breakfast club but they were not actually enrolled in any breakfast club. The reported positive engagement was an hourly safety and well-being check of the children in their bedrooms. There was no attempt at connection. These were children who were found to be caring for themselves. Finally, the supervisor had visited the placement and was recorded as having met the children, met the staff and completed a risk assessment in one 21-minute visit. Now more than ever we need the guardians *ad litem* to have their independence and we need that legal protection retained.

Deputy Norma Foley: I reiterate that the entire purpose here is to ensure that the guardian *ad litem* service is doing what it should do.

I recognise that guardians *ad litem* are an incredibly powerful resource who are hugely important in presenting the view of the child. This is to strengthen the service and ensure the system works. It is important that the system is regulated and there is absolutely no doubt about that. It is important that access to legal support is there where a case has been made in

this regard and there is no question of that. There is no question either about the independence of GALs. We can quote many other bodies that operate under the aegis of the Department. There has been consultation right across the board on the changes that have been brought in. There will be further consultations, with town hall events and meetings, and further engagement again from mid-May, and this will continue. This is to ensure we have the best possible service in place.

Childcare Services

123. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality if she has identified sites for the Government's pilot for public childcare facilities, and if she has considered Kildare South, given the urgent lack of childcare places available. [28589/26]

Deputy Mark Wall: Has the Minister identified sites for the Government's pilot for public childcare facilities? Has she considered Kildare South given the urgent need and lack of childcare facilities in that part of the county?

Deputy Norma Foley: The Deputy will be aware that we recently announced €135 million in capital investment in buildings for high-quality accessible State-led early learning and childcare. The process begins this year, as he said, with investment in buildings in what will be a groundbreaking initiative for the Government. Capital funding will be used to acquire or fit out building, depending on the requirements. Up to eight buildings will be selected for investment this year and the State-led initiative will provide thousands of places to 2030 using the €135 million provided in the national development plan. The level of investment will ramp up over the lifetime of the Government.

The Department has received project proposals from a number of sources since the programme was launched and there are also projects the Department was aware of prior to the programme's launch. In total 82 potential projects across the country have been received as of 17 April. These projects are at very different stages of development and it is also important to acknowledge this. Some relate to existing buildings ready to be occupied and ready to fit out. Others, however, are much longer-term prospects for the future. Not all proposals align with the programme objectives and some may be funded by other means, including the next round of the building blocks scheme or whatever might be more appropriate to the application that has been received. Some projects have been proposed by an existing early learning and childcare service provider while others relate to a building or property only and a separate process to identify an operator will be required.

Included in the long list are three proposals from County Kildare that have been submitted to the Department. The Department will continue to seek potential projects for consideration. There will be a particular focus in the new State-led facilities on providing places for children aged between one and three, with capacity for these children to continue in the service until they start school, because this is where the need is greatest. The aim of delivering additional supply of this type in suitable locations will include rural areas and urban areas that are not well served at present.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister and I appreciate her reply. The fact we have 82 potential sites throughout the State is encouraging at this stage. Is the process closed for expressions of interest? When the Minister suggests that some projects are from existing suppliers of childcare and others are for properties only, does she have a breakdown of those? With regard to State-led services, is the State proposing to take over existing childcare providers in a State-led childcare service or will it be through co-operation between those existing providers and the State? I stress the problems that I am made aware of on a daily basis in County Kildare. The Minister will be aware that I have raised them a number of times. I would like a breakdown between existing buildings and services and what is property only, and how the Department are treating these.

Deputy Norma Foley: I acknowledge there are three applications in Kildare and they will be adjudicated in due course. The purpose of the State-led system is to step in where there is no provision. The point I was attempting to make on existing providers is that they may well be better suited to the building blocks arrangement. We have just announced a €10 million investment for private providers or community providers in the core funding model who can apply to extend their premises and provide additional places. Some of the applications that have come in might be more suited to this. I acknowledge that in assessing the sites and buildings, they will have to align with the objectives of the programme. If we have a building that is ready, it will be about the fit-out of the building or maybe the purchase of the building, and there would have to be a tendering arrangement for a provider to come in and carry out the work.

Deputy Mark Wall: I appreciate the Minister clarifying this as it is an important distinction to make. Existing providers have access to other programmes to increase their level of service and this is important. Are those with a building excluded from putting forward that building? I want to mention the Kilcullen area of County Kildare. I am not sure whether one of the three is for this area. I have raised with the Minister previously the issue whereby upwards of 100 children are without a childcare service in that town. This is replicated throughout Kildare South where the population has increased. We have a very young population. Parents get up very early in the morning to travel 30 km or 40 km to avail of childcare services in other towns. Some of them travel into Dublin to avail of services. This cannot continue. This is a great opportunity for the Government to look at areas such as Kildare and develop State-led services. I ask the Minister to look at this and maybe she can confirm whether the option to propose buildings is still open.

Deputy Norma Foley: To be fair, it is a rolling application and it is still possible to nominate or submit buildings. There will come a point where we will have to say they will be considered in 2027 as opposed to 2026 and I want to be clear on this. At present we are still accepting them. In terms of Kildare, under the previous building blocks scheme two proposals were accepted and funded. I encourage more providers, either in Kildare or anywhere else throughout the country, to take a look at the scheme extension we announced earlier this week as it is a very suitable scheme for many who wish to extend their premises.

I also acknowledge the role of local city and county childcare committees. There is a consultation process under way on wider early years and learning in terms of the conversation

on education. Great work is being done by the local city and county childcare committees, and those who are willing to put forward their buildings, thoughts or ideas must first go through the city and county childcare committees and I want to make this clear.

Childcare Services

124. **Deputy Aisling Dempsey** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality for an update on the building blocks grant. [29531/26]

Deputy Norma Foley: As I said earlier, I am pleased to have announced on Tuesday that next phase of the building scheme. It is a €10 million capital funding scheme to deliver a significant number of additional early learning and childcare places. The scheme is being funded under the updated national development plan. The purpose of the building blocks scheme is to deliver additional capacity in the sector by supporting existing early learning and childcare services to undertake physical extensions to existing premises. The scheme will be open to community and private services that are signed up to the core funding scheme and commit to continuing in the scheme and adhering to its conditions, particularly in respect of the fee management rules.

The aim of the scheme is to tackle undersupply of full-time places, particularly for children aged from one to three years of age. Places for children in other age brackets will also be eligible for funding, once services create at least the minimum number of places in the priority age cohort. The scheme will have two strands, one for extensions to existing premises for community services and another for extensions to existing premises for private services. Community services can avail of investment of up to €530,000 for projects up to a total value of €650,000. Private services can avail of investment of up to €265,000 for projects up to a total value of €650,000, with a minimum of 50% funding to come from the operator. Thresholds from the scheme have been updated since the previous scheme to reflect construction price inflation.

11 o'clock

All projects will be required to accept a charge on the premises to protect the State's interest in the property and ensure that the capital investment continues to be used for its intended purpose over a long period of time. That is important. The State needs to protect the investment. It is important that if funding is being given to provide additional places, it will be used in the long term for the provision of the additional places, as set out in the building blocks extension scheme phase 2.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: I thank the Minister. That is positive information and it is a positive scheme. I have had many inquiries over the last while from childcare providers in my area, both private and community-run, as to when it would be announced. It is important that it is for private and community facilities. We need all of our facilities to avail of it. I know people in Trim who are putting their children's names on waiting lists before they are even signing up for antenatal classes. The demand is that strong and this will make a big difference. Aiming the scheme, as I hope we will, primarily at one- to three-year-olds is also vitally important. They are children for whom we are lacking the most spaces. We need to help

parents as much as possible to get back into the workforce if they wish to do so. This is a good scheme for achieving that. The scheme for State-led provision of childcare the Minister is working on will be hugely positive and beneficial.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank Deputy Dempsey very much. I acknowledge her personal engagement with me on all matters related to early years and childcare. I know it is a particular priority for her and her constituents. The Deputy is correct that it is important to look at two schemes. The building blocks scheme has incredible potential to support private providers but also community providers and, indeed, to provide additional places. The previous scheme is seeking to deliver 1,500 additional places and this will be a further addition.

The State-led scheme is also an important scheme. As we discussed previously, it is a €135 million investment, with a €10 million investment into the building blocks scheme. However, the €135 million investment is specifically State led, looking at areas where there is an absence of provision and where no other provider, either private or community run, has stepped in, for whatever reason. It involves the State stepping in proactively. It will be not for profit. The opportunity this year is for the purchase of the building and in 2027-28, we will look at other options as well.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: I ask that the Department and the city and county childcare committees engage with providers, both community and private. I know a lot of places have identified to me a need for extensions, but some have not yet done so. It would be helpful if they were made fully aware and there was a good advertising campaign and engagement through the childcare committees to make them aware that this funding is available. I understand it is not matching funding for community facilities. It could be hugely impactful in our communities.

Deputy Norma Foley: I acknowledge the role of the city and county childcare committees. We are indebted to them for their expertise and the manner in which they provide engagement on the ground with local providers, both private and community. I give them a shout-out because we have 50 engagements taking place right across the country on developing phase 2 of our action plan. Part of the discussion or conversation is around education, particularly early years education. Those on-the-ground consultations are very important and, as I said, they are being facilitated by early learning and childcare committees.

On the consultation, we have already had over 11,000 engagements online. There is, therefore, phenomenal interest in the whole area of early learning and childcare. The Deputy can be assured, through the city and county childcare committees, that every opportunity will be taken to advertise and promote the State-led and building blocks schemes to make people aware of the opportunities available to support them in the delivery of early learning and childcare.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Questions Nos. 125 and 126 taken with Written Answers.

Mother and Baby Homes

127. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the number of applications made to the mother and baby institutions payment scheme to date in 2026; the number processed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28748/26]

Deputy Claire Kerrane: In relation to the mother and baby institutions payment scheme, what is the number of applications made to that scheme to date this year and what is the number that have been processed?

Deputy Norma Foley: The mother and baby institutions payment scheme opened for applications in March 2024. Over its full lifetime, the scheme had been tentatively estimated to benefit up to a maximum of 34,000 people who spent time in mother and baby and county home institutions. The scheme is open for five years, so there is ample time for survivors to apply. It is very important that they are aware of that. I believe they have until March 2029 to apply. It is difficult to predict at what stage across its five-year lifetime applications may materialise, although we do know that in some previous redress schemes, significant numbers of applications were made towards their end or closing dates. As of 12 April 2026, over 7,100 applications had been received, over 6,500 notices of determination had issued to applicants and almost 5,300 payments had been made, totalling over €78 million. Over 2,800 applicants have also qualified for health benefits.

All information on the scheme, including how to apply, can be found at the dedicated payment scheme website, which includes a booklet, questions and answers and short how-to videos on the application process. A helpline is also in existence. For clarity, I will give the helpline number, which is 00353 1 522 9992. Overall, we have received positive feedback that applicants are finding the application process straightforward and that the information, helpline and so forth are helpful.

The Department will continue to do all it can to promote and raise awareness of the scheme via a significant public awareness campaign. This is operating on a phased basis in Ireland and in jurisdictions overseas that have a significant Irish diaspora. The first phases across 2024 and 2025 included a mix of press releases, poster placement in public facilities such as libraries, social posts, leaflet distribution, webinars, meetings with representative bodies in Ireland and Britain and paid advertising campaigns. To date, some €1.8 million has been spent on raising awareness of the scheme across the world.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: It is important to check the 6,500 notices of determination that have issued and the 5,200 of those that have been paid, as it means quite a number have not been paid. I do not have an issue with the system. It has actually worked quite well when people get into it and the application is processed. I have no issue there. However, that is a very significant gap and it could be checked. There has obviously been an issue raised as regards survivors who are living in England. Obviously, lots of people have lived in England and Ireland; it is very common. What level of communication has the Minister had in relation to ensuring those survivors living in England can access this compensation via the scheme without it impacting on other payments they receive, particularly pensions? More broadly, has this

issue come up elsewhere, for example, in relation to the pensions and payments of survivors who are living in the US? Is this a wider issue beyond England?

Deputy Norma Foley: Specifically on the 6,500 determinations and 5,200 payments, they will all have come at different times. The gap between the two figures is because the applications came at different times and are being processed at different times. However, if a notice of determination has been reached, it has been reached. It is absolutely our desire and intention to get the maximum number of people engaged in the process.

I acknowledge the work that has been done in the UK to have a disregard for people in the UK who are applying for benefits in the UK. We had a breakthrough in relation to that recently. The Deputy will be aware that as part of the UK-Ireland summit, the Taoiseach and Prime Minister Starmer announced that a disregard would be put in place. It is my understanding that in the short term, guidance has been issued to all local authorities and all state agencies that might have an investment here so that they would be aware of that. I want to specifically acknowledge the great work of the British MP, Liam Conlon, who I have met and who has done great work in this regard in putting it into the public domain.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I, too, welcome the statement making it very clear that there will not be an impact for those who receive money through this scheme in relation to their primary benefits, particularly pensions. Of course, the legislation has not been passed. There will be survivors who will be nervous and worried. There are also a number of survivors - I think about 700 - who have sought and received the payment and it is not clear if that has had an impact on their pensions and payments.

That needs to be checked as well.

Given the approximately 34,000 deemed to be eligible, and, unfortunately, there are seven exclusions, is it possible for the Minister to engage with other countries, such as America, to see if there is that same issue that has been experienced in England? We need to ensure that all survivors, no matter where they live, can access the support and it will not have an impact on their primary payments, particularly their pensions, in their older years.

Deputy Norma Foley: Going back to the announcement in terms of the UK, I appreciate the point the Deputy raised on legislation. In that respect, we all accept that it takes some time to put legislation in place. In the interim, I particularly welcome, as I have referenced, the proactive step that has been taken in relation to guidelines.

I am aware that operational guidance has issued to Department for Work and Pensions staff on pensions, universal credit and housing benefit so that all deciding officers would be absolutely aware and would act in that respect. The Department for Work and Pensions as also issued guidance to local authorities, as they administer the housing benefits. I am hopeful that this will support increased numbers of applications from the United Kingdom.

I acknowledge that, whilst the legislation might be there, the guidelines are absolutely there. It should be a put through to encourage more to apply.

In terms of what is happening in other instances, the chief issue arose in terms of the UK but we continue our engagements with all of the diaspora.

Child and Family Agency

128. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality whether Tusla has completed any monitoring visits to hotels used to provide separated children seeking international protection, SCSIP, accommodation in 2026; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28219/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I would like to ask the Minister whether Tusla has completed any monitoring visits to hotels or other accommodation, particularly special emergency accommodation settings, used to provide for separated children seeking international protection accommodation in 2026. Given the "RTÉ Investigates" programme, this relates to that whole sphere. I would be grateful if the Minister can give some sort of assurance that this is being dealt with and Tusla will move away from using special emergency accommodation because it is not suitable and not regulated.

Deputy Norma Foley: I appreciate the Deputy raising the question.

We know that Tusla is facing significant and ongoing challenges in sourcing appropriate placements for children and young people. It is important to recognise that there has been a 500% increase in arrivals of separated children seeking international protection entering the State since 2022, with the vast majority of arrivals aged 16 or 17 years of age. This has significantly impacted on Tusla's ability to provide accommodation and supports to this vulnerable cohort.

Tusla has advised that, where there is an unexpected increase in arrivals of unaccompanied minors, its national out-of-hours service may place young people in a hotel setting, in recognition of the immediate need for a place of safety. Tusla has said that young people are then moved to registered centres as a matter of priority and no later than the next working day.

The out-of-hours service follows standard operating procedures in respect of securing an immediate place of safety for unaccompanied minors, and immediately notifies the area manager of a placement the next working day, so that further arrangements for the accommodation of the minor can be made.

A risk assessment is completed by Tusla and support is provided to the young person and the care provider for the duration of their short time in the accommodation. Further, I have been informed when hotel accommodation is used in these instances, the young person is accompanied by staff during their stay and is not left alone in hotels.

Tusla provides regular data to my Department on its operation of special emergency arrangements. I am pleased to share that, as of Friday, 17 April, Tusla reported that there were no separated children seeking international protection placed in an SEA. In relation to that, it has come to my attention today that, whilst, on Friday, there were no children seeking international protection in special emergency accommodation, as of this week there are three with disputed age who are in three special emergency accommodations because they cannot be placed with other young people.

I acknowledge the work that has been done there by Tusla over the last number of months.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What is the process as regards how the Minister deals with those separated children seeking international protection and a disputed age? It is necessary to deal with that as quickly as possible from a child protection point of view?

I accept Tusla is dealing with far more significant issues in relation to the complexity of issues that are in front of it and the increase in the number of those separated children, but all of us were impacted by what we watched last night on "RTÉ Investigates", in particular, the case of Max. The Minister talked of children who find themselves in these particular situations and facilities always being monitored but we heard how it looks like Max, who has his own issues and complexities, at some level was left alone, found himself in a scenario where he was abused and nobody noticed for something like two-and-a-half hours. There had been a huge issue in relation to those who have gone missing for a significant time. What we need to see is a framework, that appropriate accommodation is found and we stop using unregulated facilities that are not suitable in any way, shape or form.

Deputy Norma Foley: I join with the Deputy in saying what all we saw and witnessed on the programme last night has been incredibly upsetting in terms of the young people who were part of it and the experiences that they shared. I want to acknowledge that.

I want to acknowledge also the staff that work with them every day. This past week, I met with social workers and social care workers. I am very conscious of the work of the foster care system and foster care families.

These are very complex situations. The vast majority of children and young people in State care are in foster care or residential care. Some 96% of children are either in foster care or residential care. Nine out of ten young people who are in foster care and residential care are in education, further training, apprenticeship or whatever the case might be.

I want to acknowledge too - I will not reference any specific individual case that arose last night - that in the main Tusla is working with young people in care coming from really difficult, traumatic and complex situations through no fault of their own.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I accept that. We have spoken on many occasions previously of the need for earlier intervention and family supports, and even in other cases where children need to be taken out of places that are not safe for multiple different reasons. We have spoken as well about the fact that we need more foster carers, social care workers and social workers to deliver the framework. However, I again ask what the process is in relation to those children with the disputed age. Is the Minister considering moving away from special emergency arrangements, which are not fit for purpose? What will the time frame be? There are huge dangers. Guardians *ad litem* and a number of others have given out about them.

Has the Minister the numbers in relation to those that are in SEAs at this point in time?

Deputy Norma Foley: The disputed age has been flagged by Tusla. It is a concern of the agency.

In relation to these three individuals, it will be worked through with the Department of justice. It is important that if there is any question over appropriate age, these young people are not placed with other young people who are underage.

In terms of the reliance on special emergency accommodation, I want to be clear that we are doing all that we can to move away from that, to minimise it and, eventually, to eradicate a reliance on special emergency accommodation. Last year, there were 170 special emergency accommodations. This year, there are 70. We are working to bring that down even further.

There will be for the first time a new policy on children in State care. That has been subject to public consultation. We hope that framework document will be available before the Dáil recess or in the coming months.

In the meantime, staffing is an issue. There is a new training college for special care.

Three step-down facilities are being put in place, two before the end of the year and one in January. Thirty-eight new residential places were opened last year, with a further 47 due to be opened this year. By the start of May, our reliance on special emergency accommodation will have reduced by 50%. We need to and will do more to reduce that reliance.

Childcare Services

129. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the progress to reduce the cost of childcare to €200 per month per child through the national childcare scheme, as set out in the programme for Government; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29145/26]

Deputy Norma Foley: I have always been clear in communicating that the €200 per month commitment over the lifetime of the Government is hugely important. While the phase 1 report of Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan sets out the next steps towards this long-term ambition, I have not waited until now to take action. In September 2025, maximum fee caps were extended to all partner services in core funding. Budget 2026 also enables core funding to continue to support fee-control measures. It will ensure fees remain at 2021 levels for a majority of providers.

A central objective of Shaping the Future is to reduce parental fees to an upper limit of €200 per month over the lifetime of the Government. However, this objective cannot be achieved through the national childcare scheme alone. The fee freeze and maximum fee caps required for core funding have been key to the progress in recent years in making early learning and care and school-age childcare services more affordable. The phase 1 report of Shaping the Future sets out actions that will be carried out in 2026 using existing policy tools. The 2026 actions on affordability will include further reductions in some of the highest fees paid by parents by lowering the maximum fees core funding partner services can charge. In addition, from autumn 2026 we will reduce fees for lower income families through the national childcare scheme.

Specifically on the national childcare scheme, phase 1 of Shaping the Future commits to an increase to the lower or base income threshold of the income-assessed subsidy from €26,000 to €34,000 to ensure families with incomes below the relative income poverty line receive the maximum subsidies, a measure that came out of the recent budget; an increase to the upper income threshold of the income-assessed subsidy from €60,000 to €68,000 to extend income-assessed subsidies to more families - again, that came from the budget and we were happy to

secure it; and an increase to the multiple-child deduction component of the income-assessed subsidy for families with two children under the age of 15 from €4,300 to €5,500, and for families with three or more children under the age of 15 from €8,600 to €11,000.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: My children are now 14 and 16 and while that makes me feel old, it is remarkable to see the investment we have made in childcare over the period. We paid nearly €1,500 per month with no subsidy of any sort from the Government. As the Minister said, the national childcare scheme supports families. However, we need to be careful. A commitment was made. I am saying this not only to the Minister, Deputy Foley, but also to the Department of public expenditure. It is a key commitment over the lifetime of the Government and each year we need to be working towards delivering it so that, at the end of the Government's term, we will have followed through on it.

Many positive things will come out of delivering it. It is important. On the issue, there is always a tension between the provider, the childcare worker and the parent and the needs of all three. While we have to balance that, I return to the point that we made a commitment and I hope we will do everything we can in the remaining years of the Government to deliver it.

Deputy Norma Foley: I absolutely agree with the Deputy. There is, in many respects, a balancing act in this. We have to ensure it is affordable for parents and that enough places are made available. We spoke earlier about State-led initiatives and the building blocks extension, which will be launched this week for providers. We also have to ensure that enough staff are available and that we are supporting them. I acknowledge that €45 million was put on the table last year to support staff and another €45 million is being put on the table this year to do so.

We are currently working on phase 2 of the action plan for early years. The Deputy will be aware there has been a strong consultation element to that, working through the issues and the perspectives of parents, providers and staff, to bring us to the point where we are delivering on all three aspects, the affordability for parents, a sufficiency of places and support for staff. We need to make progress quickly, but the actions we take in this second phase of the action plan will have to be sustainable and underpinned by the support and public consultation on the three different elements.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Along with the national childcare scheme, the commitment to a public childcare model is also important. That is why building blocks phase 1 was important. I welcomed the fact the Minister came to our nursery in Ballymun and saw at first hand the work being done.

On the balancing act between childcare workers, providers and parents, I am concerned that the €45 million that was set aside last year is still the subject of some negotiation. I would like to see, as quickly as possible, that money landing in the pockets of childcare workers because it is important we deliver for all three stakeholders.

I reiterate how important the building blocks programme is. I should be putting my question to the Minister for public expenditure. However, I compare it to the equal opportunities childcare programme of the early 2000s. The investment it made in youth centres and childcare was invaluable. We live with its legacy and I have no doubt we will live with the legacy of what the Minister is doing in decades to come.

Deputy Norma Foley: I acknowledge the great work happening in the Deputy's constituency. It was a pleasure to visit Ballymun and see at first hand the excellent work that happens there. I am aware of the Deputy's personal commitment to advancing early years childcare provision in his constituency.

Specifically, it is hugely important that we support providers and parents from an affordability point of view, but that we also support staff. I acknowledge that the €45 million is subject to an independent joint labour committee. I do not interfere with that, but the Government makes the money available. It is for the purpose of supporting staff and that is how it will be used. However, the decision around it is independent of the Department and I respect that.

All voices are important in this area. As a country and nation, we need to acknowledge the importance of early years education. We also need to have a pathway forward. That is the purpose of phase 2 of the action plan. In that regard, there are 50 consultation processes taking place on the ground across the country at the moment. Some have started, more are ongoing. I invite as many people as possible, including parents, workers and providers, to engage in that forum.

Question No. 130 taken with Written Answers.

Disability Services

131. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality if she is considering additional funding for disability organisations, particularly those in the voluntary sector, to help them cope with increasing costs of operations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29004/26]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Many organisations that deal with disability and vulnerable sectors of our society are voluntary organisations. That is in itself a problem, but I will set that aside and ask about proper funding for those organisations to be able to look after the most vulnerable in our society. The Before We Die campaign was in the Houses yesterday to highlight the lack of funding to deal with the need for proper housing and residential care for older people with intellectual disabilities when their parents die, get sick and so on. It is an example of the need for extra funding for these organisations to be able to do their jobs properly.

Deputy Emer Higgins: The Government acknowledges the essential role voluntary organisations have in delivering a range of disability services. The Department has provided substantial additional funding to HSE specialist disability services since the transfer of functions in 2023. In this year's budget, €3.9 billion is provided for. In budget 2025, it amounted to €3.2 billion, so there was quite a substantial increase of almost 20% in that one year alone. These substantial additional investments demonstrate the Government's commitment to supporting disability services, along with the provision of significant year-on-year Supplementary Estimates.

Through the annual budgetary process, the Department has helped the disability sector to meet the increased costs associated with existing service provision while also incrementally

expanding service provision to meet demand. Every year, the Estimates process allows the HSE to request funding for the full cost of service provision, including cost increases experienced during that year.

In this year's budget, the Department provided €3.9 billion for HSE specialist disability services. As I said, that was a substantial increase of €628 million, or almost 20% above 2025, the largest ever increase in funding for disability services. It also follows significant year-on-year funding increases in recent years. In fact, there has been an overall increase of €1.85 billion, or 91%, since 2020. The additional funding sought for this year includes a significant uplift to the existing level of service provision of €478 million to address sectoral funding pressures such as the increased cost of service provision, pay cost pressures, capacity limitations and service provider sustainability. In addition to that €478 million for the uplift to the existing level of provision, a sum of €150 million has been provided to fund service expansion in residential and respite services, day service provision, home support, personal assistance and children's services. The Department is also providing €43 million in disability capital funding for this year, a significant increase of €16 million on last year's provision.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: To be honest, bandying around figures will mean very little to those who are concerned about their loved ones being let down. The Before We Die campaign's characterisation of the situation facing parents of children with intellectual disabilities was pretty grim. A lot of it revolved around the lack of planning and related funding for voluntary organisations. The description was fairly stark. They talked about a systemic failure in the State's provision of housing and care for adults with intellectual disabilities and about overreliance on emergency placements, where parents were living in a perpetual state of near or actual crisis. They said that the system was broken and that families were terrified that their loved ones would be placed in cost-effective, for-profit settings. They argued that their sons and daughters had a right to be heard, to be planned for and to be housed. Centrally, they said this means funded plans for children with intellectual disabilities when their parents pass on and proper, ring-fenced funding for section 38 and section 39 organisations. How does the Minister of State respond to campaigns like Before We Die and the concerns they are raising?

Deputy Emer Higgins: I respond by meeting them and listening to them. I have met with the Before We Die campaign twice now and the Minister, Deputy Foley, has too. The first time was at their request and I was absolutely happy to do that. The second time was at my request because I wanted to meet them, together with the HSE, to ensure that we had the right people around the table to be able to make progress. I would also like to take this opportunity to mention a group who are not part of that campaign but who are facing similar situations, Remember Us. I met with a group of parents and adults with intellectual disabilities last month and I met with a young advocate and his parents yesterday. I have another meeting with two parents later today.

This budget, for the first time every, provides for planned residential placements so that we are not always operating on a crisis management basis but are funding beds for the future. That is the situation we want to get to. That is why this year we are investing in that and expect that to be a success. We expect to be able to bring those places on board and to fill those positions and we want to grow on that next year. We are capacity building through our service providers and through the capital plan that I mentioned earlier. We are also investing in better

collaboration between the HSE and the Department of housing because local authorities have a role to play here also in terms of providing and building houses and homes that can become respite and residential day care services. We have six positions within the HSE, four of which are now filled, dedicated solely to that collaboration to bring more buildings on stream to provide for those children and young adults with disabilities.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: That sounds good and I hope it is the case but if we look at the additional funding in the last budget, it was an extra €40 million. That amounts to about 80 to 100 new homes but there are more than 2,000 adults with intellectual disabilities living with parents over the age of 70. Around 500 of those are with parents who are over the age of 80. They characterise the situation as one where basically, unless somebody dies or gets severely ill, there is no help available. It is a crisis management situation and the allocation of funding to the relevant organisations is way short of what is necessary. I reiterate the point about section 38 and section 39 organisations that it does not help that we have a second-class tier of people working in the health and care services who are on lesser pay and conditions than the people working directly for the HSE. The lack of funding, the lack of proper payment for staff in this area and the lack of planned funding and so on is leading to a crisis management situation for very vulnerable people and their parents.

Deputy Emer Higgins: On the Deputy's last point, the WRC pay agreement reached in 2025 between Government Departments and unions includes funding for a phased 9.25% pay increase that will benefit workers in section 39 voluntary organisations. The agreement also includes an automatic linkage to future public sector pay agreements for those workers to match all future pay increases. In delivering on the 9.25% pay increase, the Government is improving the ability of service providers to actively recruit and retain staff and supporting the overall sustainability of the sector.

The Taoiseach has convened a meeting of the Cabinet committee on disability for Monday. That meeting will be attended by me and the Minister, Deputy Foley, and our officials, as well as the Minister for housing and officials from his Department. We will discuss future planning when it comes to the buildings we need to increase capacity to deliver more residential and respite care across Ireland.

Questions Nos. 132 and 133 taken with Written Answers.

Care Services

134. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the steps being taken to open special care beds that are closed in the State; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28749/26]

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I again want to ask the Minister about the special care beds in the State that are closed. When I raised this issue with her here last month, she advised that 15 of the 26 beds were open. This issue was to the fore in the "RTÉ Investigates" programme last night. What more can and will the Minister do to ensure that the 26 beds that are there and that are needed will open?

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank Deputy Kerrane for the question. Tusla has statutory responsibility for the operation of special care and the provision of special care beds. The Department recognises the significant challenges facing special care and is actively engaging with Tusla to address these challenges. Tusla has indicated that difficulties in the recruitment and retention of staff are the primary limiting factors in operating special care beds. The complex needs of children require high staffing ratios, as there is a need for at least one staff member per child throughout the day, in addition to supervisory staff, and the units must be covered on a 24-7 basis, albeit with reduced staffing at night. That means seven individuals for every one young person. Children with particularly complex needs may require up to twice that level of staffing resources, or 14 staff to one individual child or young person.

Department officials continue to work with Tusla to support it in addressing the staffing shortages in special care provision. A new grade and pay scale for special care has been introduced in an effort to increase staff numbers. This new Tusla special care worker grade offers an improved salary scale, with pay at the top of the scale 20.3% higher when compared with the social care worker grade used across services more broadly. A total of €26 million was allocated for special care in budget 2026. This represents an increase of over €6 million on budget 2025 and this investment will increase capacity and enhance provision, including funding for the new special care staff grade, staff well-being initiatives and additional therapeutic supports. As part of these therapeutic supports, Tusla has commenced recruitment for psychiatric nurses in special care.

Tusla has been allocated €188 million in capital funding for 2026 to 2030. In line with the national development plan, €17 million is the indicative allocation for special care. This funding will support Tusla in upgrading, renovating or purchasing special care and step-down units. Two new step-down units are scheduled to open in December 2026 and a third in January 2027. Tusla has commenced a project to repurpose a facility in Cork into a special care centre. This is expected to assist in recruitment outside of the Dublin area.

Tusla is fully focused on increasing staffing levels in special care and has taken significant steps to address the current challenges, with a dedicated recruitment team undertaking targeted campaigns across a range of media, including international recruitment.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I thank the Minister and acknowledge that there are real difficulties in hiring, recruiting and retaining professionals in these special care settings.

The Minister will be well aware of the restructuring that is being undertaken by Tusla. Part of that restructuring is impacting the special care services. Is the Minister aware that front-line staff and managers within special care services have raised serious concerns in relation to the impact the restructuring will have on the special care services themselves? Based on what we saw last night, would the Minister seek a pause in the restructuring in special care, given the concerns that have been raised by people who work in special care? Again based on what we saw last night, they are the people we need to be listening to. They have said that they are extremely concerned that what is being done in terms of the restructuring in special care will lead to a collapse of special care. Those people need to be heard by the Minister. Has she met the professionals in the special care services specifically?

Deputy Norma Foley: I acknowledge that there is an issue in terms of staffing levels for special care. We are very conscious of that. As I said, you can be dealing with very complex cases at a minimum. It is a staff requirement of seven people to one young person. In many instances, 14 staff could be required for one young person. Tusla is proactive on the ground, ensuring that there will be newer avenues or streams to bring in staff and make staff available. I have already referenced the new special care category, which is a 20% increase in wage. I also acknowledge that Tusla has recently launched a new special care training college. National and international recruitment campaigns have been undertaken, along with graduate sponsorship schemes, which is important. Tusla has also engaged with higher education institutions to establish a work-based learning programme which leads to a BA in social care. This programme is currently laying the foundation for formal establishment of a national apprenticeship scheme. Alongside these steps to improve capacity in special care and residential care, actions are being taken to improve foster care capacity, which is hugely important.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: We saw the need for special care beds in last night's programme. We saw the consequences of what happens when children in State care do not get the support they need. They enter a world of crime and drugs. They are abused and assaulted. They end up homeless. Those working in the special care services, who are highly trained and highly professional, are raising serious concerns in relation to the restructuring that is under way. I ask the Minister to please hear these concerns. I ask that there would be a pause on the restructuring of special care. Yes, there are issues in terms of recruitment and retention but we need to listen to those people. I am speaking about management level within those who are raising serious concerns for special care and for the restructuring and the impact that will have. I also know the director of special care has been removed from his position. That is deeply concerning based on what we saw last night. Will the Minister engage with these workers in special care services? Will she pause the restructuring until their issues are heard and addressed?

Deputy Norma Foley: I cannot comment on HR matters for Tusla and how staff are moved or otherwise. It would be inappropriate. It is directly a matter for Tusla in relation to the management of its staff. Concerted efforts are being made, notwithstanding the challenges that are there. I have already referenced how upsetting it was to watch the experiences of and learn from young people their experiences, as we witnessed last night. It is so important that Tusla continues to be proactive in the space, particularly in the area of special care, recognising that a huge volume of staff are required in the area of special care and recognising that special care is a particular area where young people, for the protection of themselves, are denied their liberty. We are currently investing €26 million in special care from budget 2026, €17 million in capital funding for 2026 to 2030, renovating and purchasing new residential elements. There are three step-down facilities in special care being brought on stream this year, two at the end of December and one in January. As I have already referenced, we have the training centre. Over €1 million is being made available for therapeutic supports for those who might be in special care, leaving special care or on the verges of special care. There is every opportunity to do more in this space. More must be done in this space. It is being done and we will continue to be proactive in this space.

Questions No. 135 and 136 taken with Writtens.

Child and Family Agency

145. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the reason the caseload management system at Tusla has been paused; the protocols in place to ensure that Tusla social workers are not overwhelmed by caseloads; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [28218/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I want to ask the Minister about the reason the caseload management system at Tusla has been paused and the protocols in place to ensure Tusla's social workers are not overwhelmed by caseloads. We have just heard from Deputy Kerrane in relation to the issues that exist for special care facilities, and the fact there are issues that need to be addressed there that have been made far worse by the show we saw - "RTÉ Investigates". Those most vulnerable children not in appropriate accommodation. While we need more staff as regards social workers and social care workers, we need to ensure they are looked after and that we do not see the huge level of burnout that is happening within the sector at the minute.

Deputy Norma Foley: Tusla has informed me that it has not paused its case management system. That is the confirmation that I have received from Tusla. Tusla's case management system provides a single integrated case management system that, over time, will be implemented across all Tusla services. This case management system provides a single view of each child, young person, family, care provider and others who are engaged with Tusla. Tusla is improving its case management system. Key to this is the creation of a single record for each child and young person, which supports integrated working, including more streamlined referral and allocation systems for residential care, improved communications, accurate data to improve decision-making on an individual level and resource allocation. In effect, Tusla is building an integrated data environment centred around TCM that will enable the agency to deliver improved integrated reporting by the end of the Tusla's management and digital transformation strategy 2024 to 2026. This strategy was reviewed by the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer and is aligned with the overall public sector data strategy. Tusla has simplified its standard business processes to reduce inefficiencies and to maximise time with children and families, facilitating more focus on direct contact and relationship building.

In 2025, Tusla experienced the largest ever demand for its services, receiving over 106,000 referrals, up 10% compared to 2024, with 96,666 referrals in 2024. Tusla areas prioritise social work resources to children where their knowledge and skill is most required, and then maximising the knowledge and skill of other professions where they can competently respond to children's needs. All of this work continues to be overseen by social work managers.

Tusla teams are constantly reviewing their caseloads to ensure that children with the highest priority are allocated as soon as a worker becomes available, while ensuring that children in urgent need of safety are prioritised for allocation. Each referral is screened. Based on the information presented, the referral is prioritised. As new information is received, the referral is reprioritised as required. Measures to reduce caseload pressure in Tusla have focused on recruitment of social work and social care staff at home and abroad, and increasing training places for social work and social care staff.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I ask that the Minister comes back to me in writing in relation to the caseload management system. My information is it has been paused. I accept the answer that the Minister got. In relation to the overall answer she gave, that sounds like a proper operating system. That is how things should operate. We have spoken before about the fact there are not enough social workers. The last figure I had was 1,728 or 1,754, including outsourced agency staff. Gerry Hone from Tusla told us we are 300 short in relation to that. There are 1,422 social care workers, of which we are at least 100 short. We need at least 500 foster carers for the overall system.

Not only does the Minister have to look at the issue in relation to special care facilities and those particular issues that are impacting it at the minute that will make it difficult to get away from special emergency accommodation or arrangements but we need to look at the operational situations for social workers and social care workers, ensuring the supports are also given to them so they can they provide the supports because we are losing, at times, some of our best to burnout. In some cases, they are just leaving because it is too difficult.

Deputy Norma Foley: I am just providing Deputy Ó Murchú the information that was given to me from Tusla. I will ask Tusla to respond directly to his concern. I want there to be 100% clarity on the issue the Deputy raised, and I thank him for raising it. That is the information I have received from Tusla. I will ask Tusla to engage directly with Deputy Ó Murchú on the matter if there is any kind of question or concern around it.

I acknowledge that Tusla teams are constantly reviewing their caseloads to ensure that children with the highest priority are allocated as soon as work becomes available, while ensuring that children in urgent need of safety are prioritised for allocation. Each referral is screened and based on the information provided. As I said, the referral is prioritised. Measures to reduce caseload pressure in Tusla have focused on recruitment of social work and social care staff at home and abroad. We have seen an increase of over 3% in the number of social workers and we want more. We are looking at a variety of schemes, whether they are apprenticeship-style schemes or whatever else, to ensure we have sufficient social workers available.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I appreciate the Minister's answer and that she will come back to me in writing in relation to the case management system. We definitely need to ensure we have a system that works. I also acknowledge the work being done in relation to training and recruitment. I ask for information on how many social workers have been recruited, how many we have and what the deficit is at this point. The information provided to the committee is that for social workers the deficit is approximately 300 and for social care workers it is 100. I also ask for information on the supports provided to those on the front line who are doing huge work.

We need to deal with the issue of special care facilities so we can move away from special emergency arrangements. Those who are the first port of call need to be given protections that will enable them to deal with their caseload and triage properly. As I nearly always say, we need to get early intervention in place. We have to give it a steroid injection or something because we are not where we should be in relation to the supports required by individuals and families.

Deputy Norma Foley: The Tusla staffing level is 5,661, which is an increase of 343 staff on the previous year. There has been a 3.6% increase in the number of social workers.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Could I have a breakdown?

Deputy Norma Foley: Yes. I will ask Tusla to make available to the Deputy a more specific breakdown on the different types of staff. I want to mention the training places for social workers because these have proven to be impactful. The number of training places has doubled over the past five years. At the end of 2025, there were 340 placements in Tusla, with further expansion planned. A social work apprenticeship has been introduced, with 34 apprenticeships starting in 2024 and 71 in 2025. The plans envisage that in 2026, we will have 100 or more apprentices in those training places.

A similar approach is planned for social care. Tusla continues to provide retention supports and management teamwork training for workers in order that caseloads are managed effectively and equitably. Tusla has also provided additional resources for more supports, including community and voluntary programmes to help assess and support cases more effectively.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): I thank the Minister. We will now go back to Question No. 137 in the name of Deputy Barry Heneghan.

Disability Services

137. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the measures being taken by her Department and the HSE to ensure continuity of care for young people with disabilities transitioning from child to adult services, particularly in CHO areas serving north Dublin; whether additional residential, respite and personal assistance capacity is planned; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [17676/26]

Deputy Barry Heneghan: This issue has been raised and it is represented in a large part of my constituency. I speak of the Before We Die campaign. Its representatives were in the committee yesterday and I met the parents involved. I welcome the statement from the Minister of State in response to other Deputies who raised this matter today that it is being reviewed. I hope it will be examined. It is a very simple and profound issue. I understand, having spoken to the Minister of State, that she is going to work on it. This is about dignity and choice. Having spoken to the parents, they need and deserve to know before they die what will happen to their children.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank Deputy Heneghan. This question relates to the continuity of care and day services.

The HSE advises that disability services integrated service area, Dublin North County, and integrated service area, Dublin North City and West, in the Dublin north-east region provides a range of supports for adults with disabilities, their families and carers, including home support, personal assistance services, respite services, day services and registered residential services, subject to assessed need and service availability.

The Deputy asked about people with disabilities transitioning from child to adult services. I point to the HSE day opportunities team which works closely with CDNTs to support transfer to HSE-funded adult services, where appropriate. Referrals for transition planning may be made from the age of 16 and families are invited to information sessions to meet local service providers, including those offering rehabilitative training. That gives people the opportunity to engage with those day services up to two years before the person takes up a place. It is really about supporting people through that transition.

The HSE national day services team is reviewing the transition process and information that young people and their families require when transitioning from services to school. This includes working with the multidisciplinary young adult teams in place for rehabilitative training and school leavers to standardise referral pathways. The national day services teams are also liaising with the Department of education with a view to co-ordinating the information and supports provided to them.

The Department of education has undertaken a transitions pilot with 41 special schools where information and support are provided to students to make informed decisions on post-school options and pathways. More generally, the HSE is supporting a day services deferrals process where individuals can avail of a deferral if they wish.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I welcome the working day services, especially the service for north Dublin. It is much needed but the area needs more investment. We need more respite centres and we need to give parents and children with disabilities support.

On the Before We Die campaign, the parents are in absolute fear. We must focus on solutions. I welcome the Minister of State's comment to other Deputies on giving consideration to cross-departmental plans for disability housing and health to specifically address these cases.

Many parents have emailed my office. Bernadette, Caroline, Lynn, Candy, Tony, Susan, J.J., Mary and Helen all represent parents who are worried about what will happen to their children after they pass. I welcome that the Minister of State is working on this. I know it is one of her main priorities, as she said to other Deputies. I would love for this to be fast-tracked so those parents could have reassurances.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I would too. I have met members of the Before We Die campaign twice, as has the Minister, Deputy Foley, and, I believe, many other members of the Government. I first met them at their request and the second time was at my request because I wanted to have a follow-up meeting with senior officials from the HSE to sit down together and work out a plan of action. I also acknowledge parents whose adult children attend the day services at Remember Us in Balbriggan, who I met on this issue as well. I met a young advocate yesterday on this and I will meet with two parents who are in a similar situation this afternoon.

I am very glad we have moved to a situation where we are funding planned placements, rather than constantly responding to emerging crises. It is important we can provide that certainty for both the adults and the parents. This year, for the first time, we are moving towards a strategy of planned placements. The numbers are small but we expect to be able to fill them.

We will be in a good position to then ask for the Department of public expenditure and reform to fill more.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I welcome the fact that the Minister of State has visited Remember Us. It is an exemplary example of what can be done. The increase in the budget for disability services was welcomed but fast-tracking personal assistance hours in these critical cases needs to be examined. Right now, these families feel like they are in the system. We need to move by making it planned for with centred supports. I welcome that the Minister of State has met parents at her request and at their request. I also acknowledge those who have contacted my office. Is there any timeline for delivering these kinds of co-ordinated supports for north Dublin and across Ireland? They are much needed. The data shows the northside has been neglected for too long.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I agree with the Deputy that we need timelines and we do have some timelines in place. This year's budget will fund the planned places that will happen this year. In terms of capacity building, we have targets and deadlines outlined in our disability capital plan, in which there was also an uplift this year.

12 o'clock

This year, we are hiring for six new additional roles within the HSE. Those postholders will liaise with, for example, local authorities, approved housing bodies and developers and work with them to ensure we are providing capacity at all levels, whether through private or public means.

I was in County Donegal last week where I met the access officer in Letterkenny, who informed me that, as part of the Donegal development plan, 30% of all new homes being built by local authorities or AHBs in the county will have to be accessible. That is really good. We need more local authorities to follow that example. That would help us to plan for the future.

An Ceann Comhairle: That concludes oral questions to the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality.

Gnó na Dála - Business of Dáil

An Ceann Comhairle: Before we move to Leaders' Questions, I have a note with regard to electioneering in the Chamber. Now that the writs have been moved and issued for the by-elections in Galway West and Dublin Central, I remind Members that the Chamber is not the place for electioneering. Clearly, Members have a wide margin to raise policy matters and matters of interest to voters in both constituencies, but it is not in order to use the Chamber as a platform to canvas for any candidate, party, or none. Members should not name candidates or bring them into their debates, either by way of praise or criticism. Contributions should relate strictly to the business before the House. I look forward to the co-operation of all Deputies during the period ahead.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: The rules today are the same as always. All contributions should be through the Chair and all Members should receive a fair hearing without interruption. Under Standing Order 38, I call Deputy Pearse Doherty.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: An tseachtain seo, den dara huair ó mhí an Mhárta, d'impigh an Coimisiún Eorpach ar bhallstáit céimeanna a chur i bhfeidhm chun an brú ó phraghsanna leictreachais a laghdú. Tá an Rialtas go fóill ag diúltú rud ar bith a dhéanamh chun cuidiú le gnáthdhaoine atá thíos le billí leictreachais iontach mór. Le bheith fírinneach faoi, tá an Rialtas ag déanamh rudaí níos measa tríd an gcreidmheas fuinnimh a bhaint díreach nuair a bhí siad ag teastáil ó dhaoine go mór. Beidh daoine anois ag cur na ceiste simplí seo, má tá an Coimisiún Eorpach ag impí ar an Rialtas gníomhú, cén fáth go bhfuil sé go fóill ag déanamh rud ar bith? This week, for the second time since March, the European Commission has urged member states to come up with measures to ease the burden of electricity prices. This morning, people are asking a very simple question: if the Government has been told to act, why is it still standing back?

The reality for families is stark. Electricity bills are rising again, heating costs are through the roof, grocery prices are up week after week and households are being pushed to the pin of their collar just to get by. Here is the reality behind all those bills. The *Irish Independent* today spoke to an 85-year-old man from Balbriggan. He has been working for 71 years and still cannot afford to retire. He works 15 hours a week just to keep his head above water. He sees it plainly. The State pension is not enough to live on. After a lifetime of work, he is still paying for heat, food and insurance, with the cost of everything rising. He knows that if he stops working, he will not be able to pay his bills. The newspaper also spoke to another man. He is a farmer from Cork in his 70s. He gets up every morning at 6 a.m. to go to work, every single day, not out of choice but because costs have spiralled far beyond what the pension can cover. The cost of heating is up, fuel costs have doubled and the price of everything is climbing up and up. This is not how people imagined their later years. After a lifetime of contribution, they should not be worrying about whether they can afford to heat their homes, but that is the human reality of this crisis.

What did the Government do at the very moment people needed supports? It took them away. Energy credits are gone, scrapped just when the pressure was intensifying and just as households were already at breaking point. That decision is indefensible because, at the very same time, we see this week that the Government's economic spring forecast shows the money is there. The reality is that a fraction of the surpluses would make a real difference in ordinary people's lives. The Government has more than enough to act, more than enough to support households and more than enough to give people a real break. This is not about money but about political choices. The Government is choosing not to act. It is choosing to leave families exposed. It is choosing to let bills rise. It is choosing to tell people to wait - wait for the budget, wait until next year and wait while the crisis deepens. People cannot wait because the crisis is here, right now. The bills are landing right now. The pressure on families is right now. These families need relief immediately.

Does the Tánaiste accept that his Government got it wrong when it scrapped the energy credits that were so obviously needed? Will the Government now act to reintroduce those supports and bring forward an urgent cost-of-living package or will it continue to sit on billions of euro in surpluses while workers, families, pensioners and so many others across the State are pushed to the brink?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. Of course, the Government did not wait. It brought forward, objectively, one of the largest packages of supports in the European Union to assist our citizens. It is either the largest or second largest package in the European Union, depending on how you look at it, and it is around two and a half times larger than the average package in the European Union. While I welcome the European Commission's high-level proposals of yesterday as an important contribution to this discussion, we in Ireland, in this Oireachtas and in the Government, did not wait for the European Commission to come up with a list of ideas.

To the Deputy's question, I welcome the high-level proposals published yesterday. They are being discussed today and tomorrow at a meeting of the European Council in Cyprus, where our Taoiseach will represent the country. I hope that meeting provides an opportunity to put a bit of meat on the bones of further areas where the European Union can bring forward opportunities to act. I welcome that the proposals yesterday referenced the ability of countries to go beyond the energy tax directive. The Deputy will remember that I brought a financial resolution into this House in which we went beyond the energy tax directive on diesel. On that occasion, we did so more to get ready to ask for forgiveness than permission. I welcome the recognition from the European Commission that it needs to give member states flexibility in relation to that.

I also note that the Commission's proposals say that measures should be targeted income measures. That is why we extended the fuel allowance. I welcome that the Commission said measures should be temporary because I think we have to stay agile and flexible during this crisis. It is hard to predict where the global economy will be in six weeks, let alone in six months. That is why our current measures run to the end of July. The Commission says that taking action on excise duty is an option, which is why we have cut the excise duty on diesel by 32 cent and on petrol by 27 cent. Between the green diesel excise duty cut and the support scheme, the cut for a litre of green diesel is 27.5 cent.

The Deputy is right that the Commission said there are options that can be considered in relation to electricity. I note it said it will soon adopt a legal proposal in relation to this, and Ireland will constructively engage on that. There is an interesting question, quite frankly, as to what more we can do around the structural cost of electricity. To give the Deputy an example, and I read the same article today as he did, we want to invest a lot more in upgrading our grid. We want to make sure more electricity is produced from renewables. The question of how much of that will come on to the household bill versus how much of it will come from the resources of the State is an important and legitimate debate. We are already planning on spending €18 billion on upgrading the grid. Is there more that can be done in that space? We will work constructively at a European level in this regard. We have already acted on the VAT rate on electricity. The Deputy will remember that we took the decision to extend the lowest rate of VAT that we can levy on electricity. That 9% rate has been in place since 2022, but it has constantly been rolled over. We took a decision early on to provide certainty that the rate would be in place until 2030. That measure has already come at a cost of about €1 billion.

We do not rule out taking further actions - no Government can - but an energy crisis in the summer months is very different from the challenges that people could face in the winter months. We have to make sure that we intervene, as we did with the largest or second largest package in the European Union, but also that we have an ability to intervene further. As the Deputy and all of us know in the context of this crisis, no matter what happens in Iran, the damage done now to the energy infrastructure means it will take a significant time to repair. Therefore, we have to be agile.

On the Deputy's point on the surplus, I am very pleased that there is a surplus. It did not come about by accident and did not fall from the sky. The sensible, pro-enterprise policies that this country has implemented mean that we have a fiscal buffer built up. The surplus is not just sitting idle. It is going into infrastructure and climate adaptation, through those funds, and into the Future Ireland Fund to meet, for example, pension requirements. It provides us with options.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste is still not listening. He is trying to spin it, and he can try to spin it whatever way he wants, but people, in their real, lived experiences, know where they are at. They see prices going up. They see the prices of electricity, fuel, home heating oil and groceries going up. They see all of that. They see a Government that is talking about surpluses - billions of euro more than were expected - and refusing to act.

The Government does not need the European Commission's approval to introduce energy credits. It withdrew those energy credits in the height of winter. We told the Tánaiste what would happen. What happened Simon? Never have we seen more people in the history of this State who cannot pay their electricity bills. On top of that, we have fuel prices and groceries increasing and rents, insurance and student fees going up. It is never ending on families. I am telling the Tánaiste, what the Government needs to do is act now. It needs to bring forward an emergency cost-of-living package that supports families in the here and now. People cannot wait for the Government to get its act together in the budget in October for measures to be implemented in January. People's bills are rising now. They are looking for help and leadership and the Government is continuing to give them the deaf ear.

The Tánaiste: Truthfully, it is quite the opposite. We have already brought forward a package of €750 million. That is the opposite of refusing to act; it is acting. It is concrete, meaningful action and people see it at the pump. They know that the diesel price is lower than it was before. It is still too high but people know it is lower. They know the petrol price is lower than it was. Hauliers and their representative body have welcomed the package. Farmers and their representative body have welcomed the package. We continue to work and engage with many stakeholders including the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, the Irish Business and Employers Confederation, IBEC, and many others. The Deputy should also acknowledge that never before in the history of the State have more people been in receipt of a fuel allowance. We made a decision to expand it to 50,000 more low-income, working families.

Here is the difference between being in government and opposition; we cannot come in here every Thursday and effectively propose we do another budget. I want to make sure we have options at budget time. We already took a very significant intervention and stand ready to take further interventions. However, we will not have the options we require as a country if we try and have a budget every Thursday.

Deputy Ged Nash: Hundreds of thousands of working families have been left asking why they have been left behind by this Government. They are left wondering what it will take for the Government to act to help them. Which piece of road or which port should they blockade before the Government takes notice? Over the past six months, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Independents made deliberate decisions which left those workers behind and worse off. It decided on plain silly VAT cuts for fast food firms, paid for by PAYE workers, because it chose not to index income tax bands and credits. Only now does Fianna Fáil appear to have a problem with that stroke.

The Government made a decision to withdraw critical, once-off payments and energy credits. For three years families relied on a couple of hundred euro to ease the burden of Europe's highest electricity prices. The Government left them at a loss with less money in their pockets. They are now getting bills for €300, €400 or €500 at a time. That decision is now coming back to haunt the Tánaiste and his colleagues.

The Iran war will nearly double inflation this year. Construction and food prices will rise further, making a complete mockery of the Government's VAT-cut misadventure. Grocery prices were already increasing at over 6% and electricity prices will rise even more, adding €150 to average bills which were already sky-high. Before Easter, the Tánaiste and other members of the Government were talking about tax cuts for the richest in our society on inheritance and for special investment accounts. Quite frankly, that was tone deaf. That consideration once again ignored the needs of many who are struggling to pay their bills. Now it seems the Government has realised finally realised the error of its ways.

In the past week, the Government has flown many budget kites, including income tax cuts, energy credits and increased retrofit grants; you name it. Why do PAYE workers have to wait more than six months for relief when protesters only had to wait for a week? Those sectors did need some support but why are the needs of the real drivers of the economy being blanked by the Government? Yesterday, the Commission laid out the measures the Government can take to address the impact of the energy crisis. There are many policy options available to the Government in this toolbox such as a windfall tax on energy profits, price controls, energy vouchers, social tariffs and income support schemes for households.

People know there is a massive surplus. Why? Because the Government keeps telling us. They also know we cannot spend it all at once and that services need to be paid for. People saw that the Government very quickly found €750 million over the past month for sectoral interests. They need help now and there are ways for the Government to responsibly do a mini-budget now to provide real relief for PAYE workers. It could reverse the VAT cuts, introduce a windfall tax on energy companies and use the money for targeted energy credits of €400 for average income households. It could introduce the income tax indexation it promised during the general election but abandoned last October, and offer real supports for families with grocery bills and school costs. It can use existing laws to place maximum-price orders on home heating oil. Will the Tánaiste now move to help working people through a mini budget?

The Tánaiste: We will not be bringing forward a mini budget but we did introduce a €750 million package, the second largest in the European Union and two and a half times the European average, less than two weeks ago. I take some of the points the Deputy made on sectoral interests versus everybody. There is something in that. However, I will make two

points regarding that. First, there are some sectors where it simply makes sense when there is a fuel crisis to prioritise an intervention. We are not all the same in terms of our fuel consumption. A haulier or a farm contractor has a very significant fuel bill. It made sense for all of us to keep our supply chains in certain crucial sectors of the Irish economy going. I do not think the Deputy and I disagree on that; he has acknowledged some sectors need help. Beyond that, I make the point that the package we brought forward is one everybody benefits from. I will explain why. The chief economist in the Department of Finance has estimated, and he said this on the day we published the spring forecast, that whatever inflation ends up being - we all want to suppress any increase - will be approximately 0.6% lower each of the months of May, June and July than it would otherwise have been. That person the Deputy quite rightly mentioned, and we all know them, who is in the supermarket and worried about the cost of food going up - by keeping inflation down through the package, we are having a positive impact on what that supermarket bill would have been otherwise.

On VAT 9%, and the Deputy got a lot of mileage since the previous budget out of the old burger baron cut, I want to ask him about it. I was in the Deputy's constituency this week. I doubt when he goes into his local café in Drogheda, and we all have a local café in our community, he looks at the man or woman behind the counter and says good afternoon to Mr. or Mrs. baron because he knows in his heart of hearts, as a former Minister in the Department of Enterprise, that the overwhelming majority of hospitality businesses are small businesses. He knows they are the heartbeat of rural and regional Ireland and they employ four, five or ten people. He knows that whatever the merits or demerits, and I accept we have a full policy difference, of our position on the budget, it is more essential we reduce their cost base. What would the Deputy be saying to me if we had not done anything to support the hospitality sector in the budget? A sector that employs well over 140,000 people directly needs our support. I am not flying any kites but when I am asked a question I try to answer it. I was asked whether there will be a personal income tax package in the budget; yes, there will.

I want to make another point as the Deputy has raised this with me many times. The country we saw in recent weeks regarding blockades is not who we are. We all know we are better than that as a people. People are angry and frustrated and there are real issues; I get that. However, we have to have really good structures for engagement in place with democratically constituted national bodies. We had a very good meeting in the past week of the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, with the ICTU, and others. It made points not too dissimilar to the Deputy's. There is a need to intensify that engagement in the weeks ahead.

Deputy Ged Nash: There are other and better ways of targeting supports to businesses which may need them, not a blanket VAT cut that is going to disproportionately benefit the burger barons like Ronald McDonald and his friends. That is a very poor use of taxpayer money and is being paid for directly by PAYE workers. That is the reality. The Tánaiste is now trying to retroactively justify that by the increased energy costs that businesses will be experiencing. I simply do not buy that. The Tánaiste is going to have to explain, with great difficulty, to workers who are going to continue to find it very difficult to pay their bills this summer when the VAT cut is introduced in July, why he is continuing to justify that. Lobbyists do a great job for the hospitality business. They did a number on the Tánaiste. Hauliers did a great job in terms of how they acted. They got the Tánaiste to respond. They have done the business for

the people they represent. It is about time now the Tánaiste and his Fianna Fáil and Independent colleagues did the business for working people.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: We will not get into it but the Deputy knows Ronald McDonald does not own the McDonald's in Bray. He knows there are franchises in relation to many of these places. It is important to point that out.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: Whether it is a franchise or a small independent business, there are hardworking, decent people running these places too. They employ PAYE workers too. I will stand in any of these cafés, restaurants or rural pubs that serve food and say to people that the reduction we have brought about from July on VAT is a reduction in the cost base of that business. At a time of real pressure, reducing costs on business is good. We can disagree on that point and agree on a broader point. There is a need to have broader engagement with wider society and representative groups on how we get ourselves through this moment of challenge. I found, and I certainly do not mean they were not tough on us or that they agree with us on everything, that the engagement we had with ICTU, IBEC and members of the LEEF to be very good.

What we need to do is have a much more intensive process now to engage with workers, their representatives and business representative bodies in the weeks ahead.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I notice the Tánaiste has been spending a bit of time in Dublin city over the past few weeks-----

The Tánaiste: Cannot mention that.

Deputy Gary Gannon: I have to ask: does he feel any shame for what Fine Gael's time in government has done to our capital city? I know that is a difficult charge but I want to illustrate the point so I will talk about just one street in central Dublin. That street is Gardiner Street. I am not sure if the Tánaiste is familiar with Gardiner Street but it is just one street over from the GPO where a mere 18 months ago, he stood and made a pre-election commitment to the people of Dublin. Does he remember that commitment? While launching the long-awaited report of the Dublin city centre task force, he said of our capital city:

It deserves a brighter future. It deserves dedicated resources, and it deserves a vision. We now have it.

That was the promise. One street over from where he made it Gardiner Street embodies the failure. One tenth of the homeless population of Ireland are being warehoused in emergency accommodation on Gardiner Street. The Dublin Regional Homeless Executive has contracted 20 properties on this one street, all but one of which are privately operated. That is 1,700 emergency accommodation beds on barely a half kilometre stretch of road. Yes, I also wince

at the use of the word “warehoused” but I know personally the lived experiences of families trapped in this reality and to call it anything else would be an insult to their experience.

Eoin Murphy is the principal of Gardiner Street Primary School where 20% of the children are living in emergency homeless accommodation. He recently told RTÉ’s “Prime Time”:

Students’ basic needs aren’t being met a lot of the time because they might be up late at night. They might not have good washing facilities or cooking facilities, nowhere to play or do their homework. If your basic needs aren’t being met it’s very hard to learn.

What is happening on Gardiner Street is a blight on this republic but there is another fact I want the Tánaiste to hold in his head if he visits central Dublin over the next few weeks. Using all available data sources, a north city centre residents alliance has concluded there are 7,000 people living in homeless accommodation in the north inner city. I do not have time to talk about the level of complex needs that are being unmet in this cohort but it is devastating to the lives of those trapped in the broken system and to the communities trying to pick up the pieces of Government failure. But there is an even crueller juxtaposition operating in tandem. The average monthly rent in Dublin city is €2,700 a month. Rents are 80% higher than they were a decade ago? How many affordable purchase homes were delivered across the entirety of Dublin City Council’s boundaries last year? Zero. There was not a single one.

Eighteen months ago, the Tánaiste stood at the GPO and talked of a vision for Dublin city. It is hard not to see the culmination of that vision as a city that is too expensive for the vast majority of Dubliners to ever live in and the creation of a system of impoverishment that is inescapable for those caught in the failed policies of the Government. Therefore, I will ask again: is this the vision of Dublin city that the Tánaiste has in mind? What is the plan to remove us from this and improve the capital city for the people who live here and the people who are caught in the oppression created by failed Government policy?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. I remember very well standing at the GPO for what was a very important moment for Dublin with the launch of the Dublin city task force report. I say that because it was a report that had nothing to do with me. I decided that we should have a task force for Dublin but the report is the culmination of an incredible body of work done by many people, including many Members, many people across the political divide, all of the agencies, the city council and its excellent chief executive, Richard Shakespeare, and many other bodies, among them the HSE, An Garda Síochána and business groups, which fed into the vision. I know the Deputy knows that too but I wanted to say that. That was the outworking of that. Since then, we have seen real progress in the implementation of the report. I believe Dublin City Council is this week progressing the establishment of the special purpose vehicle, SPV. The Deputy will be aware of the appointment the Government has made of someone to head that up and drive that in the person of Robert Watt; that Dublin City Council has allocated staff with the technical skills to a programme management unit to drive delivery and it is now working on an integrated area strategy; the changes we made to the living city initiative to make sure more buildings in Dublin, including in his constituency, can qualify for reliefs to bring them back into use as homes, including above the shop, and removing any restriction in relation to that; and the very significant money we have provided through the various renewal funds around Parnell Square culture quarter, the fruit and vegetable market and the plans in relation to the GPO as well. Now we have that SPV to drive delivery too. I am proud, quite

frankly, of the vision of the Dublin city centre task force. I think people far away from Dublin can take an interest in this too because we all want to see a capital city that is vibrant and thriving but that does not take away from the point the Deputy made because that point is very valid. Homelessness in our country, but also in our capital city, is still far too high. In certain parts of our country, there is a particularly high number of people as well; I do not like to use the word “concentration”. We know while homelessness is a national problem, it is a problem that disproportionately impacts Dublin. That is why we are providing more funding for the Dublin homeless region and have provided funding of around €400 million in 2026; why we have provided local authorities with statutory discretion around HAP payments above the prescribed maximum rent limit; and why we recently met as a Government with Dublin City Council, its director of housing and its chief executive – that is myself, the Taoiseach, the Minister for housing and the Minister of State with responsibility for housing - to see what more can be done in relation to faster delivery of social housing. I accept it is an area in which we have a huge amount more work to do but both pieces of work are important. Driving implementation of the Dublin city centre task force is key while also, obviously, tackling the homeless emergency in the country.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The Tánaiste mentioned real progress has been made by the Dublin city task force. If I capture a bit of the timeline, I will show the fallacy of that statement. The Tánaiste first announced the establishment of the city centre task force in May 2023. That was commissioned later that year. Nothing happened in between the delivery of the report by David McRedmond which came 18 months ago. It sat on the Tánaiste’s desk for four months before that. In the 18 months since the Tánaiste has talked about an SPV that is undefined and unbudgeted and the announcement of a Civil Service representative. Dublin City Council has been asking for €114 million just so it can give body and finance to some of the initiatives the Tánaiste has talked about. For example, the last time I checked the living city initiative, there had been about 30 applications for it over many years and I would be surprised if it had reached 40 now. We need a vision for the city which, exactly as the Tánaiste said, is resourced and understands the oppression of the people who are being left behind in our city and understanding that people cannot afford to live in their city. We do not need more reports and years; we need action now.

The Tánaiste: It was May 2024. I became Taoiseach in April 2024 so it was May 2024 that we announced the plan to put this in place. Now, in 2026, we are already seeing delivery on that. The Deputy is actually right about the living city initiative. There was a rigidity around the living city initiative that, quite frankly, was making it too hard for people to benefit from. That is why we made a number of changes to it. I genuinely hope we see the benefits of that, most particularly to the changes relating to above-the-shop development. There has been some funding, though, through the urban regeneration fund already. I welcome the support of the Deputy’s party, I think, and most parties in this House in terms of other ways we can look at Dublin City Council having potentially ring-fenced funding whether that is a tourism levy or the likes - I am very eager to explore that – on the understanding that the funding goes directly into issues in Dublin city. We have seen other areas. The Minister for justice is present. We have seen a real focus on and progress in Garda numbers in the city and that has been widely acknowledged by people when I visit the Deputy’s constituency as well.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The Tánaiste promised 1,000.

The Tánaiste: A memo is due to go to the Government around the next two weeks specifically on the next steps for the GPO.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Last night, “RTÉ Investigates” broadcast a shocking report on Tusla and children in State care. This is something we in Aontú have been raising solidly for the past five years. The report was obscene. Young children are being taken from very difficult backgrounds from their parents and being placed into special emergency arrangements. These are often unregulated, often with staff who are unvetted and some of those staff do not even have references. Children are being located in apartments and hotel rooms and are being moved around on a regular basis. In short spaces of time, a child could be in 20 separate locations. Children are sleeping in car parks and sleeping in broken-down cars. They are being groomed by crack cocaine dealers. Children are being sexually abused while in the care of Tusla. Children are being raped in the care of Tusla and known to Tusla. This was reported last night.

We have uncovered a harrowing case of a 14-year-old girl who went missing from Tusla just 24 hours after she was placed there. The child was missing for an entire year. She was then found in a brothel. She was a victim of unimaginable exploitation when she was supposedly in the Government’s protection. The Minister has refused in a follow-up question by ourselves to answer if anyone has ever been prosecuted for the trafficking and exploitation of that child. Children are being killed in the care of Tusla and known to Tusla.

Two hundred and thirty-five children known to child protection services have been killed in the last 12 years. There have been 13 homicides, 38 deaths as a result of suicide, and, in another parliamentary question from us, we learned that eight children were killed so far this year who were known to Tusla or in the care of Tusla. Mr. Justice John Jordan said that some of these failures are outrageous and an affront to the rule of law. He warned that Tusla is extraordinarily exposed to significant future compensation claims as a result of the harm that is being done to these children. Judge John Campbell stated that he was incandescent with rage that a secure bed could not be found for a child deemed at risk of death. He noted that children who should be getting ready for Santa Claus were being placed in unregulated placements. Judge Simms provided three important documents to the last Minister for children, Roderic O’Gorman, which were shredded. I believe this is one of the most disgusting, shocking scandals that has happened to children in the history of this State. When I first raised this in the Dáil four or five years ago, it was so horrendous that I was sure that the Government would put an end to these special emergency arrangements. It has not. It is actually getting worse. Will the Tánaiste give a commitment today and a date for when the Government will end the special emergency arrangements in this country?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising last night's programme. It is a programme which has been extraordinarily difficult for people across the country to watch. First and foremost, I thank the young people who came forward and shared their experience of the care system. It takes a lot of courage and bravery to do so and to do so in such a public manner. I commend "RTÉ Investigates" on the work it did on this. It highlighted a number of very challenging cases and indeed upsetting cases about vulnerable children who the State should support and protect. Of that, there is no doubt. Listening to some of the negative experiences,

although frankly that phrase does not capture it, so I should say listening to some of the horrors that some very vulnerable children have endured while entrusted to the care of our State raises significant questions.

Many fine people are working in Tusla. I do not think the Deputy is taking from that fact. They are working in extraordinarily difficult circumstances and often with very complex cases. I acknowledge them because they are doing good work, which is important to say.

On the specific issue the Deputy raised about the use of special emergency arrangements, this is effectively where the State becomes reliant on a private operator to provide accommodation in an emergency situation. It is good to see that the reliance on that is being reduced, although it is still too high. I think it has been reduced from around 170 children in special emergency arrangements last year to 70 but Tusla is now working to reduce that further in the coming months. I spoke to the chief executive officer of Tusla this morning and I understand that there are around 69 of these centres. Nineteen of those centres are due to be registered from 1 May. There is a further plan regarding another 19 of them too. I genuinely believe Tusla is working its way through this with a real sense of urgency. It has closed six centres and stopped working with them, and there have been five Garda referrals over a period of time. The Deputy mentioned some absolute horrors, as is his right in this House. I do not want anyone to think that any part of this country, service in this country or any individual in this country is beyond the reproach of An Garda Síochána or the law in this land. I think the CEO said connections with six centres have been ceased and there have been five Garda referrals. There are also internal monitoring teams in Tusla, which have carried out 300 visits.

It is also true that there has been an increase in the number of children requiring care, as the Deputy knows. We have seen an increase in the number of separated children seeking international protection. That reduced a lot compared with what it was a year or 18 months ago. Tusla is having to deal in real time with these pressures. It is very serious.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Tánaiste has not given a date or a commitment that these will be closed completely. The "RTÉ Investigates" programme was of great value but there was one problem with it. The Minister for children was invisible in that show. Tusla is not operating in a vacuum. Tusla is a product of the Tánaiste's Government. It is a responsibility of the Government's Minister. The lack of funds and the lack of social workers is a policy choice by the Government. This scandal is unfolding in Tusla. It ranks up there with many of the scandals in the past but the difference is that this is unfolding in real time for the Government, and Tusla cannot be used as some kind of insulation blanket to separate the Tánaiste's Government from the responsibility for this horror. The Tánaiste said once that he wanted this country to be the best country in the world to be a child. For many of these children, with these horrors, it is one of the worst countries in the world to be a child at the moment. Children are being killed, raped and groomed at a cost of €14,000 a week to the State. When will there be accountability? When will the resources be matched to the needs? Will the Tánaiste give a date and a commitment that by the end of this year, these SEAs will be closed?

The Tánaiste: I need to be very careful here. There are extraordinarily harrowing cases that deserve and require a full investigation. I know that, over time, there have been five referrals to An Garda Síochána. The gardaí do their job very well but we should also acknowledge that Tusla is not the problem here. Tusla is working with children in very vulnerable and complex

situations. It is not acceptable for any child to have an adverse or bad experience but it is important to say that-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is a sanitised response.

An Ceann Comhairle: The same rules apply to Deputy Tóibín as to anyone.

The Tánaiste: It is important to say that there are around 6,000 children in our care system, living with foster parents and in registered centres. The vast majority are in education and training. It is also true, in fairness to the Minister, Deputy Foley, who is working hard on this matter, that she secured an increase in the Tusla budget of €177 million this year on top of an additional €53 million in additional capital funding. The use of these centres is decreasing and Tusla is determined to continue to decrease it.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: No date, Tánaiste.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Menopause has recently begun to receive the recognition that it deserves in this country. The introduction of the free HRT scheme was a significant and welcome step forward. However, the policy has always contained a clear and acknowledged gap for women who are medically contradicted from taking hormonal treatments. The National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics last week published its assessment on Veozah, a non-hormonal treatment for moderate and severe symptoms associated with menopause. This medication is particularly relevant to women for whom HRT is not clinically appropriate, including women who have oestrogen-positive cancers and other medical contradictions. This is a situation I have raised on the floor over a prolonged period.

While last week's NCPE assessment raises concerns about cost-effectiveness, it is notable these concerns are framed around individuals who can take HRT. That wording is critical because it highlights that the medication is being assessed against a comparator that a significant cohort of women simply cannot safely use. That is not an abstract concept. The Minister for Health has repeatedly acknowledged on the Dáil record and in reply to my parliamentary questions that not all women are clinically eligible for HRT, and that women who are contradicted must pursue non-hormonal options with their GP or oncologist, and that there are currently no plans to modify the free HRT scheme to include those alternatives. That leaves women, often cancer survivors, with fewer treatment options, greater financial burden, and unequal access to menopause care.

The NCP process on Veozah should not be viewed as a single, narrow reimbursement decision. It presents an opportunity to address the wider policy issue on how the State supports menopausal women who are excluded from HRT on medical grounds. I ask that the Government ensure that Veozah is, at a minimum, included in the drugs payment scheme, and for a commitment to formally review the free HRT scheme so that women who cannot take hormonal treatments are not structurally excluded from State-funded menopause care. Tá druga ar fáil gur féidir tacú le mná leis an athrú saoil, go háirithe mná atá tar éis ailse a chur

díobh. Ní féidir leo an gnáth-HRT a úsáid de bharr na hailse. Mar sin, ba chóir go mbeadh an druga sin, Veozah, á chur ar fáil dóibh.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy very much for raising this important matter. I acknowledge that, as he rightly reminded the House, this is not the first time he has raised this issue here, and directly with the Minister for Health as well. There has been a welcome and renewed policy focus in this House and from the Government on the importance of HRT treatment and accessibility to the free HRT programme. I thank my colleague the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, for the work she has done in getting this programme up and running that is helping many women across the country.

I say that before getting to the Deputy's specific point. He raised the medicine, Veoza. My understanding is that the HSE received an application for pricing and reimbursement of Veoza on 9 February 2024 from the pharma company. It is for the treatment of moderate to severe vasomotor symptoms associated with menopause. On foot of a rapid review by the NCPE, the body that reviews medicines on behalf of the State, the HSE commissioned a full health technology assessment, HTA, on 8 April 2024, as per agreed processes. Often the State gets blamed for being slow but it is important to say that 16 months passed before the company submitted the completed HTA dossier. I say that because people often ask why the Government does not move quicker. Sixteen months passed from when the NCPE said it was going to carry out the HTA to when the company submitted the dossier. That fact should be made known as well. When the NCPE did receive the full dossier it carried out its work and, as the Deputy says, it issued a report. I thank the NCPE for the work it is doing.

The factual position now is that the HSE will contact the company with a view to commencing commercial negotiations. I want to be very careful not to interfere with that. The Deputy is not doing that either. We need to allow the HSE to do its job in terms of carrying out that commercial negotiation. We are now spending €4 billion a year on drugs, which is good, as we need to do so. That is more than the budget of many stand-alone Departments. The budget for the Department of justice is probably around €6 billion. We are spending €4 billion on our drugs budget, so we have to allow the HSE do its commercial negotiation and get the best value for the taxpayer because obviously if it does not, it will affect the ability to purchase other drugs as well.

I recognise the importance of timely access to new medicines. I take the point the Deputy made about certain women who cannot access other treatments. I take very seriously the point he made about cancer patients and also cancer survivors.

In terms of modifying the free HRT programme to include non-hormonal treatment - I will not comment on the specific drug given the negotiations, as I do not want to cut across that - but any of the more broad matters concerning the programme and the likes are a matter for budget time. I am very happy to engage with the Deputy on that then. The main thing now is for the HSE to contact the company and get into commercial negotiations.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: A significant milestone was reached last week with the NCPE report. Ultimately, this is a question about fairness and equality. Women who are medically eligible for HRT now receive their treatment free of charge, whereas women who cannot take HRT, often because of hormonally sensitive cancers, are directed towards non-hormonal

alternatives, yet those alternatives are not treated equally by the State. That is not a position that should continue, especially when there is an alternative available with Veoza.

I have raised this repeatedly with various Ministers for Health, including questions on medications prescribed through specialist menopause services for women who are HRT contraindicated. The response has consistently been that no expansion of the scheme is planned. That cannot continue. The assessment of non-hormonal menopause treatment such as Veoza has fundamentally changed the context.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: The scheme needs to be reopened at this point to ensure equality.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on the Tánaiste to respond.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is right. It is always a milestone moment in relation to the consideration of any new medicine for Irish patients when the NCPE produces its report and that has obviously happened. The next step is for the HSE to invite the company to initiate commercial negotiations. Following that step, clinical submissions are considered and so too are patient submissions. That is important so that the voices of the women the Deputy referenced can be heard in this process. Clinical submissions and patient submissions are considered, as well as the outworkings of the commercial negotiation. Ultimately, the HSE drugs group sends its recommendation to the HSE leadership team. That is the process that will be undertaken.

I am very proud of the work we have done together, as a Government, in terms of the free HRT scheme. I think we all are. It is very important that Deputies come to this House and highlight where they believe there is room for improvement or gaps where people cannot qualify. That is separate to the drugs piece, which I am not getting involved in because they are commercial negotiations. We can of course have those broader conversations about how we help all our citizens in the context of the upcoming budget.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What we saw on "RTÉ Investigates" last night was absolutely shocking. It went to the heart of any parent out there. Children in the care of the State are being placed in really dangerous and wholly inappropriate settings. We are talking about unregulated emergency arrangements with no proper oversight where children are exposed to violence and trauma that will stay with them for the rest of their life. Young people are leaving care into homelessness. It is appalling and it is absolutely shameful.

These are children without a voice. They are overwhelmingly from working class communities and they are treated as if they do not matter while private profiteering continues. As we heard, none of this is new. Judges and child advocates have repeatedly raised the alarm with the Government and the concerns that Tusla is at a crisis point.

This is systemic. It is a political failure. People are asking what on earth is going on with children in the care of the State. When is the Government going to get a grip on this and make sure it comes to an end? We have seen too many programmes and reports.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy's time is up.

The Tánaiste: I agree with a lot of what the Deputy said in the sense of these being extraordinarily harrowing cases involving extraordinarily vulnerable children. I want to answer his question. I know all of us in this House would say that these children do matter. Their voices do matter. All of us need to be their voice. I did have a good conversation with the CEO of Tusla earlier, with whom I have regular engagements. Tusla is making real progress in terms of opening more centres and reducing the reliance on what are called special emergency arrangements, SEAs. Alongside that, and regardless of it, there are laws in this country that have to be applied too. There are also matters that I believe are matters for An Garda Síochána. There are laws if anybody has committed a criminal act against a vulnerable child in this country and those laws need to be enforced. I understand there have been five Garda referrals and six centres were closed over a period.

Deputy Mark Wall: I too want to raise last night's horrific programme. Like the Tánaiste, I thank Barry O'Kelly and "RTÉ Investigates" for bringing this in front of us. As has been said in this House already, it is not the first time that I and others have brought up this concern. Three weeks ago, Independent Ireland raised concerns we have on Private Members' business about Tusla services, SEAs and problems concerning them. It is simply not good enough that the most vulnerable in society are put at risk by these arrangements.

The State seems to be more concerned about bringing these vulnerable children to court rather than dealing adequately with their complex needs. The fact remains that Tusla has handed out €240 million to 93 unregulated providers of SEAs. This includes one company to which it paid over €41 million. Questions remains. Will an investigation be launched by the Government into last night's findings? Are there any financial penalties for SEA providers? Does the Government have a timeline to get rid of SEAs?

The Tánaiste: Last year alone, more than 106,000 referrals were received by Tusla. There are over 6,000 children in foster care with foster parents or in registered centres doing well. The vast majority of children in care are thriving and are being well looked after. The vast majority of them are in education or training. That is not to take away from the harrowing failures.

The Government will of course want to receive a full report from Tusla on this. I acknowledge that Tusla is working hard on this. We are seeing a reduction in the reliance on SEAs. We need to see an acceleration of that. We are seeing that against a backdrop of a greatly increased number of referrals. There can be no escaping the law in terms of any consequences for anyone who has breached the law.

Deputy Jen Cummins: A new report revealed today the depths of disadvantage in Dublin's south-west inner city, where I live. On every metric, the area and its residents are being failed. There is a disproportionate disadvantage when it comes to deprivation and crime, low

educational attainment and a chronic lack of sporting facilities, which I have spoken about several times in this Chamber. There are also very stark findings with regard to drug deaths and the crime rate, which is twice the national average.

It is really shocking it is laid out in black and white. I see it every day but it is shocking when it is written out in a report. It is also infuriating. There is a lot of money in this country, but how we choose to spend it is really important.

The only real investment that has happened over the lifetime of the Government is investment in private student accommodation, build-to-rent apartments and hotels for tourists. That does not help anyone living there. What I really want to know is if it is possible to have the same sort of thing that happens in the north-east inner city for the south inner city? They mirror one another incredibly, and that is my question.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Cummins for bringing up the issue and I will have a look at that report. The question she is raising is a broader one that arises from time to time, where there is a model that works well in parts of the city or of our country and there are other communities saying that they too could benefit from that model. I am going from my memory now, but I know there was work to be undertaken towards the end of the last Government in terms of how we embed that good practice in other communities. On foot of the Deputy raising this today, I will link in with the Department of the Taoiseach, which is co-ordinating that. I will also point out, as I am sitting beside the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, that a number of funds are available to try to help communities, particularly to tackle disadvantage, and perhaps I will ask the Minister of State to speak to Deputy Cummins on that too.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I want to raise again the fact the people of south Tipperary have no consultant ophthalmology service. There has been no eye service for almost two years now. The HSE has failed in its duty to provide that vital service. We have no consultant-led service, no optometry clinics and no nurse-led clinics. As a result there is a huge backlog of 3,000 people, with hundreds of children who have never been seen. There are hundreds of people with glaucoma who either have never been seen or need follow-up and some may be facing blindness. I know the ophthalmology department at the county clinic in Clomnel has been reallocated to other services, so what is going on? Is there a plan to downgrade or transfer the services out of south Tipperary? When will we have and see a consultant-staffed service in operation again in the county, please?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Healy and acknowledge this is not the first time he has raised it in this House. It does seem to have been going on for a very long time. Truthfully, I do not know the factual reason, whether it is regarding an inability to recruit or not. I know it often can be. The Deputy also raised the issue in relation to the transfer of services. On foot of him raising it again, I will ask that the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, interact with him directly on this matter.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: In Cork city, tenants in Mary Aikenhead Place are living in flats that were built in the 1960s. They are cold, damp and affected by mould. Surrounding units in the residential area have already been retrofitted. The Government retrofit plan aims for a B2 standard by 2050, with only 25% to be completed by 2030. For many of these tenants, the

timeline of waiting for 25 years to have their flats retrofitted is simply too long. Let me be precise. Will the Government commit to prioritising older flats such as Mary Aikenhead Place with an accelerated retrofit programme and will funding be in place to bring these homes up to standard by 2030?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Flynn for raising this issue. On foot of him specifically raising that area, I will ask the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, who has responsibility for this area, to come back to him directly. The broader point as to how we make sure we can retrofit and make homes warm for people to live in and to have a higher standard more quickly is absolutely at the core of what we need to be doing now. We have so much discussion in this House about fossil fuels and chaos caused in the world. Actually, the action the Deputy outlined is the sort of step we need to be taking. We are eager to do more in this space. We have seen a significant increase in applications but I will ask the Minister to come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I want to raise the shocking and deeply concerning announcement by Pfizer yesterday that it is seeking to reduce its workforce in Ringaskiddy by over 100. This represents about 12% of the workforce. Pfizer has been a very good employer in Cork since 1969, when it established the plant. As the Tánaiste will appreciate, it is deeply concerning for staff that this announcement has come forward. Will the Tánaiste ensure the State agencies engage with the company immediately to understand the background to this announcement and also to try to minimise the impact? Will he give assurances to staff that will happen ASAP?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy McGrath for raising this issue. I will speak to the Minister, Deputy Burke, on this matter today. The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, has told me he has spoken to him as well today. Pfizer is a great company and has been a great employer in the Deputy's own community but also in this country. I would like to have a better and deeper understanding of this and I am obviously very eager to support workers who are impacted. I know my immediate consideration today, and that of Deputy McGrath and the Minister of State, will be for the employees affected. All arms of the Government will work with them, but I will speak to the Minister on this today and ask that he also contact the Deputy.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I am seeking clarity on the commencement date for the newly approved Local Link bus service, the 515, connecting Mallow to Killarney, which serves the villages of Ballyclogh, Castlemagner, Kanturk, Boherbue and Knocknagree in my own constituency of Cork North-West. This route is not just a line on a map; it is a vital lifeline for rural communities. People in these areas have faced limited public transport options, impacting access to education, employment, healthcare and social activities. The approval of this service was very warmly welcomed locally when it was announced in November 2025 and there is strong expectation it will be delivered without delay in 2026. Reliable and accessible rural transport is essential if we are serious about balanced regional development and tackling rural isolation. This service has the potential to significantly improve connectivity across Cork North-West and into Kerry. The communities I represent are ready for this service. They now need certainty on when it will begin.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Shea for raising this issue with me and with the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, here who has responsibility for rural transport as well. I am pleased to see the investment in rural transport in Cork increased by 46% between 2024 and 2025 to more than €7.2 million. To the Deputy's point about Cork, passenger numbers on the rural routes are increasing by 95% so there is clear demand for this as well. I thank the Deputy particularly for raising the proposed new bus route 515 under the Connecting Ireland rural mobility programme. I know this is something the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, is very supportive of as well. It would serve a number of villages the Deputy has outlined in Cork North-West. The NTA tells me it is planning the advancement of these routes but has not yet given me a date for implementation. On foot of the Deputy raising the matter here, the Minister of State will come back to him directly.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I am going to give the Tánaiste some examples of how this Government is failing our most vulnerable children. Hansfield Educate Together National School is telling us it will not be able to support children with additional needs due to the lack of SNA allocation for this September, forcing it to reduce timetables for students with additional needs. One school in Dublin West has been awarded DEIS plus status but there is none in Corduff, Blakestown or Mountview. At least 19 children with additional needs have no post-primary school place for September. The Minister's task force on special education, set up in October 2024, has still not published its recommendations. Why? Children have been waiting six years for an assessment of need for children with additional needs in Blakestown CDNT. School completion programmes tackling disadvantage in the Mountview, Blakestown and Ongar areas are operating with no increased funding and have been asked to support a school population that has increased by over 1,000 children. Deaf children get supports, or not, due to a postcode lottery. There is a baby alarm and monitor scheme in Meath-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy, the time is up. The Tánaiste to respond.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: ----but not in Dublin West. It is the same HSE. Why? Why is the Government failing our children?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Donnelly. I am very proud to be a member of the Government that has introduced the DEIS plus programme. For the first time ever in the history of the State, we now have DEIS plus and I thank the Minister, Deputy Naughton, for her work on that. The Deputy and I have discussed this before. It is a start. The schools have been chosen on the basis of need, with criteria that are above and beyond politics in terms of trying to identify those most in need. That is not to say we do not wish to see DEIS plus expanded or rolled out further. Of course we do.

On the other specific issues, including HSE-related issues, I will ask both the Minister for Health and the Minister for education to come back to the Deputy.

While I am on my feet, I welcome the youth advisory panel who Deputy Keira Keogh, Chair of the Oireachtas Committee on Children and Equality, said are in the Gallery. I know they spoke so very well yesterday on the topic of online safety. I think there are representatives from Webwise, Youthwork Ireland, the NYCI and the Ombudsman for Children's Office. I welcome them to Leinster House and thank them for being here.

An Ceann Comhairle: On behalf of all the Members, the youth advisory panel are most welcome and we all identify that their contributions are most important.

Deputy David Maxwell: Following the announcement in February of the annual roads allocation, will the Tánaiste give an update on any further allocations for Monaghan, Cavan and all of the other counties? This year's allocations for local and secondary roads will not go as far because they will be eaten up by price increases in supplies and labour year on year. With the excessive wet weather this winter and a number of storms, the latest being Goretta in February, local and secondary roads in counties Monaghan and Cavan are in a deplorable state. Will there be a further allocation to help local authorities reinstate these roads? These roads are used by farmers, all types of businesses and the people who live on them. It will cost Monaghan County Council just over €1.4 million for repairs to cover storm damage alone on their local roads this year.

1 o'clock

At the moment this €1.4 million is being taken out of the ordinary roads maintenance budgets that are already cut to the bone. The people of rural Ireland deserve roads that are fit to be used safely. We need sustained increases to bring all local roads up to the required standard over the coming years. Can the Tánaiste give a commitment here today to local authorities that another tranche of funding will be coming forward?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Maxwell for raising this. It is not the first time he has raised it with me. I know his constituency in Cavan and Monaghan has been significantly impacted by Storm Chandra. While we have increased the funding for roads in Cavan and Monaghan, which is important - there is an increase in the funding in 2026 versus 2025 - I want to see that money, and more importantly the Deputy wants to see that money, in Cavan and Monaghan being spent as it was intended and not sucked up by the road damage. We have gone out to the councils. When I say "we" I mean the Department of Transport has gone out to the councils and asked them to come back to us in terms of their storm damage so we can see if we can allocate additional funding for that storm damage within the Department of Transport Vote. That is the direction the Taoiseach and I gave a special Cabinet committee on the flood damage. There is currently an application in from eight local authorities, of which Monaghan is one. That is now being assessed. I am not saying this to be difficult but I am not sure if we have one in yet from Cavan. On foot of the Deputy raising this, I will follow that up. The Minister of State, Deputy Buttner, who is in that Department, will also link in with the Deputy on it.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: The new school building for Gael Coláiste Reachrann in my constituency was moved to tender. Parents have been waiting 25 years for a permanent school building. We do not want any more broken promises in the sense that the school was told the project would move to construction in the second quarter of 2026 as previously indicated. Will the Tánaiste outline any risks to this timeline and provide a detailed update on the status go háirithe i mBaile Átha Cliath Thuaidh, áit a bhfuil daoine ag iarraidh Gaeilge a fhoghlaim? Caithfidh an infheistíocht a chur isteach san áit sin. Tá tuismitheoirí agus páistí ag iarraidh Gaeilge a fhoghlaim i bhfoirgnimh bhuan ach tá siad i prefabs atá fuar. They are leaking and they are cold. Can we get an update from the Tánaiste please?

The Tánaiste: I acknowledge that this is certainly not the first time Deputy Heneghan has raised this issue in the House. The Deputy raises it almost every time we meet, either formally or informally, around this building. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta for all the work he is doing in relation to it.

It is now one of the 105 large-scale school building projects that will go to tender and-or construction during 2026 and 2027. In other words, the project is definitely moving forward. The 600-pupil post-primary school project was authorised to proceed to tender on 12 November 2025. The invitation to tender issued on 28 November 2025 through the eTender portal. A request for an extension to the tender return period was granted. The school has also been granted a two-classroom special educational needs unit to be configured within the existing layout. An addendum is to be added to the invitation to tender shortly. The short-listed parties have been issued a clarification. It is expected the tenders will be returned approximately two weeks after that addendum in the second quarter of this year. The timeline remains on track. I will get a detailed note sent to the Deputy by the Minister, Deputy Naughton.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Go raibh maith agat.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I wish to raise the issue of the HSE discharging people from hospitals without the consent or co-operation of the families and in breach of the HSE's own protocols. I have an example of a man in south Leitrim who had a stroke and was in the care of the HSE. His sister in Dublin got a phone call saying, "He is going home today". She said there was nobody at home and that the house was under reconstruction because of the situation. She was told that he would be put in a taxi and sent home. That is it. A similar situation in south Donegal involved a lady who was in hospital. She was a very vulnerable patient with poor eyesight. Her daughter phoned the hospital to inquire about her and she was told she had already gone home. The daughter contacted a neighbour who had found the lady wandering outside in her pajamas in the month of January. This type of situation is happening more often than one would realise. Because of the pressures the HSE is under it is pushing people out, in breach of its own protocols and often without a care package in place. In regard to that gentleman in Country Leitrim who had had a stroke, adequate services for his rehabilitation were only put in place this week. He was waiting for two months. No care plans are being given to people and they are being sent home in breach of the HSE's own protocols and regulations.

The Tánaiste: I take Deputy Kenny fully at his word and do not doubt in any way the accuracy or bona fides of what he has shared with the House. I also accept the HSE is often very busy and under pressure. There are very many fine people who work in our health service and we thank them for that. There is, however, no excuse for anybody, no matter how busy they are, to discharge somebody without making sure there is an appropriate care plan in place. Surprising relatives and the like is not an acceptable thing to happen. I am not doubting the Deputy but on foot of him raising it, perhaps he will share the details, if he would not mind, in a confidential and an appropriate manner with the Minister for Health. I will ask that she would directly pursue that with the HSE. There are very clear protocols in place, as Deputy Kenny said, in relation to these issues. I am very sorry to hear about those two cases. The Minister for Health will engage with the Deputy directly.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Will the Tánaiste join with me in calling for An Post to reverse the disastrous decision to move the sorting office for Dublin 16 out of Dublin 16, moving it from Edmondstown to Lucan. It makes no sense whatsoever. It is not clear where the public who miss packets and parcels are going to have to go to collect them. They may have to go all the way to Lucan to collect parcels that they miss. It certainly is clear that it will result in a worsened service for the public. The postal workers are going to be stuck on the M50 going between Lucan and back to Dublin 16. It is also clear that it is a disaster for the workers. Workers have built their lives around where they work. I was talking to one couple who both work there but one of them does not drive and they get there by bike. There is no way they are going to be able to get to Lucan. It just makes no sense whatsoever to move a sorting office for an area out of the area it serves, and particularly when it is staying in the control of An Post.

The Tánaiste: As I was listening to what the Deputy was saying, I also had colleagues here saying to me that they are not unfamiliar with the significant inconvenience, anxiety and practical issues it can cause for constituents, including the constituents the Deputy referred to. On foot of the issue being raised by Deputy Murphy, I will ask the Minister and the chief executive of An Post to examine the specifics of the issue the Deputy mentioned about the proposed move of the sorting office from Edmondstown to Lucan. We also have to look at the opportunities to use local post offices and collection points there as well. An Post needs to think outside the box and be flexible as well. There are practical ways people need to go about collecting post, collecting parcels and like. We do have a very extensive post office network in addition to the sorting offices. I will ask the chief executive of An Post to engage with the Deputy.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Cuirim ceist ar an Tánaiste faoi Ospidéal Beaumont. Despite the very best efforts of nurses and doctors in the emergency department it is often severely overcrowded. For over a decade, the Tánaiste's Government has been promising a new emergency department at Beaumont Hospital. What is causing the delay to this much-needed new emergency department? When is it actually going to be delivered?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Callaghan for raising the issue in relation to the need for a new emergency department for Beaumont Hospital. I accept that the Deputy is accurate. This is something that has been long discussed and much needed in Beaumont. I do not have the specifics in front of me here, so I do not want to give the Deputy or his constituents false information but it is my understanding that it is part of the HSE's capital plan. I will ask the Minister for Health to come back to the Deputy directly in terms of a timeline.

I also hope that some of these projects can be progressed in the healthcare space using the critical infrastructure legislation and other common-sense ways to try to speed up processes, with processes in parallel. I accept that emergency department is badly needed. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, to come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I wish to raise the ongoing issue of Garda numbers in Cobh in County Cork. This issue has been brought to my attention by my Labour Party colleague, Councillor Cathal Rasmussen. Over the past number of months, and including this week, there have been a number of knife attacks in Cobh. Recently the doors of the Garda station itself

were closed with no access to the public because of the lack of gardaí. There are four units in Cobh and in one of those units now there is only one garda. Likewise, in Carrigtwohill both stations are swapping personnel to cover the shifts. I understand now that gardaí are not willing to transfer to Cobh because of the lack of adequate resources. Locals are concerned that not only are there no boots on the ground but the station itself is now closed to the public.

Cobh is a hugely popular town and Carrigtwohill is becoming one of the fastest growing towns in Cork. The public are genuinely concerned for their safety. The first of the liners have started to dock in Cobh, swelling the daily population, but there are very few gardaí available. We all want new gardaí in our areas but Cobh brings such an economic benefit to Cork, the presence of gardaí is absolutely essential there.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Kenny for raising this issue on his own behalf and on behalf of Councillor Rasmussen. They represent a beautiful part of this country. I know so many people who live there and who visit there from home and abroad. I take seriously the points the Deputy makes in relation to garda numbers in Cobh, in Carrigtwohill and in the area more widely, and in relation to the operating hours of the Garda station. I will ask the Minister for justice to engage directly with the Garda Commissioner who is responsible for the deployment of gardaí. We are now seeing a significant increase in the Garda budget and in garda numbers in Templemore. I will raise the Deputy's concerns directly with the Minister.

Deputy Peter Roche: I want to raise the issue of TB testing, the new guidelines and the action plan. There is considerable confusion about the testing and the movement rules. Constituents are a little bit confused about the categories their livestock fall into in this regard. They are asking that the rules be simplified. The compensation cap of €3,000 is fundamentally important, as a pedigree in-calf cow would exceed much more than €3,000. Apart from the financial burden, the emotional loss is also considerable. I am asking that the compensation cap be revisited and that consideration be given to 60 days pre-movement for all. Some are asking for 90 days but I believe that 60 days pre-movement would be relevant in this instance.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Roche for raising this matter. I know he has been engaging with the Minister for agriculture on this issue also and I thank him for it. We all know a TB breakdown can cause significant emotional and financial impacts on farms, and the recent changes are necessary to help drive down the levels and prevent more farmers experiencing these very difficult impacts. The changes are targeted to ensure they focus on a group of animals that are responsible for the largest number of reactors, namely cows, while also ensuring farmers can continue to sell them at livestock marts to achieve a competitive price. The Minister wrote directly to all farmers in advance of the changes, and officials from the Department continue to engage with farm organisations - it is very important for all of us to listen and engage on this issue - and with the livestock marts to try to guide them through the changes. I am aware of the financial impact and I will discuss with the Minister the points Deputy Roche has made on compensation schemes and changes. I know changes were made to the scheme in 2023. I will discuss the matter with the Minister, Deputy Heydon.

Deputy Johnny Guirke: Shannen is the mother of four children who all have additional needs. Her daughter Evie went to Castlejordan national school in County Meath from junior

infants. After meetings with the school, Evie moved to Clonard school, which has an autism class and more resources. In under a year Evie has nearly fully integrated back into mainstream education with access to autism support and she is thriving. Sadly, Evie is now isolated from the local kids and has lost local friendships from a school the family can see from their front door. Shannen's son Fionn is almost four and attends an autism playschool in Robinstown, an 80 km round trip for a child with additional needs. There were no closer options. Shannen has spent 13 years fighting for support for her children and says services are getting worse. A lack of accessible services locally is an issue that has deeply affected Fionn and has left his mother Shannen feeling powerless to get the system to support him. She wonders whether he will have a school place when needed. What measures are being put in place so children like Fionn with additional needs can attend their local schools and do not have to travel halfway around the country?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Guirke for raising this issue in relation to Shannen and her children. I am pleased to hear that Evie is thriving but I very much take the point about people wanting their child to be able to thrive in their own community and not be isolated from that community. I take the point. There is also anxiety as to whether Fionn will have an appropriate place. The budget we are working through for 2026 allocated funding for 433 additional special classes. Of these, 432 have been sanctioned and this week the Government allocated significant additional resources to the Department of education. Much of this will be for special education to increase further the number of classes. I believe we will need a number much closer to 600 by this September. If Deputy Guirke wants to send the specific details to the Minister, Deputy Naughton, I will ask that she comes back to him directly.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Hauliers and farmers who took part in the fuel protests are now facing summonses. In some cases their registration plates were recorded at the time of the protests and now they are being pursued. These are people who have invested heavily, in some cases hundreds of thousands of euro, into their businesses, trucks and livelihoods. The additional penalty points will see many of them lose their licences and their insurance policies. There is a real risk, therefore, that some of these people will be put off the road and will lose their businesses. I hear that in some cases gardaí are patrolling certain areas where the protests originated and summonses are issuing in the aftermath. Is the Government engaging in reprisal action in relation to the protesters? Are people being penalised for exercising their democratic right to protest? Will the Tánaiste instruct An Garda Síochána to recognise the protest as peaceful, legitimate and driven by financial hardship? It is really important these people are protected.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time is up and Deputy Lawless knows that the rules apply to him the same as everybody else. There is no point in us talking over one another. The rules apply to him the same as everyone.

The Tánaiste: I want to be really clear that the Government does not give any direction to An Garda Síochána in terms of implementation of the laws of the land. Anybody who participates in peaceful protest is entirely in accordance with the laws of the land. Peaceful protest is an important part of our democracy. I have participated in protests and I have been protested at. Protest is a good thing in our democracy. What is not a good thing in a democracy

is breaking the law, and anyone who breaks the law will face the consequences of the law, as An Garda Síochána applies laws without fear or favour.

Valuation (Amendment) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Emer Currie: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Valuation Act 2001 in order to provide that property occupied for the provision of early childhood care and education, where such is provided either otherwise than for profit or subject to Core Funding and caps on all provision at Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE Programme) rates, and property consisting wholly or partly of a building, which is used partly as a dwelling to a significant extent and occupied for childminding services, should not be rateable; and to provide for related matters.

I will share time Deputy O'Shea. Despite the frequent howls from the hurlers on the ditch, this country gets it right on quite a lot of things. Sometimes it gets things very right, such as ECCE. Ireland got it right when it introduced two years of free preschool education and, most critically, it got it right for children. The first five years of a child's life shapes 90% of their development. Our preschool education programme, taken up by 96% of eligible children throughout the country, improves child outcomes, reduces poverty and enhances lifelong employment prospects. Something that is not right is a legal interpretation of valuation law that could shut down ECCE services.

ECCE-only childcare services have traditionally been exempt from commercial rates on the basis they are an educational service, which they are. These are preschool services receiving Government funding of €69 per child per week, up to €82 with core funding and a base rate of €14,400 per year. I know these services and I know that at this rate of subvention they are very far away from being profit earning. I also know something much more important, which is that they are even further away from being profit driven. These services and the people running them are deeply committed to their sector and their communities, and they are working on very tight margins. They do not need to be told that because of the legal interpretation of a State agency they now have to pay commercial rates, but that is what is happening.

In 2015, the law was amended requiring that services must be established and operated on a fully not-for-profit basis. Now, it seems that on foot of judgments by the valuation tribunal, Tailte Éireann has adopted a particular interpretation of the law that means some ECCE-only and ECCE services that offer short paid aftercare capped at ECCE rates are deemed to be for profit. This interpretation leading to rates for preschool services, and potentially for childminders, is the opposite of right; it is wrong. It is happening in Cork, Waterford and Kildare and it will come down the tracks for preschool services throughout the country. It will lead to ECCE services shutting down.

The contradiction is stark. One arm of government is getting it right and funding ECCE and childcare, and wants to expand services, while another arm of the State is taking action that could do the opposite. Ultimately this seems to be an issue for the law. It is an issue for us as lawmakers. The law must be changed, and fast, and that is what the Bill aims to do. It will ensure that ECCE-only services, ECCE aftercare services capped at ECCE rates and

childminders are exempt from commercial rates. It aims to do the right thing for the ECCE programme. It aims to do the right thing for small childcare providers, for children and for parents. There is a problem here that needs to be solved and the Bill proposes solutions. I look forward to working with all sides of the House to get the right solution.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: Today marks an important and timely step forward in Dáil Éireann with the introduction of the Valuation (Amendment) Bill 2026. This legislation is about fairness, clarity and, most importantly, protecting small childcare providers throughout the country. Many, including in County Cork, have recently been hit with unexpected and deeply concerning commercial rate bills. At a time when childcare services are under real pressure, the last thing providers need is an additional financial burden that could threaten their very survival.

Rising costs, staffing challenges and regulatory demands are all already placing strain on providers. To then be faced with commercial rate bills, often without warning, has created real anxiety across the sector. This legislation brings much-needed clarity and certainty to ensure that ECCE services, not-for-profit providers and childminders working from their own homes are not unfairly treated as commercial entities for trade purposes. It corrects an anomaly that has caused confusion and concern and sends a clear signal that we value the role these providers play. If we are serious about supporting families, improving affordability and increasing participation in the workforce, then we must also be serious about supporting the providers who make all of this possible. They simply cannot afford to see providers closing their doors because of costs that were never intended to apply to them in the first place. The loss of even a small number of childcare places can have ripple effects across entire communities. This is why I will be urging colleagues across the House to support the swift progression of this practical common-sense legislation so we can protect childcare places, support providers, give certainty to the sector and provide reassurance of families who depend on the vital services every single day. I wish to mention that Deputy Geoghegan and Senator Nelson Murray are also involved in this legislation.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): It is not opposed.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.21 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.01 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.21 p.m. and resumed at 2.01 p.m.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Mark Wall): 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 Shane Moynihan - To discuss the provision of specialist supports for children with dyslexia, dyspraxia or apraxia of speech.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss delivery of a permanent school building for Owenabue Educate Together National School, Carrigaline, County Cork.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the need for out-of-hours GP services for Dublin Fingal West.

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

Deputy Rory Hearne - To discuss the number of affordable purchase homes delivered in Dublin city.

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss Mayfield library and community centre.

Deputy Martin Daly - To discuss consumer protection in the context of grocery price increases.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí - To discuss the remit and objectives of the Land Development Agency, LDA, in delivering affordable homes for purchase.

Deputy Gillian Toole - To discuss the impact of the transfer of leases for solar development on the price of renewable energy to domestic consumers.

Deputies Richard Boyd Barrett, Duncan Smith and Sinéad Gibney - To discuss the detention of an Irish citizen by German authorities.

Deputy Louis O'Hara - To discuss the proposed extension to Gort Community School in County Galway.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss government efforts to increase the number of Traveller children who complete primary and secondary education.

Deputies Claire Kerrane and Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss issues raised about children in State care arising from a recent "Prime Time Investigates" programme.

Deputies Grace Boland and Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the need to expand the D-Doc out-of-hours services to Balbriggan, and to discuss the need for out-of-hours GP services for Fingal West.

The matters raised by Deputies Ó Laoghaire, Moynihan, O'Hara, O'Rourke, Burke, Daly, Ó Muirí, Hearne, Toole, and Boland and O'Reilly have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I will give the Minister of State some of the context in a moment but the simple ask is that the children, staff and parents connected to Owenabue Educate Together National School want to know what the plan is and when their project will go to stage 2. The current situation is totally unsustainable. The school was opened in 2020. To give some context, Carrigaline is probably a bit like places in the Minister of State's constituency. The town has grown rapidly, from about 12,000 people in 2006 to 15,000 or 16,000 by 2016, and the population will quickly reach 20,000.

There are huge numbers of young people and children and a massive need for additional school places in the area. In 2020 or earlier, the Department proposed a new school and the new Owenabue Educate Together National School was opened in 2020. A site was soon identified for the school's permanent location but the building in question was reallocated to another school in March 2021. Owenabue national school had been due to move into that building the following September. That was a huge setback for the school but, at the time, it was given clear assurances by the Department of education that it would be treated as an urgent priority. It was confirmed in 2021 that the permanent accommodation would be a new-build. A site was identified over three years ago and subsequently purchased in Janeville, a new, large housing estate built on the northern end of Carrigaline. Since then, the board of management and school leadership have been trying to engage with the Department of education.

The project was commenced and meetings were held in May 2024. These indicated the school could possibly move in 2027-28, which is potentially as soon as the school year beginning next September. Stage 1 - design and review - documentation was submitted in June 2025, which is eight or nine months ago at this stage, but as of now, the project has still not been signed off to go to stage 2. It has not progressed beyond stage 1 during that period. No communication has been received by the school or patron in relation to when the project will progress.

This has clear implications. There are a number of schools in the area and parents are trying to evaluate the future prospects for the school and the children. This is hindering the school's growth. It is a fantastic school with a strong school leadership and a fantastic school community around it. People are obviously concerned about the future given the school's inability to plan.

The school is also split across two sets of buildings. I am sure the Minister of State has come across this before. It is far from ideal for a school in terms of planning, staff, supervision of children during breaks and ensuring the whole school community stays tight together. That it is currently split is not good enough.

The Minister of State will be familiar with the need to ensure there is adequate provision of special autism classes. There are currently two autism classes. The plan for the design of the permanent building includes approval for five autism classes, recognising local need given the very young population in the area. Obviously, those classes cannot be delivered until the school building is delivered.

The school is not getting any answers. Everything asked of it was submitted before June 2025. The target of 2027-28 is not much more than a year away. The school wants to know

when the project will go to stage 2 and whether it is possible to achieve the deadline. Its ability to grow and prosper as a school community is being undermined by the lack of answers and lack of a clear plan for the school.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I am very grateful to Deputy Ó Laoghaire for raising this very pertinent issue in relation to Owenabue Educate Together National School in Carrigaline, County Cork. The Deputy is right that he could be reading this about at least seven different schools in my constituency. I have, therefore, great empathy for the case the Deputy raised and for the entire school community.

As alluded to, this school building project will deliver a new 16-classroom primary school and additional accommodation for children with special educational needs at Janeville in Carrigaline, County Cork. The project is currently at stage 1, preliminary design, assessment of site and location suitability and initial sketch scheme. As part of the stage 1 process, the design team submits a stage 1 report to the Department. A preferred design option, including the scope and extent of works to be carried out, forms part of this report. The stage 1 report was received in the Department in January 2025 and upon completion of the Department of education's due diligence review, the stage 1 stakeholders meeting took place on 24 March 2025. The principal, a representative from the patron body, Educate Together, all design team members, the project manager and Department officials were in attendance. The meeting concluded with agreement that the design team would explore further design layout options. On 30 April 2025, an architectural workshop took place between the design team architect and the Department senior architect. The Department received the full design team stage 1 addendum report in August 2025 and this report is currently under review by the Department of education. On completion of this review, the Department will be in contact with the school and patron with regard to the further progression of the project.

For wider context, as the Deputy is aware, the Government recently published the €7.55 billion national development plan, NDP, sectoral investment plan for education. Of the total €7.55 billion investment, it is envisaged that circa €5 billion will be used for project roll-out to support the delivery and modernisation of school buildings. The Department has also published a list of the 105 school building projects in the first tranche to proceed to construction or tender over 2026 and 2027. This list includes 12 projects in County Cork. The first tranche of 105 school building projects includes 80 large-scale and additional school accommodation scheme projects.

To be frank, I think this will be a slightly frustrating reply for the Deputy and those on whose behalf he raised the issue. It is, however, typical of a process that is in the middle of the weeds. It would be irresponsible of me, on behalf of the Minister, to provide false information at this stage, other than to say that this is the review that is in place. What I would humbly suggest is that the Deputy consider bringing a deputation from the school for a meeting with the Minister, Deputy Naughton. I would be more than happy to play my part to ensure that is delivered as soon as possible.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: If that is something the Minister of State could facilitate or help to facilitate, I will take him up on it. This is, of course, frustrating. The schools is looking for answers. When will the project go to stage 2? We can say the school delivery team

has so many projects and it is hard to get through them all, but if the Government, at the highest level, is setting a target for the delivery of that many schools, it clearly needs to ensure the team is resourced enough to get through them. There are many other schools as well, as the Minister of State has alluded to, that are waiting for answers. That is not good enough. This is imposing a huge constraint on the ability of the school to operate.

It is under a lot of pressure. I have acknowledged, and I hope the Minister of State will also acknowledge, that it is never ideal for a school to be split across two sets of buildings. It is a difficult situation to manage.

When we talk about prioritisation, it should be taken into account that the school was given a commitment that its project would be prioritised. The context was that five years ago the school was told the building that had been clearly identified for the new school would no longer be available to it. The roadmap changed. The goalposts were shifted right at the last minute. The school was due to move into that building in September 2021. That option was removed and it now looks like it will be September 2027 at the earliest before the school moves.

The Minister of State will not be able to provide a date right now. However, I urge the Department to provide a date - even an approximate one - by which the school will get stage 2 approval, so that it can understand when the project will move on.

I make the point again that the school will not be able to deliver the number of autism classes it wants to deliver. The school leadership has the appetite and desire to deliver as many autism class places as possible. It will not be able to do that until such time as the school has the permanent school building, its permanent home, for the coming decades and generations.

Deputy Neale Richmond: That is a perfectly valid request. I advise having a deputation meeting and writing a formal letter to the Department of education on foot of this Topical Issue debate. The Deputy has been in this House longer than I have, and he and I know that Topical Issue debates are only a step in the process by which constituency TDs provide good advocacy. I will not insult the Deputy by giving out the departmental lines that this is obviously a process, there is continuing prioritisation and that prioritisation will move forward. Ultimately, the school community in Carrigaline - the current parents, the prospective parents and, most importantly, the children who rely on the Deputy to be their voice - expect better answers. I will have no hesitation in meeting the Deputy afterwards to see how we can facilitate such a deputation meeting as quickly as possible and ensure it gives as clear a timeline as is possible, recognising that any new school project or, more likely, school expansion project will be evaluated.

I take on board the two factors the Deputy raised, namely, growing demand, first and foremost, for what is needed and that this school is split over two sites. Having two campuses and two buildings is never the optimum or ideal. I make that undertaking to the Deputy in good faith.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as ucht a bheith anseo tráthnóna.

I start by acknowledging the significant strides made in recent years, especially in the expansion of special classes for children with autism which has improved access to the appropriate supports for so many children. My colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and the Minister, Deputy Naughton, are still working to continue to make sure that provision is rolled out across the country. However, concerns have been raised with me that this progress has not necessarily been reflected in the provision of dyslexia and speech and language needs. Associated with that are needs around dyspraxia and apraxia of speech as well, especially where there is a co-occurrence of autism. Access to specialist supports, such as reading classes, needed for these sorts of conditions remains quite limited in scope and availability. For example, there are no reading classes or specialist reading schools in my constituency of Dublin Mid-West. There are only a handful of these in Dublin and, indeed, in the country.

Families in my constituency have reported to me that the early signs of dyslexia are not always recognised or acted upon in a timely way. There are many reasons for this. One is that there are capacity constraints in the National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, which impact on access to psychological assessments. While diagnosis is not necessarily required for the continuum of support framework, we know that standardised test scores are used at school level to inform decisions on additional support. While these are valuable tools, they primarily measure attainment rather than the underlying learning difficulties and may only highlight the issues once a child has already begun to fall behind.

International best practice suggests that early screening of key indicators, such as phonological awareness and letter sound knowledge, are the sorts of things that we should be zeroing in on. We see examples of this at play in some of our schools.

Looking at the evidence for what needs to happen with regard to the identification of dyslexia and then the response to it, we need structured systematic literacy instruction or targeted small group or individual intervention delivered by trained staff, appropriate classroom accommodations and timely access to assistive technology. It is important at this point to thank all the teachers in schools who work with children who have dyslexia, dyspraxia or apraxia of speech. We need to make sure they have supports in place in their classroom and school settings, but also that they have access to the necessary training, especially with regard to structured literacy, and have the best-in-class, evidence-based teaching approaches to how they address this. As fathers, the Minister of State and I both know that without appropriate and timely intervention, dyslexia-related difficulties do not improve and children can experience reduced confidence, increased anxiety and ongoing academic challenges.

My question is to ask, given the limited number of reading classes available around the country and the limited number of appropriate speech and language supports for children who have autism and may also have an underlying need with regard to dyslexia or some other speech and language issue, are there plans to consider expanding dyslexia-specific classes or to better incorporate specialist provision through the provision of reading classes in schools using the same model as the autism classes in schools? Where the continuing support, as we know, reduces reliance on diagnosis, are there plans to apply a national standard and to provide support for teachers in terms of more consistent early-screening approaches at primary level?

Does the Department intend developing a national framework around guidance or standards for dyslexia intervention that is aligned with international best practice and the evidence I have

set out? Another issue I have raised in this House, and I am sure the Minister of State, as a constituency TD, has also raised it, is the need for the expansion of NEPS provision across all schools to ensure timely diagnosis is made, as appropriate. I would appreciate the Minister of State's insight on that.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank Deputy Moynihan for raising this pertinent issue, which is one that resonates with many of us in the House in many regards. I am replying on behalf of the Minister.

It is the policy of the Department of Education and Youth, in accordance with the principles of inclusive education, that students with additional learning needs are supported in mainstream classes, along with their peers, with additional supports provided as necessary. The Department has invested considerably in ensuring that all recognised mainstream schools have been allocated additional special education teaching resources to support children with special educational needs, including students with literacy difficulties. Guidelines for schools on the organisation, deployment and use of their special education teachers have been published on the Department's website. There are 15,000 special education teachers allocated to primary and post-primary schools to enable them to support children with special educational needs. I know that, as my wife is one.

The National Council for Special Education, NCSE, has the responsibility for planning and co-ordinating school supports for children with special educational needs. The Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations.

Funding is also made available to schools for the purchase of specialised equipment such as computers or software to assist children with special educational needs, including children with specific learning disability, where relevant professionals recommend the equipment as being essential for the provision of education. Schools apply to the NCSE through their local special educational needs organiser, SENO, for such support.

A continuum of education provision is in place covering the full range of need spanning placement in mainstream classes, with supports through to more specialist placements either in a special class or a special school, depending on the complexity of need.

It is important to note, though, that the majority of students with literacy difficulties currently receive additional teaching support from a special education teacher in a mainstream class. This is provided on the basis of the individual student's learning needs identified in schools, as opposed to being based on a requirement for a child to have a diagnosis or an assessment of a particular disability.

There are four schools dedicated to supporting students with specific learning disability, SLD. There are also 14 SLD classes in 11 mainstream primary schools located across the country, in counties Dublin, Clare, Louth, Galway, Kerry and Wexford, although, I acknowledge, not in Dublin Mid-West. These settings have a student-teacher ratio of 9:1 and are attended by students normally aged between eight and 12 years for a maximum of two years. Students will have a diagnosis of dyslexia and score at the 2% percentile or lower on literacy standardised tests. They will also have an average or above average level of intelligence.

In May 2021, the inspectorate was requested by the Department's special education section to evaluate provision in special classes for children and young people with an SLD. The purpose of the evaluations was to examine the quality of provision for children and young people with an SLD, with particular reference to understanding the placement of children and young people in these classes and to identifying the strengths and areas for improvement in learning and teaching in these classes. The inspectorate's report will inform the Department's development of policy and the overall effectiveness of SLD classes in the context of emerging international trends for inclusion. This is an area that the Minister is keeping under close review.

The Minister is also working on a new measure which will see the provision of enhanced supports in mainstream schools for students experiencing literacy difficulties.

The Minister hopes to be in a position to update the House on this soon. The Minister and the Department of education will continue to consider the findings and recommendations of the inspectorate report and may in time request the inspectorate to review provision for children with specific learning disabilities, SLDs, in special schools. I undertake to ask the Minister to engage directly with the Deputy given his interest in the area.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin.

I appreciate the good faith of the response and thank the Minister of State for taking this on behalf of the Minister for education. One immediate point I will make, which I am sure the Minister of State's wife would empathise with, is that the application procedure for additional resources for SEN in a school is extremely onerous. Our focus should be on ensuring the resources and hours required are made available in a targeted and timely way, in the best interest of the child, especially where the school has demonstrated a need that can be met.

I will delve into a few other things the Minister of State referred to in his answer and I would like him to take one or two other things to the Minister. The first is around the national framework and national guidance for an evidence-based approach to how we address dyslexia and associated speech and language difficulties in our schools. It is important it be evidence based. It is important teacher training be made available on a consistent basis. While I welcome that some specialist supports are provided in schools, there is also a need for an expansion of the reading classes the Minister of State mentioned in his reply. They do not necessarily need to be in a school setting, but the provision of more reading classes in schools is an important step in addressing the medium level of difficulty some children might have.

Above all else, the reason I want to centre the importance of the national framework is that there are instances in my constituency where children in an autism special class are not able to access speech and language supports because it is not seen in the overall suite of supports provided to children in an autism class. While I am not for a second suggesting we should stop our roll-out of autism classes, I am concerned that we need to give the same level of attention to speech and language difficulties that in many cases coincide with a diagnosis of autism, but in many cases merit proper specialist supports that might be more than the SEN hours allocated to a school, that might require the opening of a reading class or, in some instances, the expansion of the reading school. Those disabilities are as important as the ones we are rightly responding to at the moment.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I appreciate the Deputy's supplementary question and, where relevant, will bring it forward to the relevant line Minister. He raised a few key issues that are absolutely understandable, but go to the nub of the complexity of providing special education that is sometimes blanket and misses certain aspects of a child's development in education or what their need or want is. It is hard to put that into a straight column.

The Department will continue to engage intensively with the NCSE on forward planning for new special provision to ensure every child has a place in an educational setting, which, where possible, best fits their special needs on the back of the 15,000 special education teachers and 12,500 SNAs already in the system. For children with more complex needs, special class or special school places are still important. That is in keeping with the policy. Crucially, there is a need for a degree of flexibility to allow children to adapt to settings to allow them flourish to their best, particularly at the key ages of between eight and 12 when diagnoses are made. It is about putting in a learning support plan that is appropriate to the child's needs and the setting.

There is no perfect answer to any of the issues, which on an individual basis I have no doubt are coming into the Deputy's constituency office, as they probably come into all our constituency offices. However, the issues the Deputy raised provide me with great material, which I will put directly to the Minister and I will ask her to respond to the Deputy with additional information in due course.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I am glad to get the opportunity to raise the proposed extension of Gort Community School in south Galway. The principal of the school, Brian Crossan, is passionate about this project and the future of the school. There is no doubt that it is badly needed. Gort Community School is holding celebrations tomorrow for its 30th anniversary. It is an important milestone for the school. I congratulate the school on 30 years.

In recent years, the school has grown from 780 to 1,050 pupils and will continue to grow. It has been working on this extension project for many years now. It first received approval from the Department back in 2019, so it has been in the pipeline for quite some time. After that approval, it is my understanding that the Department came back a few times and asked the school to make changes to redesign the project. As a result, the school is probably two or three years behind where it should be with this project.

It is important to say this is a fantastic school. People only hear good things about it, but there is a need for better facilities and investment in the school. The three ASD units are working out of ordinary classrooms. They are cramped and inadequate facilities. This is a real issue with the level of need the school is experiencing. Given enrolment trends, there is significant demand for ASD provision in the area and waiting lists for a place in these classes will only increase. The school is at capacity as it stands.

I mentioned the growth in pupil numbers, which is only going in one direction. The school is struggling for space and facilities and is reliant on prefabricated buildings. The extension will result in a 1,200-pupil school. It involves a purpose-built autism unit with three classrooms, 19 general classrooms, specialist rooms for art and home economics, science laboratories, a new staff room, a general purpose and dining area, a fitness suite and much more, as well as alterations to the existing building. This is an exciting project, but also an

essential one, if the existing and projected demand at the school is to be met and education delivered at an appropriate standard. These are the type of facilities children and young people in the south Galway area need and deserve.

Gort and the wider south Galway area is growing at a fast pace. Planning permission is in place for hundreds of homes and the school has a wide catchment area extending into north County Clare. Planning permission for the extension was granted in 2024. I understand the stage 2b report was submitted in March. The school wants to get on with this project now. It wants to build it, but it needs the go-ahead from the Department and it was not included in the NDP sectoral investment plan. It needs to be added to the priority list as soon as possible. The Minister, Deputy Naughton, visited the school recently. She is aware of the urgency of this project for the school, but it needs to be pushed on. I urge the Government to ensure that happens and to provide clarity on a timeline for when it can proceed to the next stage and issue a tender for construction.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank Deputy O'Hara for raising this important issue and join him in celebrating the 30th anniversary of Gort Community School's foundation. As the Deputy will be aware, the school was approved to enter the Department's pipeline for a project under the additional school accommodation scheme. The project will provide 19 general classrooms, seven SET rooms, two meeting rooms, one deputy principal's office, three classroom SEN bases, one art room, one home economics room, one graphics room, three science laboratories with two prep areas, one construction studies room with a prep area, one engineering room and prep area, three project stores, one staff room, one general purpose or dining area and other ancillary accommodation. The project was devolved to the school authority for delivery. It is currently at stage 2b, developed design. The stage 2b report was submitted to the Department in April 2026 and is currently being reviewed from a technical and cost perspective. All projects, including this one, undergo the necessary due diligence outlined in the public infrastructure guidelines.

Although this project is not in the first tranche of school building projects recently published in the NDP sectoral investment plan, it remains part of the Department's overall pipeline of school building projects. The NDP school sectoral plan involves a strong emphasis on maximising existing capacity and prioritisation of school building projects to meet the most urgent needs. In this regard, there will be a strong special education dimension to project roll-out. The Department of education will continue to build on the progress made in recent years with the continued roll-out of projects on a prioritised basis to meet the most urgent needs in terms of provision of additional capacity and modernisation of existing facilities. As part of planning ahead for the progress to tender of the next tranche of projects, the Department-led prioritisation process will continue over the course of 2026 and 2027 to assess and evaluate the progression of individual projects through the design pipeline, having regard to the continual need to maximise existing capacity and determine the prioritised needs going forward. This process will involve engagement with key stakeholders and individual schools and ultimately inform the next tranches of programme roll-out to tender.

The Department-led energy and conditions survey of the school estate, which will be finalised later in 2026, will provide an additional evidence base for assessing priorities. Based on this ongoing prioritisation process, some projects may be added to the list over the course of 2026 and 2027, having regard to their prioritisation and urgency of need and taking account

of the ongoing ability to progress them to tender and construction within the parameters of overall funding.

Where appropriate, the Department of education will also assess opportunities to undertake advance enabling works for the most urgent and complex projects to facilitate a smooth progression to construction in 2028 and beyond. Any interim accommodation requirements will continue to be assessed and considered by the Department on a case-by-case basis to determine the prioritised needs and the best approach for addressing same.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I thank the Minister of State. This has been going on for many years at this stage. Of course, I understand that these projects take time but there is a pressing need for this project to be accelerated and delivered. I mentioned the pressure on ASD provision in the school. That is a real and immediate need that has to be met. Further delays with this project just makes it more difficult for the school to meet the demand that exists and provide an inclusive learning environment. I also mentioned that Gort and south Galway is a growing area and it is inevitable that significant additional school capacity will be required in the local area. Indeed, it is already required and the young people attending school there deserve top-class facilities, the same as one would expect to find in any other school. There is a clear need and that is the message that I want to get across today. We have to meet the demands of a growing community. It is the Department's own land and buildings. The Department has asked the school to upgrade the plans to build for 1,200 pupils and everything is in place now. The school has done all that has been asked of it but the project needs to start so that the school is ahead of the curve and can avoid significant issues in terms of school places, ASD provision and so on. Again, I urge the Government to ensure that this happens, that the project is made a priority. I also ask the Minister of State to provide clarity on the timeline for when the school can proceed to the next stage.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Once again, I thank the Deputy for giving me the opportunity to provide, on behalf of the Minister for education, an update to the House regarding the accommodation at Gort Community School. The Department is committed to ensuring appropriate accommodation is available for all school pupils and will, in the wider context outlined, ensure that each school project on the school building programme is subject to the due diligence required under the Government's infrastructure guidelines.

Since 2020 the Department has provided €256.55 million in capital funding for Galway schools. Over this period a total of 88 schools have been upgraded either through the provision of a new school building, a large-scale extension or modular accommodation. There are currently 17 school projects in Galway under construction and another ten school projects will go to tender or construction in 2026 and 2027. This summer, 20 schools are approved to undergo works as part of the climate summer works scheme. In addition, since 2020 a total of 101 special classes have been opened in Galway, of which 23 were sanctioned for September 2026.

The accommodation needs at this school in Gort will be considered as part of the ongoing overall Department-led prioritisation process in consultation with the school's patron and school authorities. The current status of all projects continues to be set out under item 10 on the Department's website under building works for the construction, extension and refurbishment of schools. This is updated regularly to reflect progress through the capital

appraisal, site acquisition, design, tender and construction stages. The Minister, Deputy Naughton, is aware of the situation in Gort, not just from having visited there personally but from Deputy O'Hara's ongoing advocacy and that of other Members in the area. I will bring the contents of this debate to her attention and ensure that the pertinent points are made. I thank Deputy O'Hara again for raising this issue.

Traveller Education

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this Topical Issue for discussion. Every child is innocent and should have the opportunity to reach his or her full potential but the education system and the State are failing Traveller children. We have statistics showing that only 27% of young Travellers complete post-primary education compared to 97% of the wider population and less than 1% of Travellers go on to third level education.

This issue is particularly topical in the context of a report from UCC entitled Traveller transitions - Racialised inequalities in education, which was launched today. It is qualitative research so it is the voice of young Traveller people themselves. One of the key findings was that young Traveller people find the loss of tailored supports in the transition from primary to post-primary school extremely difficult. Relationships between Traveller young people and school staff are crucial but most Traveller young people in this study reported negative relationships with teachers. There were a number of other findings and recommendations for Government, schools and for policymakers. Recommendations include ensuring that: Traveller young people are supported in the transition into secondary school from primary school; ethnic segregation practices are not happening at school; discipline practices are not disproportionately affecting Travellers; and practices of inclusion are informed by Traveller young people themselves. These recommendations reflect some of the key findings.

Does the State have a strategy? It has a Traveller and Roma education strategy. I looked at the third progress report from December last year which is only a handful of months ago. It shows that a significant number of measures were only partially implemented or not implemented at all. We have been over this ground previously and have identified the barriers and what needs to happen but the necessary progress has not been made. What measures is the Government taking to support young Travellers and to increase the number of young Travellers who are completing primary and secondary school?

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. This week there has been a lot of focus, correctly, on the areas raised by Deputy O'Rourke. Delivering an education system that is of the highest quality and where every child and young person feels valued and is actively supported and nurtured to reach his or her full potential is a key priority for the Government and the Minister. In that regard, supporting the education of Travellers and Roma children is one of the key objectives of the Government.

Currently action to address Traveller and Roma education outcomes is progressed through the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024-2030 and its associated plans for implementation and action which were developed through the strong collaboration of Traveller and Roma organisations with the Department of Children, Disability and Equality and the

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The strategy acknowledges that Travellers and Roma are among the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups in Ireland. While educational outcomes have improved in recent years, they remain significantly below those in the general population, as outlined by Deputy O'Rourke.

Key actions contained in the plan for implementation and action include increasing the number of Traveller and Roma young people who are completing post-primary school and achieving the leaving certificate; embedding Traveller culture and history into the curriculum; promoting workforce diversity; and providing teacher training on inclusion, cultural competence and anti-racism. The Minister is committed to promoting positive relationships and supporting the learning of Traveller and Roma children and young people. In this regard, funding was provided for 15 community link workers to work across a number of schools in areas where there are high numbers of Traveller and Roma children and young people. Their roles will focus on fostering greater engagement with Traveller and Roma families to facilitate successful communication, promote positive relationships and support the learning of Traveller and Roma children and young people by linking them to resources within their area. The link workers will provide vital engagement on the ground between schools, families and communities.

In addition, two Traveller and Roma strategy national co-ordinators and a Traveller and Roma education strategy general manager were appointed to support the implementation of the strategy and to lead on specific actions outlined in the initial two-year plan for implementation and action. The implementation of the strategy is supported by action plans, governance and consultation structures, including the Traveller and Roma education strategy plan for implementation and action and associated progress reports. The strategy's oversight group and the Traveller and Roma education forum are ensuring ongoing engagement with communities and effective monitoring of progress.

Work is currently under way on the development of the next plan for implementation and action, running from 2026 to 2028, which is due to be published in July of this year. To inform the plan, engagement is ongoing with the Traveller and Roma education strategy oversight group, the Traveller and Roma education forum and other Traveller and Roma organisations, communities, children and young people. I know that any contribution to that by Deputy O'Rourke would be welcomed by the Minister.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: This is really important. I welcome a number of recent announcements by the Government related to DEIS plus and the DEIS plan. I will contest every inch of it but the principle of the transformational power of education and a specific focus on educational inequality is hugely important.

Within that, there needs to be a particular focus on the Traveller population because the figures are absolutely shocking. I referred to the completion rate for the leaving certificate, but if we consider those on reduced hours or timetables and the rate of absenteeism, the potential is being ripped from the lives of these young people. The State can take significant steps through the education system and other services to support these young people. They deserve that opportunity the same as every other child. I will be happy to engage with the further consultations and progress reports. A wealth of effort has been put in to date. There is a roadmap but it needs to be actioned and implemented. The stakes are high here. The number

of children that are being failed, falling through the cracks and are being left behind by dint of the fact that they are Travellers is a stain and a shame on the State.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter. I want to underline, without any degree of uncertainty, that the Government, just like everyone else in the House, is absolutely committed to increasing the number of Traveller and Roma children who complete primary and secondary education. The vision of the Traveller and Roma education strategy is that we want a high-quality, inclusive education system that is open and welcoming to all, irrespective of background or ability and that meaningfully engages learners of all ages in a positive learning environment where quality is upheld, diversity respected and where every individual is valued and actively supported to reach their full potential. The next two-year TRES plan for implementation and action will be published in July. The new plan will focus on improving the opportunities and achievement levels of Traveller and Roma children and young people and in addressing racism and discrimination by developing more targeted cultural competence in training and teaching Traveller culture and history through the curriculum. The TRES and its associated plans for implementation and action reinforce the Government's commitment to supporting and nurturing Traveller and Roma children and young people to reach their full potential in education and making up for lost decades of missed opportunities from successive Governments in the political system and the education system as a whole.

Library Projects

Deputy Colm Burke: Will the Department provide the necessary funding to Cork City Council to enable building work to be carried out on Mayfield library and community centre in view of the fact the council has submitted an application for funding for this project? Will the Minister of State make a statement? Mayfield has a large population on the north-east side of Cork city. It has many retired people but the population in the area is growing as well, with over 1,500 houses being built within a 1 mile radius of the library. It also caters for residents in Dillon's Cross, St. Luke's and upper Glanmire and the Glanmire area, which was an area previously in the county, which has now come under the city council's jurisdiction. There is a very big population in this area. A Part 8 planning notice was filed on 22 April 2024 by Cork City Council setting out what the proposals were. The proposals set out the changes that are required in the facility there. It is very detailed. The council, I understand, prior to putting in that Part 8 planning notice in 2024, made a submission to the Department as far back as 2023. We are three years on and nothing has occurred.

This is an important facility for the community. As well as a library, a community centre is attached to it, providing a lot of essential services for the area. The proposal included reconfiguration internally in the building itself, but also an extension to the existing facility to cater for the growing population of the area. It is an essential facility for the north-east side of Cork city, but also for the new housing that is being built in the immediate area. The housing is being built at a very fast pace. Over a three-year period, it is expected that at least 1,500 additional houses will be in place, with a new population moving in there. There will be people who are retired and new young families. It is important that the service provided by Mayfield library is up to date and it can provide for the population of the area. Will funding be provided to Cork City Council by the Department in order that this project can progress?

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am very grateful to my dear friend, Deputy Burke, for raising this matter, as is the relevant Minister. Public libraries are at the heart of all our communities. The Deputy and I were in the Chamber when our former colleague, Paschal Donohoe, made that very clear appeal as part of his closing salvo to this House. Public libraries are multi-purpose social, cultural and educational spaces for the whole community to enjoy. There are 330 public libraries nationwide providing an excellent service throughout the country.

As the Deputy will be aware, the provision of library services, including buildings, is primarily a matter for local authorities in their capacity as library authorities under the Local Government Act 2001. Accordingly, the funding and delivery of the Frank O'Connor Library in Mayfield project is primarily a matter for Cork City Council. In April 2023, the Department invited proposals for funding under the current Libraries Capital Programme 2023-2027. A total of 33 proposals were received for library capital projects and 15 for next generation mobile library vehicles. Each proposal received was evaluated thoroughly using a scoring matrix published with the initial call for proposals document.

Cork City Council's application in respect of Mayfield library unfortunately did not score or rank high enough to receive funding approval or to merit inclusion on the waitlist. One of the key factors in the failure of this project to secure funding was the lack of progress regarding planning approval at the time. The Minister has been informed by Cork City Council that the library project at Mayfield Is categorised as a priority project in the council's development plan 2022 to 2028. I have also been further advised that the Part 8 planning application, as per the requirements of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, was approved by councillors in October 2024, allowing the proposal to be progressed through the standard planning approval process.

With Part 8 approval secured for Mayfield library, the project is now positioned to provide a modern multi-use facility for the north-east suburb of Cork city and its surrounding area. This places the Mayfield development a strong position to compete for future funding developments as they arise. The Department's current libraries capital programme is fully committed. This ambitious €25.2 million investment includes €22.6 million in 11 state-of-the-art infrastructure projects nationwide and €2.6 million dedicated to 12 next generation mobile library vehicles to improve rural and community outreach.

I am delighted that later this year, the Department will begin planning for the next iteration of the libraries capital programme and a successor to the current national library strategy. Since 2019, the Department has demonstrated a strong commitment to library services in the region, providing €8.3 million in funding to Cork City Council and Cork County Council public library services, through the libraries capital programme and the rural regeneration and development fund.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Minister of State for the reply. The issue is the new development that is going on. That was not part of the submission made in 2023 because it had not even gone through the planning process. There has been a huge growth in population. It is an area that needs to be prioritised. The library facility in Mayfield, which has very good staff, is not adequate for the demand that is there now. There is also the whole issue about community facilities as well, which is attached to the library and part of the library building. They also need to be upgraded. I was there earlier this week for the AGM of the community

association. There is an active community association there. They are trying to assist in various projects in the immediate area, but they also need to have the infrastructure in place. For instance, one of the projects within the community facility is a preschool facility for a small number of children.

That is already in place there. However, there is a whole lot of services that need to be developed. In particular, we need to ensure we have a library that is adequate for both the existing population and the growing of population. It is important it is prioritised. I ask that the Department makes sure it is considered in the next round of funding when it is dealing with it with Cork City Council.

Deputy Neale Richmond: While I agree with the Deputy it was a shame that the Mayfield library could not be considered in the most recent tranche, I do think the Department's response and the developments from a planning point of view and more widely in the local community in that part of County Cork illustrate the need and merit for the library to be considered in the next round. I have no doubt the next time a funding round becomes available, a strong submission will be made by Cork City Council. The Deputy may rest assured that I will raise with the relevant Minister the strong case he has put forward this afternoon. A common-sense approach to this would be valued not just by the locals and patrons in Mayfield but more broadly by all those projects and potential projects that will be seeking funding under the next scheme. I fully believe Mayfield will be in a very strong position. I look forward to providing Deputy Burke with whatever supports I can, along with the Minister, to achieve that development.

Food Prices

Deputy Martin Daly: I welcome the opportunity to raise this issue which has been felt in households right across Roscommon-Galway and, indeed, across the country. People are very clear about what they are experiencing. The cost of the weekly shop has risen significantly and it continues to rise. For many households, particularly those on low and middle incomes, this is not an abstract issue; it is a real and immediate pressure.

Families are noticing it week to week. They are adjusting what they buy, where they shop and how much they can afford to spend. What was once routine has now become a careful calculation. We know this is not just anecdotal. Food prices have risen by over 20% in a relatively short time. That represents a very real and sustained increase in the cost of living. For lower income households the situation is even more stark. A healthy weekly shop can take up to one third of disposable incomes. When we talk about grocery prices, we are not just talking about marginal changes but we are talking about a structural shift in affordability.

The core issue I raise here today is not simply that prices are rising but how those prices are being monitored and understood. We have a number of bodies with roles in this space, including the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission and the Agri-Food Regulator. There is no single body with a clearly defined role in monitoring grocery price trends, examining retail pricing practices or providing a consistent, consumer focused view of what is happening in the market. That raises a fundamental question about whether the current framework is sufficient. If prices are rising at the pace people are experiencing, who is tracking

them in a structured way? If there are issues around pricing practices, who is examining them from the perspective of the consumer? If pressures are building, where is the clear line of accountability?

In rural areas such as Roscommon-Galway, this issue is particularly acute and was brought to the fore during the recent fuel crisis, which expanded into a cost-of-living issue for people in that area and many other areas. Choice can be more limited and households can be more exposed to rising costs. What assessment has been made of grocery price increases and their impact on consumers? Does the Minister of State accept there may be merit in a more clearly defined stand-alone mechanism or watchdog with the responsibility for monitoring grocery pricing, transparency and affordability from the consumer perspective?

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am grateful to the Deputy for raising this issue, one that I have absolute familiarity with having previously been a Minister of State in the Department with responsibility for retail during a period when we had 16.9% grocery inflation on the back of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which massively increased food and energy prices across western Europe. Global inflation will see grocery prices increase. At the time, we would have seen grocery stores reduce their prices on about 700 products in the interim but there was a range of different proposals suggested. The opportunity I have this afternoon, given the directness of the points raised by Deputy Daly, is to outline the existing situation.

The Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment is responsible for policy in relation to competition and consumer protection. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, is the independent statutory body responsible for enforcing competition law and consumer protection legislation. The CCPC is not a price-monitoring or price-regulating body. The collection, compilation and publication of official price data is a statutory function of the Central Statistics Office.

Businesses in Ireland are generally free to set their own prices, provided they do so independently and in compliance with competition and consumer protection law. The CCPC has engaged with public concerns about grocery prices within its existing remit. In August 2025, it published an updated high-level analysis of the Irish grocery retail sector, updating its 2023 work. This analysis examined market concentration, entry and expansion, national and international price trends, and the profitability of major grocery retailers.

The CCPC concluded that while grocery prices have risen significantly since 2021, there is no evidence of a failure of competition or of excessive pricing in the sector. The CCPC plays an active and enforcement-focused role in protecting consumers. It enforces competition and consumer protection law across the economy, including in the retail and grocery sectors, and takes action, for example, where traders mislead consumers, fail to display prices correctly, or breach pricing transparency requirements. This includes inspections, prosecutions and enforcement actions in the grocery and wider retail sectors. In parallel, the CCPC protects consumers by preventing anti-competitive outcomes that could lead to higher prices or reduced choice, including in rural areas. For example, the CCPC approved a proposed supermarket acquisition by Tesco only after the company agreed to divest an outlet in Oranmore, protecting local competition in Galway.

The Central Statistics Office continues to publish detailed and independently-verified data through the consumer price index, including on food and drink prices. This data provides a

transparent and authoritative basis for understanding price movements across the wider economy.

Deputy Martin Daly: I appreciate the response but the concern remains around how this is being experienced by people on the ground. People are telling us that the value of a euro in the shopping trolley has fundamentally changed. There was a time when people could shop around. They might do a core shop in one retailer and then top up in other retailers for choice. However, we are increasingly hearing those price differences have narrowed significantly, suggesting a lack of competition in the retail sector. The sense of being able to shop strategically and save has reduced and people feel they are paying more regardless of where they go.

At the same time, the evidence is clear that healthier food can be up to three times more expensive per calorie than less healthy alternatives while cheaper more processed options continue to offer more for less. People with the least resources eat the unhealthiest food and that has ramifications right throughout our health system and our State. When households are under pressure, they are not making lifestyle choices, they are making budget decisions.

That brings me back to the central point. People are seeing prices rise, but they do not see who is actively tracking those increases, analysing them or holding the system to account in a clear and visible way. The question is not whether structures exist but whether they are sufficient or coherent enough for the reality that people are now facing. It has to be put in the context that this is not simply an Irish problem. This is about the lower-middle class people - people who get up for work every morning and pay for everything in this State but who are being squeezed and crushed. As Senator Teresa Costello said to me, there is no fun in their lives. That means they go out for work every day and by the time they get to the end of the week, they just about make ends meet. These are a group of people who do not want to be radicalised but are going to be radicalised. It was clear they were targeted during the recent fuel crisis.

Does the Minister of State accept there is case for a more focused and visible approach to monitoring grocery pricing so consumers can have confidence that what they are experiencing is being properly examined and understood?

3 o'clock

Deputy Neale Richmond: To be honest, I do not necessarily accept that. Perhaps this is a communications issue. As the Deputy said, the structures are there. The CCPC enforces competition and consumer protection law, and the CSO independently collects and publishes official price data through the consumer price index. This means two bodies are doing the key things the Deputy is asking for.

The CCPC is not the price monitoring or price regulating body; it just enforces the law. The CSO is the price monitoring body. The Deputy is right, equally, that grocery prices are not a uniquely Irish issue. We do not perhaps have the competition in the grocery sector that I would like, but let us not forget that there were only three major grocery retailers in the country up until about ten or 15 years ago. The addition of two other grocery retailers has provided other options. When we look at consumer spending, purchasing power went up by 2.9% last year

compared with the year before. This is something that has, unfortunately, bedevilled economies across Europe. Croatia and Hungary introduced price caps on groceries and that had a disastrous consequence, with a lack of affordability and availability. The left-wing Government in Spain proposed to introduce price caps, only to reach the conclusion that isolated, rural supermarkets and smaller stores would simply have to close.

To get to the nub of the Deputy's point, I do not for an instant hesitate to accept that people are very much feeling the pinch at the supermarket tills at the moment, and they are rightly concerned. The key to this is that we are in the grips of an energy crisis that leads to issues with costs and food provision. In turn, we need to make sure the systems already in place in this regard, through the activities of the CCPC and the CSO, perhaps communicate more clearly and directly to allow that level of consumer confidence to be in place and ensure people are aware that even though things are very tight, the Government has genuine plans, be it through changes to income tax rates or targeted supports and social welfare, to make sure a little bit of a break is given to what I accept is a very hard pressed part of our society.

Land Development Agency

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: The Land Development Agency, LDA, is building up a great head of steam now in starting to produce homes at scale all around the country, but particularly in the urban areas where they are badly needed. There are two projects in my area, Clongriffin Central and, just this week, Richmond Village. Some projects the Minister of State will be familiar with in his own area or generally in his neighbourhood are Shanganagh and Dundrum. These are big projects. The planners are saying that apartments are what are required now in terms of the use of land, the intensification of land use, transport-oriented planning, etc., and that is welcome. When I look at the LDA, however, and taking Richmond Village as an example, the tenure mix is not yet hammered out on that development of nearly 800 units. The LDA says it will do it over the next while.

Affordable purchase, which is where citizens and families get to own their own homes, is a relatively recent thing for the LDA, as I understand it. The point I want to make is that I would like to see the LDA going with affordable purchase first. There should be a lot more emphasis on affordable purchase, giving people a chance to buy the units the LDA is building. I appreciate they would likely be subsidised based on the cost of these in the context of modern-day construction, but it is absolutely vital that we empower the LDA as much as we can to build quality homes that citizens can then buy in whatever way. Affordable purchase first should perhaps be the strategy for the LDA. I will come back to cost rental because issues with that were mentioned.

In my experience, and taking Clongriffin Central as an example, the LDA is not necessarily funded or empowered to deliver community facilities. We have that issue out in Clongriffin Central. An area left underdeveloped and unfinished for 15 years after the crash needs community facilities. The LDA is in there, buzzing along and actively delivering phase after phase of residential units, very welcome homes, but community facilities have to be put in as well. They are vital. I ask that we would look to broaden or maybe re-emphasise the strategy of the LDA towards affordable purchase first as a key part of any of its developments and also look at how it will deliver, and be empowered to fund and deliver, vital community facilities,

including community centres, pitches, outdoor parks and all the other facilities that make communities in Dublin so great.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am very grateful to the Deputy for raising this issue. I think Richmond Village is a brilliant name. There should be more of them, needless to say.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: *Quelle surprise.*

Deputy Neale Richmond: More pertinently and directly to the Deputy's point, on behalf of the Minister, we all know why the LDA was set up and the ambition it has. The Deputy is right that it is really ramping up. We can see that in sod turnings, on one hand, such as in Richmond Village, and in site clearings, such as at the former Central Mental Hospital, or Dundrum Central as we know it, but also, crucially, in people moving into homes, as we see in Shanganagh and Shankill.

In terms of affordable purchase homes, LDA-sourced or -built affordable purchase homes are delivered in partnership with local authorities, funded by the Department via the affordable housing fund and sold through the local authority affordable purchase scheme. Under this scheme, newly built homes are made available at a reduced price for first-time and other eligible buyers who cannot afford to purchase these homes at the open market value. These homes are made available at a sale price of at least 15% below comparable housing market prices.

Since 2022, the LDA has delivered over 400 affordable purchase homes through partnership arrangements with local authorities, on State lands or sourced through Project Tosaigh. This delivery includes the LDA working in partnership with other bodies, such as at Shanganagh. A total of 597 homes were delivered there, of which 91 were affordable purchase, with the remainder being delivered as 306 cost-rental homes and 200 social homes across 2024 and 2025.

In addition, the agency has partnered with Kildare County Council to deliver 66 affordable purchase homes last November at Barracksfield West in Naas. More recently, the LDA has launched Priory Fields in partnership with Fingal County Council, as Deputy Boland will be aware, to deliver the first phase, comprising 36 affordable purchase homes of a total of 345 homes at Hackettstown in Skerries. A further phase of 91 affordable purchase homes is planned, with the remainder being delivered as 117 cost-rental homes and 101 social homes. Furthermore, the expanded role and remit of the Land Development Agency, as outlined in Delivering Homes, Building Communities, will help to further accelerate its delivery of affordable homes. Key measures include the expansion of the LDA's geographical area of operation, which will enable the agency to partner with more regional-based local authorities and bring forward developments on local authority-owned land.

I could not agree more with the Deputy, and I think this matter is going to be a precursor to Deputy Hearne's Topical Issue question to the Minister. Prioritising affordable homes first and foremost should be the aim of the LDA, and I will make sure this point is brought directly to the relevant Ministers.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: As the Minister of State said himself, even the affordable purchase element of the Shanganagh scheme is about 15% of the overall project. We hear about the challenges with cost rental and concerns around mounting maintenance costs. Uncertain costs like that will, of course, upset mandarins in all the various Departments. The benefit of affordable purchase is that whatever discount or subsidy is given, the Government locks it in upfront. It goes to the homeowner, and is crystallised there and then and there is no long-term risk. The Government picks up part of the tab. I do think affordable purchase first should be the direction in which the LDA is headed. Without a doubt, there will be issues with cost rental in the future. They are being raised in the media, with various schemes having challenges with maintenance.

In relation to community facilities, local authorities, including Dublin City Council and South Dublin County Council, collect development levies from private development and use those development levy funds to deliver the parks, playgrounds and various community facilities. The LDA does not have that funding stream. It is vital that this is acknowledged by the Government and that the gap is plugged in some way for the LDA. Residential developments are fantastic, but the community facilities have to be provided as well while these projects are being built. I encourage the Minister of State to consider this issue from a Government perspective. I thank him.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I will make two points quite clearly. In relation to affordable homes, that is the sort of prioritisation the LDA should be looking for. I am more than happy to bring this point forward on the Deputy's behalf to the Minister. Perhaps there will be scope for further discussion at the next round of oral parliamentary questions.

The Deputy has raised a point that is not being raised enough in relation to the collection of development levies and the ability to use those funds for community facilities.

The part of Dublin where I lived was very much a project of the Celtic tiger era where land that was once rural was rezoned rapidly, and housing of all forms – apartments, duplexes and three-, four- and five-bedroom houses - were built at pace, but it took approximately ten years for the schools to open, for roads to be finished off and even for the basic, more commercial entities such as supermarkets and shops to come on stream. We see where development has got this right, such as in Cherrywood, just up the road from me, where the roads and parks are already in. It is only now that we are starting to see the large-scale housing accommodation provided. The three school sites have not only been identified but groundwork has started, and they will be open for the children of that area to be educated in. It is similar with Clonburris in South Dublin County Council's locality.

I would argue that many of the mistakes made before have been learned from, but there are a heck of lot more that need to be learned from, and that requires our diligence to make sure those mistakes are not repeated. We need to make sure that, absolutely, we crack on and massively ramp up the delivery of new homes, but that those communities and, indeed, the scope for commercial facilities that goes with that are prioritised as well. Again, these are points I will be more than happy to make to the Minister on the Deputy's behalf.

Deputy Rory Hearne: People across the city who are looking to buy a home are despairing. The prices of houses and rents are way beyond what they can afford. They are looking to the

Government for hope to be able to buy a home. We have reached the point where no ordinary people can afford to buy a home in our capital city. It costs €500,000 for the average home in the city. That is ten times the average salary. In the main, new supply being built is investor fund apartments being rented out at €3,000 and €4,000 a month. A shocking 50,000 adults over the age of 18 are stuck living in their parents' home in Dublin city. They need the State to build genuinely affordable homes they can buy to allow them to start their lives and families.

In Dublin city last year, however, not one affordable purchase home was delivered by the State - not one. In my constituency of Dublin North-West, over 7,000 adults are stuck living in their parental home in Finglas and Ballymun, and there are over 6,500 in Artane and Whitehall. How many affordable purchase homes does Dublin City Council plan to build for these 13,000 adults? Just 291 between now and 2030. Fianna Fáil's and Fine Gael's plans for affordable housing for sale will only meet the need of 2% of the adults living in my constituency between now and 2030. That is not to mention the thousands of renters stuck looking to try to buy a home as well.

Why is affordable housing so inadequate? It is because the starter home programme is not about delivering actually affordable homes but keeping house prices inflated for developers and investor funds. The Government does not want to undercut market prices. It refuses to set up a State construction company that could build tens of thousands of genuinely affordable homes for sale and rent. Will the Government take radical action? We need to see radical action for a generation of young people in their 20s, and increasingly their 30s and 40s, who cannot start their lives. They cannot buy a home in our capital city. Workers, young people and families cannot buy a home in this city. What is the Government going to do to change this and ensure there are affordable houses that people can buy in our capital city? It is beyond a crisis or a disaster. We need to see a significant change beyond what is planned.

I can go through the figures for the Minister of State. They are terrifying in terms of the low numbers of planned delivery of affordable purchase homes in Dublin city. In my own area of north central Dublin, zero affordable purchase homes were delivered last year, and 73 are planned for 2026. There are zero planned for 2027, 95 for 2028, zero for 2029, and zero for 2030. If the houses are not planned to be built and are not in the city council's plans, where are they going to come from? I am absolutely terrified. Not only is there poor delivery of affordable purchase now, but there is no sign of it coming.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue and giving me the opportunity to reply on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Browne, who unfortunately is not here today.

Affordability and the chance to own a home is at the heart of the Government's housing policy, as embodied in the new housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities. The Government is continuing to invest an unprecedented level of funding to support housing delivery, which will underpin the new starter homes programme, delivering an average of 15,000 starter home supports annually to 2030.

In terms of starter home delivery, over 22,000 starter home supports have been delivered since the launch of the previous housing plan, Housing for All, including nearly 1,000 in Dublin City. Dublin City Council has established a significant pipeline of starter home delivery and

continues to work proactively with all delivery partners to ensure the successful delivery of these homes.

Dublin City Council currently has an affordable housing delivery programme that includes a total of 789 new starter homes, which will be available for affordable purchase by eligible, approved housing candidates by 2028. These homes will be located at Ballymun, Montpelier, Oscar Traynor Road and Cherry Orchard. Twelve homes have been delivered at Ballymun to date, with the schemes at Montpelier and Oscar Traynor Road at an advanced stage. We will see significant delivery during the year.

The delivery programme continues to be expanded and accelerated. Two additional schemes with the potential to deliver a further 240 affordable homes are under assessment. The first home scheme, which supports first-time buyers in purchasing new houses and apartments in the private market through the use of an equity share model, is also available to support eligible new home purchasers. It has been availed of by 93 affordable home buyers in Dublin city up to the fourth quarter of 2025, the latest period for which statistics have been published.

The Department of housing is funding 12.5 dedicated administrative and technical staffing posts in Dublin City Council to support the resourcing and development of these starter homes schemes. In addition to this, we look at cost-rental delivery, the croí cónaithe scheme and, crucially, the vacant property refurbishment grant and other available opportunities.

In conclusion, in order to further drive the required delivery of 90,000 starter homes under Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030, local authorities including Dublin City Council will shortly commence the preparation of new housing delivery action plans for review by the Department, setting out how the starter home programme will be implemented within their area. These plans, replacing those previously drawn up under Housing for All, will be informed by affordable housing need within the local authority area and will involve collaboration with the delivery partners, including the Land Development Agency, approved housing bodies and the wider development sector, as applicable. The plans will be published on each local authority's website following engagement with the relevant Department.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I appreciate the Minister of State's response and setting out of the detail, but surely he can see it is completely inadequate. In terms of the numbers I gave earlier, 13,000 adults over the age of 18 are living in their parental home in my constituency alone. There are 50,000 people in that situation across Dublin. Where are young people, and as I said, increasingly those in their 30s and 40s, going to be able to buy a home in Dublin city? It is a disaster that is hitting now and is going to get worse in the coming years. It is a breakdown of the social contract.

The Minister of State said Dublin City Council is talking about 789 starter homes, which is higher than the figure we were given, but it is still a drop in the ocean of what is actually required. I do not see where the change in the plans is. What is going to change? Where is the step change that is going to deliver tens of thousands of affordable purchase homes in Dublin city? That is what is needed, but it is not set out. There is no answer to the question I have asked about actually providing a step change in policy. Surely the Minister of State sees that. I know Fine Gael agrees with affordable purchase, as does Fianna Fáil, but in what has been brought forward in housing plans and policies, I do not see any step change of delivery of actually affordable purchase homes. The main schemes of delivery of affordable purchase

homes in Dublin are coming through various market subsidies, including the first home scheme. I am surprised Government TDs such as the Minister of State are not extremely concerned about this. The Government's own policy, which I do not agree with, is only delivering 93 affordable homes in Dublin city under the first home scheme. It is a tiny number of people being supported to buy a home.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I greatly appreciate Deputy Hearne's contribution. Delivering Homes, Building Communities is a clear priority for Government and we are committed to delivering on the targets across all pillars of the plan. The strategy delivers on the programme for Government commitment to increase housing supply and tackle homelessness with an ambitious target to deliver 15,000 starter homes annually to 2033 via local authorities, approved housing bodies, the Land Development Agency, the first home scheme, the vacant properties refurbishment grant and the help to buy scheme.

The next iteration of the local authority housing delivery action plan will shortly commence outlining local authorities plans to deliver in their areas over the next five years.

The LDA has also been tasked with taking over State lands in addition to unlocking stalled private planning consented developments in the shorter term through its market engagement initiative, Project Tosaigh, to facilitate additional starter home delivery. We will continue to work closely with local authorities, approved housing bodies, the LDA and other key stakeholders to support delivery of the starter homes programme and I will undertake to bring the points made eloquently by Deputy Hearne to the Minister in due course.

Renewable Energy Generation

Deputy Gillian Toole: I will give a little context in advance. It is in the same vein as Deputy Daly's Topical Issue in relation to the cost of living. The current electricity pricing is between 28 cent and 37 cent per kilowatt hour, including VAT, and the night time rate is 14 cent. If we take an average annual consumption of 4,200 kilowatt hour, that works out at about an average of €1,700 per annum, equating to €142 per month. However, I think every Member of this House and every consumer outside this complex is well aware that in many cases, the prices are approximately 50% higher and at least €200 per month and upwards.

The majority of our renewable energy is now wind derived but solar renewable energy is fast on the catch-up. In the past five years, my home county of Meath has nearly become the solar renewable energy capital. It is probably on a par with Cork. It is certainly well up there. Areas such as Batterstown, Culmullen, Duleek, Kilbride, Ratoath, Kells and Kentstown either have solar developments planning approved or pending with gas peaking plants and battery storage facilities at planning phase or some point along the line.

I have some concerns which have been reiterated to me by residents. The first is the absence of the second land use review. Then there is the solar development guidelines. Currently, planners have no reason to refuse a valid planning application but the residents are very concerned about a number of things, including the food producing integrity of these soils; the impact on visual amenity and heritage of these commercial developments and most recently; and, most importantly, their personal community and business concerns about the price of energy given that it is now majority renewable energy.

We know from EnergyCloud that there is a surplus of renewable energy. Its report for 13 months to 31 January shows there is an availability of approximately 1,500 GW, which equates to €559 million of monetary value that could be redistributed. The Minister of State might ask where I am going with all of this but hopefully it will make sense.

I will factor in the Irish Grain Growers group. It has flagged the availability of tillage land with me over the past two to three years. That is land its members would have leased for native local grain growing and food production. That land availability is diminishing because that land is being sold and leased for solar energy production. In those areas I have highlighted, there has been a pattern of leases being sold on after planning or after the renewable energy auctions. If you are trying to compile a risk benefit or take a cost benefit analysis approach, in a time of severe grid fragility and price volatility, what impact, if any, the transfer of leases from solar development may have on the price of renewable energy for domestic consumers if we take that gap between the average energy price and the real energy price?

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank Deputy Toole for her forensic Topical Issue. I appreciate the detail and I will endeavour to respond as best I can on behalf of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. Ireland's energy security has moved from being a long-term ambition to becoming one of the most pressing challenges facing our country. I think back to the formation of the Common Agricultural Policy which was based on the basic need that Europe did not starve again. We are now in a situation where the basic need is that we cannot allow the lights to go out again in Europe because recent geopolitical tensions and volatility in global energy markets have proven that energy security is not just an environmental issue but it is essential for delivering long-term energy security and price stability for Irish households and businesses. It is now more important than ever that we reduce Ireland's exposure to imported fossil fuel price shocks.

The programme for Government has reaffirmed Ireland's targets of 80% of electricity demand to be met by renewables in the near term with plans to move to net zero by 2050. We are fortunate here in Ireland to have extraordinary renewable energy resources. Our wind is among the strongest in Europe. Our solar sector is growing at speed, particularly in County Meath but, indeed, beyond, and it is already the third highest share of electricity generation for the country.

Ireland currently has over 8 GW of renewable electricity generation capacity connected to the network, a remarkable achievement as it means we have added approximately 5 GW of new renewable energy generation capacity in just ten years, including doubling our wind capacity and establishing solar energy as a major pillar of our energy supply. In a few short years, solar has become a major component of our electricity supply. Solar is now the third-highest supplier of indigenously generated electricity, behind natural gas and wind, to the electricity grid. Solar is not only reducing electricity bills for households and businesses but it is also easing pressure on the grid by lowering peak demand and supporting a more resilient energy system. The accelerated deployment of both rooftop solar and solar farms is a critical part of meeting the Government's commitment to deliver 80% of Ireland's electricity demand from renewable energy sources in the near term, including 8 GW of solar energy alone.

The design of our renewable electricity support scheme auctions ensures that the new renewables capacity is delivered in as cost effective and competitive a manner as possible.

Solar has featured strongly in each scheme auction to date delivering real benefits to Ireland's electricity network and Irish electricity consumers. Indeed, at times of high electricity prices the two-way scheme design ensures consumers benefit directly from the claw back of any revenue in excess of scheme strike prices. For the 2025-2026 PSO levy year, it is expected that over €11 million will be returned to Irish electricity consumers via the PSO levy as a result of operational scheme projects. It is worth noting that all renewable electricity developments are subject to careful independent scrutiny at the planning application stage by the relevant planning authority when reaching a decision on an individual planning application.

Operational functions of the planning system, including the process of planning applications are, of course, a matter for the relevant planning authority. The points made by Deputy Toole are particularly relevant and I will be more than happy to bring them directly to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien.

Deputy Gillian Toole: I thank the Minister of State. I always say here that every day is a school day. The €11 million PSO levy being returned is most welcome. I do not wish to be cheeky but I would welcome a response from the Minister of State on whether the transfer of leases has or does not have an impact on price? I appreciate that the Minister of State is deputising. I highlighted the average price versus the real price and the gap in the middle. I know the patterns in my area. In one instance, a farm was bought by a business person on the open market, and there was no problem there. The planning application was successful. Post-planning the parcel of land was sold on with a margin. I am not naïve in that my background is small business and margin is critically important. However, if you add a margin at various stages which, to the best of my knowledge, do not have a safeguard or control, you could end up with the retail price at the end having that factored in. For something as essential as energy, that is something that really needs to be looked into.

Again, I would draw attention to the EnergyCloud report for the 13 months where there is €550 million of spare renewable energy that would be most welcome to those 330,000-odd households which are in energy arrears.

That should be investigated. There should also be an investigation into where that differential may arise.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank Deputy Toole and the Ceann Comhairle for giving me the opportunity to provide a response to the overarching points the Deputy made and the wider context of domestic renewable electricity generation, the substantial progress that has been made, and the opportunities to further improve the transition to renewable energy to make sure it is not just a climate imperative but is central to our energy security and, indeed, our economic development. I fundamentally believe that we are making crucial investments in renewable energy, our electricity grid and, importantly, in energy efficiency. The ongoing conflict in the Middle East and, indeed, the continuing conflict in Ukraine underline again why we must accelerate the deployment of renewables, strengthen our grid and retrofit homes and businesses. The real issue raised by Deputy Toole about the transfer of leases is key. We have to provide that level of confidence in the system, not only for the consumer but also for those who are prepared to engage in this process to make sure there is balance and affordability.

I undertake to write to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, on the Deputy's behalf to see if we can get a specific deputation meeting on this issue. Perhaps it might be more pertinent for oral parliamentary questions in the next round. Hopefully, the wider information will provide a good grounding for further discussion on this key area, which I am grateful to the Deputy for raising.

Primary Care Services

Deputy Grace Boland: The Minister of State has heard me say many times before that Fingal is the youngest, fastest-growing area in the country. Balbriggan is the youngest large town in the country and the fastest-growing, yet our D-Doc services are appalling. My understanding is that D-Doc was set up in 2006. Obviously, the population of Balbriggan, Skerries, Rush and Lusk, and the rural villages of Garrettstown, Naul, Ballyboughal, Rolestown, Oldtown and so on, have all grown hugely since 2006, yet our healthcare services have not expanded in line with population growth. Census 2022 tells us that the north part of my constituency, Balbriggan, Skerries, Rush and Lusk, and the surrounding villages, has a population of 68,000 people. I have tabled many parliamentary questions for the Department asking what the criteria are to get the expanded D-Doc services, and I am getting no answers back about the criteria. There has been major housing growth and we are continuing to see major housing growth. The reality is that Fingal is the growth engine for housing in Dublin if not the country, yet we have not had the increase in health services, education, public transport, roads or other services that need to go with the delivery of houses.

I find it concerning that the HSE service planning is relying on historical data or telling me that what was established in 2006 is suitable in 2026. Something is seriously wrong. Regarding the D-Doc services that are available to us, the parliamentary question response tells me that I can go to Ballymun, Coolock, Hartstown in Clonsilla, which I am not sure I have ever visited before, North Strand Health Centre in Dublin 1, or, the closest, in Swords. The reality is that the Swords D-Doc only stays open Monday to Friday until 11 o'clock and, at the weekends, only from 9.30 a.m. to 10.30 p.m. We simply do not have access to 24-hour healthcare. You absolutely have to have a car to access any of these health services. There is no direct public transport service to them except for Swords which, as I have just said, closes at either 11 p.m. or 10.30 p.m. It is not good enough and I would really like to understand what the Department of Health is going to do to meet demands in the area.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I have to be very careful with this reply because, needless to say, replying on behalf of our mutual dear friend, the Minister for Health, whom I spoke to subsequent to receiving the script, is a balance, because I could throw back to the Deputy many of the points she has raised and somehow that constitutes a reply. I sometimes question, when replies are being drawn up, whether people look at maps or live in the areas. I know where Clonsilla is. I also know where North Strand is. It is a long way from Balbriggan. It should not take a southsider to tell someone that. I could also talk about the responsibility of every GP to make sure they are providing a genuine option for out-of-hours care for their patients as per their contractual requirements and, increasingly, how those out-of-hours services have been developed and expanded over time, and how they are working extremely well in so many parts of the country. It is a real testament not just to the Department, the HSE and the Minister but to the doctors who provide that care. I had reason to be in west Cork just last week and I read

the local paper. It talked about a doctor who retired after 27 years of providing out-of-hours care to the sprawl of west Cork. I know Balbriggan is a long way from Stepside but west Cork is even bigger again.

Crucially, it is important to look at the population in the round. The latest population figure for the wider area covered is 690,000. It is covered by five treatment centres, which the Deputy has listed, two of which are only open overnight on weekdays, and those two are open 24 hours on weekends and public holidays. The geography is vast and the requirement for a car is quite obvious. The key thing the Minister would say, which I absolutely agree with her on, is about two things in the immediate area that require attention. The first is the sheer number of GPs in the system. Genuine and forceful efforts are being made on her behalf to make sure we have more general practitioners, both through the additional annual investment and through the conclusion of the GP GMS agreement.

Something that we talk about, which is particular to this issue and which is parallel, not the solution, but complementary to it, is to have a greater D-Doc facility that goes into the north county. That is obvious to the Deputy and me, and indeed obvious to the Minister. That is ultimately the direction of travel we are taking, not just because Fingal is the fastest-growing county in the country or that Balbriggan is the fastest-growing area. I remember once when it was Stepside but obviously it has been overtaken two censuses later. One of the key areas to cover the wider north county area is the development of the Swords surgical hub, which will be operational from this summer. It will draw on and replicate the success of Tallaght and Mount Carmel elective surgical hubs. One is in my own constituency. Indeed, I was born in Mount Carmel hospital. It will implement the use of innovative patient pathways and have a real impact on reducing waiting times for patients. If waiting times for patients are reduced, it means they will have less chance to need that out-of-hours care. Once it is fully operational, that Swords surgical hub is expected to deliver additional annual activity of 8,000 day care procedures based on the four theatres, 5,700 minor operations procedures, and approximately 18,500 outpatient department appointments. The Minister also introduced greater regulations to strengthen that. That is all complementary to the issue the Deputy raised and needs to be addressed at source. Needless to say, I will bring that directly to the Minister following this debate.

Deputy Grace Boland: I appreciate that. As the Minister of State knows, the surgical hub will be a very welcome addition to the area but it will not deal with the critical issue of the fact that people get sick every time of day and night and need access to a GP. The infrastructure exists in Balbriggan. We have a primary care centre. The population demand is clear. The growth projections are clear. What I am concerned about is that the response to the parliamentary question I received told me there were no plans to expand the GP services in the area. I hope that I am hearing from the Minister of State that the HSE and Minister are open to expanding services. I have been that parent who has had to drive two premature twins to Swords to try to find GP healthcare. The reality is that I did not have access to a car at the time and had to ask a neighbour. That is simply not good enough. We have a huge population in the area. We need to have clear criteria from the HSE and the Department about when we can get a D-Doc service and a timeline for expanding the services, and access to 24-hour GP care.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Out-of-hours GP care is provided to the population in integrated areas. The Government is committed to the continued development of our general practice service to ensure patients across the whole country have timely access to GP services. As mentioned previously, work is ongoing to increase the GP workforce and therefore improve access to both daytime and out-of-hours GP services. Significant investment has taken place in general practice both in the 2019 and 2023 GP agreements but we need to do a lot more. The input from the Deputy makes a very clear geographic case for an increased need to service the wider Dublin Fingal and north county area, with a particular focus on the rapidly growing town of Balbriggan.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 3.40 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.47 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 3.40 p.m. and resumed at 3.47 p.m.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

An Ceann Comhairle: We will begin with Deputy Ó Snodaigh's Other Question, Question No. 223.

Oideachas Tríú Leibhéal

223. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science an bhfuil sé i gceist aige aon mhaoiniú ar leith a chur ar fáil chun tacú le hinstitiúidí tríú leibhéal cúrsaí a sholáthar trí mheán na Gaeilge; ar phléigh sé riamh an gá atá le breis cúrsaí trí Ghaeilge chun an sprioc 20% earcaíochta faoi Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú), 2021 a bhaint amach leis an Aire Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail, agus Gaeltachta, leis an Aire Caiteachais Phoiblí, Bonneagair, Athchóiriúcháin Seirbhíse Poiblí agus Digitiúcháin, leis an Údarás Ardoideachais nó leis na hinstitiúidí tríú leibhéal; agus an mbeidh sé sásta labhairt leo mura pléadh go fóill é. [22074/26]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: An bhfuil maoiniú breise chun a bheith tugtha do na hinstitiúidí tríú leibhéal chun a dhéanamh cinnte de go bhfuil siad ag soláthar cúrsaí trí mheán na Gaeilge chun cuidiú leis an Stát an 20% atá leagtha síos ó thaobh earcú isteach sa Státchóras a shroicheadh?

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy James Lawless): Is é sin an chéad cheist inniu toisc go bhfuil a lán daoine as láthair. In any event, aithníonn mo Roinn an ról tábhachtach atá ag an earnáil oideachais tríú leibhéal i dtaca le sprioc an Rialtais a bhaint amach, is é sin go mbeidh 20% d'earcaigh san earnáil phoiblí inniúil sa Ghaeilge faoi 2030.

Le hAcht an Údaráis um Ard-Oideachas, 2022 cuirtear oibleagáid reachtúil ar an Údarás um Ard-Oideachas tacú le hinstitiúidí ardoideachais chun an Ghaeilge a mhúineadh, a chur chun cinn agus a úsáid. Chun na críche sin, tacaíonn mo Roinn le hinstitiúidí ardoideachais faoi láthair, tríd an Údarás um Ard-Oideachas, trí mhaoiniú lárnach agus trí shruthanna maoinithe sonracha do thionscnaimh Ghaeilge. Áirítear leis seo beagnach €1.8 milliún in aghaidh na

bliana d'Acadamh na hOllscolaíochta Gaeilge in Ollscoil na Gaillimhe agus €900,000 do thionscnaimh Ghaeilge níos leithne sna hollscoileanna.

Lasmuigh den earnáil ardoideachais, tá scileanna Gaeilge á gcur chun cinn freisin trí líonraí Skillnet Ireland, printiseachtaí agus cláir bhreiseoideachais agus oiliúna. Cuireann sé sin uile leis an sprioc bheartais níos leithne maidir leis an nGaeilge a thacú i dtaobh úsáid na teanga go gairmiúil.

Maidir leis an bplean náisiúnta do sheirbhísí poiblí Gaeilge go sonrach, tá mo Roinn tiomanta go n-oibreimid leis an earnáil oideachais tríú leibhéal agus le Ranna eile chun a chuspóirí a chur chun cinn. Áirítear leis an obair seo grúpa oibre earnála a bhunú, a mbeidh comhchathaoirleacht á déanamh air idir mo Roinn agus an Roinn Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail agus Gaeltachta, chun breathnú ar bhealaí praiticiúla inar féidir leis na hearnálacha-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Ar a laghad tá tuiscint ann anois go bhfuil gá chun gníomh a dhéanamh agus díriú isteach ar an gceist seo. Tá roinnt de na hinstiúidí tríú leibhéal ar an eolas faoin ngá díriú isteach ar an gceist, ach don chuid is mó tá siad ag caint faoi láthair ar modules a chur ar fáil sna cúrsaí, seachas go mbeadh an cúrsa iomlán i nGaeilge. Tá buntáiste ag an dá chóras, ach sa deireadh thiar thall, muna bhfuil an cúrsa ina iomláine trí Ghaeilge, déanann sé níos deacra do roinnt de na gairmeacha a chur i láthair i gceart as Gaeilge. Ní leor do dhochtúir a bheith in ann Gaeilge a labhairt. Is gá dóibh an t-eolas a bheith acu agus é a chur i láthair sa Ghaeilge theicniúil a bhainfeadh le dochtúir, innealtóir nó aon duine mar sin.

Deputy James Lawless: Is minic a fhaighim an cheist ar cé mhéad mac léinn san ardoideachas a dhéanann staidéar ar an nGaeilge. Ní rud simplí é líon na mac léinn atá ag déanamh staidéir ar an nGaeilge sa tríú leibhéal a oibriú amach ós rud é go gcuirfeadh an Ghaeilge ar fáil mar ghné riachtanach i gcuid mhór clár, lena n-áirítear formhór na gclár comhchéime onóracha BA. Léiríonn anailís a rinne an tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas le déanaí go raibh 420 mac léinn ag déanamh cúrsaí go hiomlán trí Ghaeilge sa bhliain acadúil 2023/2024 agus 2,625 eile ag déanamh cuid dá gcúrsaí trí Ghaeilge, á spreagadh go mór ag cúrsaí san earnáil oideachais. Ní áirítear leis na figiúirí seo, áfach, mic léinn atá cláraithe i gclár ginearálta BA inar féidir an Ghaeilge a thairiscint mar ábhar riachtanach.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Táimid ag díriú isteach ar cheann de na ceisteanna go gcaithfidh mic léinn a mhealladh isteach sa chóras chun na hábhair seo a dhéanamh. Ní bhíonn a fhios acu. Níl an cúrsa ar fáil. Faoin am atá sé ar fáil, tá na mic léinn seo tar éis bogadh ar aghaidh. Mar shampla, bhíodh céim san iriseoireacht ann go hiomlán trí Ghaeilge. Níl sé ann a thuilleadh, in ainneoin go bhfuil TG4 againn anois agus tá fás i ngach uile gné den saol ó thaobh na meán cumarsáide. Tá roinnt réimsí ar féidir linn daltaí a mhealladh isteach ann an-tapa. Tógfaidh sé i bhfad Éireann níos faide do chinn eile. Caithfidh straitéis a bheith ann ionas go bhfuil a fhios againn go bhfuil innealtóirí, dochtúirí, lianna de shóirt eile, fiú garraíodóirí agus a leithéid, go bhfuil an tomhas acadúil acu as Gaeilge, ní díreach an Ghaeilge.

Deputy James Lawless: Níor luaigh mé leis an Teachta Dála gur fhoghlaim mé mo chuid Gaeilge sa King's Inns at the time. Tuigim an pointe sin. Tá an Roinn ag tacú le húsáid na Gaeilge ag an tríú leibhéal trí mhaoiniú a leithdháileadh ar institiúidí tríú leibhéal. Dáileadh €1.6 billiún ar institiúidí tríú leibhéal tríd an Údarás um Ard-Oideachas mar bhloc deontais chun tacú le soláthar oideachais tríú leibhéal lena n-áirítear soláthar don Ghaeilge. Arís, dáiltear €900,000 gach bliain tríd an soláthar speisialta chun tacú le húsáid na Gaeilge i measc foirne agus mac léinn ag an tríú leibhéal. Leithdháiltear €1.76 milliún gach bliain ar Ollscoil na Gaillimhe chun tacú le hAcadamh na hOllscolaíochta Gaeilge. Is scéim mheantóireachta, oiliúna agus gradaim é Gníomhaí Gaeilge do mhic léinn a bhfuil baint acu leis an nGaeilge ar an tríú leibhéal.

Student Accommodation

211. **Deputy Eoghan Kenny** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of purpose-built student accommodation beds that will be available in the State for the coming academic year; the amount that this has grown on the previous academic year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22017/26]

Deputy James Lawless: The activation of supply of student beds is of the utmost priority to me, my Department, the Government as a whole, to Deputy Kenny and I am sure to all in this House who take in an interest in the matter.

Since 2017, we have seen 16,266 purpose-built student accommodation beds completed nationwide, which brings the total stock to just under 50,000 around the country. At the end of March 2026, commencement notices issued in respect of 2,735 student beds, with a further 14,233 having planning permission but not yet been built out. In addition, planning permission has been applied for a further 1,684 beds that are coming through the system.

The projections contained within my student accommodation strategy, which I recently launched, indicate an emerging demand for approximately 42,000 additional student accommodation beds over the next decade, which underscores the scale of the challenge and opportunity. I should state that those 42,000 beds are not immediately required but they will be required as the decade progresses. However, there is undoubtedly a shortage of the beds that are required right now. It is not in the magnitude of that number but it is worth noting.

I am sure the Deputy has engaged with the new strategy which is published on the Government's website if people want to read it. It sets out a pathway to make higher education more accessible by promoting accommodation through addressing two critical challenges. The first is the affordability of accommodation by grant aid and additional supports to students to meet the costs of accommodation in lieu of commuting. The other challenge is around accommodation supply and viability and incentivising a greater rollout in the development of beds so that the 14,000 beds with planning permission that are not built out actually become activated. Affordability is delivered through a range of schemes, which I might speak about following the next supplementary question because I am watching the clock.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: In relation to the student accommodation strategy, the Minister knows I am not in the business of criticising in any way, shape or form any new development

and I welcome it. However, I will call out certain aspects of it that I do not perhaps agree with. We might differ on that but that is fine. I have a sense that the strategy itself is developer-led with an enormous reliance on the private market. It fails in very basic protections in terms of capping student rents and ensuring service charges cannot be used as an excuse to drive up the rent beyond the RPZ rate. The landlords will be able to reset the rents in between the tenancies. I am just noting these issues.

A final point is that it is vital that technological universities have opportunities to borrow in order to purchase land to build or fast track their own accommodation for students. I raise those points because at the committee on higher education, a number of students from Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn, AMLÉ, came in and spoke with us about that.

Deputy James Lawless: I have just one point, and I know the Deputy has engaged in good faith, as he always does. I have to correct one statement he made, and perhaps it is just not widely known. Landlords actually cannot reset rents between tenancies and that is a very deliberate thing I inserted to the legislation following engagement with my colleague the Minister, Deputy Browne. In terms of regulation, overall, student tenancies are subject to the same base rules as any other residential property in the State or any other rental, with the additional safeguard that in a student tenancy the rent cannot be reset when tenants move into and move out of purpose-built student accommodation. This is for the very simple reason that the new RPZ rules allow a reset when a tenant vacates, or after a period of six years, whichever comes sooner. In the case of student accommodation, the students vacate naturally most summers, if not every summer, and I thought it would be unfair on the students to impose an additional rent reset on them every summer. That would make the properties very expensive indeed. I intervened and negotiated with the Minister, Deputy Browne, who in fairness was happy to accede to that request and that protection is contained in the legislation now.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I thank the Minister for clarifying that and I will correct the record on that. I also want to speak to the broader aspect of accommodation that is being used by students in our cities. Since the Minister has taken up his position, in regard to communication he has with the Minister, Deputy Browne, there has been a significant amount of it in relation his own strategy. For example, in regard to private rental accommodation students have, there has been a significant number of cases brought to my attention where students are living in private rental accommodation near University College Cork, MTU and other third level institutions, particularly in Cork because I am a representative from Cork, where the accommodation itself is generally not fit for purpose. Whether it is because the local authority does not have the manpower or there is a lack of availability, there are very few inspections going on within private rental accommodation. From my perspective as spokesperson on education, and from the Minister's perspective, does he believe it is now more essential? Is he in any conversation with the Minister, Deputy Browne, about the inspections of private rental accommodation being used by students?

4 o'clock

Deputy James Lawless: I understand that the Deputy's question has a pertinence to students because they are living in the private residential sector but I do not want to trespass onto the

brief of my colleague the Minister for housing, Deputy Browne, in terms of the rules governing that.

While I cannot quite mandate it, I have strongly encouraged, and used any powers available to me, to suggest and request that where universities are advertising properties on their student portals or websites they should only do so where they have met basic standards. The rent-a-room scenario is one of the ways that digs accommodation is being provided. We have a sample licence agreement, which we have published on the website. I have asked my officials to examine whether that can be enforced in the sense in order for any publicly-funded higher education institution to market it properly through the different student platforms and student union campaigns, which I appreciate most student unions are embarking on, that this would meet minimum standards including signing up to that licence agreement. That would be a very reasonable request.

In his opening remarks the Deputy mentioned the technological universities so I will speak to that briefly. There is a programme for Government commitment to give them a formal framework. That is delivered in this strategy.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Third Level Education

220. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the position regarding the engagement there has been with his Department, Dundalk IT and Queen's University Belfast in relation to their partnership to create Dundalk university college; the work being carried out by his Department to resolve cross-Border further and higher education issues and the anomalies caused by the CAO-UCAS systems; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22073/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What engagement has there been between the Department, Dundalk IT and Queen's University Belfast on a partnership? The heads of agreement have been signed from the point of view of creating Dundalk university college. What work is being carried out by the Department to resolve cross-Border further and higher education issues and the anomalies in the CAO and UCAS systems? The recognition of awards, etc., is an ongoing difficulty.

Deputy James Lawless: I must first send best wishes to the Deputy's colleague, Teachta McGettigan. I understand she has not been well this week and normally she would be a key part of this debate. She is a very valued contributor to the education conversation. I just wanted to send our best wishes. I know she was taken unwell this week.

On the Deputy's question, he will be aware, and as all in Dundalk know at this stage, that committed to developing the North-South collaboration in student mobility but particularly in driving on the partnership between Queen's University and Dundalk IT, DKIT, with the aim of Dundalk IT becoming a legally recognised university college of Queen's University, aligning on awards, on research and on quality assurance, creating the first all-island university. This is actually very exciting and something I am really pleased to be in a position to progress, and I

am intending to progress very rapidly. It is something we are all very much aligned on and celebrate. It is a new model within the higher education landscape. There are significant opportunities for cross-Border collaboration and enhancement of higher education on an all-island basis through that.

In March I was present at the signing ceremony between the two institutions. The Deputy was present at that great event, as were Deputy Erin McGreehan and many others. That work is progressing as rapidly as my officials can deliver it. I am pleased to steward it through.

On another note, the Deputy asked about other collaborations or partnerships. I have met the Minister for the Economy in Northern Ireland, Caoimhe Archibald, MLA, on a number of occasions. We are working together to synchronise the two jurisdictions as best we can in terms of rules, exam results being released, and how the points are computed between the A levels versus the leaving certificate. As recently as this morning I launched the AIReady website that is about AI skills where I had a conversation with a number of interested parties from north of the Border who would like to see that developed on an all-island basis. I am having ongoing collaboration, which has been very positive and constructive so far, and I intend to continue it.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I will pass on his best wishes to Deputy McGettigan. Our thoughts are with her and we are very glad that she is getting better.

We are all support this partnership, which is an all-island project that can deliver for the people of Dundalk and beyond. It will vw beneficial to Queen's University Belfast. It follows on from the idea of the M1-border corridor. At the Good Friday Agreement committee recently we had the Newry-Dundalk Chamber of Commerce and many others in. The representatives spoke about the absolute importance of this while dealing with other infrastructural issues that need to be dealt with.

I thank the Minister for his words in relation to his engagement with the Dr. Caoimhe Archibald. It is absolutely vital that we deal with those anomalies around points and the release of results, but that we also we get down to the issue around qualifications and recognition. It is absolutely necessary.

Deputy James Lawless: A body of work is required. This is the first time this has ever been undertaken and there is a job of work to do to align the different rules and regulations across the Border. My Department has been intensively engaged with that. In consultation with my officials, DKIT has established a number of representative groups working to identify requirements and issues, and bottom out the issues around legislation, the awarding of degrees and other qualifications, quality assurance criteria and aligning the two systems on each side of the Border to make sure they can work together and find out what the model is to present these into the legislation that I will bring before the House in the near future. There has been active engagement between my officials, between Queen's University and Dundalk IT, and between the agencies of the Higher Education Authority and Quality and Qualifications Ireland, QQI on this end, and the Department of the Economy in the North. They have carried out a programme of consultation with key stakeholders, which is going well. A regulatory impact assessment is also being performed which will inform the legislative programme. It is certainly full steam ahead and progress has been good to date.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all agree this is vital stuff. Consultation on issues is a necessity so that we can cut the issues off at the pass. I thank Dr. Diarmuid O'Callaghan and his team in DKIT and those in Queen's University in making this happen. From what he says the Minister is in support of it and whatever is necessary from this end will be delivered.

There will be learnings in respect of those cross-Border issues the Minister is aware of that are impacting on a huge number of students and those that are qualified. It deals with higher education, further education and all the rest of it. We have heard here previously of the need for a proper clearing house for dealing not only in the educational sphere but in all spheres regarding cross-Border issues, while I might want to see a greater amount of work done in on delivering the all-Ireland project altogether.

Deputy James Lawless: To continue that theme of collaboration, Universities Ireland is co-funded by my Department and the Northern Ireland Department for the Economy. This is another cross-border body. Through that body universities across the entire island of Ireland have been working together on this project but also on others. They have really displayed an agility, a willingness and an ambition, which I applaud, to align entry procedures and to encourage student mobility. I have asked my officials to engage with the representative bodies across the Irish Universities Association and the Technological Universities Association to take this matter forward. I met with Dr. Archibald quite recently at the all-island ministerial forum where we compared notes on this and other matters. The associations were very keen to align those processes and make sure their students can travel each side of the Border seamlessly and without having to come across any kind of procedural hurdles or hiccups that might delay that path because it is a fundamental goal that students in the North be treated the same as those in South and *vice versa*.

Apprenticeship Programmes

228. **Deputy Eoghan Kenny** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of apprenticeships the State has taken on each year from 2020 onwards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22012/26]

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: What number of apprenticeships has the State taken on each year from 2020 to date? We have discussed apprenticeships previously in this House. They are extremely important to me as a public representative and as someone who has grown up with many family members who have become apprentices.

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin): I thank the Deputy for his question. The Government's commitment to expanding apprenticeship opportunities is delivering strong results. My Department secured €79 million additional investment through budget 2026, bringing the total investment for apprenticeships to over €410 million, more than double the level of 2020. This investment has supported significant growth with annual registrations rising by 78% from just over 5,000 in 2020 to well over 9,000 in 2025.

The question relates to apprenticeship participation across the public sector and this is a very specific priority for the Government. The public service apprenticeship plan, a deliverable under the Department's action plan for apprenticeship, which will soon be released, and the better public services strategy of the Department of public expenditure, sets a target of 750 annual public service apprentice registrations.

A co-ordinated set of actions from both Departments was put in place to assist employers in meeting apprenticeship targets. This included the establishment of leadership and working groups, employer engagement activities and practical supports such as the guide for employing apprentices in the public service, as well as promotional activities. While the target of 750 annual registrations has not yet been met, uptake increased from 67 in 2022 to 286 in 2025, demonstrating momentum and a foundation for continued expansion. The establishment of new apprenticeship programmes, such as social work, has been central to the increase achieved. In addition, earlier this week, together with the Ministers, Deputies Lawless, Chambers and Calleary, I launched a new business and operations apprenticeship, which will open up new pathways for careers in the public service.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I firmly welcome the developments in the public service apprenticeship model made by the Department of further and higher education. The Minister, Deputy Lawless, and I have had many exchanges on the role of apprenticeships in our public services. It is being focused on by the Government and I welcome this. It is something I am absolutely focused on. We all know of the difficulty with the number of apprenticeships our local authorities are able to take on. Will the Minister of State outline, in relation to the goal of having 750 apprenticeships annually, whether we have an idea where they will be working in our public service? Will they be located in our local authorities? I want to know where they will be located. I have made the point previously on the floor of the Dáil, and I will make it again, that local authorities are finding it ever more difficult to try to get their own workforce and are leasing out a lot to third parties.

Deputy Marian Harkin: The new business and operations apprenticeship will open up new pathways, beginning with the Civil Service, as well as contributing towards the overall target of 12,500 new apprentice registrations. There are other relevant programmes, including paramedic, spatial planning and data analytics. Information on public service apprenticeship uptake is not available prior to 2022 so I do not have figures prior to that. Regarding the figures Deputy Kenny is looking for with regard to public service apprenticeship numbers, back in 2022 the total number was 373. Last year, 2025, it was 566, and the annual registrations increased from 67 to 286. We can see a real increase in the numbers across the public service and Civil Service.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: The increase is significant and I am glad that some of what I spoke about 15 or 16 months ago has been taken on board, relating to the role of apprenticeships. With regard to students in fifth or sixth year who may be thinking about going into third level or progressing their academic life, or people in their 20s or whatever age they may be, where or how can they access this information? Is it being publicised correctly? Is it being given to career guidance teachers in schools? Is it openly and freely available through an online system? Are we promoting it? Can we help to promote it in different ways to try to get apprenticeships

into our system? Genuinely, this is the first time I have heard about a lot of what the Minister of State spoke about. Is there a possibility, from our perspective or from an outside perspective, of promoting this better so we can give young people in this country the opportunity of jobs in our public service?

Deputy Marian Harkin: The point Deputy Kenny has made is very important. We have a number of programmes, especially in construction, and I will come back to the public service in a minute. One of our best programmes was a social media programme, Building Heroes, whereby 15 young men and women in the construction industry were involved in a social media campaign so that young people could see what it was like to be involved in these jobs. Yes, there are challenges with getting the messages out through schools but things are improving significantly. More and more career guidance teachers are becoming involved. Sometimes it is a teacher in a school who has a specific interest and can encourage students on this pathway. From this perspective, the Department is making every effort to advertise these programmes. I can say there are plenty of applications for the public service apprenticeships, and this is really where these apprenticeships are for now.

Earcaíocht agus Soláthar Foirne Tríú Leibhéal

229. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science an bhfuil sé ar an eolas faoin inní atá léirithe nach mbeidh inniúlacht sa Ghaeilge anois ag Uachtarán, Meabhránaí ná Rúnaí Ollscoil na Gaillimhe nó ag an Déan Feidhmiúil atá freagrach as an nGaeilge san ollscoil ar a bhfuil dualgais ar leith maidir leis an nGaeilge agus freagracht as Acadamh na hOllscolaíochta Gaeilge; an aithníonn sé go bhfuil íslíú stádais tugtha don Ghaeilge san ollscoil le roinnt blianta anuas; agus an bhfuil sé i gceist aige aon ghníomh a ghlacadh chun stádas na Gaeilge a threisiú san ollscoil ar nós Bille an Choláiste Ollscoile, Gaillimh (Leasú), 2017 a chur i bhfeidhm. [22075/26]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tá an cheist seo dírithe ar an inní atá ann maidir leis an bpolasaí Gaeilge agus an ról lárnach atá ag an nGaeilge in Ollscoil na Gaillimhe, áit a mbeidh seans ann nach mbeadh Gaeilge inniúil ag an uachtarán, meabhránaí, rúnaí ollscoile nó an déan feidhmiúil agus go mbeadh sé sin mar dhroch-chás don Ghaeilge agus do stádas na Gaeilge san ollscoil.

Deputy James Lawless: Is institiúidí féinrialaitheacha iad ollscoileanna de réir bhrí Acht na nOllscoileanna, 1997. Dá bhrí sin, coinníonn siad freagracht as an ngnó ar fad maidir le hacmhainní daonna, faoi réir chomhlíonadh bheartas an Rialtais maidir le líon na bhfostaithe agus an bheartas pá. Maidir le ceapacháin in Ollscoil na Gaillimhe, tá siad faoi chúram údarás rialaithe na hollscoile sin, agus níl ról agamsa ná ag mo Roinn sa phróiseas sin.

Aithníonn mo Roinn an tábhacht ghéar le cur chun cinn agus leathnú múineadh agus úsáid na Gaeilge ag an tríú leibhéal. Le hAcht an Údaráis um Ard-Oideachas, 2022, cuirtear oibleagáid reachtúil ar an Údarás um Ard-Oideachas tacú le hinstitiúidí ardoideachais chun an Ghaeilge a mhúineadh, a chur chun cinn agus a úsáid. Chun na críche sin, tacaíonn mo Roinn le hinstitiúidí ardoideachais, tríd an Údarás um Ard-Oideachas, trí mhaoiniú lárnach agus trí shruthanna maoinithe sonracha do thionscnaimh Ghaeilge.

Leithdháileadh beagnach €1.8 milliún in 2024 agus 2025 ar Acadamh na hOllscolaíochta Gaeilge in Ollscoil na Gaillimhe. Tacaíonn Acadamh na hOllscolaíochta Gaeilge leis an nGaeilge laistigh d'Ollscoil na Gaillimhe, agus ar fud Éireann. Cuireann an t-acadamh roinnt clár acadúil ar fáil trí mheán na Gaeilge. Tacaíonn an t-acadamh le hOllscoil na Gaillimhe freisin agus í ag iarraidh a bheith ina hollscoil dhátheangach trí fheabhsú scileanna sa teanga Gaeilge a chur ar fáil don fhoireann agus seirbhísí aistriúcháin a chur ar fáil don ollscoil.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Ní féidir agus ní ceart go mbeadh Pontius Pilate á dhéanamh sa chás seo. Is cinneadh Rialtais a bhí ann Acht Ollscoil na Gaillimhe a thógáil isteach in 2005 nó 2006. Rinneadh íslíú ar stádas na Gaeilge ó thaobh coinníollacha a bheith ann maidir leo siúd atá i gceannas ar an gcoláiste. Is féidir leis an Rialtas, tríd leasuithe a dhéanamh ar an Acht atá ann faoi láthair, dualgas a bheith ann go mbeadh cáilíochtaí ar leith ann - toisc an príomhról atá ag an ollscoil seo maidir leis nGaeilge - agus go mbeadh ar iarrthóirí a bheith inniúil sa Ghaeilge. Ní caitheamh anuas é seo ar na daoine atá sna poist seo. Fuair siad an post tríd an ngnáthchóras. Is caitheamh anuas ar an gcóras é nach raibh an coinníoll ann sa chéad dul síos. Dá réir, tá íslíú tugtha don Ghaeilge.

Deputy James Lawless: Tuigim an fhadhb. Is institiúidí féinrialaitheacha iad ollscoileanna de réir bhrí Acht na nOllscoileanna, 1997. Dá bhrí sin, coinníonn siad freagracht as an ngnó ar fad maidir le hacmhainní daonna, faoi réir chomhlíonadh bheartas an Rialtais maidir le líon na bhfostaithe agus an bheartas pá.

Is ábhar don chomhlacht rialaithe san ollscoil féin é ceapadh uachtarán nua cé go mbeifí ag súil go mbeadh próiseas oscailte earcaíochta i gceist. Ní bhíonn aon ról ag an Roinn ná ag an Aire sa cheapachán seo.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Tuigim cad atá á rá ach tá ról ag an Aire tríd reachtaíocht na Tithe seo. Bhí an díospóireacht ann agus léiríodh an bhuairt ag an am. In fact, sular éirí sé as, léirigh Éamon Ó Cuív, duine do chomhghleacaithe an Aire, an bhuairt chéanna. Chuir sé Bille chun cinn chun tarraingt siar ón gcinneadh a glacadh in Acht 2006. Thug sé an Bille an Choláiste Ollscoile, Gaillimh (Leasú), 2017, chun cinn a bhí dírithe ar cinnte a dhéanamh de go raibh stádas níos daingne agus níos láidre ó thaobh na Gaeilge de sa choláiste, agus go mbeadh tús áite ann ó thaobh na Gaeilge de. An bhuairt atá ann ná muna bhfuil inniúlacht sa Ghaeilge acu siúd ag an leibhéal is airde sa choláiste go ndéanfaidh sé dochar don straitéis atá ann. Tá straitéis ann a bhí ag tabhairt borradh don Ghaeilge sa choláiste agus tá dainséar ann anois.

Deputy James Lawless: Tá suim agam sa bhfadhb agus tuigim é. Beidh suim ag an Teachta sa mhéid atá á dhéanamh sa Roinn ag obair sa spás sin. Is rannpháirtí gníomhach í an Roinn sa réimse agus tá obair na hearnála ardoideachais tábhachtach chun a cinntiú go bhfuil luach ár saothar againn leis na scileanna teanga atá riachtanach chun an sprioc inniúlachta 20% a bhaint amach. Tá a lán oibre ar siúl sa Roinn towards that regards. Tá réimse leathan cúrsaí nua a bhfuil cuid acu i nGaeilge ar fáil do mhic léinn. Is iad na hinstitiúidí féin a chinntigh soláthar na gcúrsaí sin de réir neamhspleáchas a ceadaíodh.

Mar sin féin, tacaíonn an Roinn le réimse téacsleabhair Gaeilge freisin atá dírithe ar thacú le húsáid na Gaeilge ar champas tríú leibhéal lena n-áirítear tacaíocht do chlubanna agus cumainn Gaeilge. Tá m'am thart.

Education and Training Boards

217. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to provide an update on funding cuts to the Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29090/26]

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I ask the Minister of State to provide an update on the funding cuts to the Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board. This specifically relates to the cut to English for speakers of other languages, ESOL, funding, which has resulted in the loss of 25 teachers and hundreds of classes within GRETB. This has had a devastating impact of which I know the Minister of State is aware.

Deputy Marian Harkin: The Deputy did bring this to my attention previously. I assure him that there have been no cuts to GRETB's core funding allocation. My Department remains committed to supporting a further education and training, FET, system that enables individual success, supports economic growth and strengthens communities, underpinned by almost €1.1 billion in current funding for ETBs in 2026. In 2026, GRETB's core allocation is €65.7 million. That is an extra €4.3 million relative to what was delivered 2025. In fact, it is an increase of over 34% to what was delivered in 2020. There are, therefore, no cuts to the allocation.

I understand what the Deputy is referring to, however, which is the conclusion of what was temporary emergency funding that was introduced following the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022. As I said, that was time-limited, temporary funding, but it did significantly expand ESOL provision for a fixed time period to meet exceptional demand. As was always intended, the temporary funding has now concluded, and ESOL funding has reverted to its pre-2022 core funding, which is in line with the parameters for budget 2026. While I acknowledge that the ending of these temporary supports presents challenges for some ETBs, it is important to be clear that this does not constitute a reduction in the overall ETB budget.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: I thank the Minister of State. I visited the Dunmore centre last week. I met with some of the English language students whose classes have been cancelled. These are people for whom English is not their first language. These classes really helped them to integrate into the community and find employment and so on. It was really heartening to hear what a positive difference it has made for them but, unfortunately, their classes have been cancelled. It is not just English language and literacy. We also had Irish language classes being cancelled in Athenry, which is really disappointing when we should be doing everything we can to promote the language. Digital literacy has also been affected in other areas. It is really disappointing because this has impacted on vulnerable and marginalised students in particular. It has also impacted a lot of teachers who were very close to completing their four years and receiving permanent contracts. It was a slap in the face for them after years of service. Altogether, 25 teachers and hundreds of classes have been affected by this. I met

representatives of GRETB. They said their hands are tied. They have to deal with pay increases. They cannot touch apprenticeship funding, which is the only pot that has increased. There is, therefore, nothing they can do.

Deputy Marian Harkin: The point I made earlier is that there is no cut to the GRETB budget. In fact, it has significantly increased this year from last year. It is also important to say that while ESOL provision has reverted to pre-2022 levels before the Ukraine war, when it was significantly expanded on a temporary basis, ESOL continues to be delivered nationally as part of core funding. It is not that we have stopped it; it is just that we have gone back to the pre-2022 levels. Of course, ETBs have to manage within the budgets that are allocated to them, but GRETB has an extra €4 million this year. As the Deputy said, while it may impact on Spanish students and otherwise, it is important to remember that this was a temporary expansion and it followed the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: The reality is that it is a very significant cut within GRETB. Like I said, 25 classes are saying their hands are tied. I do not know if there has been engagement with GRETB on this. These cuts are cruel and they are impacting on marginalised students and staff who are about to become permanent. The Minister of State is shaking her head but, in fairness, there has been a significant cut to the budget in this area. GRETB has been very clear that it cannot move the funding around and that it has pay increases it has to meet. She might outline what engagement there has been with GRETB on this issue and if she would perhaps commit to meet with its representatives or with some of the teachers and students who have been affected by this. Every effort should be made to get these classes reinstated and get these staff back in place. I have been inundated with calls, texts and emails from people who are absolutely devastated by the outcome of this. That is the bottom line. I ask that the Minister of State do everything she can to get these classes reinstated.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I accept the Deputy's bona fides on this, and I hear what he says. However, I cannot emphasise often enough that there are no cuts here. There is an increase of €4 million in the budget. Each ETB has to decide how they spend their individual budgets, within certain parameters, obviously. ESOL programmes are simply going back to pre-2022 levels. We have seen similar tapering off of supports across other Departments. This was an emergency fund because of the Ukraine war and now, we are going back to where we were beforehand. I understand what the Deputy is saying to me, however. If he contacts me, I will get him as best an answer as I can. I cannot emphasise firmly enough, however, that it is up to individual ETBs. Each of them gets its funding. GRETB had a significant increase in funding and it is up to it how it spends that funding. I am, however, willing to speak to the Deputy about it to see if we can find any solutions.

Proposed Legislation

219. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the current status of the draft legislation to amend the Technological Universities Act 2018 to facilitate a partnership between Dundalk Institute of Technology and Queen's University Belfast; the timeline for when a draft Bill will be presented; if IADT is the only other remaining institute of technology, being actively

considered within the scope of any proposed legislative amendments to the Act; if any proposed amendments will also provide a pathway for IADT to achieve university designation within the technological university sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29169/26]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What is the current status of the draft legislation to amend the Technological Universities Act in terms of the facilitation of the partnership that was announced between Dundalk Institute of Technology and Queen's University Belfast?

I ask that question in particular because of the potential implications for what will be then the last remaining institute of technology, IT, which is the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, IADT, and whether there is scope within the legislation for its status to be dealt with.

Deputy James Lawless: First of all, to take the Dundalk Institute of Technology and Queen's University Belfast partnership, that partnership under development is a hugely significant initiative, as I am sure the Deputy will agree, and advances the Government's goal, not only of balanced regional development, although it very much does in creating a university now on that north-east corridor between Dublin and Belfast, but by creating the first ever all-island university it very much advances the shared island objectives and broader objectives of alignment between both jurisdictions on the island and creating that shared entity. That partnership will include the development of shared processes in awarding qualifications, managing quality assurance of these different assessment bodies and grades, etc., within it, and collaboration in the research and innovation space.

It is also worth noting that Dundalk, under the partnership and under the technical specifications we are devising in terms of how it will operate, will retain its status as an autonomous designated institution of higher education in the State. While being part of Queen's, it also remains an autonomous entity within the State.

The matter has progressed steadily. I first brought it to Government in November. I was delighted to be able to do so. I secured Cabinet approval and set out immediately on pursuing the legislation that would be required to give effect to it. The colleges themselves, Queen's and DkIT, have been engaging closely and setting up working groups along with officials from my Department to prepare the necessary requirements and regulations to align the two jurisdictions and address whatever wrinkles may be there between incompatibilities to bring those together.

I am conscious of the Deputy's interest in IADT, which I share. I have visited the college on a number of occasions. I have met the IADT executive, president and team, both on site and, indeed, in here and in other areas. The IADT is one of only two remaining ITs in the State. It is a distinctive institution. It is a great opportunity for it, as a leader in the creative arts. I will come back to that in my next contribution.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I can see the attraction of university status for Dundalk as an all-island university, etc., but that leaves Dún Laoghaire IADT out on its own with no clear pathway forward. In particular, I am concerned for the staff and the workers, their terms and conditions and the sustainability of the IADT. If everybody who used to be in an IT is now in a university, who wants to go to IADT, but if IADT is to get university status, is it to be done under the Technological Universities Act 2018 so that the staff retain their existing terms and

conditions? That is the way the staff would like it to be done. That is their clear declared position, and they are quite angry.

The Teachers' Union of Ireland, TUI, deplored the way in which the announcement was made, that it had not been consulted with in advance, that the authorities of Queen's and Dundalk and the Government clearly involved in the discussions around this make an announcement but that there was no consultation with the TUI and with the workers. This needs to be addressed.

Deputy James Lawless: Taking the Deputy's questions in reverse order, I will deal with the TUI in the first instance. The manner of the announcement was sensitive and was a case of jumping together. The executive of Dundalk IT, the board of Queen's University and, indeed, Cabinet here considered the matter on the same morning at the same time, and having come to a shared conclusion, we were then in a position to announce. I hope the Deputy will understand due to the sensitivities around it. It is historic. It is groundbreaking as a development creating the first all-island university, and it was essential that we moved as one. I hope that puts some context on the announcement.

I have met the TUI executive on a number of occasions, both here in Leinster House and elsewhere. I attended their conference recently and engaged with them on this matter and many other matters. We had a good, solid engagement. I do not say they agree with me on everything, nor I with them on everything, but we have a good working relationship and there is mutual respect there.

I might come back to the IADT-specific position in the next round because I want to go into some detail on that.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: First, it is not great to make an announcement like that without consulting the workers. Their clearly declared position is that it should be done through an amendment to the Technological Universities Act 2018. Will the Minister clarify that is what the draft legislation is, when we are going to see it, when it will be published and whether there will be scope for amendment to accommodate a pathway to university status for IADT, which will be the last remaining IT? IADT will not be sustainable unless it has a pathway to university status, but the one that is preferred by the TUI and the staff in IADT is for it to be done through a technological universities Bill because anything else threatens or creates considerable uncertainty for the future of those workers and the terms and conditions of employment they enjoy.

Deputy James Lawless: The Technological Universities, TU, Act is predicated on the creation of technological universities through the amalgamation of institutes of technology and by ITs coming together to form a technological university. That is the framework that is provided for in the current TU Act. The Act does not currently have a mechanism for the elevation of a single IT to become a university. That process is not catered for within the Act. The Act is for an amalgamation and coming together of different satellites to become one. It does not have a single elevation path.

In the case of Dundalk and Queen's, there are a number of unique aspects to the partnership, because of the North-South and cross-jurisdictional nature of it. That requires separate

legislation. I intend to publish heads of Bill at the earliest opportunity, which will be very soon and perhaps as early as next week, and we will see the flow forward from it at that stage.

I share the ambition of IADT to achieve university status. I fully support it in doing that. I respect the rights of staff and, indeed, learners at the college to have their say in that process. That is the process I am also engaging in, working with the institute in parallel.

Third Level Fees

221. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if supports or grants are available for Irish students undertaking specialist artistic third level training abroad that is not available in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21628/26]

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Tá mé ag tógáil na ceiste seo thar ceann mo chomhghleacaí, an Teachta Ó Cearúil. The question is to ask the Minister if supports and grants are available for Irish students undertaking specialist artistic third level training, such as ballet dancing and dance training, that may not be available in Ireland, what supports are available to those families and those students undertaking such training and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy James Lawless: The student grant scheme operated by Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, provides maintenance grants to eligible undergraduate students pursuing approved courses in other EU member states provided, of course, that they qualify for a SUSI grant at home in the first instance. A qualifying student can take that grant with them if they are pursuing a course of study abroad within the EU.

In general, the rules of the scheme state an approved undergraduate course is defined as a full-time undergraduate course of not less than two years' duration pursued in a university or equivalent third level institution that is maintained or assisted by recurrent grants from public funds in another EU member state or the UK. Therefore, there are certain minimal entry criteria to qualify, but they are quite well understood and quite compatible with the SUSI scheme as it operates at home.

Students who may be in receipt of SUSI grants in a domestic institution whose course of study includes a compulsory period of study abroad, and those registered in participating higher education institutions taking part in schemes such as Erasmus or other student mobilities, continue to receive their maintenance grant payments while abroad. Effectively, they take SUSI with them. If they are undergoing a placement, an exchange or an Erasmus programme, their grant travels with them and continues to support them.

However, the student grant scheme does not extend to the payment of tuition fees to institutions outside the State, other than exceptional provision in a small number of cases for postgraduate courses in Northern Ireland. This provision, which has been in place since the establishment of SUSI, is consistent with the principles of the Good Friday Agreement and is intended to promote greater tolerance and understanding between both jurisdictions. A little like the previous question where I spoke about Queen's and Dundalk IT, there is a particular sensitivity and complexity to aligning the North and South jurisdictions but it is seen and

treated, I believe correctly, as a special case that deserves special support and a special set of rules to promote and encourage that mobility. It is a special case for Northern Ireland, which does not extend beyond that in terms of fees for tuition payments.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin.

I want to be clear on the kinds of programmes I am talking about. I am talking about specialist ballet programmes that may not necessarily result in an undergraduate degree award but that are for individuals who would have been practising or learning how to perform ballet, in some cases since the age of four. They would enrol in universities abroad, for example the University of the Arts in Rotterdam.

A number of the constituency cases Deputy Ó Cearúil and I have been dealing with have come back and said that such a programme is not covered by SUSI grants at the moment. When people have a talent for something like ballet and it is something they want to pursue, it is important that, where programmes are not available in Ireland, some flexibility be given to people who want to study.

I know of instances where families have explored all available supports, such as through the Arts Council and SUSI and have been told quite clearly that such courses are not eligible for coverage by SUSI. Therefore, my question is on whether there is scope for grants or bursaries or for an alteration to be made to the criteria for SUSI grants to support families in such instances when students are not able to pursue these kinds of courses in this country.

Deputy James Lawless: I see the point and the scenario the Deputy described and I am sure these talented young people have great opportunities available to them in certain specialist centres of education outside the State. It is unfortunate that specialist area of training is not available in the State at present. There are institutes such as the Royal Irish Academy of Music and a number of different dance and music courses are available across many institutions. I am not sure of the degree of compatibility. I heard the Deputy say, and noted it, that this particular course is not available in the State. I am not sure whether there are comparable courses. The Deputy mentioned he had explored the avenue of the Arts Council. It does appear that this may be a candidate for a bursary scheme or sponsorship scheme. There are students studying in Ireland who have such bursaries from their home states, although not necessarily from their states but from sponsors who have taken them under their wing to promote their talent. Sometimes that happens on a private sector basis. In examples I have seen, students ended up in Ireland supported by sponsors abroad but it is not a scheme currently in operation here.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I ask for some consideration by the Minister of the possibility of exploring joint approaches with other Government Departments. When we see great people achieve greatness in their disciplines, we take credit for them and take pride in those people being Irish citizens. It would be great for people like these constituents we have dealt with who have an aptitude for things like ballet and will represent Ireland in the international arts environment, if we were able to say the State played a role in supporting their love of their vocations and in them developing the skills and doing the training they needed to excel on the world stage. It is about reviewing the criteria for SUSI grants, especially if there are niche

courses like this for which there are no equivalents in this country. Consideration should be given to what kinds of supports could be made available. If it cannot be done through the SUSI angle, will the Minister look at partnering with other Government Departments or State agencies like the Arts Council and the creative Ireland programme, not only for things like ballet, but for other specialist art and performing arts we are all familiar with in our constituencies? We all take pride in them when they excel but we must ensure the State has played a role in helping them to do so.

Deputy James Lawless: There is a case to be made for sponsoring, perhaps to a greater degree than is currently the case, students in the situation the Deputy described. It may be of interest to the Deputy and the House that I have asked my Department to commence preparation of a strategy for the creative arts, on how we support our artistic institutions, including the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, IEDT, the National College of Art and Design, NCAD, the Royal Irish Academy of Music and others, which perform a vital function in the creative tapestry of the social life in the State.

It is pertinent at a time when we require more transversal skills and the deep dive of specialised education is no longer as transferable as it once was. We need graduates to come out with skills in communication, problem solving and analysis. I often find the creative arts is a wonderful foundry for that kind of skill set and those kinds of ideas. I will take it on board. I would be happy to talk to the Deputy separately if he wants to follow up with me on the details of the case, or Deputy Ó Cearúil may wish to. In the context of the creative arts strategy, I will certainly examine whether there are any lacunas that could perhaps be usefully filled.

Oideachas trí Ghaeilge

222. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the steps his Department is taking to support and encourage the provision of adult and community education programmes through the medium of Irish; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22067/26]

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Is ceist í seo le cur ar an Aire maidir leis an tacaíocht atá á cur ar fáil ag a Roinn le soláthar oideachas pobail agus soláthar oideachais do dhaoine fásta trí mheán na Gaeilge. My question relates to the provision of adult and community education through the medium of Irish. Will the Minister make a statement on the matter?

Deputy James Lawless: The Government is strongly committed to promoting and supporting the Irish language, including in the sphere of further education and training. Education and training boards, ETBs, play a crucial role in this work. ETBs assess demand in their communities for programmes delivered through Irish, including adult and community education, and provide these programmes where needs are identified and it is practicable to do so. Several ETBs participate in the breacadh scheme, which provides important support through the development of Irish-language teaching and learning resources, along with tutor training and curriculum development. ETBs also offer Irish language classes at a range of levels, including seasonal part-time and evening courses, with provision available for accredited awards from the national framework of qualifications, NFQ, levels 3 to 6.

In addition, Irish-language community organisations may apply to their local ETB for funding through the adult literacy for life collaboration and innovation fund, as well as the reach fund, subject to eligibility criteria. These funds support innovative projects addressing unmet literacy needs and engaging disadvantaged learners. Some examples of projects funded under these initiatives include digital skills programmes for older adults delivered through the medium of Irish and supports for refugees seeking to learn the Irish language. We spoke earlier about English for Speakers of Other Languages, ESOL, provision. There was some Irish language provision for Ukrainian nationals at one stage and gardening and horticulture classes are also delivered bilingually. That gives an illustration of the breadth of different courses being delivered by ETBs through the medium of Irish in a range of subjects.

The fundamental principle, which the point the Deputy made so well, is that Irish-language education does not mean teaching Irish. It means teaching other subjects through the medium of Irish. I am keen to progress that and expand on it.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. Tugaim moladh mór do na ETBs timpeall na tíre atá ag cur ar fáil scileanna nach scileanna Gaeilge iad ach atá ag cur foghlaim scileanna ar fáil trí mheán na Gaeilge. Tá an-tábhacht ag baint leis sin, ní hamháin sna ceantair Ghaeltachta ach sna ceantair nach bhfuil an Ghaeilge in úsáid iontu chomh forleathan céanna.

I pay particular tribute to the City of Dublin ETB for the Gaeltacht skills course it has put in place. It is a two-week immersion course for tutors and teachers in the City of Dublin ETB to give them the ability to revive their subject expertise through the medium of Irish. I was glad to hear the Minister articulate on the floor of the Dáil that nuair a cuirimid ceisteanna faoi úsáid na Gaeilge sa bhreisoideachas, nílmid ag labhairt faoi Gaeilge a chur ar fáil i ranganna, ach ábhair eile a chur ar fáil trí mheán na Gaeilge. That is an important distinction to make.

I would like to see the City of Dublin ETB approach expanded across the country, not only in extending the provision of courses through the Irish language but also ensuring its staff feels comfortable doing so. Support from the Department is needed to allow the sort of immersion courses in City of Dublin ETB to widely expand the ability of staff to deliver tuition through Irish.

Deputy James Lawless: B'fhéidir go mbeadh suim ag an Teachta i ngrúpa oibre earnála nua um riachtanas oideachas treasach don Ghaeilge san earnáil phoiblí. Tá an grúpa oibre seo á bhunú ag an Roinn agus an Roinn Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail agus Gaeltachta faoi ghnímh 4.3.3 den Phlean Gníomhaíochta do Sheirbhísí Poiblí Gaeilge 2026-2028. Is oifigigh shinsireacha ón dá Roinn, chomh maith le páirtí leasmhara earnála ó Ranna Rialtais ábhartha, gníomhaireachtaí Stáit agus ionadaithe ó na hearnálacha breisoideachais agus ardoideachais a bheidh mar chomhaltaí an ghrúpa. Is é cuspóir an ghrúpa machnamh a dhéanamh ar an gcaoi ar féidir réimse iomlán an soláthar oideachais tríú leibhéal ar fud an ardoideachais, breisoideachais, na hoiliúna, na bprintiseachtaí, agus na foghlama tacú leis an bplean náisiúnta do sheirbhísí Gaeilge.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Molaim go mór na hiarrachtaí sin. We need to go a little further with the upcoming draft strategy on FET, that should have - and I hope it will - an explicit

mention of the provision of courses that are not on the Irish language but are taught through the medium of Irish. Ba mhaith liom rud eile a chur in iúl don Aire agus na ETBs ar fud na tíre ná go bhfuil an-chuid Gaelcholáistí againn ar féidir a úsáid don oideachas do dhaoine fásta agus don oideachas pobail. Community colleges provide a broad range of adult and community education courses. There is no reason Gaelcoláistí could not be asked to do the same and provide the same sort of model. That is something I would encourage. Tá an t-éileamh ann don Ghaeilge. Tá daoine ann atá ag iarraidh cur lena gcuid stór focal agus lena gcuid Gaeilge. Tá múinteoirí ann ar fud na ETBs ar fad atá in ann an teagasc seo a dhéanamh. Caithfidh an mhúinín a thabhairt dóibh é sin a dhéanamh as Gaeilge. Táim ag súil go ndéanfaidh an tAire obair leis na ETBs chun é sin a bhaint amach.

Deputy James Lawless: I agree with the suggestion about the greater utilisation of Gaelcholáistí and Gaelscoileanna as part of the educational real estate, which could play host to some courses of this nature. That is a good suggestion and one that I will take away with me and consider. I reiterate my Department's commitment to furthering provision of Irish language in this space and across all aspects of the tertiary estate. Tá an Rialtas tiomanta oibriú ar bhonn thras-Rannach oideachas trí mheán na Gaeilge a neartú ag gach leibhéal ó na leathbhlianta go dtí an tríú leibhéal ag cinntiú gur obair thairbheach agus inbhuanaithe atá ann chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn. I hope I have provided some reassurance to the Deputy that this is being taken seriously by me and within an Roinn freisin.

Third Level Education

241. **Deputy Eoghan Kenny** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the level of demand for specific courses particularly in health services, inclusive of medicine, nursing and dentistry; the number of applicants who apply for a particular course that will be granted a place on the course; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22015/26]

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I wish to ask the Minister about the level of demand for specific courses, particularly in healthcare including courses in medicine, nursing and dentistry; the number of applicants who apply for a particular course and the numbers that will be granted a course for the coming academic year.

Deputy James Lawless: I ask the Deputy to repeat that because I have run out of prepared answers. That is fine, I can take a free run but I ask the Deputy to repeat his question.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: The question generally relates to the number of courses available in medicine, nursing and dentistry and if all applicants for whom it is their number one choice on their CAO form, for example, will receive a place on those courses.

Deputy James Lawless: I would never be so bold as to make a commitment that every applicant will get his or her first choice every time because I am not sure that is something the system has ever achieved. However, 80% of applicants receive their first, second or third choice within the system. The vast majority of students receive a choice within their top three

course preferences and that is positive. The traditionally high-point courses in healthcare, including medicine, nursing and dentistry, as well as physiotherapy and veterinary medicine the Deputy mentioned are all in high demand and they typically attract high points. One of the issues I have been working on is increasing the provision of courses. We have 1,100 additional places available in the current year.

When I assumed my role in the Department, I asked the HEA to conduct an expression of interest exercise. The authority went to the different universities and asked them how many more students they could take on board. I was happy to fund that and indeed, we have done that already this year by creating the 1,100 additional places. This is also imperative in the context of the whole-of-government focus on disability services and healthcare and in the context of our demographics, whereby we have a population that is ageing and living longer. It is key that people are enabled not just to live longer lives, but to live healthier lives as well, and part of that is having the medical and other professionals available to assist. This is an important mission of Government.

I am currently in the process of undertaking a second round of expressions of interest. I have invited the universities to consider whether, having provided 1,100 extra places, they can do more. Can we create more places? That has two effects. The first is that it creates more capacity in the system, which should exert downward pressure on points, leading to more students getting their first choice or certainly, their first, second or third. It also increases the throughput of those professions through the system. It is a very important piece of work.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I thank the Minister for that. I asked the question because a lot of people have come to me who achieved the required points but they did not get the actual course because of a lack of places. I also asked it because we all see the extensive waiting lists across our health service, particularly for those trying to access a GP in their local area. There are also extensive waiting lists within community hospitals and in larger hospitals in Cork, Dublin, Galway and elsewhere. I am particularly interested in dentistry courses because I have come across a number of cases of people having difficulty accessing dental hygienist courses. I know of one person who applied for a dental hygienist course in UCC but a place is just not available.

Has the Minister been in communication with the Department of Health regarding the level of demand for these courses, given the waiting lists that we have in our health service?

Deputy James Lawless: On dentistry, I was pleased to visit the RCSI's new dental hospital in Sandyford recently where a number of new places have been created straight into the system. I met students who are already in first year on that course and they were participating eagerly. I am very aware of the shortages of GPs and the pressure on rural practices as a TD and have seen it myself in my own constituency. One of the benefits of the new courses I have been supporting and encouraging is that rather than doing the same thing in every university, and repeating it around the country, universities are coming forward with different offerings that are more targeted and localised. For example, in Galway a new medical degree is being offered in the area of rural and remote medicine. That focuses on future practitioners who will have a rural catchment area and a slightly different practice than might be the case for an urban practitioner, which is helpful. The ATU and SETU are creating new veterinary courses with a focus on large animal practice, unlike the small animal practices that are typical of cities. The

RCSI have a proposal for a new GP medical course focusing on care in the community. Each of these new courses has a particular focus which is of societal benefit.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: The question is based on the fact that people have come to me because their child has been waiting on a dental appointment for two years. People cannot get access to a GP, particularly those who are living in rural areas. I am sure the Minister is acutely aware of that. The first question that is often posed by constituents is around why we do not have more nurses, doctors or dentists because that would bring down the waiting lists. A cross-government approach to this is important. There are significant issues in our health service and the waiting lists. The possibility of providing extra courses, particularly in medicine, nursing and dentistry, would have cross-government and cross-House support because it would have the effect of bringing down the waiting times that many people are facing.

Deputy James Lawless: I sympathise with the plight of people. The Deputy asks what I am doing about that. I am creating more professionals. I am creating more college places and more capacity on those courses that are in demand. I am doing this for two reasons. The first is to enable access for professionals into those courses and the other is to ensure that we have a supply of graduates into the system to provide the services that the Deputy speaks about.

It is not related to my Ministry but there are incentives for GPs practising in rural areas. The rural practitioner allowance is a payment made to GPs taking on a rural practice to reflect the nature of the work they do, which can be somewhat different.

In terms of conversations with the Department of Health, the Minister for Health and I have had a number of conversations on this issue. We very much have a shared goal and I want to thank the Minister for Health publicly for her collaboration and cooperation with me on this piece of work. I also want to thank the Minister for Education and Youth in that regard because we are also looking at speech therapists, educational psychologists and a number of different professionals within the educational sphere. One of the key aspects to this is not just increasing the number of college places, although that is important, but having the placements that students can go on within the hospital setting as part of their training. The Minister for Health is working with me on that.

Employment Rights

251. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the progress made to resolve employment issues of personal assistants who work in some education and training boards and further and higher education centres; the timeline for when the issue is expected to be resolved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22072/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I ask the Minister to outline the progress in resolving the employment issues of personal assistants, an issue we have dealt with previously. He has met with me and a number of these personal assistants who work in ETBs and further and higher education centres. What is the timeline for when the issue is expected to be resolved? Will the Minister make a statement on that matter now? I am aware that a WRC proposal is in play but

I am not sure there is absolute joy in relation to it. If he could give me an update, I will come back in then.

Deputy James Lawless: I can give a very good answer in a minute or I can give the Deputy an answer off the top of my head right away. I do have any prepared answers left. We are beyond the range of questions that are normally reached.

I am very much aware of that situation. I have met the group with the Deputy in Leinster House and we have had some good conversations. A disability demonstration project is under way in my Department, the purpose of which is to fathom the appropriate level of supports available to adult learners within the third level and further education system.

5 o'clock

It may not be a direct correlation to perhaps an SNA-type role that we would see within the second level or primary school system because there has to be a degree of autonomy, dignity and recognition that the young adult may not be as keen to have a companion at all times in a way that a student at a junior level might. The actual nature and parameters of it are a little bit complex and require understanding.

There are multiple other supports from assistive technology through to different schemes. I increased the student assistance fund to €19 million this year, the highest it has ever been. It has a discretionary allocation within it that welfare officers and access officers in colleges can use to support students with a particular need. I appreciate that the question the Deputy is asking goes to the workers of his constituency, and the wider group whom I have met and engaged with. My proposal is to engage with the Deputy offline on that in terms of the latest development. It has been through the WRC, as he mentioned. I do not want to say too much on the Dáil record for fear of interfering with the industrial relations process, but we might engage on that offline.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I thank the Minister. We definitely will. The stakeholders are the Department, the education and training boards, and Fórsa on behalf of the workers. This issue has been ongoing for considerable time. I took it to the Tánaiste when he was Minister for further education. An element was dealt with in that the pay rate per hour was improved. It was a considerable percentage because it was a very low base. The big thing for them was the 52-week contract. These are people who are facilitating those who have challenging or further needs to stay in the educational sector and in further education. That is an absolute requirement. In relation to the disability project, a proposal is in front of them. It is not a 52-week contract, which is the big thing. The Minister knows that issue of applying for social protection is a huge issue. He might comment on the disability project, the outworking of that and how it may facilitate both those who need the help and those who are working in a scenario that is far from perfect.

Deputy James Lawless: There are a number of different ways in which I can assist students with challenges in navigating the educational system. One cohort of such students are those with intellectual disabilities who are engaged in further education and training programmes. I became aware of a lacuna in the system last year when a case was presented to me. There was no transport system available for those students to avail of learning within their own areas,

which often meant a parent had to take time off. Perhaps they could not even take up a job or work outside the home because the student was entirely dependent on that parent to bring them up and down to the place of learning. Those places of learning were somewhat unique and specialist and not necessarily available in every town or village. It is typically one or two per county. I intervened in that regard and made a sum available - €2 million, in fact - through SOLAS, which has been disbursed to the ETBs. This now means a transport scheme is available for those learners with intellectual disabilities to take up their FET place within the system. The funds have been made available to the ETBs. My Department has issued guidance as to how that should be operated. I hope that will make a meaningful impact for those learners and their families.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We all realise the supports that are required, from reasonable accommodation to assistive technology. In some cases, students need added supports such as personal assistants. I do not see it as something that is changing. I accept that it creates a difficulty given that a proposal is in front of workers at the minute. I will deal with the Minister offline about that. There will be issues with pay and conditions, but the 52-week contract was a fundamental issue and is the reason there has not been huge retention in the area. Again, it is about providing the supports that work for those students who need added supports to stay in education, particularly in third level. It is also about providing people with a decent contract and decent pay. Even if this is accepted, I could not think that this will be a solution to the problem.

Deputy James Lawless: As I said, I am aware of the issue and am very much engaged with the Deputy and the workers on it. We have had good meetings with them. The Deputy engaged with my predecessor on the matter in a similarly constructive fashion. I thank him for the approach he has taken to it.

While we are talking about the assistance provided through those very diligent workers that the Deputy represents and those to whom he has introduced me in his area and other parts of the country, we also have work to do around the transitions from education into the workplace. Many learners with intellectual or physical difficulties have said to me - I have met a variety of groups - that they are managing to navigate the education system, but it is about actually getting a job. It is about getting the dignity at work at the far side. That is fundamental. I am working with my colleague the Minister, Deputy Calleary, on that and on the pathways. My Department is investing significantly. A number of officials are looking at a project around that to support that transition journey so that they will find an employer that is suited to their requirements and so we can make that journey work for all.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: That is absolutely necessary. We will need to sort this out, particularly for personal assistants in DIFE, Ó Fiaich, Cavan and beyond.

Further and Higher Education

255. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to restore funding for the postgraduate and graduate scholarship scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29176/26]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We talked earlier on about big announcements without people knowing they were coming. I met earlier with representatives of the Postgraduate Workers' Organisation and Aontas na Mac Léinn Éireann, AMLÉ, the national students' union, about the surprise announcement from Research Ireland that it is pulling out of graduate and postgraduate schemes for PhD and postdoctorate funding. People will now be applying directly to colleges and universities. They are extremely worried that this has come out of nowhere and about what it may mean for the stipend, for the autonomy and independence of postgraduate students and post-doctorate researchers, along with many other concerns. Will the Minister say something to reassure them?

Deputy James Lawless: I am familiar with the situation. Research Ireland is changing some of the schemes it operates. It is consolidating some schemes. There were a number of different schemes within it, partly arising from the merger of the Irish Research Council to Research Ireland, and there was some duplication of schemes and programmes within that. There has been a consolidation. A new strategy has been adopted by Research Ireland, which is one I applaud and share the ambition of. Research Ireland has been funded to a level that has never been seen before. It has been one of the focuses of my time in this role that I have invested significant research funding, including in Research Ireland, which should be working its way through to the individual researchers. I would give an assurance to those researchers that while there may be a change in title of some of the schemes and a movement from one scheme to another, the overall contents of those programmes are being continued. The funding is also being continued. Those researchers should not have to fear the changes they are hearing about.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: They are very concerned because the background is that the Postgraduate Workers' Organisation and students' unions fought for stipend increases. They got them up to €25,000. It is still not enough and is much less than their European counterparts. They are also looking for status as workers. They fear that their conditions may be impacted by moving over to universities because if a block grant is going from Research Ireland to universities, potentially the university could say it will have more postgraduate students on stipends of less than €25,000. The universities will not want to be taking them on as workers, which is what the postgraduate students want. The postgraduate student will have less autonomy because, currently, the grant is given to them. Now, it will be given to the Department or the supervisor rather than to the individual. People's choice about the things they propose to research will be reduced and put into the hands of the colleges and universities.

Deputy James Lawless: I would be very concerned if I was to learn, and I invite the Deputy to share details with me if it is happening, of researchers being told they cannot research certain areas and are being directed toward particular areas of research, because academic freedom is a key part of my strategy, the Department's strategy and Research Ireland's strategy. It is also the case that I have promoted education as a public good and the pursuit of curiosity and knowledge as one of the four pillars of my Department's strategy.

It is fundamental to my approach that researchers should not be told that a particular area is off limits or is not in vogue. In fact, there should be that full academic freedom. There are a number of schemes in place that should be supporting that. I invite Deputy Boyd Barrett to share those details with me if he wishes.

The Deputy mentioned AMLÉ. I met AMLÉ yesterday. I hosted a cost of college event where we met a number of students, learners, apprentices, researchers and people in the system across a range of institutions. It was a very helpful event which will inform my deliberations on the budget later this year. It is on my list to arrange, in the next couple of weeks, a dedicated sit-down meeting with the Irish Federation of University Teachers, IFUT, which represents researchers. I met with IFUT before but I am working towards a one-to-one meeting to hear what the organisation has to say on the issue.

I invite Deputy Boyd Barrett to share with me some of the details if there are issues of that kind.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I understand from talking to AMLÉ and the postgraduate workers that IFUT is also concerned about this. I have not talked directly to it since this information came out but clarifications and reassurances need to be given that there will be no question that, for example, the stipends of €25,000 that have been achieved when researchers applied to Research Ireland will be undermined when they go to the colleges and the universities.

Another concern that was expressed is that because there is more money available from the corporate sector, industry and so on for STEM subjects, the arts could get squeezed and that there will be a pressure because the sector does not want so many people doing postgraduate courses in arts and humanities and wants more of them in areas where the universities can get more money from the corporate sector and industry.

There are serious concerns that need to be addressed and assurances need to be given. One would need to explain why this is happening and what exact benefit there is in this change for research, postgraduate researchers and their staff, incomes, career paths and so on.

Deputy James Lawless: The Deputy obviously did not hear me on David McCullagh's show two weeks ago when I extolled the virtues of an artistic education, an arts degree and the humanities more widely.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am glad to hear it.

Deputy James Lawless: It is something I have been saying for ten years. The Deputy and I have joined in common cause on that in this House before. A point I have made at a number of events I attended, including today, for example, with companies in the technology and digital space, is that we need to produce a wide range of graduates across all disciplines. That is even more the case in the age of AI and digital because the problem-solving, collaborative, creative mindset enables and creates those transversal skills that can be applied across a range of jobs and areas of industry in the future.

The job for life has long been a thing of the past but the skill set for life is something that is continuing to change and evolve. It is those creative industries that can very helpfully augment that talent pool in a portable, transferable way. Ironically, and perhaps unexpectedly, they are the skills that employers are seeking out more and more, rather than deep technical qualifications that are, of course, in great demand, but workers need to be able to translate learning across different sectors and respond to change as it comes at them.

Community Training Centres

259. **Deputy Jen Cummins** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the position regarding the pay negotiations of community training centre staff; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [19513/26]

Deputy Jen Cummins: I want to talk about community training centres, CTCs, and the pay negotiations that are under way for them. I have spoken about this before. I am very passionate about CTCs. I have seen the major benefits these centres have for the young people who are in them in terms of their ability to learn, progress and gain self-esteem they may have lost in other education facilities. I would like to know how pay negotiations are going for those staff members.

Deputy James Lawless: I thank Deputy Cummins. I share her high regard for the CTC sector and also for the very similar work Youthreach organisations perform. I have had the privilege of visiting both in my role on a number of different occasions. I attended the Irish Association of Community Training Organisations, IACTO, annual conference. I think it was in Athlone. It was certainly in the midlands. I attended that event, spoke with the IACTO executive and addressed the membership. It was a really positive event which I was pleased to be able to engage with. I have a great interest in that area.

In terms of the pay negotiations, I do not want to trespass on the functions of the Department of public expenditure, which is leading the negotiations in that regard. However, I am aware of some advances and some progress made. I do not want to go into great detail on the record in the Dáil for fear of misquoting or misattributing a figure somewhere because it would be unhelpful to the process were I to do that.

I will share my view that CTCs and Youthreach perform similar functions and it would be desirable to strengthen both by ní neart go cur le chéile - being stronger together. There is a sort of consolidation exercise in a very positive way that could be performed there in terms of bringing them together. I have engaged with some CTCs on that initiative already. It is something I have called out in my tertiary strategy, which I brought to Cabinet on Tuesday. There are several actions in that strategy, close to 100. One of them is to look at a consolidated strategy that would allow CTCs to enjoy effectively the same rights and entitlements as the Youthreach centres currently enjoy, in a way that promotes them as a common entity or certainly as a common mode of educational delivery. There is such a similarity across the two services that it would make sense to consolidate in a way that gives both a greater platform.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I do not want to jeopardise any negotiations that are going on either, but I am aware of the frustrations people in the sector have. People are leaving CTCs because they can no longer afford to live on the wages they receive. They feel disrespected and not recognised. I am glad, as I think others will be, to hear the Minister express respect and understanding of how important CTCs are. I am a little concerned about the use of the term "consolidation strategy". I hope that does not mean CTCs are going to be replaced with Youthreach. I hope it means both will be strengthened, as the Minister has said.

Another important point as regards Youthreach and CTCs is that the wages of another cohort of people, namely, staff in the local training initiatives, LTIs, some of whom were in front of the further and higher education committee today, are even worse than those of CTC staff. In fact, I was shocked to learn they want to move to CTC scales. I asked why they do not want to move to Youthreach scales. I obviously do not work in the Department of public expenditure. These are people who are working with a very vulnerable cohort of students. We need to respect and support those staff members to the best of our ability in order that we keep them in place, given all the experience they have.

Deputy James Lawless: I completely agree with the Deputy. In terms of the vulnerable cohort of students, part of my political philosophy is to take a progressive approach by giving most support to people who need it most and making targeted interventions. That goes to the heart of the issue, in terms of the learners attending Youthreach, a CTC or an LTI. I have had the privilege of meeting many such learners. In fact, I have a piece of art that was put together by a learner in Kilkenny Youthreach. It now has pride of place on the wall of my office across the corridor.

The stories of each learner are unique and different. They are often inspiring and challenging. One of the points made to me by the educators in the centres is that there is not a homogenous group. There are many different people coming through with many different stories to tell. Many of them have challenges, all of a different nature. Many of them blossom when they are given an opportunity in a CTC or Youthreach centre. That is something I am very keen to continue to support.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I am pleading with whoever is making the decision. I have been told several times that the Department is not their employer. Notwithstanding that, as a member of the board of management of one CTC, I have to say we can only pay the staff on the scales that are provided and those scales are provided by the Department. A bit of guidance and some moving of the scales and terms and conditions for staff members would be fantastic.

As the Minister rightly said, there are vulnerable learners and they present as they present, are taken as they are and really thrive. However, that is because of the skill and dedication of the staff members. We have to do everything we can to ensure they have appropriate pay scales and there is a parity of esteem for all staff members, whether it is in Youthreach, the CTCs or the LTIs. There are a lot of initials there. The most important thing is that there is equality and equity among staff members to ensure they do not leave because without those skilled workers, the students will suffer, will not be able to progress and will not have the bright future they deserve.

Deputy James Lawless: The Deputy is right. I will give another example of the kind of creative learning that occurs. In the course of maths week this year, I visited Youthreach in Naas in my own constituency where I saw many of the learners being engaged.

Learning in the STEM and technology space was very evident that day. From speaking to tutors and learners, I know there is a range of activities and skills. Down the road, Newbridge CTC is another centre I visited recently. Any time I visit a constituency, I seek to go to a

Youthreach or CTC because I think it is so valuable to do so. I am continually being impressed by the quality of education and the determination found in those institutions.

Separately, on the question of Youthreach, I am also aware of the issue of aligning with the school calendar. The request has been made and it has only come to my desk very recently. It is an issue I engaged with the TUI on at its conference and when I met its executive. To put it simply, I have great sympathy for the argument and I hope to be in a position to progress this matter shortly.

Further and Higher Education

269. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the position regarding his plans to bring Marino Institute of Education under the remit of his Department rather than the Department of education; the timeline envisaged for any such change; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [22066/26]

Deputy Shane Moynihan: This question is to ask the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the position regarding his plans to bring the Marino Institute of Education under the remit of his Department rather than the Department of Education and Youth; the timeline envisaged for any such change; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy James Lawless: I am very familiar with the Marino Institute of Education, notwithstanding that it is under the remit of the Department of Education and Youth. I recently visited it with Deputies Brabazon, Heneghan and Ó Muirí. The college serves a vital function in producing primary school teachers. It also has a wonderful ethos in terms of its embrace of an teanga Gaeilge and iománaíocht agus peile. The institute has had a variety of sporting achievements. The cultúr there spoke very strongly to me when I visited. It was very evident in the institution.

I do not want to put it too strongly because, again, some of these negotiations and engagements can be somewhat sensitive, but I am aware that Marino has engaged with at least one third level institution in the co-awarding of degrees. I think it is not a secret that it is Trinity College Dublin. An interest has been expressed in exploring a closer collaboration or partnership. I am not in any way opposed to that, but neither am I in a position to mandate it. Regarding the next steps, Marino, if it wishes to, is freely entitled to continue as it is as a stand-alone, independent college within the system. Equally, if it wishes to achieve an alignment with a third level higher education institution, it is perfectly entitled to do so as well. As I set out on the day, without going into the details on the floor of the Dáil, a number of steps are to be taken towards that, a process which ultimately means the college's destiny lies with itself and whatever putative partner it may wish to engage with. I have set out what needs to be done if it wishes to follow that path. It is an autonomous institution. I think that has been regarded as helpful within the college. If it does wish to take the next steps, it knows what to do and I would certainly be happy to engage as that progresses.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I will clarify that I am asking this question on my own part, because I discovered the lacuna that Marino is not under the aegis of the Minister's Department. This query has not been requested by Marino.

As the Minister said, it is a fine institution. My wife is a graduate of it. She did her degree there. I am also struck by the sheer range of programmes it offers. It does not just offer primary school teacher training programmes. It also offers the early childhood education programme and a further education and training programme. I was puzzled, therefore, when I learned it was not under the aegis of the Minister's Department. The Minister's answer would suggest that the college needs to designate itself appropriately to be under the aegis of the Minister's Department, as opposed to it falling outside its remit. Could the Minister go into a bit more detail about where the lines lie in respect of it falling under his remit? If the college were to decide to take the path referred to, and, again, I have not spoken to the institution about this issue, what sort of timeframe might see it falling under the remit of the Minister?

Deputy James Lawless: A number of institutions in the State are perhaps finding they struggle. I am not saying Marino is in this category, but there are some smaller institutions that may find they do not enjoy critical mass and wish to partner with a larger institution. It is one of the reasons the technological universities were created. We had multiple institutes of technology around the country, and joining those together meant the whole was greater than the sum of the parts. That was very much the philosophy that led to the creation of the technological universities. The process was assisted by an OECD report to ensure that the criteria for gaining university status were being met in all cases. To be fair, there have been some excellent examples of research innovation and high-quality education across all the TUs. It is beyond doubt at this stage that they have not only met those targets but surpassed them, and this is why they are technological universities today.

Some of the institutions, however, for whatever reason, were not suitable or did not engage in that process. Earlier, we heard a debate about the Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, and I absolutely share its ambitions for university status. It is the aspiration of Dundalk Institute of Technology, along with Queen's University, to become a university college there.

Acting Chairman (Deputy Grace Boland): I apologise, but we have run out of time in this section. I am sure we all did not think we would have got through so many questions, but we do need to move on to the next section.

Question No. 210 taken with Written Answers.

Questions Nos. 212 to 216, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Question No. 218 taken with Written Answers.

Questions Nos. 224 to 227, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Questions Nos. 230 to 240, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Questions Nos. 242 to 250, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Questions Nos. 252 to 254, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Questions Nos. 256 to 258, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Questions Nos. 260 to 268, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

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Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Message from Select Committee

Acting Chairman (Deputy Grace Boland): The Select Committee on Health has completed its consideration of the Health (Amendment) (Home Support Providers) Bill 2025 and has made amendments thereto.

Education (Medical Emergencies in Schools) Bill 2026: Second Stage

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I thank the Minister of State for being here and Deputies Darren O'Rourke and Jen Cummins for being in the Chamber. As I speak on this legislation for the second time, it is important for me personally and professionally, being a former secondary school teacher, as well as being an epileptic, having been diagnosed at the age of 21. This legislation is personally and professionally significant for me.

The Bill would improve access to training and resources for school staff to confidently and competently respond in emergency situations, including the safe administration of prescribed medication, where necessary. My intention in putting forward this legislation is to create a clear framework for first aid and medical emergency training in our schools, promote awareness and enable quicker access to life-saving interventions, where appropriate.

Having worked in classrooms across Cork and having experienced epilepsy in my own life, I understand how important it is that schools are prepared for medical emergencies. Awareness is important, but awareness must lead to action. Every student and every staff member deserves to feel safe and supported in their school community. We need to empower those working in school communities to respond to issues when they occur, from epilepsy to allergies, and to make sure those working in schools are fully equipped to provide emergency care when medical assistance is required. It is inevitable that most teachers will face such a moment at some stage in their profession. We must ensure that they are properly trained and supported when they do.

There are many steps between introducing legislation and seeing it working effectively in our schools. We must ensure that staff are supported every step of the way. This includes guaranteeing that school personnel are protected from liability, where they act in good faith and in accordance with training, if an adverse medical outcome occurs. Confidence and clarity are crucial if we want this initiative to succeed. As legislators, it is our duty to ensure protections are in place that safeguard our young people and those who care for them every day. This legislation is about preparedness, prevention and peace of mind for students, parents

and staff alike. With the right supports, training and legal clarity, we can build a safer school environment for everyone.

I also wish to speak about a number of the groups I have met. Obviously, I meet quite frequently with Epilepsy Ireland. I am going to read some of what the group has said. It stated that, given its Seizure Safe Schools campaign, I had engaged with Epilepsy Ireland to update it on my plans to introduce this Bill. Commenting on the news that the Bill would be introduced in the Dáil this week, its advocacy and communications manager, Paddy McGeoghegan said:

We are very pleased to see Deputy Kenny bring forward this legislation which further amplifies how epilepsy and other medical emergencies can present in the classroom. Ensuring our teachers and educators are equipped with the information they need from the outset is the whole purpose of our calls for Seizure Safe Schools. The bill obviously expands to other medical conditions and not just epilepsy, but we are delighted to see legislation being introduced that could make Seizure Safe Schools a reality. From our ongoing contact with Oireachtas members on the need for Seizure Safe Schools, we know there is broad support for what we are calling for – and we hope that there will be similar support for this new legislation.

In relation to Allergy Action Ireland, it has given me a fantastic briefing note and some very important pieces of information I want to lay before the House.

An estimated 160,000 people, 1% to 2% of adults and 5% to 6% of children, live with food allergies. A 2024 study from the University of Galway found that 80% of teachers and special needs assistants in primary schools had not been trained to recognise the signs of a severe allergic reaction, and 77% were not trained to administer an adrenaline auto-injector. Those are quite severe statistics when we think about it. Some 80% of teachers and special needs assistants, the core number of staff we have in our schools, are not trained to recognise the signs of severe allergic reactions, and 77% are not trained to administer auto-injectors.

In February 2026, Benedict's Law was formally introduced in England, committing to introduce mandatory statutory allergy guidance to schools through the Department for Education. In Canada, a similar law was passed in 2005, Sabrina's Law. These are two laws I can reference in relation to this legislation. Sabrina's Law, introduced in Canada in 2005, 21 years ago, is legislation quite similar to this. In February of this year, not too long ago, as I said, Benedict's Law was introduced in England. It is very similar to this legislation. There is cross-party support when it comes to this Bill as many of these groups have already met with a number of committees. I am going to read some of the experiences and give figures in relation to this.

Some 81 people responded to Allergy Action Ireland on its Instagram page. Some 63% of them said teachers in their child's school did not receive training on using an auto-injector. Some 17% selected "a tell us more" option and shared mostly negative experiences where training and knowledge depended on the individual. They shared that teachers were doing their best but it was not enough. Training was provided by a parent or there was no training provided at all. Just 20% felt the teachers in their child's school received adequate training and 52% of the 82 respondents were unhappy with the safety of their children at school. Some 16% selected "a tell us more" option and shared similarly negative experiences, citing the same lack of training and awareness among teachers and school staff. In some cases schools have

implemented a “no-nut” policy, but this is undertaken on an *ad hoc* basis. Some 32% feel that their child is safe in school. That is a very poor statistic when we think about the number of children we have in our school system, and the more than 4,000 schools we have in the country. That statistic is quite stark and at the end of the day, all of us in this House, party politics aside, every single one of us wants to ensure children feel safe in their school environment. A parent and nurse in Dublin states:

Passage of this Bill is an important step in giving greater confidence to all involved with the school system that any intervention given to a student in the event of a medical emergency is supported by legislation and appropriate training. First, it gives students suffering from severe conditions the confidence that support is available in the school setting, especially as those students are children. Second, it gives school staff the confidence to engage with training and helps support students in the knowledge that there is legislative backing supported by formal training in any intervention. Third, it gives parents and carers the confidence that there is structure that supports their child in school in the event of an emergency medical incident.

I am the parent of two boys in secondary school, both of whom have severe allergies to a number of foods which can result in a medical emergency. The current situation is that in agreement with the school, I attend at the start of each year and carry out training with the school staff. I am lucky that the school is receptive of this, and that I am both a qualified nurse and educator as part of my role. Many other parents and children do not have these advantages. I have always found staff open and receptive to this but my experience is narrow; a particular school and medical issue. I believe formalised training with clear protocols can help improve confidence and outcomes compared to the existing *ad hoc* arrangements in place.

As first responders, there are significant asks of school staff in the event of an emergency, and it is only proper that they are supported in a structured and formal way to help deliver the often life-saving care that may be necessary. In my experience of talking to school staff, the overwhelming theme is that staff, including teachers, SNAs and support staff just want to be able to do the right thing. Keeping children safe as well as providing an education is their priority.

I know the priority for all of us across this House is the very same. The person continued:

Some of the questions which come up are enlightening. There is a fear of getting things wrong, concern at how exactly to administer the medication and monitor the child, and concern of blame if something goes wrong. One SNA asked me what happened if a child was not given an EpiPen. The answer that they would watch him die in front of their eyes was stark and powerful, but it was not intended to raise fear. There is a risk through the informal nature of these sessions that they could be seen as scaremongering. That is why formal training is so important. Linked with that, it is critical that anyone asked to intervene is supported and knowledgeable about what they are being asked to do.

I am also going to read some of what has been said by a parent and teacher in County Kerry:

Ten years ago I brought my son to allergy specialists and found out he is allergic to cow's milk and eggs. The doctor perceived I was very nervous and asked why. I answered that as a primary school teacher I had often found myself wearing two or three crossways bags on

a school tour containing emergency medication for students I did not teach or know. It would be for a few minutes while other staff were taking a break. I might have known how to administer the medicine, but there was no certainty that I did. Thankfully, my boy successfully worked through the egg and milk ladders, and he can eat both with no issue since.

In January of this year, my daughter who is 13 started carrying EpiPens for a peanut allergy. I was shocked to discover nothing has changed. In my experience, EpiPen training only happens if a parent offers it. This is not a judgement of school staff. In my girl's school there are two very capable first responders who update their training regularly, but administration of EpiPens is not included in this. I really think it should be compulsory for all staff, including ancillary staff, just like child protection training. As a school principal in County Clare, I can testify from the accounts of many teachers and principals at schools are under-resourced and under-supported to intervene in children's emergency care. The Department of Education and Youth persistently fails to commit the necessary support and resources to training in schools, even when it relates to areas the Department itself has identified as priorities. This I think will need considerable effort and I respectfully suggest that any training would be provided as whole-staff training where possible, rather than a cascade model of training.

A teacher in Cork says:

Recently I had the opportunity to attend the Allergy Wise informal talk on food allergies and it really opened my eyes. Hearing about the daily struggles a child with allergies faces in school both in terms of safety but also socially, was so impactful. The presentation shed light on both the physical effects of allergies and the emotional toll it can take on a child's confidence. It was a powerful reminder of the importance of awareness, inclusion and support. It is a talk that should be given in every school in the country.

At the end of the day, this legislation is positive, forward-thinking and relatively fair in terms of the asking of school staff to engage in proper, adequate training to make sure our school environments across this country are safe environments for our children to enter every day of the school week. All children across this country want is a safe, efficient environment to be able to progress in their academia. All parents across this country want, and I am not speaking as a parent but I know from speaking to parents, if they have a child who has a long-term illness, disability or perhaps allergy is to know if the child suffers a medical emergency in their school environment they are safe and the staff within that school environment are trained to deal with medical emergencies. As a member of the Association of Secondary Teachers, ASTI, myself and having spoken to the teaching unions about this, there is general consensus among teachers and school staff across the country that this would be appropriate and they would welcome it from the Department of Education and Youth. We must ensure in the steps we take in making this legislation law, that teachers are protected and indemnified if something was to go wrong in the administering of prescribed medication. It is important legislation and we can work together on it. It is for the benefit of children across the country, and not just children. I taught in schools. Only for the fact that I was able to inform my colleagues of what to do if I was to receive an epileptic seizure, they probably would not have known what to do.

They probably would not have known only for the fact that there was another colleague in the school who was also an epileptic. It just so happened that was the case. Thankfully I did

not receive an epileptic seizure in the school. I do not speak from experience but I fear if I had it in the time when I was in primary or secondary school what the consequences would have been had I received an epileptic seizure and if there had been no staff member there to prescribe any medication they might have deemed necessary. I am hoping there will be cross-party support in the House and I commend the Bill.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "That" and substitute the following:

"Dáil Éireann resolves that the Education (Medical Emergencies in Schools) Bill 2026 be deemed to be read a second time this day twelve months, to allow for consideration of all relevant matters at an inter-departmental level and the development of comprehensive proposals, noting that it may be necessary to consider settings other than schools, to obtain comprehensive legal advice, to allow for engagement with a wide range of stakeholders, including the education partners, management bodies and parent and student representatives, and to consider registration, training and budgetary matters."

I am pleased to be afforded the opportunity to speak today about the Education (Medical Emergencies in Schools) Bill 2026 on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank Deputy Kenny for bringing forward this important Bill. I am reminded of progress made in other jurisdictions. I remember speaking in favour of Sabrina's law when I was in the Seanad quite some time ago.

I will take the opportunity to outline the engagement that is under way between the Department of Education and Youth and other relevant stakeholders in regard to progressing how we deal with medical emergencies in our schools. I would also like to outline to the House the current practice that is happening in our schools to safeguard children and young people, as well as staff members, when such instances occur.

I recognise the importance of this Bill, in proposing to make provision for promoting participation by a greater number of school staff in approved courses of training in first aid for medical emergencies and for a greater number of schools to be listed as organisations whose staff are authorised to administer certain prescription-only medicinal products without a prescription for the purpose of saving life or reducing severe distress in medical emergencies. I wish to assure the House that the safety and well-being of all children and young people in our schools is a priority for Government. While the board of management of each school is responsible for the care and safety of all pupils, the Department of Education and Youth consistently seeks to support them in that role. Therefore, while the Government is not opposing the Bill I am asking for a timed amendment to allow for consideration of all relevant matters at an interdepartmental level and to allow for the development of comprehensive proposals.

I note that it may also be necessary to consider settings other than schools, to obtain comprehensive legal advice, to allow for engagement with a wide range of stakeholders, including the education partners, management bodies and parent and student representatives, and to consider registration, training and budgetary matters.

I ask the House to note that initial discussions already are under way on this matter between the Department of Education and Youth and the Department of Health. In addition, discussions are also under way with the Health Service Executive and the Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council on how best to further develop policy in this area. These discussions are at an early stage, and significant further engagement is required with a wide range of stakeholders before further progress can be made on this important matter. Officials are committed to continuing this engagement with a view to progressing these important matters as a priority.

As the House may be aware, the Health Products Regulatory Authority, HPRA, is the statutory authority for medicines in Ireland. Under the regulations, employees or those engaged by listed organisations - who have completed specified training - can, under conditions outlined in the regulations, administer medication in an emergency.

The list of organisations that can register with the HPRA includes educational establishments and childcare facilities and I understand that five schools have registered. Registration is a matter for school boards of management if they consider it necessary to do so. However, it is understood that schools also have local arrangements in place, including parents attending to administer medication on-site. Where a school is aware of potential difficulties that may arise as a consequence of a medical condition suffered by one or more pupils, it may be possible for the management authorities, working in conjunction with parents, teachers and children, to put preventative measures in place. These measures would be designed to lessen the possibility of any difficulties arising or to ensure that if a pupil suffers from an illness which requires the administration of medication, that appropriate treatment is available. Where a child requires adult assistance to assist in the administration of medicine and where the extent of assistance required would overly disrupt normal teaching time, special needs assistant, SNA, support may be allocated for this purpose.

The role of the SNA, as set out in Circular 30/2014 - a circular which will be updated in the near future - is to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs to facilitate their attendance at school. SNAs support the non-teaching care needs of students with additional needs, fostering inclusion and attendance. Primary care needs covered include the administration of medication, in addition to assistance with feeding, assistance with mobility and toilet hygiene. When appointing a SNA, it is a matter for the board of management to ensure they are in a position to effectively meet the care needs of pupils for whom SNA support has been allocated. There are many different training and upskilling opportunities currently available for school staff in the area of first aid and medical training. These include the education support centres located in regions nationwide who provide professional development to teachers, school management and parents. Many of these education support centres, which are funded by the Department of Education and Youth, provide accredited courses in first aid response and medical care for school staff.

Children's Health Ireland also provides an education day specifically for SNAs on clean intermittent catheterisation, CIC. The SNA national training programme, which is fully funded by the Department of Education and Youth for serving SNAs, provides practical training and a module on supporting students with primary care needs, including medical and complex needs. To date, approximately 3,774 SNAs have completed the national training programme. Where specific targeted training is required, the board of management can also liaise with the HSE in

order to ensure that the HSE provides guidance and training that enables the SNA to meet the care needs of the pupil in an appropriate manner. It is a matter for individual school authorities to make such arrangements locally.

The SNA information hub that was set up for SNAs and schools as a result of feedback on the plan also includes links to accredited training. In addition, the Department of Education and Youth is currently advancing work on the first SNA workforce development plan, which is intended for publication shortly. Proposals for the plan have been developed in consultation with key stakeholders, including SNAs, school management bodies, unions, schools, parents and students. The learning and development programme to be established under the plan will strengthen SNA service delivery by providing access to appropriate and legitimate opportunities for upskilling and reskilling to ensure that SNAs are equipped to meet the complex needs of children in their care in an evolving educational environment.

In conclusion, I ask Members to note that discussions and policy development arising, in regard to dealing with medical emergencies in schools, are currently at an early stage. There is a need for co-ordination across several Departments and agencies. There is a requirement to obtain comprehensive legal advice and ensure its thorough review, to engage with a wide range of stakeholders, including the education partners, in particular staffing unions, management bodies and parent and student representatives, and to consider registration, training and budgetary matters before proposals can be developed. These may or may not require legislative change. A timed amendment provides sufficient opportunity to explore the relevant matters at an interdepartmental level and develop comprehensive proposals that may impact settings other than schools.

I thank the House for affording me the opportunity to speak about the Education (Medical Emergencies in Schools) Bill 2026 on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth. I trust that the House recognises the current practice that is happening in our schools to safeguard children and young people, and that while we support the provisions of this important Bill in strengthening this work, I am asking for a timed amendment to allow for consideration and progression of all relevant matters.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome this Bill. Sinn Féin supports it and I thank Deputy Kenny for bringing it forward and outlining how personal it is to him. No child or member of staff should die or come to serious harm in a school because those around them did not have the training, equipment or permission to act. Every day, parents across Ireland drop their children to school trusting that they will be safe but the hard truth, backed by evidence, is that too many of our schools are not fully prepared for a medical emergency. In 2024 a report from Medical Emergency Response Ireland asked how prepared are Irish schools for a medical emergency and the answer was very concerning. Most primary school staff have not been trained to use life-saving equipment like adrenaline autoinjectors. We are not talking about rare hypothetical events. We are talking about the child with a severe nut allergy who suffers anaphylaxis, the student with type 1 diabetes whose continuous glucose monitor alarms requiring an insulin injection or the staff member who collapses from sudden cardiac arrest. In those moments, seconds count. In those moments, the difference between life and death can be whether a trained person is nearby with the right equipment. This Bill is about creating a system of preparedness that covers first aid training, medical awareness and the availability of critical emergency medicines.

Section 1 empowers the Minister to make regulations requiring schools to promote the training of sufficient staff in first aid for medical emergencies including the use of equipment like defibrillators. The Bill also pushes schools to join the list held by the HPRA, the list of organisations whose trained and authorised staff can administer prescription-only medicines such as emergency asthma inhalers or adrenaline autoinjectors without a prescription to save a life or reduce severe distress. That list exists but too few schools are on it. This Bill aims to change that.

We should also be clear about what this Bill is not. It is not a mandate to pile yet another unmanageable responsibility onto already overworked teachers. This Bill does not require every teacher to become a medical expert. Where a child requires additional, ongoing medical support, such as insulin monitoring or regular glucose checks, that is the role of an SNA. That is a clear line. Medical emergency preparedness is a whole-school responsibility, not an individual teacher's burden, and where extra help is needed with ongoing medical support, the State must fund extra SNA hours. Right now, there is no statutory requirement for consistent, high-quality emergency medical training in our schools. We rely on the goodwill of individual principals and passionate staff. Goodwill is not enough, though. We need a legal framework. We need every school to have a sufficient number of staff trained in emergency first aid, a maintained defibrillator that people know how to use, and a clear pathway to access and administer life-saving medicines without fear of legal repercussion. This Bill provides that framework. It is proportionate and necessary, and Sinn Féin supports it.

In the wider context, the Bill deals specifically with the Education Act, but the principle applies across all health issues, from allergies to epilepsy, from asthma to diabetes. A medical emergency does not ask for a timetable. It does not wait for the HSE to arrive. It happens in the classroom, on the playing pitch, in the playground. Parents deserve peace of mind. Students with medical vulnerabilities deserve safety, and staff deserve clear guidance, proper training and the knowledge that they are supported, not abandoned, when a crisis hits. This Bill provides the basis to give our schools the tools, training and legal clarity they need to protect the lives in their care, and I am happy to support its progress to Committee Stage.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I commend Deputy Kenny on this Bill. It is practical and timely. A plethora of things go on in schools. They are really busy environments where many things happen. Medical emergencies happen at times when people are not expecting it. They happen when the trained individual is not there. They happen when it is busy, there is going to be a trip, or whatever it is in the yard. It is really important that we have as many staff as possible in our school settings who are able to support those children in an appropriate way. I have been an occupational first aider for many years. There is the Good Samaritan protection for anybody who, in good faith, is going to support somebody in a medical emergency. To be that person, you have to be very brave.

Sadly, I have witnessed many medical emergencies in my time in and out of schools and other education facilities. I remember a man who came back to work after years of being off. It was his first day back at work, working as a youth worker at the time, and he sadly had a massive heart attack on his first day back. The staff in that centre had just done first aid training but were terrified of touching him and did not know what to do. I was not trained at that time, so I was on the phone to 999, as it was at the time, and I administered CPR for a very long time. Sadly, he died. He was probably already dead when I was doing the CPR. The fact is

that people were nervous. They had just done their training. They had never seen this happen. Huge panic sets in. I was probably 32 weeks pregnant, so it was not that easy to administer. He was a big man. I made it my business to become very trained straight after that, as soon as I had the baby, in case that ever happened again. Thankfully, it did not, but I would be able to support whoever that is.

The training needed to be constant, over the years in schools and in occupational therapy, so that we were able to do it in schools, at the after-school projects that we worked in, or in holiday time. That was important. Three years later, people might say that they remember all of it, but they do not, so the training that happens needs to be updated and practical, and it needs to be fun as well.

The worst-case scenario is that someone dies when you are giving them CPR, but that is life and emergencies like that happen in all settings. It could be a seizure or allergic reaction. With the best will in the world, school principals can write letters home to parents asking them not to send things in, but allergies and reactions happen, and asthma, too. How many inhalers are forgotten? What is needed as an adult in that situation is a calm demeanour, someone who is not going to panic, someone who has appropriate training to make sure that they know what they are doing, and other people around them who are also trained and know what to do so that there is support for one another doing it. We cannot hope that the trained person is the one who is there on the day when there is a medical emergency. The more people who are trained, the better.

I know when it comes to special schools and special classes that there is a whole other level of need. If nurses are involved in those special schools and special classes, that is fantastic. I am sure it must be a great relief for the staff that the medical professional is there.

I commend Deputy Kenny. Well done. I hope this goes forward. I should say before I finish that it is not just children who may have emergencies, but also adults. We can all have a medical emergency at any time, if we are healthy or not or if we have a condition or not. I thank Deputy Kenny. Congratulations.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I also commend Deputy Kenny on bringing this forward. It goes without saying that on some level, there should not actually be a need for a conversation in here. Everyone is always worried when they see we are kicking the can down the road. I hope there will be a proper attempt to address this issue. Forget the politics, which can occur from time to time in here. Obviously, I never partake in that and am always very constructive. In reality, this is about saving lives. It could be anybody's life. It is that idea. We have all seen it with regard to defibrillators. I have seen it in Louth. I have met people whose lives were saved on the basis of having a defibrillator and staff who were able to access and operate it. Deputy Cummins made a really coherent point about making sure that people are properly trained, including about the panic that can happen, because we are dealing with medical emergencies, people going into anaphylactic shock, people having heart attacks, and issues such as diabetes, which requires an insulin injection. It can be much more difficult when dealing with children, particularly young children.

A number of Deputies mentioned that this was a follow-on from Sabrina's law in 2006 in Canada. It seems this has been well tried and tested. It is straightforward. Deputy O'Rourke put it simply, in that it is making sure there are the correct resources, the correct training and,

most importantly of all, given the issues that exist with insurance and so on, permission to act. We would also have the correct element of registration with the HPRA and so on.

We are all aware of children or adults who have been in difficult circumstances or medical emergencies. There will often be situations where it is an allergy to something that everybody is aware of, but kids are kids and adults are adults. You are not always necessarily sure of the thing that you get from somebody else's lunchbox, not that I would ever have taken anything that I was not offered in the first place, just in case the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, were to make some sort of crass accusation later.

This is an incredibly serious topic. The legislation has been presented by Deputy Kenny and is properly packaged and ready to go. We just need to make sure, as much as I have a difficulty with this being kicked down the road, that adequate planning and resourcing is put in place and we do not end up, in a year, having not dealt with it, which has happened from time to time. It cannot be another Bill that just withers on the vine. It is an absolute necessity that we have the autoinjectors, correct medicine, defibrillators, and people able to operate them.

6 o'clock

I also want to follow on from what Deputy O'Rourke said from the point of view of putting more pressure on teachers who are obviously under severe pressure at the moment. He spoke about some of the delineation points, particularly in regard to children with diabetes. At times, this falls directly into the sphere of SNAs, which shows the importance of SNAs to the school population. I like to think we would eventually get to a position whereby we have a sufficient number of SNAs in schools from the point of view of ensuring children get the best opportunity to be all that they can be and to benefit from and flourish in the educational setting.

As I have said before, in an awful lot of cases there is a very simple solution to issues. It does not deal with every issue across the board, but the sense is that we should just make it happen as soon as possible. I ask the Government to make sure that it would happen. This is a lot more fundamental in the sense that we have already spoken about situations we have come across where people have been saved because the correct equipment or the correctly trained person was there and they were able and willing to do whatever was necessary with regard to using an autoinjector or defibrillator. It is just about making sure that happens within schools.

We are talking about the entire school population. Something could happen to any of us at any time. I do not know how many times in the last while we have seen paramedics within the campus. There are people with medical training as well who have put that to use. I spoke earlier about GAA clubs. We have seen it in all sorts of sporting organisations and community centres that have access to defibrillators. Sometimes the issue is not related to a particular campus but it happens in an adjacent organisation or premises. It is important that where there is an issue that at least somebody can get access. That happens. In fairness, schools play a fundamental role in many communities. In real terms, it could be a facility that operates even beyond the school.

First and foremost, parents need to feel their child will be safe, in particular if they have a kid with an added ailment or an added worry, for example, an allergy or some underlying condition that is understood. We must make sure that we have the facility there to ensure their safety as much as possible. We cannot make this an absolutely safe and perfect world, but we can definitely make it a bit safer. If this was done across the board I would like to think we

would have fewer tragic circumstances. Nobody wants to be in a situation where they are saying "what if" or "if only".

I commend Deputy Kenny. I request that the Minister and the Government would take action to assuage my fears about the can being kicked down the road.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): As I outlined earlier, there is absolutely no objection to Deputy Kenny's Bill, but the Government is asking for the timed amendment of 12 months to be agreed to allow for sufficient time to develop the legislative proposals in line with the principles of the Bill.

I assure Deputy Ó Murchú, and all those who contributed in the House, that the Government will proceed with this Bill as quickly as is possible. There is a very clear bit of work that is needed to be done.

The safety and well-being of all children and young people in schools is a priority for this Government. While the board of management of each school is responsible for the care and safety of pupils, it is the Department of education that consistently seeks to support them. While I welcome the provisions of this Bill, work has already started in the area, and that is why I asked Deputies to note that initial discussions are already under way between the Department of education and the Department of Health. In addition, there are additional discussions under way between the HSE and the Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council. While these discussions are at an early stage, significant further engagement is required in this area with a wide range of stakeholders before further progress can be made. That includes the Health Products Regulatory Authority engaging with employees and those listed by organisations who have completed specific training on the conditions. I understand that a number of people have started this.

I do not want to repeat the debate. I do not for an instant disagree with one comment that was made here in the Chamber by any Deputy. I agree with them. I appreciate the very real human and emotive need to get this done quickly. The fact that we are essentially 21 years behind the Canadians is something that does stick in my craw. The fact that something significant has been moved so recently in the far more similar jurisdiction of Great Britain just this year will provide an added level of motivation for officials to work across everything to make sure that this timed amendment provides a sufficient opportunity to explore the relevant matters. They must develop the comprehensive proposals that might impact on it in order to provide peace of mind so that when this Bill is enacted, which I very much hope will be the case, in 12 months' time that not only will it be fit for purpose - it clearly is already in its format here - but it will provide the overall surety and guarantee so that it is something that everyone can stand over, be it a teacher, parent, legislator or whoever else. Once again, I commend Deputy Kenny for his work on this Bill, and for introducing it here. I beg the House to pass this timed amendment to come back to it in 12 months.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, and the other Deputies. The Minister of State is here longer than me, but this is probably my first time to agree with everything that has been said in the Chamber, from both this side of the House and the other side of the House.

A timed amendment is appropriate and necessary. I thank the Government for engaging me on this crucial legislation. The Minister of State referred in his opening statement to engaging with stakeholders. It is extremely important that there would be engagement with stakeholders. I warmly welcome the fact that discussions have already begun between the Department of education and the Department of Health. The Minister of State mentioned legal advice. The indemnity of staff is something that has come up regularly with the three teaching unions. Seeking legal advice as part of the preparatory work is absolutely essential. We must ensure that no extra pressure is added to school staff.

As the Minister of State mentioned, we are 21 years behind Canada and Great Britain passed a Bill this year. We can be a flag-bearer across Europe if the legislation is enacted here. I do appreciate that the preparatory work has to be done.

I want to state clearly on the record that there are many schools already among the 4,000 schools in the country doing very good work. Some schools have trained personnel on site to deal with medical emergencies. I am not putting every single school into the same bracket. This legislation would ensure that there would be school staff in all schools across the country who are prepared to deal with a medical emergency, be it for a colleague or a student.

I want to quickly touch on the keeping of prescribed medication in schools. The Minister of State referenced already that very few schools across the country are able to act as locations for the keeping of prescribed medication. This is about empowering school communities to respond to issues when they occur, from epilepsy to allergies, and to make sure that those working in schools are fully equipped to provide emergency care when medical assistance is required.

Once again, I thank the Government for engaging with me on this crucial legislation. I offer to work constructively to see this crucial legislation become law. With the right supports, the right training and the right legal clarity, we can build a safer school environment for all children and school staff.

Amendment agreed to.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 6.09 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 28 Aibreán 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.09 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 28 April 2026.