



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

Message from Select Committee	191
Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions	191
Trade Agreements.....	191
Irish Prisoners Abroad.....	193
Middle East	196
Foreign Policy	201
Foreign Conflicts.....	203
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions	205
Cybersecurity Policy	205
Passport Services.....	207
Trade Agreements.....	210
Trade Promotion.....	218
Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions	221
Rural Schemes.....	221
Seirbhísí trí Ghaeilge.....	224
Road Projects	226
Cúrsaí Tithíochta	228
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions	230
Rural Schemes.....	230
Road Network	232
Urban Development	234
Departmental Policies	237
Departmental Programmes	241
Pleanáil Teanga	243
Departmental Funding.....	246
Social Isolation.....	248
Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions.....	249

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions	260
Ceisteanna ar Pholasáí nó ar Reachtaíocht - Questions on Policy or Legislation	263
Guardianship of Infants (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage.....	274
Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters.....	290
Guardianship of Infants (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage (Resumed)	290
Guardianship of Infants (Amendment) Bill 2026: Referral to Select Committee.....	293
Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate.....	293
Family Resource Centres	293
Postal Services	296
Commercial Rates	299
Vacant Properties.....	301
Report on Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the Revised General Scheme of the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill: Motion	305

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoín, 21 Bealtaine 2026

Thursday, 21 May 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh) i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Message from Select Committee

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): The Select Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy has completed its consideration of the Air Pollution (Amendment) Bill 2025 and has made no amendments thereto.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Trade Agreements

4. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if she is aware of concerns regarding the investor court system established in the CETA deal, particularly the potential need for EU-wide consent for the termination of CETA as well as the possible 20-year post-termination obligations that Ireland would still face. [38316/26]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Thomas Byrne): I will answer this question on behalf of the Minister.

The ratification of the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, CETA, between Canada and the EU is an absolute priority for the Government. The 2025 programme for Government contains a specific commitment to ratify this important free trade agreement and the Government is committed to delivering on it. The ratification of the Canada-EU Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement is an important part of Ireland's diversification strategy in reducing concentration risk among our trading partners. The ratification of CETA is also a key priority for Canada, which has been repeatedly raised with Ireland by Canadian partners, including with me last weekend.

CETA took seven years to negotiate and the deal that was agreed at the Council of the European Union followed extensive engagement and debate among EU member states. It is now close to ten years since the agreement was signed, with the European Parliament giving

its consent a number of months later. The EU's new approach to investment protection includes the investor court system, which will replace the old, long-standing investor state dispute settlement, or ISDS, mechanism. The EU and all of us are keenly aware of the criticisms of the old system. To overcome those shortcomings, the EU and its member states have put forward new reforms which address the concerns head-on. The new, progressive system contains investment protection provisions that are very much balanced against the State's right to regulate in the public interest.

In relation to the termination clause the Deputy referred to, we have collectively agreed, through the democratic process at EU level, to have a trade and investment agreement with our ally, Canada. It makes absolute sense that it would involve a collective decision of the EU to terminate it. I cannot envisage circumstances in which the EU and Canada would want to end this agreement. In the case of Ireland alone, we have seen bilateral trade in goods and services increase from €3.2 billion in 2016 to more than €12 billion in 2024. This significant increase in bilateral trade between Ireland and Canada supports thousands of Irish jobs and benefits large and small Irish businesses throughout our country.

The Government is currently progressing the Arbitration (Amendment) Bill 2025 through the Oireachtas as part of ongoing efforts to take forward ratification of CETA. The Bill, which amends the Arbitration Act 2010 to deal with concerns addressed in the Costello case, is currently before the Seanad.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Farmers, workers and consumers have been left totally confused by the CETA deal. Although the Minister of State describes the extensive debate at EU level, that debate has not been reflected here in the Oireachtas, where the Bill is being rushed through and pre-legislative scrutiny has been essentially suspended on it. The EU is not rushing us to ratify and given that France has shown extreme reluctance, I do not understand why we are pushing this through. We have all of the benefits of the trade we want with Canada without the investor court system. Essentially, we are selling out to this system by forcing through this Bill. It is such a threat to our sovereignty as a country. It is a threat to future legislative powers of this Dáil that we are choosing to go with investors courts and not just settle for and work with what we have, which is a positive trade agreement.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: In relation to farmers, citizens and consumers, they are the ultimate beneficiaries of the EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement. They benefit. We are not selling out; we are buying and selling goods and services. This is mutually beneficial. CETA is not a threat to our sovereignty. Every time an agreement is reached with another entity or country within the EU, there is a sharing of sovereignty in order to get bigger benefits for all of our citizens. I do not accept that the legislation is being rushed through. The Bill is just over two pages long. There has been extensive debate and there continues to be extensive debate about it.

I absolutely reject this notion we are selling out the country. This type of language about a trade agreement is damaging to politics. It is not the case. There is no imposition on the State's right to regulate, as I have extensively explained to the House during this legislative process. If we do not ratify this or make a decision not to ratify this, as the Government's regulatory impact analysis says, it would collapse the entire agreement.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The Bill is two pages long but it will have an immeasurable impact on this country. As I said, we can continue our current arrangements with Canada without the investor court mechanism which undermines our regulatory ability. I will focus on the real dangers these investor courts present to us. They would hear cases from X against Ireland if we were to ban their undressing AI software. We have seen the prioritisation of big polluters' profits in Mexican investor courts and it is explicit that companies will be able to sue for loss of future profits because of regulation. That is not just in the area of climate; it is in areas like workers' rights as well. It is possible that the State would have to pay off X for the privilege of protecting the children of this country. Will the Minister of State accept that the introduction of investor courts is a serious danger to people's well-being and their rights under the European Charter of Human Rights?

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The idea that we would have to pay off X to protect the children of this country is simply the latest scare story about CETA. It is unbecoming of the debate to start going into this. By stating that, Deputy Gibney has completely ignored the terms of CETA, the joint interpretative instrument and the fact that there are no precedents for this investor court system she can rely on because it is not in existence yet. The safeguards are in place. The agreement is there to enhance our economies, and it has done that.

If we take the route the Deputy is suggesting, the entire agreement between the EU, its member states and Canada would collapse. That is simply a fact. The Deputy cannot say we can retain the benefits without having the overall agreement because that is not factually correct. These examples that keep getting thrown out here in the Dáil are getting more and more extreme. The facts do not bear out what the Deputy is saying. The Deputy and the opponents of this treaty simply refuse to read the actual text of the agreement and the interpretative instrument.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: That is not true.

Irish Prisoners Abroad

5. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade whether she is aware of very serious concerns about the fairness of the prosecution and trial of an Irish citizen (details supplied) in Germany, alongside concerns about the conditions of detention; whether she has raised concerns with the German Government; whether she will send an observer to the trial; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38665/26]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Today, the world is rightly expressing disgust at the treatment of Irish and other activists trying to bring aid to the besieged people of Gaza at the hands of the Israeli regime.

However, Germany, a European country, is treating another Irish citizen, another pro-Palestinian activist, in an equally outrageous way. There is a show trial going on and the basic rights of an Irish citizen are being absolutely flouted as he and the other detainees are being prosecuted as criminals and terrorists for protesting against Germany's complicity with Israel's genocide in Gaza. Will the Government send observers to the trial to protect the rights of an Irish citizen, Daniel Tatlow-Devally?

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank the Deputy. I am obviously aware of the case he has mentioned. It is important to stress that my Department, and in particular my team, have been providing consular assistance to Daniel since September 2025. We have a dedicated consular office in the consulate general in Munich which has been assigned to provide consular assistance to support Daniel but also his family, because I appreciate this is a difficult time for them. Staff in the consulate, including the consul general but also the deputy consul general, have undertaken four consular visits, the most recent on 10 April, and another visit is to be carried out next month.

It is important to stress that the very clear readout I have received on this states Daniel did not raise any complaints about his treatment. He reported that he has been treated relatively well, both physically and mentally, and that he is able to avail of the facilities and activities in the prison. His visiting conditions have been relaxed. He is able to have video calls and in-person visits with family members, and I understand that other visits may be possible as well.

It is also important to stress that in the prison Daniel is in, he is the same as any other person. It is a normal or regular pre-trial detention facility. The reports I have directly from our ambassador, who is dealing directly with him and engaging with him and will have a further visit later this month, are that he is being treated well and has access to the facilities he needs. Again, it is the same for any other person in his situation.

I assure the Deputy, because I appreciate this is very difficult for Daniel and his family, that my Department will continue to provide all appropriate consular assistance. We have to do this in line with the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations 1963, which specifies the functions of our consular officials. It is obviously subject to limits permitted by international law, so we cannot interfere in the domestic affairs of the receiving state. While consular officials have a role in assisting citizens, including by helping them to find lawyers and visiting them in detention, consular officials cannot give legal advice or intervene in the judicial process or internal affairs in the receiving state. Throughout the trial, when it happens, we will of course continue to engage directly with Daniel and his family and make sure the assistance continues.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I actually cannot believe my ears. Daniel's family are appealing for the Government to send observers because they fear a show trial situation. The detainees are being prosecuted under anti-organised crime legislation. They are being tried in a high-security court, not a normal court. They are being denied access during the trial to their own legal team. They are brought in handcuffed and put behind high-security glass. They have been kept in more or less solitary confinement – since last September in Daniel's case, or eight months. It is completely unprecedented.

Daniel's legal team has called for the judge to be recused, such is the level of bias that has been directed against those on trial, the "Ulm five". To remind the Minister, they were protesting. It was an act of civil disobedience but there was no threat of violence. They videoed themselves. They handed themselves up for arrest peacefully because they were protesting about Elbit Systems or Germany providing arms to Israel for the commission of genocide. Their families are saying the trial is a show trial and that they should be released, and that the Irish Government should send observers to watch the trial to ensure that their rights are upheld at it, given the manner in which it is being conducted. Is the Minister going to do that?

Deputy Helen McEntee: First, it is essential that any Irish citizen who finds himself in this situation be provided immediately with consular assistance, and that has been the case. I have said very clearly that our consular team on the ground cannot provide legal assistance. That is not the position it has. However, it is our role-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I did not ask for legal assistance; observers are what I asked for.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Absolutely. It is our role and duty to make sure the detainees are treated in the appropriate way. Daniel is in a pre-trial facility. He is being treated the same as others. I appreciate how difficult this is. The most important thing is that the facts of the trial are borne out. The Deputy has outlined some of what has happened. It is for the trial judge and the system itself to make sure all the facts are borne out. While the Deputy might not agree with the particular legislation under which Daniel has been charged, it is for the trial to ensure the facts of what happened are borne out and for a decision to be taken in that regard.

We will ensure that there is fair oversight of this trial. I can assure the Deputy of that. I will be meeting my German colleague this week and I will reiterate that point when I meet him. We will ensure that we continue to have direct engagement and provide consular support to Daniel. We will make sure the trial, which I hope happens soon because I agree this should not be drawn out any further, is subject to direct oversight and that we have full sight of what is happening in it.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: This points to the duplicity of the Government. It says it is appalled at the treatment of flotilla activists at the hands of the Israeli regime. The flotilla activists, before they were detained, or kidnapped, urged for a vote in favour of the sanctions Bill to sanction Israel but the Government condemned it, said there should not be business as usual and came in here and voted against sanctions. We are getting the same duplicity in the case of Daniel.

Will the Minister send observers to the trial, which is what the family are asking for, because it is a show trial? It is absolutely outrageous. Why are the detainees even in custody? They are not a threat to anybody. They are being kept in solitary confinement before their trial in a high-security courthouse behind a glass cage, having been brought in handcuffs. The judge is speaking about them as if they are terrorists when they are actually peace activists opposing German complicity with the genocide in Israel via Elbit Systems, which provides Israel with weapons.

Is the Minister going to send observers? I am going to try to get an all-party group to go across to the trial. We will see whether all the parties will send someone. I know the Opposition will, but will the Government do so? Even German MPs are being refused access to the courtroom by the judge. That is how much of a show trial it is.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I cannot be any clearer in what I am saying here. It is our role and responsibility to make sure that citizens, when they have been arrested and detained, have access to consular assistance. I am saying very clearly to the Deputy that this has been

happening. There has been direct engagement with Daniel with a view to making sure he is in good health and is being treated well. That is exactly what he has conveyed and relayed.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: This is the duplicity of the Government.

Deputy Helen McEntee: He is in a pre-trial detention facility. I fully agree with the Deputy that this should not go on indefinitely. However, as the Deputy and every other Deputy in this House well knows, it is not for me to determine when a trial in another country should take place. What I have said to the Deputy is that I will raise this directly with my German colleague when I meet him on Friday, but I cannot, nor can any Deputy here, intervene in respect of when a trial is set and how its outcome is presided over. What I can be clear on, however, is that we will make sure we have sight of what is happening in the trial and that we are in direct communication with Daniel and ensuring his welfare at every stage.

Middle East

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Le cead ón Dáil, bogfaimid siar anois go dtí Ceisteanna Uimh. 1 agus 2, atá á dtógáil le chéile. Glaoim ar an Teachta Ó Laoghaire ar dtús.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Ba mhaith liom leithscéal a ghabháil leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach agus an Aire mar go raibh mé déanach. Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach as teacht ar ais go dtí mo cheist.

1. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to outline the current progress on the drafting of the Israeli settlements (prohibition of importation of goods) Bill 2025; if she will outline the recent advice she has received from the Attorney General; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38408/26]

2. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to provide a detailed timeline for introducing the Israeli settlements (prohibition of importation of goods) Bill 2025; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38523/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The scenes in the last few days – I have a further question on the Global Sumud Flotilla, so we can perhaps discuss that further – underline the fact that the international community has allowed Israel to behave with absolute impunity. It continues to act accordingly. It continues to breach all the international laws dictating what is right and wrong. There have to be consequences. The occupied territories Bill needs to be a part of that, as far as I am concerned.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I am asking this question on behalf of Deputy Duncan Smith. The world is rightly outraged at what we saw yesterday but none of us should be surprised. The Government made a solemn commitment at the time of the election and published legislation last year but has done nothing since. It has rebuffed every single legislative effort brought before the Dáil and Seanad. Will the Minister level with the Irish public now? Is she

abandoning the Israeli settlements Bill she introduced? If not, she should please set out a timeline for it, because the Irish public and indeed Palestinians and everyone across the world deserve nothing less. We need to have clarity from this Government as to what its position is.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank both Deputies for raising this matter. I do not believe there is a single person who saw the footage yesterday who could not but be appalled by what they saw. The Deputy is right that this is just another act by the Israeli Government among a string of acts we have seen over recent weeks, months and, indeed, years.

The Irish Government has been consistent in its approach, and I, as Minister in recent months, have been consistent in mine. I have said very clearly that I will commit to bringing forward the occupied territories Bill. The Government approved the general scheme of the Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory (prohibition of importation of goods) Bill last June. The main purpose, obviously, is to prohibit the importation of goods into the State from the Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory.

I have been clear with this House that since it was published, a number of questions needed to be asked of the Attorney General and that information has come back and forth to me. What I can say is that I will bring forth legislation in the coming weeks. We, as a Government, and I, as a Minister, have said that we will fulfil our commitment. That has not changed just because of this week. I have been clear that I believe the best way to bring forward legislation is to do so with our colleagues. I have been engaged with my Dutch and Belgian colleagues and, more recently, my Slovenian colleague, whose Government is going through a particular change process at the moment. While introducing this is the right thing to do, and I will, as I have said clearly, bring forward legislation in a matter of weeks, I also firmly believe that bringing forward changes at a European level will have a much greater impact. I have been working on that, too. For the past number of months, I have been engaging directly with my colleagues. I have been engaging directly with the High Representative to ensure that we can put this back on the agenda at a European level. It has not been on the agenda since last summer before a ceasefire was agreed.

What we agreed last week at the Foreign Affairs Council was, for the first time, a Commission proposal that has been on the table since last year to impose sanctions on violent settlers, and for it to be agreed. It had been prevented because of the position that Hungary had taken. Thankfully with a new government in place, Hungary lifted that ban. Last week, there was an agreement from the EU that we would impose sanctions on violent settlers, members of Hamas and anybody who supported these types of actions in the West Bank. What I have subsequently done, and did clearly at the most recent meeting, is to advocate for a further vote at the next Council meeting.

A second Commission motion has been on the table since last year to ban or suspend the trade element of the EU-Israel association agreement. Israel as a whole gets preferential treatment through that trade agreement. It is worth billions to the Israeli economy. It is not a blanket ban like the ban that was being voted on last night. The reason we voted against that is that it is a sanction on every single person in Israel. That is not an approach we have taken in any sanction placed on Russia or any other part of the world where sanctions have been imposed by the EU. I believe that the European Union should agree to the proposal that we suspend the Israeli association agreement and, in particular, its trade elements.

I have also advocated for a second proposal to ban trade within the West Bank and with the settlers. That is the most appropriate approach to take. It is in line with what has been said internationally. This is what we have been advocating for. It would be in tandem with our occupied territories legislation. This is the principle and the right thing to do. At home in Ireland, we have always taken that approach, from recognising Palestine to the humanitarian aid we have provided and raising the issue at every Foreign Affairs Council, and every single Council that we can. I will also, for the first time, ensure the matter is raised this week at the trade Council. The only way we can pass this at European level is where there is qualified majority voting, QMV. That is why we have focused on trade. It is why we have focused on the suspension of the trade agreement. Instead of needing unanimity, QMV is needed. I will be raising this directly with colleagues at the trade Council on Friday this week. I will be pushing for this to be put to a vote at the Foreign Affairs Council. I spent an hour and a half with my Jordanian colleague yesterday. That is somebody who is on the ground and sees what is happening. His view is that Europe needs to respond collectively in this kind of way and I have been advocating for that for months.

Separate from that, I say clearly that we will fulfil our commitment in the programme for Government. We will bring forward legislation because it is the right thing to do. However, I also want to make sure that the actions we take have a knock-on impact and change the actions of the Israeli Government. That is what has to happen here. The actions we saw this week were despicable. We all agree that this is just one action in a string of actions that we have seen over recent years.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I will use the phrase "the occupied territories Bill" as shorthand. I appreciate the Government's Bill has a different title, but that is what it is commonly understood as. The Minister's statements are difficult to reconcile. She has come here and said we will have something in a couple of weeks. What I interpreted from her interview with Virgin Media during the week was that we will see what happens at a European level and then might act. There have been contradictory statements over the course of the past couple of years. If you look at it in terms of a timeline, there were commitments in parties' manifestos before the general election to pass the occupied territories Bill. There was no qualification or equivocation about trade or services. The programme for Government and the Department of foreign affairs strategy to 2028 include references to the enactment of the occupied Palestinian territories legislation by 2028. This year's strategy talks about progressing the occupied territories Bill by 2029. The Government is putting it back by a year and talking about progressing rather than enacting. There seems to be constant watering down. The Minister is talking about a couple of weeks, but I am not sure she would have said that at the start of this week if we had not seen those scenes.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: It was February 2024 when the Irish Government first brought the EU-Israel trade agreement to the European Council. It is now two and a half years later and there has been zero action. What I am hearing today is a strategy of crossing the fingers and toes and hoping other countries keep up with us with regard to the plan to outlaw trade from illegal settlements. What I am hearing today, which is more worrying, is that the Government is now narrowing its intent. It is going after violent settlers. It is not going after all trade from the illegal settlements but violent settlers. I would like to hear the clarification on that point. Ireland has a proud tradition of diplomacy and using our voices and words. The time for voices

and words is over. It is a time for economic action and sanction against a government that is acting with impunity. There is no point continuing to talk and hoping that the rest of the world will catch up. We need to take a lead here and ensure that we send a clear signal that the disgraceful acts we saw yesterday are not tolerated.

Deputy Helen McEntee: That is exactly what we are doing. We are taking a little time to build a consensus. At a European level, I have been sitting around the table for the past few months. Months ago, there was no discussion of how we would move or impose sanctions. There was nothing. Sanctions have been on the table at the Commission since last year. I have, with colleagues from Slovenia and Spain, over recent weeks and months, pushed for this issue to be put back on the agenda. Because of that, what we agreed last week was sanctions on violent settlers in the West Bank. That was one sanction that was on the table, and not before time, but there are more. The next sanction on the table is that we would suspend the trade element of the EU-Israel association agreement. That is for all of Israel and not just the West Bank. It would have a significant economic impact on Israel. That is something we should have done before now, but Ireland has called for it. We have been at the table and calling for this, but others have not agreed. What I have been trying to do is to build a consensus.

I have also asked for a proposal that would ban trade with the illegal settlements, separate from the ban on violent settlers that we have already agreed. That is in place, has been agreed and will be followed through on. I want action at a European level because that is how we have the greatest impact. Yes, Spain has already imposed its legislation, but I want to ensure that we move collectively and have legislation individually.

In response to Deputy Ó Laoghaire, I am not confused at all in what I have said this week. I have said we should move both. I have said that if this does not happen at a European level, it is all the more reason we should have this other legislation. We have lots of legislation in our programme for Government and not all of it gets implemented in the first couple of months or the first year. We have to work through it. I have worked with the Attorney General because we need to make sure that we have legislation that can be implemented and can take effect. That is what everybody here wants. There is an element of making sure that we do what is principled, and I believe that Ireland has always taken that approach when it comes to Palestine, Gaza and what is happening in the West Bank. However, as Minister, I also want to make sure that our actions have a positive impact on the people on the ground and the best way I believe we can do that is by Europe taking a strong stance. I believe we are in a much better place in that regard than we were a couple of weeks ago and that is because I and other people in other countries have been working to build consensus. We are not sitting on our hands and saying nothing. We have been trying to get people to this point within Europe so that we will have a vote at the next meeting. I reiterated that point to High Representative Kaja Kallas again this morning and said that we need to have a vote at the next meeting because we have discussed it long enough. This week's actions show us exactly why we need this.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I agree with that last point. However, my interpretation of the Minister's interview was different from what she is saying. I do not think we were going to hear anything about legislation in the next couple of weeks. It seems to me that what we have seen may have lit a fire under the Government, as has often been the case and as was the case in the first place when manifesto commitments were given for the occupied territories Bill.

If that is the case, it entirely justifies the actions of people who are taking up initiatives such as the Global Sumud Flotilla. They highlight these issues and make it clear that governments have to act. Activists out there are having to take initiatives such as that to force governments to act.

I absolutely recognise that if the European Union could act in concert in a way that delivers actual results and puts pressure on the Israeli Government, I would welcome it, but clearly it has taken three or four years for the Union to move an inch. There is legislation there and no reason not to enact it. The arguments in relation to services are paper thin. It is clear that the Spanish have been able to move on this. Will the Minister give a commitment that we will be debating the legislation on Second Stage before the recess?

Deputy Marie Sherlock: If the Dutch and other governments the Minister called out do not move, will Ireland still move ahead? I am hearing two things here: I am hearing "the next few weeks" and I am hearing that the Government wants to move in concert. Frankly, that is not clear enough. The reality is that 70,000 people are dead. Over 900 people have died since the October ceasefire. We saw the scenes yesterday. God only knows what is happening to the countless nameless Palestinians who are behind bars at this point in time and who are facing the death penalty. I am still not clear about the intentions of this Government. The reality is that if the Israel-EU trade agreement is suspended, it still does not fully deal with illegal trade. Yes, it puts a prohibitive set of tariffs on it but it still does not fully ban that trade. We need a crystal-clear message from this Government as to its intentions.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I cannot be any clearer in saying that what I am advocating for and what I have been advocating for is that there would be a full ban on trade with the illegal settlements. That is not a proposal that has been put on the table by the Commission before now. The proposal on the table is that we would suspend the trade element of the EU-Israel Association Agreement. That did not have full support last year but that is now what we are discussing and it is very much what we discussed last week at the Council. However, I want a further proposal on the table specific to the West Bank and to the illegal settlements because we very clearly set out that this is illegal occupation. It has been agreed by all of us; therefore, we need to follow through. This has not just come about because of this week; Ireland has been saying this consistently. However, we cannot move on this on our own. Even with QMV, it is 55% of the Council or 65% of the overall population but that is manageable and something I believe we could achieve. Certainly, looking at the different kinds of comments we have seen in the past few weeks around the table, there are countries that are moving and countries that perhaps would have had a different position only a few weeks ago.

As to where we are now and in terms of our own work, again, I cannot be any clearer in saying that as regards the work I am doing with European colleagues - say, my Dutch colleagues and others - they have made it very clear. My Dutch colleague at the last meeting said that they were bringing forward legislation, and I have been engaging with them as to the timeline in order that when we do introduce this, we can have a stronger voice around this. If, however, they decide not to do this, we will still continue with ours. I am being very clear about that and very clear in what I say. The approach here has always been to make sure that everything we do has an impact. Yesterday, when I saw our citizens and other people with their hands tied behind their backs, I thought, if this is how they are treating Irish citizens and other

people, how are they treating Palestinians, people we cannot see? I think we all think that and we can all imagine exactly what has been happening. That is why we need to do everything we can over the next while, in the coming weeks, myself at the Trade Council this week and then in the coming weeks, to make sure that Europe moves. I am pleased to say that the statements and much of the actions we have seen across Europe and internationally have been to condemn these actions and to call for some form of accountability from Israel.

Foreign Policy

3. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade her view on the need for international pressure to vindicate the right of Western Sahara to self-determination, and the Government's relations with the SADR; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38409/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: From one occupied territory to another, albeit one that probably has received less attention, maybe one of the least discussed occupations in the world. It certainly does not get enough attention. I refer to the issue of Western Sahara, or the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. It is considered to be a non-self-governing territory but it is largely occupied by the Kingdom of Morocco. The Irish Government needs to continue to take a firm position in defence of international law on this. Unfortunately, many other countries are moving away from that.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): On 31 October 2025, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 2797, extending the mandate of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, MINURSO, for one year until 31 October 2026. Ireland is not currently a member of the United Nations Security Council but has taken note of Resolution 2797. Ireland's position on Western Sahara has been and continues to be guided by the aim of achieving a just and lasting political solution that will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara.

Ireland's engagement on this issue will also continue to take account of the role of, and the insights provided by, the Personal Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Western Sahara, Staffan de Mistura. Any outcome should be consistent with the principles and purposes of the Charter of the United Nations, including the fundamental principle in international law of the right of peoples to self-determination. It is in this spirit that Ireland will continue to support UN-led efforts to achieve a solution to this long-standing dispute.

Officials at the headquarters of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and in the mission network continue to be in contact with relevant parties to the dispute in this regard. Ireland shares the concerns expressed by the Personal Envoy of the Secretary General for Western Sahara, Staffan De Mistura, and MINURSO, the UN Peacekeeping Mission in Western Sahara, concerning the recent attacks by the Frente Polisario near Smara. The Personal Envoy, Staffan De Mistura, has emphasised that this is a time for dialogue and negotiations, not a time for military escalation.

Any relevant developments will continue to be kept under close review, including in the context of EU and UN discussions. The United Nations recognises Western Sahara as a non-

self-governing territory under international law, specifically Chapter XI of the United Nations Charter.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic is 50 years old now. To put on record the context here, it is currently occupied by the Kingdom of Morocco. MINURSO was set up in order to safeguard and facilitate a referendum. That was in 1991. There has been no referendum. Discussions in the early and late 2000s about a referendum delivered no referendum. The fundamental principle here is that of self-determination but the Sahrawi people, the vast bulk of whom are in exile, with the bulk of the population living in refugee camps in southern Algeria, have been denied that right to self-determination for decades, for generations. I appreciate that the Irish Government has taken the right position on many resolutions but it may need to take a more robust position because the positions of other governments are beginning to slide away from that principle of self-determination. That needs to be challenged by the Irish Government.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I would like to pick the Deputy up on that last point because I think in all our discussions we always try to find areas of agreement, even when there are certain areas of disagreement on technical matters. This is one area that is really concerning for us. We have a very clear process in place. I appreciate the Deputy's thoughts that it is going far too slow and that in some persons' opinions it is not fully engaged with the Sahrawi people in the broadest sense, be they resident or non-resident, or, as he rightly says, in refugee camps. However, the position is consistent with international law and has been respectfully pushed at a UN level. Ireland absolutely stands by that position and will absolutely make sure that support for the UN resolution and, crucially, the implementation of international law will be updated. I would be more than happy to work directly with the Deputy to see where we can push back against any backsliding in that regard.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I appreciate that and appreciate the sentiment, and I believe that where we can work together we should do so. As regards people feeling that progress is not fast enough, there is no progress. There is no process, in truth. The only process that exists is the peacekeeping mission that, in theory, is to facilitate a referendum but there is no sign of that. Ultimately, the Moroccan Government believes that it has got away with this, that it has ultimately succeeded in its objective, that it has occupied the territory and that that will not be in any way affected. I believe, therefore, that the Irish Government and like-minded governments need to begin to escalate this issue. The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic is a full member of the African Union. It is recognised by dozens of countries around the world. I ask the Irish Government whether it considers that the national council, the legislative council, of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic is considered the legitimate representatives of the Sahrawi people. Does the Government recognise that?

Deputy Neale Richmond: Yes, the progress towards a referendum or any process of self-determination has been painfully slow but it is not straightforward simply to engage with the people because there are very clearly conflicting opinions here and, as a country outside that seeks to be supportive crucially of what this really is, it is a peace process. What went before 1991 was a brutal conflict that cost many lives, and what has come after may be frustrating and may not be the true fulfilment of what certain people want, but I would argue it is better than

what went before. The process is sadly at risk based on isolated and sporadic incidences of violence in the region. Certainly, from an Irish Government point of view, the most important thing is not making binary choices and not making declarations; it is upholding the very real process, particularly in a wider context. We are at a time when international law and the rule of law are under threat.

We have a UN process, we support the UN process and we will continue to support that and make sure that process leads to an outcome that continues and maintains what is, to some extent, a relatively fragile peace.

Foreign Conflicts

6. **Deputy Catherine Callaghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for an update on the level of support being offered by her Department to the ongoing situation in Sudan; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38554/26]

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: Listening to the debate today it is very clear, even in the modern world, the one thing that remains is that man's inhumanity to man is quite staggering sometimes. I ask the Minister of State for an update on the level of support that is being delivered by his Department in response to the humanitarian crisis that is currently unfolding in Sudan.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am very grateful to the Deputy for raising this. I acknowledge the consistent effort by both Deputies Ó Laoghaire and Smith to raise this in a constructive manner. The conflict in Sudan, which has continued for over three years, is causing devastating levels of hunger and displacement. This year, two out of every three people in Sudan are in need of humanitarian assistance. We are seriously concerned by the escalation of violence in the Kordofan and Blue Nile states, and the expected intensification of conflict in North Darfur. I attended the third international Sudan Conference in Berlin on 15 April. The EU and its member states, including Ireland, pledged over €812 million in humanitarian assistance to support people in Sudan and to respond to the regional refugee crisis. Ireland will significantly increase our humanitarian assistance this year, from over €14.3 million provided in 2025 to somewhere in the region of €21 million this year. Our assistance is channelled through trusted partners, including the UN, international organisations, Irish aid organisations and, crucially, their local partners. Findings from a visit by Department officials to the Chadian-Sudanese border in January will help shape our response in addressing the complex humanitarian needs of those affected. This includes a continued focus on providing assistance to vulnerable people who are hardest to reach, including women and girls, who are seriously affected by sexual and gender-based violence.

"Sexual and gender-based violence" is a term we use in these discussions but we rarely go into the detail. Having sat and met a number of survivors from the region on a visit not so long ago to the Horn of Africa, it is the most devastating conversation when you have to listen to someone who bore witness to seeing their 13-year-old niece raped by 15 men at one time in the face of their family being used as a tool of war. This is what sexual and gender-based violence is. We have a proud record in this country, led by the Minister, Deputy McEntee, in her time in the Department of justice, of clamping down on domestic violence, but we are seeing it

harrowingly used as a tool of war in the most depraved manner in the most vulnerable situations. That is why, in addition to addressing the humanitarian crisis and ensuring the protection of civilians and humanitarian workers, it is vital to explore all avenues towards an urgent, credible and inclusive Sudanese-led political situation.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit for that response. It is harrowing to hear that level of violence towards women and girls. I commend the principled and robust measures Ireland has undertaken in this conflict. The increasing use of armed drones in Sudan and the targeting of civilian infrastructure such as the health facilities and Khartoum's international airport, are indicative of a conflict that is widening at an alarming rate. While the fighting rages, it is becoming more and more difficult to tend to the dire humanitarian needs of the Sudanese people. Just under half of the entire Sudanese people, as the Minister of State said, or some 21 million people, are facing crisis levels of hunger because of this conflict. That is why it is imperative that we, as members of the EU, use every lever at our disposal to not only advocate for financial and humanitarian supports to be made available, but to call for a negotiated and enduring ceasefire. How does the Department intend to utilise its position as Chair of the EU Foreign Affairs Council during Ireland's Presidency to ensure peace in Sudan remains firmly on the agenda?

Deputy Neale Richmond: Over the past three years, Ireland has been consistent at a Foreign Affairs Council level, be it the full Council, the development formation in which I sit, or the defence formation, in making sure Sudan is on the agenda and that does not slip from the focus of European partners. What is happening in Sudan will end up on our doorstep in due course, when we see mass movement of people, the real impact on the wider political situation and the fragility in the area, but also when we see the spread of energy and food insecurity and how that feeds in. Ireland will ensure going forward, as we take over the Presidency on 1 July, that this remains a key issue for Europe and that Europe stands by the political pressure to bring peace to the area, to ensure the blockage embargo of weapons going into the region is upheld - something that is undermined greatly, including by EU member states, I regret to say - but also, crucially, to ensure the finance from the European Union, as well as bilaterally from member states, is maintained.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: That is very welcome news. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. Latest figures show that almost 7 million people have been displaced by fighting in Sudan; the largest number of internally displaced people globally. Neighbouring countries impacted by this emergency such as Chad, Egypt and South Sudan, are hosting large numbers of refugees and internally displaced people on insufficient levels of humanitarian funding. To compound the problem, there is the downturn in aid funding from other countries. I acknowledge that Ireland has continued to increase funding, and the Minister of State mentioned contributed €21 million towards Sudan and towards aid this year but the overall downturn we are seeing in the international community means that dealing with displaced refugees will only become more difficult for these countries in the region. At a time some of the most developed countries in the world are slashing aid budgets, I am heartened, as we have mentioned, by the principle role Ireland continues to play in funding humanitarian causes. Is this something the Minister of State intends to build on going forward?

Deputy Neale Richmond: The short answer is "Yes" but I will give a little more detail to the context of how we do that. In recent years, Ireland's humanitarian support has included funding to the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA, country-based pooled fund, the UN population fund and the International Rescue Committee to target people most in need, particularly women and girls for aforementioned reasons. OCHA's Sudan pool is our largest partner in humanitarian response. This fund is a rapid and flexible funding mechanism, which supports national and international aid organisations and UN agencies to work in co-ordination with local partners to respond to chronic and emerging needs. The fund has received a major injection of funding from the US Government of €200 million. Our support to Irish Aid partner organisations including GOAL, Trócaire and Concern has enabled life-saving assistance to reach the most vulnerable communities, and we work consistently with the UN Refugee Agency, the International Committee of the Red Cross in Chad, Sudan and South Sudan. Ireland will continue to be a trusted partner. When we see development budgets being slashed by other member states it has a very real consequence. We have famine in Sudan due to the conflict there, but due to the cuts in aid and development it is harder to get a humanitarian response to starving children. We see an ebola outbreak in the DRC that is spreading in a virulent manner that is being affected by health systems that have been absolutely destroyed due to aid cuts. Our actions, or the inaction of our partners, have very real consequences that we will be dealing with for years to come.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Cybersecurity Policy

7. **Deputy Catherine Ardagh** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for a report on the discussion on efforts to tackle hybrid threats and disinformation at the EU General Affairs Council on 11 May 2026. [37994/26]

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I ask the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for a report of the discussions and efforts to tackle hybrid threats and disinformation at the EU General Affairs Council on 11 May 2026.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I attended the informal General Affairs Council in Lefkosi, Nicosia, in Cyprus on 11 May. Hybrid threats, of course, including foreign information manipulation and interference, FIMI, represent a serious political and security challenge for the EU and our partners. Ireland continues to work together with our EU counterparts to counter such activities. The work includes implementation of the EU's hybrid, cyber and foreign information manipulation and interference toolboxes. Together, these provide a range of measures, which enable us to identify, deter, mitigate and respond to disinformation and interference campaigns, including through the imposition of restrictive measures where appropriate. Disinformation, more broadly, is a serious challenge, which must be met with a whole-of-society response. Our national counter disinformation strategy sets out commitments and actions to help counter this complex problem.

At the EU General Affairs Council informal meeting in Cyprus on 11 May we discussed all these issues. At the meeting, EU ministers were joined by the UK Minister for the Constitution

and EU Relations, Nick Thomas-Symonds, MP, which I welcome, for an exchange on efforts to tackle foreign information manipulation and interference. The participation of the UK minister is a recognition of the importance of engaging with close partners on the issue. At the discussions in the informal meeting we focused on EU-UK co-operation on countering FIMI, and we reaffirmed that this is a shared and evolving threat, which requires a coordinated European response. In that context, we welcomed the UK minister, noting the common challenges we face across Europe in tackling threats against the stability, social cohesion and democratic nature of our countries.

We exchange best practice. We focus on how to strengthen co-operation, co-ordinate international efforts and build resilience, including through the European Democracy Shield and the European Centre for Democratic Resilience. We underlined the need to strengthen co-ordination in multilateral forums and to enhance resilience in the digital space.

Responding to hybrid threats and activity is a priority for the Government and for EU partners. During our Presidency, we will work to help the EU in navigating our complex and evolving threat environment and we will work to progress the EU agenda on countering hybrid threats.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister for his response. We frequently underestimate the extent to which as a country we face hybrid threats and cyber threats. There are two areas I want to focus on. One is during our EU Presidency, when we hold events here in Ireland but also when we hold meetings of the European political community. There are also challenges and responsibilities for us, as TDs and Senators. We are at risk of hybrid attacks during the EU Presidency. We have heard at the AI committee the extent to which we are ready. I question whether we are ready for AI-enabled drone attacks during that period. Because of hybrid warfare, there are going to be efforts by malign actors to influence TDs and Senators and it is crucial that we are also aware of efforts to destabilise our political institutions and to influence political opinion.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Government is committed to delivering a successful Presidency. We continue to engage closely with EU partners and An Garda Síochána as the preparations accelerate. The scale and significance of Presidency events that are planned to take place in Ireland mean that unprecedented security considerations arise, certainly for the European political community meeting. That will be the largest ever meeting of its type in Ireland. The security arrangements that will be put in place will reflect the wider backdrop of a changed EU security landscape and a more complex threat environment.

When we look back to the Presidency of 2004, while I will not say there was a level of informality, the security considerations were nowhere near what they are now. We will see a difference. Work is under way, led by the Garda Síochána and the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration in planning the security and policing requirements. That includes liaising continuously with policing and security partners across the European Union.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I welcome the co-operation between ourselves and our European partners but the Minister of State will be aware that during the Danish Presidency in the second

half of last year, we saw a number of efforts by drones to interfere in and disrupt an EU Council meeting. I have no doubt we will see that again by malign actors during our Presidency.

I would also ask - I am really serious about this - about efforts by malign states to influence Oireachtas Members, which will in various ways and through various inducements try to persuade Members of these Houses of the merits or demerits of particular policy proposals. When we talk about neutrality and security, we do not sufficiently engage in issues around what is happening with regard to cyber threats and hybrid threats. I genuinely believe there needs to be a programme of education for Members of these Houses about the potential threats that we individually face.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: The Deputy is certainly not wrong. I agree with him. There is huge potential for people to be influenced in an unwitting way in most cases. The test that I always try and put forward is what is in the best interest of this country, not what is in the best interest of a particular ideology.

Counter-drone capability will be very important for events during the Presidency. As the Deputy said, the airport was closed in Denmark during some of their major meetings because of drone activity. Lithuania takes the Presidency after us. Its airports have been closed on occasion because of balloons coming in from Belarus. The question is not whether this would happen, but how we deal with it when something does happen, whether that is drones or hybrid activity.

We are committed to ensuring the State is equipped to counter-threats posed by drones, through a combination of investment in domestic capability and through international partnerships if it is appropriate. An Garda Síochána is responsible for this. It has counter-drone capacity in place in terms of both detection and mitigation. The Garda continues to build capacity. Additional funding has been given by the Government for this as well. The Defence Forces have an important role to play and they are also making significant investments in this.

Passport Services

8. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if she intends to open a passport office in the North of Ireland. [37792/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It is a busy time of the year for the Passport Office. We had a very good briefing from its officials yesterday. It was very useful. I thank the team for that. They offer an excellent service. There was a lot in the presentation about their ambition for the future with some positive aspects. Given the increased workload they face and the significant percentage of passport applications that come from the Six Counties, it makes sense to have a passport office in Belfast. That is something we have been continually looking for. The logic for it is very clear.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank those who attended the briefing yesterday. It was a good discussion and an opportunity to make sure that every Deputy is able to support their constituents, in particular where people need passports quickly for various reasons. I thank all

of the team in the Passport Office. Every year the demand increases and there is huge pressure on the staff, so I thank them for the work that they do.

Demand for passports from citizens in Northern Ireland has continued to increase and remain steady. To date in 2026, 12% of all passports that have been issued have been to residents of Northern Ireland. The passport online service offers citizens the ability to apply for passports online 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That applies to absolutely everybody, and it is available to 100% of applicants globally, not just on the island. Currently, 96% of all applicants use the passport online service. It is worth noting that just 1% of all passports issue through the public counters. This is a really good statistic because over the years we have been advocating that people apply online. A lot of money and investment has gone into the online system. It is actually quicker and easier to turn around and it is a much more efficient system for everybody no matter where they are applying from.

Last year, 91% of citizens resident in Northern Ireland applied through passport online. I did not have the figure the other evening in committee but since then I have been informed that it has increased to 97% this year. In the first four months of this year, 97% of passport applications from citizens in Northern Ireland were through the online portal.

In December, a new passport assist service launched to support citizens who do not wish to use passport online because we do have a cohort who still perhaps might find it difficult. They might not have somebody to support them or they might not have access to an online system. This is to assist them in making that paper passport application. Citizens can call the dedicated passport assist number as well to receive personalised paper forms along with a bespoke list of documents required that they post back to the passport service through their local post office. This is an all-island service that enhances the paper application route by offering direct assistance to citizens.

There are no plans to open an office in the North. We closed the office that we had in London for the reason that I have outlined: we are moving to a situation where the vast majority of people who apply do so online. Of course we still need to make sure that we offer a counter service for people and that is why the offices in Dublin and Cork will remain open. There are no plans to go beyond that at the moment.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: That gives the logic itself, if the Minister is making the case for having physical offices at all, then the same case could be made in terms of the North whether Belfast or somewhere else.

Since the Good Friday Agreement, one of the primary and practical ways in which people who identify as Irish in the North vindicate that right and identity is to apply for an Irish passport. It is the case that increasing numbers of people apply for an Irish passport. It makes sense for people to be able to access this. It is welcome that a huge percentage of applications are online. It is efficient and it is an excellent service. I pay tribute to the staff in the office. We hear excellent reports about people applying and their passport nearly appearing the next day but it would make sense to have an office in the North. It does not necessarily have to be the case that they are only dealing with the counter stuff. If we have an office and the staff are in a position to deal with the counter stuff, that does not mean they could not do some of the back office stuff as well. We talk about the increase in foreign birth registration cases. Perhaps a team in Belfast could take some of that workload. Could some of that work be redistributed

to a different office? There are various other aspects of renewing and advancing the service. I ask the Minister to give it further consideration.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I appreciate the points the Deputy made but we have to balance things as well. We have a really efficient office at the moment where we know that so far this year 97% of citizens in the North are applying through the online system. When we look at the overall figures, if 1% is using the counter service, it amounts to 496 - just under 500 citizens - that are using the urgent appointment service and the in-person service.

The argument that the Deputy makes is not around distance because if a person is in Galway and they have to travel to Dublin or Cork, they probably have a longer distance to travel than if they were in the North. However, we also have to look at what we are investing in terms of the overall costs. We have had many discussions on this floor around making sure that anything we invest in is sufficient. For example, if we put up an office, the operational costs for 100 staff or so is estimated to cost approximately €6.8 million per annum. That is potentially for the 469 customers who would be applying and availing of this appointment service in person, so we have to balance all of this out.

We have an Oireachtas line, as I told the Deputy's colleague when I engaged with them this week. We have a line where Deputies and colleagues can deal directly with the service if there are queries that our constituents raise. I am happy to look at whether it or something similar could be made available to colleagues in the North and to see if we can have that direct line. However, this is about making sure that our focus is on prioritising how we can do things more quickly and efficiently, and that there are efficiencies in terms of cost overall, but most importantly that everybody has access to the same type of service on an all-island basis. That is what I am determined and committed to do.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I welcome that last suggestion. It would be very welcome because it can be a challenge for MLAs and MPs in dealing with this. Sometimes they seek assistance through us and sometimes they try to come at it through general inquiries. It makes sense. These are elected representatives who are working on behalf of Irish citizens who have an entitlement to a passport, so it makes sense for them to be able to access that direct line, particularly for challenging cases.

Just as in the Twenty-six Counties in the South, most people in the North will be able to apply online and so on and get it without any difficulties, but there will always be emergency and complicated cases. I welcome the statement the Minister made and perhaps we can explore it further by correspondence because it would be very beneficial.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I am happy to follow up on that. I want to use my time to encourage people, particularly given the time of the year, to check their passports, look at the date and make sure that it is submitted in time. If they are travelling somewhere where they need more than six months, even if it is out by a day, it obviously causes difficulties, so the earlier they can check and apply for a passport, the better. While it has become a really efficient service, if someone is applying for a child for the first time, there are often difficulties and challenges with photos and making sure they can be followed up with An Garda Síochána or the person who signed it. I encourage anyone who is listening and colleagues to let their constituents and

those in their counties know that it is really important to apply on time, but we are obviously here to assist and support where that is not possible as well.

Trade Agreements

9. **Deputy Tom Brabazon** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if she will report on the political agreement at the recent EU Foreign Affairs Council to move forward with targeted sanctions *vis-à-vis* extremist settlers and entities supporting settlements in the West Bank. [37999/26]

35. **Deputy Catherine Callaghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for an update on the status of the EU-Israel association agreement; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38376/26]

36. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the action she is pursuing at EU level with regard to the growing violence and the expansion of settlements in the West Bank; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38025/26]

44. **Deputy Tom Brabazon** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if she will report on the discussion at the recent EU Foreign Affairs Council of further policy options regarding the West Bank, including trade-related measures concerning the import of products from the settlements; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38000/26]

55. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the discussions she has had at EU and UN level regarding the reported escalation of settler violence, forced displacement and settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank; the specific measures Ireland is advocating for to ensure accountability under international law; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38374/26]

83. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade considering that Israel is continuously violating international law by breaking the ceasefire agreement in Gaza and escalating violence in the West Bank, as well as attacks on civilians in Lebanon and approval of the death penalty for Palestinian prisoners by the Israeli Parliament, the practical and immediate sanctions against the State of Israel she is considering and proposing to other EU counterparts; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38225/26]

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I ask the Minister to report on the political agreement at the recent meeting of the EU Foreign Affairs Council to move forward with targeted sanctions *vis-à-vis* extremist settlers and entities supporting settlements in the West Bank.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I propose to take Questions Nos. 9, 35, 36, 44, 55 and 83.

As was the case with my previous answer, there are quite a number of different things happening and I want to set things out clearly. From a European perspective and context, I will take the House back to last year. Prior to me coming into this Department and at a time when there was continuing escalating violence in Gaza and there was no end in sight, the Tánaiste,

Deputy Harris, advocated for sanctions to be put on the table by the Commission that would suspend the EU-Israel association agreement, with a particular focus on the trade elements of it. We also advocated for sanctions against violent settlers in the West Bank because we have seen over time how violent settlers and the actions they are taking have increased significantly in recent years. They were not voted on at the time. There was a ceasefire even though we know that the ceasefire is not being held and that there are significant issues with it, not least the lack of humanitarian aid that is getting in, but also the fact that hundreds of people have been killed since it started.

We have continued to advocate for sanctions at a European level since then as we are conscious of what continues to happen and what has been happening specifically in the West Bank where cities of literally hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced. It is not towns and villages. Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced.

Since taking up this role in recent months, I have advocated that these sanctions and the proposals by the Commission would be put back on the table. At last week's meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council, we did just that. The Commission's proposal from last year was to sanction violent settlers in the West Bank and those who support them, including Ministers within the Israeli Government. The leaders in Hamas who carried out the atrocities that started so much of what we are talking about would also be sanctioned. That was voted on and agreed. It was agreed because of the pressure that we put on but also the fact that Hungary has changed its position. I welcome that, and I hope to see it continue in any future vote. What we have advocated for since then, and what I advocated for at the last Council meeting, is that we would have further votes at the next meeting that will take place in early June.

We also have a second Commission proposal that is still on the table from last year. This is to suspend the trade elements of the EU-Israel association agreement. This is where there is essentially preferential treatment across of all our agreements, including trade agreements, with Israel. If this was suspended, it would be at a cost of billions of euro for the Israeli economy. We have not only clearly asked for this to be put on the table but have also said that we would vote for it.

Along with other colleagues, I have also been advocating for a further proposal by the Commission that would essentially ban trade in the occupied territories in the West Bank. This is in line with what we know should be implemented. We know that these settlements are illegal and that trade with these settlements is illegal, so we want to make sure that Europe responds to this and does so collectively because I believe, and I think we all believe in this House, that this is the strongest way in which we can send a very clear message.

It will also impact the Israeli Government and the actions it has taken. Since we have had these discussions over the past number of months, Israel has not only continued to increase its settlement policy and done so very publicly in the West Bank, but it has also reintroduced the death penalty, which is taking a step hundreds of years back. It has now said that it will have public prosecutions as well as executions. We have all been talking about what has happened in the last few days and seen the way in which Irish citizens and many other countries' citizens have been treated after being illegally detained in international waters. We need to act in unison, and we need Europe to respond, and that is what I have been advocating for.

I want to clarify again that the reason we have advocated for the trade side of things is because this requires qualified majority voting, QMV, in the Parliament. It requires the vote of 55% of member states whereas if we were to propose other possible sanctions, they may require unanimity. We just know - I am sitting around those tables - that there are countries that will not support them. I have been trying to build a consensus so that we will have this vote at the next European Council and Foreign Affairs Council meetings. I have written again and engaged with Kaja Kallas, who is the chair of the Council, to advocate that this will happen, and I hope that member states will support this. We saw the condemnation right across the EU yesterday. There were public comments not just in the EU but also internationally, and I hope that this is a turning point for people, and we can respond collectively.

Separate to that at home, the Government made a clear commitment that it would enact the occupied territories Bill. This Bill was published last summer. The Department and I have been engaging directly with the Attorney General on this. I am saying clearly this morning that I will bring forward the occupied territories Bill. I will publish legislation in the coming weeks, and we will enact this separate to and in parallel with what is happening at a European level. It is important that we agree at a European level to do this, but it is also important that we progress the legislation that we have said we are committed to and we have been working on. We will work collectively with colleagues because that is something that everybody in this House will support. The last few days have shown us that we need to change the behaviour of the Israeli Government.

I want to reassure colleagues that we continue to engage with the Israeli authorities in relation to our citizens. We have 14 citizens who are detained on land in Israel. They, along with the other countries' citizens, are now in a convoy of buses to the airport and they will be deported to Istanbul from there. Our embassy team is on the way to the airport as well to make sure we have direct engagement with them. We have raised in no uncertain terms, as have other member states, the horror and dissatisfaction at the way in which our citizens have been treated. That is why we now need to make sure that these are not just words we are saying. We need to make sure we follow them through with actions at the next European Council and Foreign Affairs Council meetings.

I will also be raising this at the Trade Council this week. It will be the first time that it will be raised at the Trade Council and the vote will then take place at the later Council meetings.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister. I appreciate her comprehensive answer in this regard. I believe that she reflects the views of everybody in this House when she expresses the concerns of Irish people over what has been happening in the West Bank.

10 o'clock

I was struck when listening this week to the Catholic Bishop William Shomali, who I understand the Minister met with. He spoke on it and referred to "really nasty" actions on the part of some of the settlers. Their behaviour is, frankly, appalling. He asked where we need to go beyond this. Ultimately it is about how we can secure a lasting peace in Gaza but also in the West Bank, and what we need to do. He spoke very clearly about our peace process here. For individuals like that we must continue to engage with him and support him. I agree with the Minister that the more action we can take at a European level collectively, the more impact it will have.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I welcome the Minister's comment. I listened very carefully to her interview on Monday with Gavan Reilly. It has outlined a process of the Minister's intention regarding where we go in respect of the occupied territories Bill and also at an EU level. This week on Tuesday, a constituent of mine, Mikey Cullen, rang me from the flotilla. Incidentally, he is the third constituent of mine on different flotillas. We agreed and disagreed on different things as he was floating off in the Mediterranean. What is utterly unacceptable is that in what is effectively international waters, Israel can take constituents of mine from a boat, forcibly put them through a process to say that they illegally entered either Israel or Gaza, then humiliate them on video and send them back to Istanbul. I know the Minister rejects that. I know the Government rejects that. The three constituents would tell me that it is nothing in comparison to what the people of Gaza and other people in the West Bank have been through. I ask the Minister to continue to take strong action on this issue.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Just a few days ago every single one of the Irish Global Sumud aid flotilla activists put out a video while they were on the boats, before they were kidnapped, asking the Government to support a sanctions Bill last night. The Government, after issuing statements condemning their kidnapping and abuse at the hands of the violent settler, Itamar Ben-Gvir, trooped in here and voted against a Bill proposing sanctions against the State of Israel, having said just before that there should be no business-as-usual with the Israeli regime. That regime is guilty not just of the abuse of the flotilla activists, which is disgusting and has given us a glimpse of its barbarism, but also the brutality that is inflicted on the Palestinian prisoners who are tortured and abused. There is a genocide in Gaza, there is ethnic cleansing happening, there is apartheid and there is brutal suppression of rights, and the Government voted against imposing sanctions on them when the activists on the flotilla appealed to the Government to vote for it. The Government is gaslighting the Irish public.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I commend those on the Global Sumud flotilla. It is a deep shame that people still have to do that to highlight the absolute criminality, that has not been brought to book, of the Israeli regime. We have all been disgusted by the video of Ben-Gvir, who is obviously a thug, a genocidal criminal and an idiot. When most people commit crimes, they do not actually put them on video. This is a guy who has been accused of being a draft-dodger by brothers in arms and his defence was that he was not allowed in the IDF because of his views. That just tells you. He is only one element of Netanyahu's regime. What are we talking about? The death penalty for Palestinians; genocide in Gaza; ethnic cleansing in Lebanon, which many of our peacekeepers have seen; and the attempt to create enough settlements to destroy any chance of a Palestinian state.

The Ministers said that this is not a time for words alone, so we need to see action. We all want to see consensus, we all want to see co-operation across Europe, but we need to see the occupied territories Bill passed, including goods and services. It is an absolute disgrace that the EU-Israel association agreement is still in operation. What interaction has the Minister had regarding ensuring that there will be delivery, even if only on the trade element?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputies. It is important that it was asked what our longer term objective is. We cannot lose sight of that even though it seems impossible in some ways that a two-state solution would still be a focus and a priority. It has to be. That is why

Ireland continues to be actively involved in the global alliance on the two-state solution. That is why I hosted, with others, a conference in Croke Park at the beginning of this year where we explained and set out our own experience of what has happened in the North and how, at times, when it seemed a peace process would be impossible, we worked at it and it is something we are still working on. I discussed with Bishop William Shomali how we are focused on a two-state solution and what that looks like despite all of the complications and difficulties we are in at the moment.

Whether people agree or disagree with the approach taken by the flotilla, I certainly understand why people have taken that approach. People in Ireland feel they want to do something. Many feel they cannot and these types of actions have been taken. I am very clear, whether you agree or disagree with it, that they were illegally detained in international waters. It is completely against the law and that is why I and other countries have, in the strongest terms possible, objected to this. I have raised this at the highest level and I will continue to push for change and response at an EU level. I have been doing that this week and for the last number of weeks.

In terms of the sanctions Bill, an outright blanket ban has no legal basis. Trade is an EU competency. We all know that.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: No, we do not. No, we do not. No, we do not.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Trade is an EU competency; we all know this. However, when it comes to the issue-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): The Deputy will have a chance to speak in a minute.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The genocide convention. Read it. Read it. Read the genocide convention.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): Deputy Boyd Barrett will have his opportunity in a minute.

Deputy Helen McEntee: If the Deputy does not want to hear the answer, that is fine. Even in the situation in Russia, we do not have the blanket ban that was being proposed on this. Let us be clear on that.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is rubbish, rubbish, rubbish. Read the genocide convention.

Deputy Helen McEntee: There are unintended consequences for citizens. There are citizens in Israel who do not-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Read the genocide convention.

Deputy Neale Richmond: We have.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): The Minister without interruption, please.

Deputy Helen McEntee: There are citizens in Israel who do not agree with what the Israeli Government is doing. Imposing a blanket ban in the way the Deputy is suggesting, in a way we have not imposed with Russia or any other country, is imposing a blanket ban. It is also an EU competency and that is why we are advocating for the suspension of the EU-Israel trade association agreement at an EU level.

Separately, the occupied territories Bill is specific to the occupied territories. This has already been made very clear in international law and the EU agrees. They are illegally occupied territories. That is why we are pursuing the occupied territories Bill and that is why I will publish legislation in the coming weeks. In tandem with that, we will pursue action at an EU level when it comes to the overall trade association agreement.

We must make sure we do not lose sight of the fact that in Gaza there are still millions of people who are not getting access to appropriate humanitarian aid, food and water. They are not getting the assistance they need. We must focus on the fact that Palestinian authorities still have billions of euro owed to them by the Israeli Government that they are not being given. We have to remain focused on the fact-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: No sanctions. No sanctions.

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----that the second stage of the peace agreement is not progressing because our efforts are focused on all the other conflicts that are happening. I and this Government are, at every step of the way, making sure our focus remains on this while trying to build a consensus as I have just outlined.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister for her response and I think it is the correct approach. We need to start to think about what the ultimate goal is regarding what we are achieving. We all want to achieve peace. There is no disagreement in this House about achieving peace and getting away from the horrors we are facing right now. I was really struck when I listened to some of the interviews with Bishop Shomali where he said it is going to be about bringing the people together including, as the Minister said, many of the people within Israel who object to what the Netanyahu Government is doing. Given our own experience on this island, we can provide very valuable lessons. It is about where we want to see west Asia in the next five years. What is the goal we want to achieve? It is not always about the short-term solution; it is about how we can provide a sustainable peace whereby the peoples who live within that region can work co-operatively. I commend the Minister's approach and believe that co-operating at European level is also essential.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I raised the case of Mikey Cullen and, as I said, there are two other constituents of mine, Robert Murphy and Dougie Douglas, both of whom are out. The wider issue here has been well aired in the House. I agree with many of the points. I want to return

to the issue of three constituents of mine who have been taken from a boat in the Mediterranean. There must be a more rigorous process other than us issuing a press release to condemn what has happened to those three constituents and Irish citizens. Each of them would say it is nothing in comparison to what the people of Gaza have been through.

There must be a process where innocent Irish citizens who are going about their business in the world cannot be taken by a third-party state and be detained without any process or be forced to participate in a process to say they illegally entered Israel. Many will say that that is the intention of the flotilla but the point is - and where Israel continuously makes errors - they did not enter into an Israeli-controlled area. They should not have been taken from that boat. The Irish Government must take very strong action against Israel on this and on a whole host of other issues.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Deputy McAuliffe's constituents asked him to vote for the sanctions Bill and he walked in here and voted against it. All of the Irish participants specifically asked their constituency TDs, Government and Opposition, to vote for the sanctions Bill but the Government TDs voted against it. Then they come in here saying there should be sanctions against Israel. That is gaslighting and duplicity which is designed to convey the impression that the Government is going to do something when it has done nothing. It is the impunity that Israel has been extended by our Government and by the EU that emboldens it. They say they can do anything. They can torture people, commit genocide, kidnap people on the high seas, do apartheid, invade Lebanon and bomb Iran and that nobody is going to do anything. So far, they have been proven right because nobody in this Government has done anything. We continue the complicity.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: When we talk about the Global Sumud Flotilla and what the Israelis are doing, what is it? It is kidnapping on international waters. This is absolutely illegal but they do not care. They do not care about anything and that is a fact. We always talk about apartheid South Africa and how it took many factors but one of the major ones was that they were taken to task, they were sanctioned and individual South Africans were made to feel like the pariahs of the world. That put pressure on their government and then they could not trade with anybody, so big business said it needed to get out of that circumstance. That is what brought them to the book, so that is why we need to see action, not words. On the EU-Israel Association Agreement and the trade element, what interaction has the Minister had from a point of view of ensuring even that can be delivered? The Minister has given a promise now of a couple of weeks in relation to the occupied territories Bill. We really need to see it. I get that it is not the be-all and the end-all but it is a decent first step and we will be followed by others because they are an absolute disgrace, they are genocidal maniacs and they have to be brought to book, and we have to do whatever we can.

Deputy Helen McEntee: On the EU-Israel Association Agreement, before the last meeting I wrote directly to the High Representative, Kaja Kallas, to ask that this issue be put on the agenda. I engaged with other colleagues who also signed that letter, Spain and Slovenia in particular. While the vote was specifically was on the sanction of violent settlers. I advocated again in the Council meeting with all our colleagues that this would be put to a vote. It was not put to a vote at the last meeting. I have advocated that it be put to a vote as soon as possible,

preferably at the next Council meeting, which is in early June. My team has been engaging with other countries to try to build the consensus that there would be a vote and that we would be voting on this but potentially - and it is my preference - that we would also vote on a new proposal that would ban trade in the illegally occupied territories. There are two options here but in relation to this, I have written to the High Representative. This has been shared with all the member states. We discussed it at the last meeting and I am pushing for it to be voted on.

In the conversation I had with Bishop Shomali, he spoke about the increasing violence. As someone who has lived in the region all his life, he spoke about the change he has seen. Actually what struck me was the fact that he spoke about how he works with people from both sides, from Israel and Palestine, and how he sees a hopeful future and how he still sees an opportunity for Israel and Palestine and for the Israelis and Palestinians to live side by side. This gave me a sense that people on the ground still have that hope and that we need to continue to focus on that overall objective and that goal, as difficult as it might seem.

In terms of the flotilla, again, I cannot condemn in any stronger way possible the actions by the Israeli Government in illegally detaining Irish and other citizens in international waters. It is completely against international law. We have stressed this but at this stage the only way we can take firm action is that the EU collectively responds by suspending the trade element of the association agreement and that we move to ban trade in the illegal settlements as well. At home, I have given that clear commitment again. I will bring forward legislation in the coming weeks. There are many people who do not agree with the sanctions Bill that was put forward because it is a blanket ban.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: All the Palestinians do-----

Deputy Helen McEntee: I am sorry but-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----and all the flotilla activists do.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I have spoken to many people. We do not impose it in any other sanctions regime because-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We did it with South Africa.

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----there will be unintended consequences for citizens who do not agree with the actions being taken by Israel, Netanyahu or any of those members of the IDF who have breached international law.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Name a single Palestinian against it.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I will work to build that consensus at a European level. I assure Deputies that those who were on the flotilla and who are on their way to the airport will be met by our officials to make sure they are safe and supported.

Trade Promotion

10. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for an update on the Government trade forum; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37942/26]

31. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade when the Government trade forum will next meet; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38378/26]

51. **Deputy William Aird** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for an update on the latest Government trade forum meeting; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38315/26]

Deputy Tony McCormack: I ask the Minister for an update on the Government trade forum.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I propose to take Questions Nos. 10, 31 and 51 together.

I thank the Deputy for this question. The trade forum has become a vital form of engagement between Government, Departments and Ministers but also important key trading stakeholders during a very uncertain and challenging time for international trade. The information and, importantly, the real-time feedback received from the members is extremely valuable. The Tánaiste established this last year during his time in this role. The intention was to make sure that there was that two-way flow of information, particularly in light of what was happening with the US, and that there was an ability for Government to outline the actions it was taking and for individual Ministers in specific sectors to outline the actions they are taking and for sectors and industry to provide feedback to us. The make up of the committee is reflective of some of our most important sectors and some of our most important relationships, including with the US and the UK chambers. We also have representatives from chambers across Europe.

This is part of a more comprehensive and deliberative approach taken by the Government to make sure that Ireland's continued economic growth is resilient, so that despite all the uncertainty that we continue to focus on economic growth. This approach also includes the national development plan, which was published in recent months. We are moving to implement budget 2026 and we are now starting to talk about budget 2027 and the mutually supportive action plan and market diversification which was a real focus and priority for us, in particular during our visits for St. Patrick's Day this year, where that market diversification focus came through.

Regarding the action plan on competitiveness and productivity, the Deputy will be aware that competitiveness is one of the key overarching themes of our Presidency in the six months ahead. We want to make sure that not just Ireland but the EU as a whole remains competitive and open and are investing in research and innovation. To do that effectively, we need to always be listening to business. That is why this forum is invaluable because we are hearing directly back from those in business and getting their ideas as well as giving them an opportunity to highlight where there are challenges.

Agendas and minutes of the Government trade forum are published on *digitalhouseireland.ie*. Deputies can see that there is an approved work plan for 2026. We have tried to set out that we have an actual plan and that we are focused on various priorities at the different trade meetings. This year, I have convened three meetings of the forum and the minutes are available on *digitalhouseireland.ie*. My intention is to maintain that intensity of meetings. While a date has not yet been set, there will be another forum in June. This will give us an opportunity to focus on more key areas.

At the last forum, I was joined by the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance; the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, Deputy Chambers; the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Deputy Heydon; the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Lawless, and the Minister of State with responsibility for European affairs, Deputy Byrne. Other Government officials and CEOs from State agencies also attended. This was the 12th meeting we have had. In particular, we reflected on the recent St. Patrick's Day programme, which was the largest in the history of the State. It was welcomed by all of those at the meeting. When we look at the overall figures - not just the number of diaspora we managed to reach, which was really quite substantial but also at the number in the business community - about 6,500 people across the world attended different business events we hosted not just stateside but in South America, Europe, Asia-Pacific, Australia and Africa. There has been a huge focus on how we can identify more ways to open up trade, to support business to grow and to open up new markets as well.

We also focused on our engagement on our relationship with Canada. Unfortunately, a trade mission had to be postponed but that is a relationship that has grown from strength to strength. As we celebrate ten years of CETA and hope to ratify CETA this year, we can see that investment increasing significantly into the billions every year. There is a real opportunity to do more. In the coming weeks we will welcome further visitors from Canada, which will provide an opportunity to strengthen that relationship.

The EU-US trade relationship is certainly on the agenda of every meeting. I am pleased this week that the EU has agreed the pathway forward for our side of the Turnberry agreement. Before the summer and before we take over the EU Presidency, I hope that we can see significant progress on more areas and the priorities that we want to work closely with the US on. We are working closely with the Commission on issues relating to the agrifood sector, the aviation industry, medtech and other areas to make sure that we can support our industries here. The relationship with the US is strong. Zero tariffs benefit everybody and that is where we would like to get to. Tariffs are not good for business or consumers. We want to work closely with the US to make sure we can reduce tariffs where possible.

The ongoing conflict in the Gulf was a key focus point for the trade forum. It is safe to say that every business, large or small, I have met in the last number of weeks is experiencing the impact of the knock-on implications of what is happening in the Gulf, not least because of the cost of fuel. Of course, the price of commodities has continued to increase because of the conflict in Ukraine and now because of this ongoing conflict in the Gulf. It is important that we understand exactly how these conflicts are impacting sectors and how we can respond and provide supports and services. As the Deputy knows, in the last few weeks the Government has provided €750 million directly to individuals in their homes, but also to businesses to make

sure that they continue to be viable and a part of a growing economy in what has been a very challenging and difficult time.

The one thing that comes through from the forum is the demand and need for certainty in a time of uncertainty. That is what we have been striving to achieve, as well as supporting businesses.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I am delighted that the Minister has all the stakeholders involved in the forum and commend the work that has been done. I thank her for her comprehensive response.

In light of what has happened the last 24 hours, I hope she will forgive me for deviating a little from the question. I welcome her and the Taoiseach's remarks yesterday and again today on the Government's clear and principled position regarding the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, what happened last night and the importance of international law. People from all over the world are disgusted, including Israelis living in Israel and other parts of the world. Ireland has consistently shown leadership internationally on these issues. At a time when many people across Europe are calling for stronger action, it is important that Ireland continues to speak with clarity and moral authority at both EU and international level.

I ask the Minister to provide an update on the Government's current engagement with EU partners on the situation in Gaza and the efforts under way to build a stronger and more united European response. In particular, what role is Ireland playing in advocating for a collective European position, grounded in international law, humanitarianism, protection and accountability?

Deputy Helen McEntee: My focus and priority this week have been ensuring the safety of our citizens who have been on board the flotilla. I am pleased to say that they are now on buses on the way to the airport and that our officials are on their way to the airport, if they are not already there, to assist and support them. We have been strong in condemning the actions of the Israeli Government. As I said earlier, the way in which we can respond effectively and send a very clear message to the Israeli Government that this is not acceptable, and that not just Ireland but the EU as a whole will not accept this kind of behaviour, is by collectively agreeing to suspend the trade elements of the EU-Israel association agreement or indeed the association agreement itself. We should also propose new sanctions that would prohibit trade with Israel in the occupied territories or with settlers in the occupied territories. I have been working on this for some time to try to build a consensus. We need to make sure that this comes to a vote as soon as possible to allow us to respond in that strong collective way.

Like others, I have been looking at the response on the international stage as well. There has been global condemnation of the actions by the individual minister. Again this is symptomatic of a government that continues to take these types of actions, whether it is the reintroduction of the death penalty, public prosecutions and subsequently executions that they are discussing or the consistent blocking of humanitarian aid getting to innocent civilians in Gaza who are really suffering and see no end in sight.

To that effect, at every Foreign Affairs Council meeting I have been at, I have specifically raised the need for more humanitarian aid to be let in. When I travelled to Egypt and to the

Gaza crossing in January of this year, my main focus was to meet with those who are delivering the aid to talk to them about the challenges they are facing. It is very clear that blockages have been put in their way every day. The truck heights allowed on one day change the next day and then they have to offload. The types of products allowed in one day changes and they then have to change the truck again. The food that they are allowed to bring in is being left to sit in a warehouse going out of date and then when it is out of date it is not let in. It is unbelievable to think that the actions being taken are being done to prevent food and life-saving treatment from getting in. At the same time, the figures will show that hundreds of trucks are coming in. What it does not say is that it might be a truck full of Nutella or a truck full of goods that are going to be sold that people cannot actually afford. These are the types of actions that we need to continue to highlight and which I am highlighting at the Foreign Affairs Council.

My colleague, the Minister of State, has responsibility for development aid. During our Presidency, one of our core priorities will be values. That means making sure that the values that underpin the European Union and the actions that we take are upheld. That means supporting life-saving organisations like UNRWA and the World Food Programme that are supporting people in Gaza, not pulling back our funding as other countries have done, but actually advocating and building a consensus to make sure the funding is reinstated and increased at a time when it is needed.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I welcome that the Government is continuing to work closely with our European partners to strengthen and unify the European response. We cannot simply stand by and watch what is happening in Gaza. Ireland has led internationally on this issue and was first out of the blocks to condemn it at the start. We should continue to lead within Europe in pushing for a clear and principled response.

I thank the Minister for her strong remarks over the last period in response to what has happened to the people on the peace flotilla. What has happened is disgusting and beyond belief. We must act in unison with our European colleagues and impose trade sanctions on Israel. What discussions are now taking place at EU level regarding possible collective measures, including the examination of sanctions linked to illegal settlements? Is Ireland advocating for stronger co-ordinated action among member states?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh): I can give the Minister 30 seconds to answer that one.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I engaged directly with colleagues at the most recent Council meeting. We have raised this matter directly with the chair of the Foreign Affairs Council. Since then, I have been advocating and working with colleagues to try to make sure this comes to a vote at the next Council meeting.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Rural Schemes

89. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht if he shares concerns regarding the unprecedented rate of rural pub closures across Ireland; if he accepts the role rural pubs play as important community hubs in combating isolation and sustaining rural economies; and the engagement he has had with the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment on measures to support the long-term viability of rural pubs. [38291/26]

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: More than 2,200 pubs have closed across the State since 2005, with closures now accelerating to around 128 per year. In rural areas, the pub is often far more than a business. It is a meeting place, a social hub and a venue for music, sport and local culture. It is sometimes the last remaining indoor public gathering space in a village or rural community. Does the Minister share my concern at the scale of rural pub closures? What engagement has he had with the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment on protecting their long-term viability?

Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Dara Calleary): I am aware of the recent figures from the Vintners Federation of Ireland, which highlight the challenges faced by rural pubs and their importance as hubs for social connection and cultural life. I agree with the Deputy's analysis in that regard. I also acknowledge that the VFI made a written submission to the consultation process which the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I opened last year to inform the development of the next iteration of Our Rural Future.

While specific supports for the sector would fall under the remit of my colleagues, the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, the new Our Rural Future policy will take a whole-of-government approach to rural development, with actions to support the rural economy and rural communities, including addressing rural isolation.

The policy is underpinned by funding through my Department's rural investment and community development programmes, as well as an array of funding streams across government.

As Deputy McGuinness set out, rural pubs play an important social role in rural communities in particular. I am conscious of the challenge of rural isolation. With this in mind, the Department has a range of funding streams to help address the issue. These supports include the local enhancement programme, the community services programme, the social inclusion community activation programme and the seniors alert programme. There is no doubt that our significant investment in the community centre investment fund in recent years has helped to ensure our rural areas have high-quality facilities that serve as focal points for communities.

The development of the new Our Rural Future policy will continue to provide a framework for continued investment in our rural communities in the coming years. The policy and its associated action plan are nearing completion. I am continuing to engage with all of my ministerial colleagues to ensure that our ambition for rural Ireland is underpinned by a series of ambitious and practical actions. That ambition includes addressing the challenges faced by rural communities, rural isolation in particular.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: The Minister is correct that the supports are matters primarily for the Ministers with responsibility for enterprise, finance and taxation and that they fall under enterprise, taxation, tourism and hospitality policy. However, as he acknowledged, rural pubs also sit squarely under rural development. When a rural pub closes, the impact is not just limited to the licence holder or business. It is not just the loss of enterprise, economic activity and employment. The community loses its social anchor in many respects. In rural areas, older people, single men, farmers, musicians, local sports clubs, tourists and community groups all lose a space.

This is particularly serious given that Ireland has been identified as having the highest prevalence of loneliness in a recent European survey. Rural isolation is already one of the great hidden social crises in this State. We cannot say that we are serious about tackling loneliness while allowing rural social infrastructure to disappear. I am not asking the Minister or the Government to take responsibility for every tax or cost-cutting measure affecting pubs or for everything that is happening, but the Minister's Department and the Government must recognise rural pubs as part of the social and community fabric of rural Ireland.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I assure the Deputy that we are very committed to investing in rural social infrastructure. That is why we will be opening the community centre investment fund for investment of €25 million in the coming week. That will assist community centres right across the country.

When it comes to rural isolation, the Deputy is correct to identify rural men in particular. We have just invested up to €3,000 per shed for 369 men's sheds across the country. The rural pub is important. I welcome and thank VFI for its submission. While it highlighted excise duty and cost, it also highlighted the need for a rural transport plan, capital supports for rural pubs and support for pubs as community venues. In the context of the transport plan, we are having engagement with the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. Pilot schemes are running in both Killarney and Achill with the TFI Anseo app, which is effectively providing a bus-on-demand service to a certain extent. We will look at that pilot and, ideally, we will expand it around the country, specifically to rural areas. That will assist the viability of rural hospitality venues.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I am glad to hear the Minister mention rural transport because that is often a key factor in accessing pubs in rural Ireland. It speaks to the need to see this not just as a matter of taxation, licensing or enterprise support but, rather, as a matter of safeguarding and maintaining rural community infrastructure. Has the Minister raised this directly with the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, Deputy Burke? Has he had a specific conversation about this issue? Will he seek targeted measures or a package for rural pub viability in next year's budget? Has the Minister and his Department, or the Cabinet, given any consideration to rural development schemes that could be tailored or used to support local pubs, be they under current ownership and management or under the management or control of a social enterprise or community organisation?

Deputy Dara Calleary: We are very focused on rural transport. Deputy Buttimer is a Minister of State in the Department of Transport as well as being a Minister of State in my

Department. The work being done by Local Link to expand its services and, more importantly, expand the flexibility of its services in recent years will continue. We will engage with the Minister, Deputy Burke, and the Department of enterprise and tourism in the context of Our Rural Future policy to determine what can be done to sustain rural enterprises and economies.

Obviously, as the Deputy knows, due to state aid rules, we have to be careful in how we intervene in private business. That is why we are investing in the social hub of communities, such as community centres, sports clubs and men's sheds. Through the local enhancement programme, we are supporting local community groups. I am certainly open to ideas and proposals, however. As I said, the Vintners Federation of Ireland has made a good and round submission to the consultation on Our Rural Future. I will engage with the Minister, Deputy Burke, on some of its proposals in the context of Our Rural Future.

Seirbhísí trí Ghaeilge

87. Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh den Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht cad é an dáta faoina ndéanfar na seirbhísí go léir a sholáthraíonn comhlachtaí poiblí sa Ghaeltacht a sholáthar trí mheán na Gaeilge. [38272/26]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Fiafraím den Aire faoin uair a bheidh na seirbhísí ar fad de chuid an Stáit, nó roinnt acu fiú, ar fáil go huile is go hiomlán trí Ghaeilge do phobal na Gaeltachta.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an gceist seo a ardú. Baineann an cheist seo le halt 18E(b) d'Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla a cheanglaíonn ar an Aire, le hordú, an dáta nó na dátaí a shonrú faoina gcuirfear gach seirbhís a sholáthraíonn comhlacht poiblí i limistéar pleanála teanga Gaeltachta, nó don limistéar sin, ar fáil trí mheán na Gaeilge.

Mar atá luaite agam cheana maidir leis an gceist seo, is beart suntasach agus fairsing é, a bhfuil go leor le cur sa mheá faoi. Dá bhrí sin, tugadh faoi chomhairliúchán cuimsitheach agus fiúntach leis na comhlachtaí poiblí ábhartha chun na críche seo tríd an taighde don phlean náisiúnta um sheirbhísí poiblí Gaeilge, agus arís i ndiaidh fhoilsiú an phlean náisiúnta céanna. Bhí na próisis úd an-tábhachtach ar mhaithe leis an leibhéal is airde tuisceana agus feasachta maidir leis an bhforáil a chothú i measc na gcomhlachtaí poiblí, go háirithe dóibh siúd a bhfuil an leibhéal is airde idirghníomhaíochta acu leis an bpobal.

Is fiú a aithint freisin nach beart iomlán neamhspleách é seo atá le feidhmiú i bhfolús. Tá sé mar chuid den éiceachóras foriomlán a bhfuiltear ag iarraidh a fhorbairt faoin Acht. Chuige sin, beifear ag tacú lena cur i bhfeidhm tríd an obair atá ar bun faoin phlean náisiúnta agus, go deimhin, an plean gníomhaíochta trí bliana a foilsíodh níos luaithe i mbliana, mar aon leis na caighdeáin teanga agus forálacha eile an Achta i gcoitinne.

Táim muiníneach, mar thoradh ar an gcomhairliúchán breise seo agus ar an obair atá ar siúl ag mo Roinn idir an dá linn trí fhorbairt na struchtúr seo, go gcuirfear na tacaíochtaí cuí ar fáil do chomhlachtaí poiblí chun tabhairt faoi aon athruithe is gá sa spás seo. Bunaithe air seo, beidh mé ag leagan síos dáta nó dátaí réalaíocha agus insroichte a chothóidh muinín phobal na Gaeltachta in úsáid na seirbhísí poiblí sin trí Ghaeilge de réir a chéile, sa chás nach bhfuiltear á n-úsáid cheana féin.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Glacaim leis an ndúshlán atá ann anois toisc gur theip ar an Stát le breis is 100 bliain na seirbhísí i gceantair Ghaeltachta a sholáthar don phobal. Níorbh fhéidir roimhe seo agus ní féidir le gnáthshaoránach a bhfuil cónaí orthu sa Ghaeltacht a labhraíonn an Ghaeilge mar phríomhtheanga – b'fhéidir gurbh í an Ghaeilge an t-aon teanga a bhí acu roimhe seo - a gcuid gnó a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge leis an Stát, lena n-airítear comhlachtaí poiblí, Ranna Stáit agus daoine a bhíonn ag obair thar ceann an Stáit. Tá 23 bliain imithe ó ritheadh Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003 ar dtús. Tá muid anois cúig bliana ó ritheadh Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú), 2021. Tá muid anois ag fanacht leis na caighdeáin. Is é sin atá an tAire tar éis a rá. Tá an plean gníomhaíochta ann, ach níl aon spriocanna ann. Cén uair go díreach a bheidh pobal na Gaeltachta in ann na seirbhísí sin a fháil trí Ghaeilge?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tuigim an mífhoighne ach ní mór na dúshláin a thuiscint freisin. Tá muid ag obair ar na dúshláin sin le cinntiú go mbeidh daoine in ann na seirbhísí a sholáthar, ní hamháin do mhuintir na Gaeltachta ach dóibh siúd a labhraíonn Gaeilge freisin. Is gá go mbeidh taithí agus muinín ag na daoine a bhíonn ag obair sa Státseirbhís chun é sin a dhéanamh. Tá muid ag obair air sin.

Agus mo hata eile orm mar Aire Coimirce Sóisialaí, tá sé sin tábhachtach dúinn. Tá muid ag obair go mbeidh daoine sa Roinn sin in ann seirbhísí a sholáthar do mhuintir na Gaeltachta agus do dhaoine a bhfuil Gaeilge acu. Léiríonn mo thaithí sa Roinn sin na dúshláin atá sa Roinn chun an tseirbhís seo a thabhairt amach. Tá muid ag obair air agus tá muid dírithe air. Tá sé tábhachtach freisin - tuigim go dtuigeann an Teachta é seo - go mbeidh seirbhís le daoine i gceist agus go mbeidh muinín ag muintir na Gaeltachta agus muintir na Gaeilge as an tseirbhís atá le teacht. Tá muid ag iarraidh go mbeidh muinín ag muintir na Gaeltachta go mbeidh an tseirbhís ag feidhmiú ag an gcaighdeán is airde. Tá muid ag obair ar na caighdeáin sin.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Glacaim leis nach dtarlódh sé seo thar oíche, ach níl athrú thar oíche i gceist againn. Mar a dúirt mé, bunaíodh an Stát breis is 100 bliain ó shin. Tógadh Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla isteach ar dtús 23 bliain ó shin. Leis an Acht sin, cuireadh scéimeanna ar bun i ngach uile chuid den Státchóras chun cuidiú linn na seirbhísí sin a chur ar fáil, ní hamháin do phobal na Gaeltachta ach don phobal i gcoitinne. Is é an dúshlán ná conas is féidir, ar a laghad, na seirbhísí a sholáthar dóibh siúd a bhfuil cónaí orthu i gceantair atá aitheanta gurbh í an Ghaeilge príomhtheanga an cheantair sin, áit ar mian linn an Ghaeilge a chaomhnú. Ina dhiaidh sin, ba chóir na seirbhísí a leathnú amach lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht chomh maith céanna. Tháinig Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla (Leasú), 2021 isteach ina dhiaidh sin. Dúradh linn go mbeadh na caighdeáin ar fáil laistigh de mhíonna tar éis don reachtaíocht sin a bheith foilsithe. Níl siad sin le feiceáil go fóill. Tá plean gníomhaíochta ann ach níl aon spriocdhátaí ann. Tá fadhb bhunúsach ansin. Cén uair a fhoilseofar na caighdeáin? Ar a laghad, tabharfaidh sé sin treoir nó sprioc dúinn.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tá muid ag obair ar na caighdeáin sin. Tá mé muiníneach go mbeidh muid in ann iad a fhoilsiú roimh i bhfad. Tá mé ag obair freisin leis na comhlachtaí poiblí chun go mbeidh tuiscint ag gach comhlacht ar na caighdeáin seo. Caithfidh siad iad a thuiscint agus a chinntiú go mbeidh na resources acu chun tabhairt faoi seo. Ní mór do na comhlachtaí sin freisin tuiscint a bheith acu ar cé chomh tábhachtach is atá sé seo do mhuintir na Gaeltachta

agus don Rialtas araon. Mar Aire, tá sé thar a bheith tábhachtach go mbeidh na caighdeáin sin ard agus go dtuigeann na comhlachtaí poiblí agus eagrais Stáit go gcaithfidh siad é seo a dhéanamh agus go gcaithfear na resources a chur i bhfeidhm lena dhéanamh ar ardchaighdeán. Níl aon phointe caighdeáin a fhoilsiú agus a rá go bhfuil an tseirbhís ar fáil ach nuair a théann daoine chuig aon oifig Stáit, níl an tseirbhís sin ar fáil toisc easpa cainteoirí chun an tseirbhís a sholáthar. Tá sé tábhachtach dom, nuair a fhoilseofar gach rud, go mbeidh muid agus gach comhlacht ar an talamh réidh le dul.

Road Projects

88. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht to review the level of funding for local improvement roads schemes for the current year, in view of the level of demand; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37944/26]

Deputy Brian Stanley: The local improvement scheme is very important for local roads. The local community makes a contribution of between 10% and 15%. The level of funding this year in the case of Laois dropped by €1,000. I was hoping it would be a bit more. I ask that the funding for this year be reviewed.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I acknowledge the Deputy's ongoing interest in this area. The local improvement scheme, LIS, provides for the upgrading of non-public rural roads and laneways typically not maintained by local authorities. It was reintroduced in 2017. Since 2017, funding of over €200 million has been allocated to local authorities and over 5,500 roads have been improved. In February this year, I was pleased along with the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, to launch the 2026 scheme. We confirmed base funding for 2026 of €17.5 million which represents an increase on the initial base funding made available in 2025. Laois County Council received a 2026 allocation of almost €470,000. The total allocated to Laois since 2017 is over €6.6 million. My officials are engaging with local authorities which have submitted their priority road lists for 2026. They have now received approval to proceed with the works. I have directed that scheme spend be monitored closely to ensure that funding is fully utilised and not returned to the Department and that as many road improvements as possible are completed under the scheme this year. Parallel to that process, I will be monitoring spending within my Department over the coming months to identify any potential savings that can be reallocated to the LIS programme. I am very aware of the importance of the scheme to councils and rural communities. It is a priority for the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and me. We continue to monitor expenditure within the Department. We are also asking local authorities to consider their level of expenditure on each road. There are considerable disparities in expenditure on the scheme from local authority to local authority. We are zeroing-in on that to ensure there is a common spend around the country. In that way, we will also achieve more roads being completed.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I think the Minister will find that with Laois not too much money comes back to the Department. It tends to get used. I agree with him about using it well. It is a 10% contribution where there are five residents or landowners or fewer and 15% where there are more than six. The funding for Laois is actually €469,000. It was €470,000 last year and

nine schemes are approved locally for this year but there are more than 80 on the waiting list. Some are more urgent than others. The Minister will appreciate that, as will anyone who is local councillor or constituency TD. I highlight to the Minister the western Slieve Bloom area - he was in Mountrath recently and saw how money was spent very well in the wonderful Cafe Donate and the river walk, etc. With the topography, a lot of those roads are over peat and bad land. At this rate, it will take nearly ten years to complete what is on the scheme. That is if the scheme is closed. The Minister knows more will come on next year and the year after. It is a matter of trying to keep ahead. It requires more funding.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Laois completed 18 roads in 2025 and 81 are outstanding on the list we have. We had a really successful visit to Laois with Deputy Stanley and with Deputies Fleming and Aird some weeks back. I saw the fantastic work Laois County Council is doing. I pay tribute to that work. I could literally throw the entire budget of the Department at LIS and still have waiting lists. Other Departments also have responsibilities in terms of regional and public roads funding in rural areas. It cannot just be this Department that takes on that burden. We are working closely with other Departments on that. We are looking at our expenditure as we are nearly six months through the year. I reiterate the necessity for every local authority to complete and spend the money allocated to them in a given year. If money is returned by local authorities, it makes my job in the Department of putting extra resources into this programme even more difficult.

Deputy Brian Stanley: In his reply the Minister said some local authorities may not use it. There may be indications throughout the year that some local authorities are not going to use it. I understand there is not an endless pot of funding and it is not down to the Department of community and rural affairs solely but in relation to this scheme, it is. I ask that where there is a surplus of funding or unused funding that the funding be reviewed. I am with the Minister in relation to spending it well and getting a good return for it. The county council is very good at making sure the local contribution is made by local residents and landowners. It is important that happens. We are in a standstill situation. The cost of roadworks has gone up 15% with contractors. It is between 10% and 15% extra this year, so it is not even a standstill situation. Only about 80% of the work that was done last year will be done this year with the level of funding we have, which is €1,000 less at €469,000.

Deputy Dara Calleary: We are very aware in the Department of the increase in costs, in particular over the past three months since the outbreak of the war in the Middle East. That directly impacts road costs in particular.

That is why the Department will be flexible. If I can see underspends, LIS will be a priority. Our capital delivery teams are engaging with local authorities that are serial offenders as regards sending money back. We tried to get notification of the approval of schemes out to councils earlier this year so that they could get work under way in the so-called summer period and get most of that work done. Looking around, I see that nearly everybody here is a rural Deputy. I encourage every Deputy to engage with the management of their local authorities in respect of LIS to ensure they are spending the allocation they are getting because, as I have said, it is not good for local authorities to be sending back money. I want money spent,

particularly where it is capital money. I encourage engagement at local management level around LIS budgets.

Cúrsaí Tithíochta

90. Deputy Conor D. McGuinness den Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht an bhfuil comhaontú bainte amach aige féin agus an tAire Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreacht maidir leis an tráth a chríochnófar agus a fhoilseofar moltaí an Rialtais maidir le tithíocht i gceantair Ghaeltachta, chomh maith leis an ráiteas pleanála Gaeltachta; agus cén obair atá déanta go dtí seo ag a Roinn maidir leis na moltaí sin. [38292/26]

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Cuirfidh mé ceist ar an Aire faoi mholtaí an Rialtais maidir le tithíocht sa Ghaeltacht agus faoin ráiteas nó straitéis pleanála Gaeltachta atá geallta le fada. Tá géarchéim thithíochta ag brú daoine óga agus teaghlaigh óga amach ó mo cheantar féin. Gan tithíocht, ní bheidh pobal inmharthana againn. Gan pobal inmharthana, ní bheidh todhchaí ag an nGaeilge mar theanga bheo phobail. Cathain go díreach a fhoilseofar na moltaí agus an ráiteas pleanála?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Mar is eol don Teachta, is fiú a thabhairt faoi deara go dtiteann an fhreagracht maidir le cúrsaí tithíochta ar bhonn ginearálta ar an Roinn Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreacht. Agus é sin ráite, tá soláthar tithíochta dóibh siúd atá ina gcónaí agus ag obair sa Ghaeltacht thar a bheith tábhachtach dom go pearsanta agus do mo Roinn. Go deimhin, tá tithíocht riachtanach chun an teanga, seirbhísí, fostaíocht, fiontraíocht agus deiseanna eile sa Ghaeltacht a fhorbairt. Agus é sin san áireamh, tá céimeanna tacaíochta á dtógáil chun na críche seo.

Beidh an Bille um Údarás na Gaeltachta (Leasú), 2024 le tógáil ag Céim na Tuarascála an tseachtain seo chugainn. Cé gurb é athbhunú toghcháin chuig bord an údaráis príomhchuspóir an Bhille seo, ar mhaithe le tacú le soláthar tithíochta sa Ghaeltacht, déanfar leasú sa Bhille ar alt 8 den Acht um Údarás na Gaeltachta chun cead a thabhairt don údarás talamh a dhíol le comhlacht tithíochta ceadaithe nó le húdarás tithíochta, nó a dhiúscairt ar shlí eile chuig an gcuspóir céanna, chun tithíocht a sholáthar sa Ghaeltacht.

Tá mé féin agus mo chomhghleacaí, an tAire, an Teachta James Browne, ag obair go dlúth lena chéile ar an gceist seo lenár n-oifigigh, a bhfuil obair shuntasach déanta acu ar fhorbairt ráiteas náisiúnta pleanála don Ghaeltacht. Sa phlean tithíochta a foilsíodh le déanaí, Tithe a Sheachadadh, Pobail a Thógáil, gealltar an ráiteas náisiúnta pleanála a fhoilsiú agus moltar scrúdú a dhéanamh ar an bhféidearthacht go n-oibreodh Údarás na Gaeltachta le hUisce Éireann agus údaráis áitiúla chun tacú le tithíocht a thógáil do phobail labhartha na Gaeilge. Reáchtáil mé cruinniú le gairid idir Údarás na Gaeltachta agus Uisce Éireann chun a chinntiú go ndéanfar dul chun cinn gan dua maidir leis an fhéidearthacht seo a scrúdú.

Bunaithe ar fhigiúirí ó na húdaráis áitiúla, ceadaíodh meán de 90% d'iarratais phleanála le haghaidh tithíochta sa Ghaeltacht in 2025, rud a léiríonn nach bhfuil fadhb ag daoine cead pleanála a fháil sa Ghaeltacht. Ina theannta sin, bronnadh os cionn €3 mhilliún ar iarratasóirí sa Ghaeltacht faoin deontas athchóirithe do réadmhaoin fholamh le linn 2024 agus 2025.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Tá sé ráite ag an Aire go bhfuil obair idir-rannach ar siúl agus is léir go bhfuil. Tá cúrsaí pleanála, údaráis áitiúla agus an Roinn tithíochta luaite aige. I dtaobh na fianaise ar an talamh, tá pobal na Gaeltachta tar éis fanacht rófhada cheana féin. Cé go raibh sé geallta arís ag deireadh na bliana seo caite sa phlean tithíochta, níl tásc ná tuairisc ar an straitéis nó ráiteas sin. Níl sé feicthe againn. Tugaim faoi deara nár thug an tAire aon dáta daingean dúinn faoina mbeidh sé foilsithe. Glacaim leis go mbaineann sé seo leis an Aire tithíochta chomh maith ach tá freagracht ar an Aire agus ar a Roinn as an gceist seo freisin.

I dtaobh cúrsaí pleanála agus cead pleanála a fháil, tá an ceart ag an Aire i slí amháin. Ní hé an fhadhb nach bhfuil na húdaráis áitiúla ag tabhairt cead d'iarratais phleanála. Ní féidir le daoine áitiúla sna ceantair seo suímh a fháil ar phraghas inacmhainne. Is ceann de na fadhbanna é sin chomh maith. Caithfimid dul i ngleic leis an gceist iomlán seo, ag tabhairt san áireamh tithíocht shóisialta, na húdaráis áitiúla, an t-infreastruchtúr nó bonneagar, agus an córas pleanála.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Mar a dúirt mé, tá mé féin agus an tAire, an Teachta Browne, ag obair go crua air seo. Níl in ann dáta a thabhairt don Teachta ag an bpointe seo. Caithfidh mo Roinn agus an Roinn tithíochta teacht ar aontú faoin mbealach le dul. Tá sé tábhachtach go mbeidh scéim agus ráiteas pleanála againn a oibríonn ar an talamh. Tá a lán dúshlán ann. Caithfimid obair ar na dúshláin seo. Táimid ag obair air sin ach níl aontú ann go fóill idir mé féin agus an Aire, an Teachta Browne. Nuair atá an plan réidh, beimid in ann é a fhoilsiú. Tá an obair ar siúl. Bíonn cruinnithe ag na hoifigigh. Bhí cruinniú ag na hoifigigh sa dá Roinn an tseachtain seo caite. Táimid dírithe isteach air ach ní bheidh sé éasca. Tá sé sin an-tábhachtach le rá. Tá dúshlán againn freisin le hUisce Éireann. Táimid ag obair ar na dúshláin sin chun go mbeidh talamh seirbhísithe ó thaobh uisce agus séarachais. Is ceann de na dúshláin eile atá againn é sin. Táimid ag obair le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta chun a chuid talún a cheangal le córas Uisce Éireann chun go mbeidh deiseanna ansin.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Is cúis le frustrachas sna pobail Ghaeltachta seo an mhoill ar an straitéis nó an ráiteas, mar a dtugtar air anois. Ba cheart go mbeidh roinnt mhaith oibre déanta idir an dá Roinn le blianta anuas mar bhí sé seo geallta blianta ó shin. Athghealladh é anuraidh. Tá an tAire ag rá nach bhfuil sé éasca agus tuigim é sin ach cad iad na pointí easaontaithe? Muna bhfuil sé aontaithe idir an Aire agus an Aire tithíochta, cad iad na pointí nach raibh siad in ann aontú orthu go fóill? Cad iad na coimhlintí atá ann idir an dá Roinn? Cad atá ag cur bac nó srian ar an straitéis a bheith foilsithe? Tá dhá Ranna Rialtais anseo. Tá na blianta caite air seo. Glacaim leis nach bhfuil rudaí den saghas seo éasca ach it is not beyond the realms of human endeavour é seo a chur i gcrích leis na hacmhainní atá ag an dá Roinn agus na hacmhainní ama atá caite air seo go fóillín. Cad iad na pointí easaontais idir an Aire agus an Aire tithíochta?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Níl mé chun iad seo a leagan amach ar urlár na Dála. Táimid ag obair air. Tuigeann an tAire, an Teachta Browne, agus mé féin cé chomh tábhachtach is atá an ráiteas seo chun díriú ar an nGaeltacht agus go háirithe ar na daoine óga atá ag iarraidh tithe a chruthú inti. Táimid ag obair ar gach ceann de na dúshláin atá ann. Tá a lán oibre ar siúl ar a lán dúshlán sa Roinn. Tá na hoifigigh sa Roinn tithíochta atá ag obair liom ag obair ar roinnt de na dúshláin eile. Táimid ag obair ar chúrsaí taobh amuigh den ráiteas freisin. Mar a dúirt

mé, tá san áireamh ansin soláthar séarachais agus uisce. Táimid ag obair le príomhfheidhmeannaigh na n-údarás áitiúil a bhfuil freagracht as pleanáil sna Gaeltachtaí orthu. Tá a lán píosaí ag baint leis an dúshlán nó jigsaw seo. Táimid ag obair air. Creidim go n-aontaíonn an Teachta liom gurb é an rud is tábhachtaí ná go mbeidh ráiteas pleanála againn a oibríonn agus a thugann deis do dhaoine tithe a chruthú sa Ghaeltacht. Tá sé tábhachtach go mbeidh siad in ann íoc as na tithe sin agus go mbeidh siad affordable. Táimid dírithe air seo agus ar thithe sóisialta freisin.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Rural Schemes

91. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht the role his Department plays in tackling dereliction, vacancy and underuse of buildings in rural towns and villages; the way in which his Department co-ordinates with local authorities and other Departments to ensure town and village renewal funding is linked to housing, transport, community services and local economic development; and if he will consider a more integrated, multi-annual funding model for rural towns and villages. [38128/26]

Deputy Rory Hearne: Will an tAire outline the role the Department plays in tackling dereliction, vacancy and the underuse of buildings in rural towns and villages and the plans he has in that regard? In particular, will he outline the way in which the Department is co-ordinating with local authorities and Departments to ensure that funding is linked to housing, transport and community services?

11 o'clock

Is fadhb an-mhór ar fad í seo.

Deputy Dara Calleary: The town centre first policy, for which I and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage hold joint responsibility, is the major cross-government policy. It aims to tackle vacancy, combat dereliction and breathe new life into our town centres. It does so by setting out a framework to facilitate and resource the regeneration of our towns and villages to ensure they are vibrant, viable, visible and happy places to live, work, invest in and visit. Town centre first complements other national policies, including our rural future, the national housing strategy and the national planning framework.

Significant progress has been made. For example, town regeneration officers funded by my Department are based in 26 local authorities. They are a key conduit between the Department, each local authority and towns and villages and the communities that live in them. They work as part of a multidisciplinary team in local authorities to support town regeneration and combat vacancy and dereliction. As was discussed with Deputy Stanley, I encourage Deputy Hearne to visit Laois where he will see a very good model in operation.

A range of capital schemes funded by my Department are crucial to this. The town and village renewal scheme and the rural regeneration development fund have provided growing

levels of funding to rural communities in recent years. Our local authorities are working closely with local communities to deliver projects. Funding under these schemes is generally by way of a competitive call for applications. Funding is allocated to successful projects on a multi-annual basis. This is an approach that has worked well in recent years. It ensures high quality and impactful projects are funded in a targeted and strategic manner. We continue to ensure that the funding the Government is investing in rural towns and villages will deliver. I met the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, yesterday regarding the future iteration of our town centre first policy and other investments that we can make.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Is fadhb an-mhór iad na tithe folmha agus tréigthe, agus na foirgnimh thréigthe freisin, i mbailte agus sráidbhailte ar fud na tíre. The State has failed, from Spiddal to Fermoy to Carrick-on-Suir and Loughrea. When driving around the country, I see so many derelict buildings. It is scandalous. It is such a shame for these towns, many of which I have visited. I visit relatives down the country and see this. Dereliction is still visible. The town centre first policy is clearly not working. The policies are not working to address this at the scale needed and to deal with the extent of it. It is just not enough. We still see massive levels of dereliction in villages and towns. This affects many commercial buildings. We in the Social Democrats believe that there needs to be things like compulsory sales orders. These buildings cannot be left for decades.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I disagree with the Deputy. This is another social media statement without any basis. He mentioned Fermoy. We are currently investing €2.2 million in Fermoy to renew the town centre and the Blackwater experience and are working with the local community and development companies. The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I are involved. The Deputy has to see for himself, or else does not want to see, the level of progress in many rural areas. In Athy, the Shackleton experience is led by the local community, in partnership with Kildare County Council. Old buildings have been renewed and repurposed. I could provide any number of examples under RRDF and the town and village renewal scheme.

We need to examine how can we can expand the town and village renewal scheme. Deputy Currie is in the Chamber. We need to consider how communities and villages in Dublin can be tackled.. The Deputy suggested that there be CPOs, as if that could happen very easily. Many councils are trying to do that. The Deputy understands more than most the property rights in our Constitution, ownership rights and the difficulty of getting access to CPOs. Many councils are doing that through the town regeneration officer. The person is doing the legwork on that necessary work and research. That town regeneration officer is funded by my Department. We cannot just wave a magic wand. Town regeneration officers are doing very hard work on the ground. It is unseen, but is making a difference in towns and villages around the country if one chooses to see it.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I want to respond to the claim about social media clips. That is disingenuous. I do not know whether a memo went around Cabinet to try to suggest calling out the Social Democrats for just doing this for social media. It is very demeaning to an elected Member of the Dáil-----

Deputy Dara Calleary: The Deputy is very touchy about it.

Deputy Rory Hearne: -----to turn around and say he is just doing this for social media. That is very demeaning and disregards the people who have voted for me and us. I am doing this because it is what I know and see. The Minister has pointed to areas that are working and where something has been done. I can point to just as many areas and towns where policy is not working and there are still derelict buildings. Is he denying that there are derelict buildings in towns and villages across the country? Derelict houses and buildings are falling down. What the Government has done is not enough. It is factually correct that there are tens of thousands of derelict buildings, even above shops, that could be homes. The Government will point to where it is doing something, but it is not enough. That is my point.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Over €440 million has been invested in 160 projects through the RRDF since 2020. Many of those projects are now coming to fruition. Some €140 million has been invested in the town and village renewal scheme, which has dealt with 1,000 projects since 2020, owned and driven by local communities and local authorities. Under the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme, €110 million has been invested in dereliction, to a lesser extent.

The Deputy has suggested nothing is happening.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I did not say "nothing". I said "not enough".

Deputy Dara Calleary: He has seen tens of thousands of buildings, but he will also see, should he choose to see it, much progress and that things are happening on the ground. We are providing that level of investment through the RRDF and town and village renewal and we want to provide more. We will provide more investment and the Department is focused on that through Our Rural Future. That is why we have invested in our town regeneration officers across the country, who work in partnership with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. We have people on the ground identifying properties and their ownership and, ideally, working in the first place with local communities to upgrade and repurpose them.

The Minister, Deputy Browne, and Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, are working on guidelines on spaces over shops because that will lead to the ultimate regeneration of towns, namely getting people back living in them and having life in towns after 6 p.m. That is happening on the ground if the Deputy chooses to see it.

Road Network

92. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht if there are plans to increase local improvement scheme, LIS, funding in Kerry; the reasons the funding was cut between 2025 and 2026; if he will ensure that funding is increased in budget 2027; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38220/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: I want to ask the Minister about the LIS funding scheme, in particular relating to County Kerry. A significant number of roads are on the list. While I appreciate Kerry County Council is doing the best it can, it is only able to address a limited number per year.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for his interest in this. As I said in reply to Deputy Stanley, since we introduced the LIS in 2017, over €200 million has been allocated to local authorities. The Minister of State and I confirmed the 2026 scheme will have an additional initial funding application of €17.5 million, representing an increase. Kerry County Council was allocated €1.13 million in initial funding for LIS in 2026, representing an increase in the initial allocation of over €1 million in 2025. Following our announcement of a supplementary budget of €14 million in August last year, Kerry received additional funding of over €1.2 million in 2025. The total Kerry allocation for 2025 represents a 44% increase on the 2024 allocation.

We are committed to ensuring that the LIS scheme in Kerry and, indeed, nationally remains well-funded. We are engaging with local authorities. We have given the go-ahead for the initial 2026 programme to proceed. We are closely monitoring our spend in the capital area across the Department to ensure any savings that emerge in the Department can be redistributed to LIS. I am very much aware of the challenge in Kerry regarding outstanding roads. Some 37 roads were completed in 2025.

Kerry County Council did not send any money back to my Department in terms of underspend, which I welcome. I am also conscious of the outstanding roads to be addressed in the county. As I said, I could invest the entire budget of my Department in LIS and still have outstanding roads. I am focused on addressing this. We are focused on introducing uniformity across the country in the spend on LIS. With that uniformity, we can get more roads done.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Minister. The difficulty and the reason Kerry should be treated as more of an exception than other counties, such as the midland counties, is that there are 580 roads in the scheme for the county.

I appreciate 37 were done last year but if we do the maths on that, we are talking the best part of 20 years. A lot of the people who are contacting me from places like Ballinglanna near Causeway, Tiershanaghan, Ballyheigue, Kilgulbin, Ardfert, Ballyconry near Ballyduff and Dromid in south Kerry will be drawing their pension, if they are lucky, by the time these roads are addressed. I appreciate there has been funding since 2017 but the problem with that is the list was closed in 2018 because there were so many roads in Kerry on it and it has not been opened for the past eight years. That is the scale of the problem we are dealing with in the county.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I agree. Looking at the figures, it is a particularly long list in Kerry. The Deputy is not the only Kerry Deputy who has made a special case for the county; there is also the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Foley, and other colleagues. We have put over €200 million into the LIS in less than ten years. It has made a difference around the country. I am aware of the length of the waiting lists and I am aware of the scheme. I make a very special case indeed for County Mayo, given its size, but I have other competing capital

priorities. What the Minister of State and I have done last year is that where we can identify capital savings in the Department, we have targeted them towards LIS. It may not always be possible to do that but LIS will be a priority project as long as the Minister of State and I are in the Department.

I also say this to other Departments: the role of rural roads is not just for our Department. Other Departments have to step up. They are doing that but collectively, we could do a lot more. Our per km spend is an issue we are looking at as well. All local authorities need to have a certain band within which they spend on LIS. We do not need gold-plated roads; we need roads.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Minister for the reply. I will give some background and context on this. I am glad he mentioned local and regional roads because there were many announcements from certain Deputies in County Kerry that there was increased roads funding for the county but the local and regional roads funding was actually slashed by €2 million. Villages like Ballyduff, Fenit, Abbeydorney and Glenbeigh have no wastewater infrastructure. There is basically an Imhoff tank, or a hole in the ground, where the sewage is going into and they cannot develop in those areas.

Inflation has surged costs for the materials, labour and fuel, in addition to all of the heavy rainfall from climate change, which is digging into roads and making the roads that have been repaired in need of patching. I am talking about local and regional roads, such as Knocknacaska outside Kilflynn, where there has been a solar farm proposed. Despite all the great work it is doing, the council is playing catch-up. It is galling for people in Kerry to look at the nearly €500 million spent on MetroLink without a sod being turned and they cannot get to school, work or their businesses without going over potholed roads.

Deputy Dara Calleary: As well as giving us a tour of Kerry, the Deputy has raised a very important issue. I share the Deputy's concern about the severity of rain and the damage it is doing, as well as the severity of hard winters that are damaging roads. The Minister of State and I will be looking within the Department at some sort of uniformity. Some councils are spending a lot more per km than others. The disparity is quite significant. I do not want to be in a situation where we dictate to councils how they spend their money. That would be wrong.

Equally, we want to make sure the money we invest in LIS is spent on tar and roads and not on administration or positions. That is not the position in Kerry. We are very aware and conscious of the pressure on capital budgets, especially keeping in mind cost increases over the past three months. We will engage with our colleagues in the Department on spending and looking at LIS. The Minister of State assures me there has not been a cut in the Department of Transport for regional roads but I will certainly engage with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, on that one.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy heard from the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien, the last day. He is pressing the recurring button the whole time.

Urban Development

93. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht for an update on the commitment to resource the town centre first model and establish a town regeneration team in every local authority, as outlined in the programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38004/26]

Deputy Emer Currie: I thank the Minister and the Minister of State for their work on the town and village renewal scheme, the town centre first scheme and their engagement with me on these issues. I want to keep them on the agenda. Town centre first and town and village renewal are excellent schemes delivering tangible results for rural towns and villages. Suburban villages, like ours in Dublin 15, are not technically eligible. Will the Minister widen the schemes so more communities can benefit and could he do this for budget 2027?

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for her ongoing interest in this with the Minister of State and I. As she knows, the town centre first policy is a key Government initiative. Within this Department, we share the town centre first policy with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and I met with the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, so that we can continue to ensure town centre first is relevant and delivering a real impact across rural towns and villages into the future. Significant progress has been made since the launch of the policy. This includes the establishment of town teams nationally, which is an important initiative, and setting up a national town centre first office within the Local Government Management Agency. In relation to our Department, I can confirm that 26 town regeneration officers have been appointed in local authorities across the country, including in Fingal County Council. These officers are the central drivers of the town centre first approach are the key link between the local authorities, towns and villages and their communities. As we discussed earlier, they do a lot of work that is unseen on identifying properties within town centres and identifying the opportunities in town centres.

As well as that, they support town teams, help towns to access available funding and they have a national network to support knowledge development and sharing best practice. Town regeneration officers also work closely across multidisciplinary regeneration teams in local authorities. Those teams include the capital delivery teams that are funded by my Department, as well as vacant homes officers, broadband officers and night time economy officers. As I said earlier this morning, on a recent visit to County Laois, I witnessed first hand how Laois County Council's strategic approach is leading to the effective delivery of a wide range of projects across the county.

The Minister of State and I continue to engage with officials on the Deputy's proposal for suburban towns. We also continue to engage with the Deputy on that. I very much believe and share her idea, which has also been expressed to me by other Deputies, that suburban villages and towns, which were the heart of communities, deserve support to retain their individual identities as cities continue to grow.

Deputy Emer Currie: I thank the Minister. I appreciate how positive and successful the town centre first and town and village renewal schemes have been for my rural colleagues, which is why I want to access them for Dublin 15. There is a distinction between Dublin city or major population centres and then suburban villages that have been subsumed into the wider metropolitan area. Despite suburban growth, which we need, these communities still have

village hearts, with residents eager to nurture, support and develop their village centres. During Covid, there was a new-found appreciation for local, suburban villages and supporting businesses and amenities in local communities within a short distance of people's homes. Building sustainable communities has never been more important.

In places like Castleknock village, we would be looking at upgrading the public realm, strengthening walking and cycling access and addressing chronic traffic issues because that would drive more footfall to the village. It would bring more life to the village and would support the businesses. There are wider funding streams such as active travel, business supports, playgrounds and other community centre investment funds but town centre first is unique because it devises plans for the village, by the village, and it tackles specific issues within a village.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I like the concept of the village heart. We have worked and models in Fingal, St. Margaret's, Rush and Ballyboughal. We ensured funding under town and village renewal. They are more rural villages and meet the population criteria. I have asked my officials to examine those examples with a view to a pilot. I cannot comment on budget 2027. It is far too early to actually comment on it but regardless of budget, we have to look at the schemes and protect those suburban villages and protect their heart. It is also a good time to ensure that the Deputy's communities know the community centre investment fund is open to them for the refurbishment part, which offers up to €100,000. That opens in the next week

The community recognition fund has invested in community projects across Dublin, within the inner city but also within communities. I had a good visit with the Deputy to Castleknock Community Centre and saw the amazing work being done there through community employment and other schemes. We are very much working on this. The town centre first policy should do what it says on the tin, and it is for towns and villages regardless of where they are.

Deputy Emer Currie: I thank the Minister. He is absolutely right. There is a lot of interest in this. Interest is growing. I am just going to talk about Castleknock. The population directly around and including the village is about 15,000, whereas the wider area has about 30,000 people. That is why we are not eligible. We would not be eligible either under the urban regeneration and development fund. I have said before that we are falling between two stools.

Just over a year ago, Fingal County Council agreed that under the town centre first initiative, it would actually do a health check for Castleknock and Blanchardstown villages. That work is going to start in September, led by a town team that includes Castleknock Tidy Towns and the Castleknock business forum that was set up about a year ago. That is really positive. They are working on diagnosing the problems in the community and seeking funding to activate the associated plans. There is potential in this regard under the town and village renewal scheme. It would work for other villages in my area, such as Clonsilla, Blanchardstown and Ongar. We want to replicate in suburban areas the Government's success in rural areas. My colleagues are interested in doing this in other parts of the country as well.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Absolutely. The Deputy is very much pushing an open door here. The Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation,

Deputy Chambers, has had similar discussions with me on this issue. The Minister of State in my Department, Deputy Buttimer, has mentioned Bishopstown, Douglas and other villages in Cork.

We need to keep the focus on the actual scheme, however. The scheme has been successful. It has been tightly defined in terms of projects and what can be achieved. We have to be realistic about what can be done in a rural area versus a city area in terms of budgets and the availability of space on the ground.

The most important thing the Deputy mentioned is how various organisations within her hometown, Castleknock, are being asked for their opinions first. The initiative is not just coming from city hall or county hall in Fingal; the community is running it. We had the privilege of meeting the Tidy Towns group and various other groups with the Deputy. Pride in the area is evident but we need to protect it, invest in it and, as the Deputy said at the outset, invest in the heart of the village.

Questions Nos. 94 and 95 taken with Written Answers.

Departmental Policies

96. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht if he will provide an update on the public consultation process for the successor to the Our Rural Future policy; the way the recently announced €3 million investment in Coillte recreational sites and the €60 million allocated for rural regeneration and development fund projects in 2026 will be prioritised to address depopulation in the most remote western regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31546/26]

125. **Deputy John Paul O'Shea** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht for an update on the publication of Our Rural Future 2026–2030; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37547/26]

137. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht to confirm when Our Rural Future 2026–2031 policy will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38266/26]

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy O'Sullivan is not here but, with the permission of the House, his question may be asked by Deputy O'Shea.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: Will the Minister give an update on the publication of Our Rural Future 2026–2030 and make a statement on the matter? As he knows, rural Ireland is at the heart of our country. It is where people live, work, raise families, run businesses and contribute enormously to our economy and society. Rural communities also face unique challenges, from access to housing and healthcare to transport, connectivity and sustaining local services. I am very hopeful that the new strategy will focus on balanced regional development, supporting rural jobs, revitalising our towns and villages, improving infrastructure and ensuring that people can continue to live and thrive in their own communities.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I propose to take Questions Nos. 96, 125 and 137 together.

I thank Deputy O'Shea for his question. The Our Rural Future policy is delivering vital investment and supports to rural areas, strengthening local economies and improving quality of life across rural Ireland. Our programme for Government includes a commitment to publish and implement a new Our Rural Future policy. The development of this policy has been informed by very extensive public and stakeholder consultation, which took place throughout 2025. It gathered the views of over 2,000 participants.

The engagement included an online survey, a series of eight public and stakeholder events, including one in Charleville, and a public written consultation, which received more than 270 responses. The Rural Youth Assembly was directly consulted to ensure the voices of young people are being fully considered in this process. The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I, along with our officials, have held bilateral meetings with key stakeholders and representative groups, including the GAA demographics group, Departments and public bodies.

The key themes emerging include supporting local economies and strengthening the resilience and sustainability of rural towns, villages and communities, all with a view to promoting balanced regional development. The development of the new policy has also been informed by an independent review of rural policy in Ireland, which was carried out by a panel of international experts from the OECD. The new policy will continue our whole-of-government approach, building on the progress and investment that have been delivered to date and setting out a renewed and refreshed vision for the years ahead.

With this in mind, I recently brought an update to a Cabinet meeting in relation to the development of a new policy and our shared approach to delivering ambitious and measurable actions across government. Informed by the results of the consultations and the OECD review, the new Our Rural Future policy will be based around five interconnected policy pillars, focusing on rural places, rural services, rural communities, the rural economy and the rural environment.

In addition to the policy setting out the key priorities in each pillar, a series of ambitious, clear, practical and measurable actions will be developed and outlined in the accompanying action plan, which will cover the initial period, until the end of 2028. The policy and the associated action plan are nearing completion. We are continuing to work with ministerial colleagues to finalise this process. We are beginning a series of bilateral meetings with a view to bringing a draft of the policy to the Government over the summer.

On the issue of depopulation, recent figures from the Central Statistics Office show the population of highly rural and remote areas increased by 6.4% between 2016 and 2022. These findings align with the analysis of the OECD, which, in its review, found that rural and remote regions in Ireland recorded the highest population growth of all OECD countries between 2001 and 2021.

Of course, there are significant variations within these figures, and I very much recognise that there are rural areas that face particular challenges. Ensuring the sustainability and attractiveness of all rural areas remains a key focus of the Government. The development of our new Our Rural Future policy and the full range of schemes being delivered by the Department focus on this.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I welcome the Minister's commitment to the publication of the Our Rural Future strategy for the period 2026 to 2030. It is vital that we continue to deliver for rural Ireland through sustained investment and practical schemes that make a real difference in people's lives. We have seen the positive impact of investment in rural regeneration, town and village renewal, rural transport, broadband and community development projects right across the country. However, there is still more work to do. Rural communities want to see continued support for housing delivery, improved local services, stronger infrastructure and greater opportunities for young people to live and work in their own areas. Schemes that support rural businesses, farmers, tourism and community organisations must remain a priority if we are to keep our towns and villages vibrant and sustainable. The strategy now provides an opportunity to build on the progress that has already been achieved and to ensure no rural community is left behind over the coming years.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I am very much focused on and in alignment with the Deputy's vision. We have made significant progress. Through budget 2026, we are investing €600 million in communities across the country, particularly through the rural development investment programme, which will see a total of €192 million invested this year. The various initiatives have been developed in capital programmes in a targeted way, but also, as I have said consistently this morning, they are directed and owned by communities, either through local authorities or local development companies. It is important that this is not coming from the Department but from communities across the country.

I was particularly delighted to announce the community centre investment programme, which is not just for rural areas but is very much focused on them. It will open next week. We recently announced a partnership with Coillte to invest further in a programme that, since 2020, has delivered €16 million to develop rural trails and services to open up enterprise initiatives. I thank Coillte for its work on this. My officials are engaging with Coillte to develop a further programme.

We have already mentioned the RRDF programme, the town and village renewal programme and the outdoor recreation investment scheme. Those schemes are bringing economic opportunities that are sustainable and job-creating. They are bringing infrastructure investment into rural areas, which will allow for long-term development. We have looked at the reawakening of rural communities, such as the Shackleton Experience in Athy and the projects in Laois and Kerry that I had the pleasure of visiting some weeks back. All of the projects we visit give us a drive to keep doing this work and to ensure the new Our Rural Future document will be different. It will build on previous work but it must be different and relevant to Ireland between 2026 and 2030. Many of the submissions we have got reflect that ambition. They reflect the challenges but also reflect a new ambition and outside-the-box thinking.

As I said in my initial response, the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I met the GAA demographics committee to get under the bonnet of those population figures. While the OECD report was very positive, the GAA demographics committee gives us much more of the reality on the ground and, most importantly, of the disparity on the ground in rural population figures. That is something we will be targeting under the RRDF.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I thank the Minister, the Minister of State and the Department for the significant level of grant funding that has been delivered to Cork North-West in recent years for projects and community initiatives. I know that both the Minister and the Minister of State have been to Cork North-West in recent months, celebrating those projects, so I thank them.

Across our towns and villages, we have seen the real benefits of investment through schemes such as the town and village renewal scheme, the CLÁR scheme, the outdoor recreation supports and the RRDF. These investments are helping communities to improve facilities, support local enterprise, enhance public spaces and make rural areas more attractive places to live and work. I acknowledge in particular the work of the local community groups in the area, Cork County Council, the local development companies and the volunteers who continue to drive forward these projects on the ground.

Importantly, we have many more worthwhile projects in the pipeline across Cork North-West. The community has ambition and eagerness to continue improving those local areas. I look forward to working with the Minister, the Minister of State and the Department to secure continued support for these projects into the future. Continued investment in rural Ireland is essential to ensuring balanced regional development and strong, thriving communities.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy. We were delighted to be with him in Baile Bhuirne in April, which is a good example of Departments working together under the RRDF, Roinn na Gaeltachta agus Údaras na Gaeltachta to reimagine Coláiste Íosagáin into the hub that it is now. That was a good example of Departments coming together. We have invested €440 million in 160 RRDF projects since 2020. We have invested €140 million in over 1,000 town and village renewal projects since 2020 and €110 million in over 1,200 projects under the outdoor recreation investment scheme since 2020. We have invested €65 million in 1,500 projects through CLÁR since 2020. Through the community centres investment fund, CCIF, we have invested €112 million across new builds, including one in Rylane in the Deputy's constituency, since its launch in 2020. The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I are opening CCIF again.

Separate from our Department, there is also the ongoing progress of the national broadband plan, a €3 billion investment in the communications infrastructure of rural Ireland. That will be finished next year. There is also the rural mobility plan, which the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, leads out at the Department of Transport, and will include the delivery of more than 180 new or enhanced public transport services. There is also work ongoing in my old Department with the regional enterprise plans and various initiatives that are regionally targeted, focusing on the different strengths of our regions. As we have already discussed this morning, there is also the town centre first initiative across the country. We continue to invest our island communities. I will be visiting island in the coming weeks around enhanced communications infrastructure.

All of that must happen under scaffolding and requires a policy document. That is why we are engaging in bilateral meetings at ministerial level around Our Rural Future. We must ensure that every Department understands it has responsibilities for the future of rural Ireland and cannot delegate all of those responsibilities to my Department. Our Rural Future in an all-of-government document. The action plan that comes with it will be an all-of-government

document. It will assign responsibility, actions and targets to the various Departments and I will monitor their delivery. We will ensure they are delivered between now and 2028 in the first iteration of the programme.

Departmental Programmes

97. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht further to Parliamentary Question No. 518 of 26 March 2026, if he will outline when the new programme will launch to succeed the RAPID programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38009/26]

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I ask the Minister to outline to the House his plans to roll out a successor to the revitalising areas by planning, investment and development, RAPID, programme. The Minister will know that was a previous programme that was closed in 2011. It brought together funding from different Departments to invest in some of our most disadvantaged communities to try to improve design and invest in those communities' infrastructure.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for his ongoing interest in this issue. As he knows, the current programme for Government commits to the establishment of a new communities initiative, similar in style to the previous RAPID programme, whereby all State agencies work together to implement community development and town centre rejuvenation. The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I prioritised the development of this programme in 2026. We are in a position to announce €5 million in capital funding. We are currently finalising the details of what that scheme may look like, and hope to be able to launch it ahead of the summer.

Considerations that are informing our work in the development of the programme include the changed demographic and socioeconomic landscape in Ireland. According to the revised Pobal HP deprivation index, post-census 2022, the gap between Ireland's most disadvantaged areas and the national average has increased. Furthermore, the number of people living in areas classed as very or extremely disadvantaged has also increased. The purpose of this new initiative is to focus on these areas to provide support for the development of much-needed infrastructure identified by the communities themselves. We need to ensure that the scheme is robust, evidence-based and fit for purpose, and directly targets the areas most in need of support.

We have conducted extensive research in the development of the new scheme. We have had discussions with experts from the ESRI, the Central Statistics Office and Pobal to inform the evidence base. The County and City Management Association, CCMA, the Local Development Companies Network and other Government Departments have also been consulted.

The level of information we now have about disadvantage in Ireland has increased enormously since the original RAPID programme was launched. Building on that evidence, the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I are determined that the new programme will become a solid foundation for ongoing targeted investment in our urban areas of greatest need.

We have also been clear that a €5 million budget is not going to change things overnight. We want to ensure that this programme is back in place, grows in the years to come and is seen to make a difference on the ground in our most disadvantaged urban communities.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I welcome the efforts of the Minister and the Minister of State. The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, has responsibility for SICAP, which does fantastic work in disadvantaged areas. However, funding for infrastructure is also incredibly important. Often, by changing the physical landscape of an environment, you can bring real change to those communities. We should be working in partnership with, for example, the local community safety partnerships, the SICAP partners, the local community development committees, LCDCs, and the providers of the range of other grants that are coming into the communities for which people can apply. There needs to be a degree of co-ordination.

I also welcome the fact that there will be an evidence base for this. That will ensure the communities that are really in need get these supports. It will mean we will be advocating for other communities that are on the edge to also be included. I say with some certainty that some of the communities in my constituency that are in that category will be on that list. Both the Minister and the Minister of State are welcome to my constituency to launch the scheme when it is done. That is an open invitation. I say that in the expectation that there may be communities nearby or elsewhere that will not be included. We have to go further than €5 million. We must go to €10 million and €15 million over successive budgets. I wish the Minister and the Minister of State the best of luck. They are both great champions of this project.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I thank the Deputy for the invitation. We will bear it in mind. There will be relevant areas in the Deputy's constituency, which is not something we should be proud about. There has not been an urban disadvantage programme that includes capital investment. The Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, is doing huge work with SICAP but this programme needs to make a difference and we need to ensure it is not wasted and the money goes directly to projects and communities.

What I do not want is for it to go into administration or stuff that will not deliver to the communities we want to target it at.

Second, it will be evidence based and massive work. I thank the officials in the Department, who are putting in massive work to try to ensure we have a solid evidence base.

Third, as soon as we get a launch, we will engage in terms of budget negotiations for 2027 and 2028 and to the end of the lifetime of this Government to ensure we can begin to build this up. Whereas €5 million is a small investment, I think it is one that will make a difference in many of these communities if it is targeted appropriately and correctly into facilities that have been identified from within the community.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: Absolutely. The other thing is that it is sustainable and has certainty. Local authorities, for example, depend on funding over time. Often with sports capital funding, for example, they are able to identify a project and then over time they are certain of funding. RAPID has to be the same. We have to have this on a permanent basis for people who are planning in these communities. In places like Ballymun or Finglas, the problem

often is that people are exhausted with initiatives. There is initiative after initiative and there is a new approach and what we need is certainty of funding over time and a strategic approach. The Minister saw that when he came to Ballymun while in opposition, and I know he committed to investing in those communities. I welcome what he is doing in terms of RAPID and I call on the Minister for Finance and the Minister for public expenditure to ensure there is sufficient funding. I also credit Joe O'Brien in the previous Government, who had the enhancing communities programme. It builds on this but we have to learn the lessons from that programme too as to where things did not go right. Enhancing infrastructure has to be co-ordinated and sustainable. The local authority has to have confidence over time, and we need to make sure that over time, it increases in its scale.

Deputy Dara Calleary: I know, and the Deputy has touched on something there about initiative exhaustion. That is important because we are often asking the same people in communities to lead out on these on the ground. We are generally always asking the same people in local authorities and in local development companies to drive these on the ground. That is something both the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I will reflect on. It is important that we get the scheme back, that we have it on the books of the Department, that it grows in the years to come and that it will make a difference. I think the difference will be measured over a number of years. When I was with the Deputy in his constituency in the winter, I saw a couple of areas where small capital investments would make a big difference. They do not have to be trophy projects or massive projects. Small investments will deliver security to a community. I hear the Deputy 100%. We will engage with the Department of justice around community safety partnerships as well. Definitely, we will reflect on his point about initiative exhaustion. That is very real. For this to be successful, we have to ensure that people have faith in it.

Pleanáil Teanga

98. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** den Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht an bhfeiceann sé acmhainn i bhforbairt líonraí nua pobail Ghaeilge agus i dtabhairt aitheantais fhoirmiúil do phobail taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht; agus an bhfuil scrúdú déanta ag a Roinn ar thacaíochtaí nó ar bhearta beartais do cheantair ina bhfuil pobail láidre Ghaeilge agus Ghaelscolaíochta. [38387/26]

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: If invitations to the Minister and the Minister of State are what gets things done and gets investment happening, they are both very much invited to Dungarvan, hopefully with-----

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I was there last week.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: -----a load of funding to build a community centre. If it is big enough, we might even name it after the pair of them.

An cheist ba mhaith liom a chur ar an Aire ná mar gheall ar phobal láidir Gaeilge taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht. Tá pobail nua ag fás ar fud na tíre, mar is eol dó, go minic bunaithe ar Ghaelscoileanna agus ar eagraíochtaí pobail. An bhfeiceann an tAire acmhainn i scéimeanna

nua tacaíochta agus in aitheantas foirmiúil do phobail den chineál sin, áit a bhfuil an Ghaeilge á húsáid mar theanga phobail agus oideachais?

Deputy Dara Calleary: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Teachta as an invitation go dtí Port Láirge. Beimid ann i gceann cúpla seachtain. Táim ag súil leis an gcúirt sin. Mar a dúirt mé, tá scéim le haghaidh árais phobail. Tá sé ag oscailt. Tá scéim le haghaidh árais phobail nua ag oscailt an bhliain seo chugainn. Beimid in ann é sin a reáchtáil.

Faoi Acht na Gaeltachta, 2012, tugtar aitheantas do líonra Gaeilge nuair a bhíonn pleananna teanga aontaithe acu lena bpobal. Ní mór do na pleananna sin na critéir pleanála teanga a chomhlíonadh le go dtabharfar an t-aitheantas cuí dóibh. Tá Foras na Gaeilge freagrach as tacú le heagraíochtaí maidir le hullmhúchán agus feidhmiú pleananna teanga sna líonraí Gaeilge.

In 2015, fuair cúig cheantar aitheantas mar líonraí Gaeilge, is é sin go n-aithnítear iad mar cheantar taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht ina bhfuil mais chriticiúil de chainteoirí Gaeilge agus tacaíocht Stáit agus seirbhísí ar fáil don phobal sa teanga. Is iad na líonraí a fuair aitheantas ná Cluain Dolcáin, Baile Locha Riach agus Inis faoi Acht na Gaeltachta agus iarthar Bhéal Feirste agus Carn Tóchair faoin scéim neamhreachtuil atá á riar ag Foras na Gaeilge sa Tuaisceart. Feidhmíonn pobail na Gaeilge sna líonraí seo trí ghréasáin shóisialta agus bíonn ceanneagraíocht áitiúil i mbun forbartha ar na pobail ghréasáin sin.

Is é an aidhm atá leis an scéim forbartha líonraí Gaeilge - scéim eile de chuid Fhoras na Gaeilge - ná an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn, a chothú agus a bhuanú ar bhonn ceantair le béim faoi leith ar fhorbairt agus ar fheidhmiú pleananna teanga cuimsitheacha do na ceantair sin rannpháirteach sa scéim. Tá an bhéim sa scéim seo ar phleanáil níos fadtéarmaí agus níos straitéisí, de réir phrionsabail na pleanála teanga. Bítear ag súil go mbeadh sé mar chuspóir ag an iarratasóir aitheantas mar líonra Gaeilge a ghnóthú amach anseo don cheantar atá rannpháirteach sa scéim. Cur chuige céimnitheach atá beartaithe sa scéim seo; dá réir sin, aithnítear trí chéim forbartha - ardchéim, meánchéim agus bunchéim.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Aontaím leis an Aire go bhfuil an Ghaeltacht lárnach agus go bhfuil pobail Ghaeilge breá bríomhar fud fad na tíre seo ó Thuaidh agus ó Dheas. Caithfidimid an Ghaeltacht a chosaint, a chothú agus a neartú. Níor cheart go mbeadh cosaint agus fás curtha i gcoinne a chéile. Tá gá le seasamh cosanta cinnte mar gheall ar an 100 bliain d'fhaillí an Stáit seo i dtaobh na Gaeilge agus na bpobal Gaeltachta. Tá gá freisin le fis fháis - fis atá uaillmhianach. Ní leor a rá go gcaithfidimid an méid atá fágtha a shábháil. Caithfidimid oibriú i dtreo pobal nua, líonraí nua, spásanna nua agus todhchaí níos leithne don Ghaeilge. Nílím ag déanamh glaoch inniu mar gheall ar theorainneacha na Gaeltachta a athrú nó a leathnú láithreach, ach táim ag iarraidh go mbeidh an tAire ag glacadh leis an bprionsabal go bhfuil pobail láidre Ghaelacha taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht ar fiú iad a aithint agus tacú leo. Baineann sé sin le stádas chomh maith, b'fhéidir stádas Gaeltachta nó stádas ar leith taobh leis an nGaeltacht. Táim ag smaoineamh ar na bailte seirbhíse Gaeltachta atá taobh leis an nGaeltacht, agus, i gceantair áirithe, laistigh den Ghaeltacht, agus na líonraí ó Thuaidh agus ó Dheas.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Aontaím go mór leis an Teachta. Beidh sé suimiúil é sin a phlé lá eile. Faoi scéimeanna tacaíochta Gaeilge i mo Roinn, cuirtear maoiniú suntasach ar fáil do

thionscnaimh éagsúla chun an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht. Déantar sin trí eagraíochtaí, lena n-áirítear Conradh na Gaeilge, Glór na nGael, Gaeloideachas, Gael Linn agus Oireachtas na Gaeilge. Faigheann na heagraíochtaí sin a mbunmhaoiniú ó Fhoras na Gaeilge.

Tugann mo Roinn maoiniú breise dóibh le haghaidh tionscnaimh straitéiseacha chun úsáid na teanga a chur chun cinn. I nGael Linn tá an scéim Gaelbhratach do scoileanna. I nGlór na nGael, tá scéim teanga tí ag cur úsáid na Gaeilge sa bhaile chun cinn. Úsáideann Conradh na Gaeilge an ciste spreagtha a chothaíonn úsáid na teanga ag imeachtaí pobail thart ar sheachtain na Gaeilge. Tá maoiniú ag Gaeloideachas chun earnáil na luathblianta Gaeilge a fhorbairt. Tá maoiniú suntasach ag Oireachtas na Gaeilge chun na healaíona teangabhunaithe agus líonra Gaeilge sna seirbhísí poiblí a fhorbairt.

Tá a lán slite ina bhfuilimid ag cuidiú leis an nGaeilge taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht. Aontaím leis an Teachta go bhfuil deiseanna agus fuinneamh ag cúrsaí Gaeilge ag an bpointe seo. Caithfimid cuidiú leis sin agus é a spreagadh. Tá sé i ngach cuid den tír. Is é sin an rud is tábhachtaí dom.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Cé go bhfuil an dualgas orainn an Ghaeltacht a chosaint agus tá an Ghaeilge rófhada faoi chosaint ar pháipéar agus faoi bhrú sa saol fíor amach ansin, tá gá anois an chéim uailmhianach chun tosaigh a ghlacadh. Tá an-taithí agam ar na scéimeanna, na tionscadail agus na heagrais ar leith atá ag obair ar an talamh agus atá ag fás an phobail sin agus ag tacú leis an bpobal leis an nGaeilge a bheith mar theanga chumarsáide inár dteaghlaigh i mbailte, i sráidbhailte, i scoileanna agus sa phobal i gcoitinne. Caithfimid an stádas agus an t-infreastruchtúr a chur timpeall air sin ionas gur féidir linn a rá go bhfuilimid ag cosaint ár gceantair Ghaeltachta agus an fás nua seo chomh maith don todhchaí ionas gur féidir linn an Ghaeltacht - pobal mór lucht labhartha teanga na tíre seo - ní hamháin a chosaint ach a mhéadú amach anseo agus an fhís uailmhianach sin a bheith ann.

Is cinnte go mbaineann sé sin le hacmhainní, agus acmhainní sa bhreis ar an méid atá dáilte amach ag an Rialtas go dtí seo. Tá sé bainteach le cúrsaí stádais agus aitheantais chomh maith.

Deputy Dara Calleary: Tuigim an dualgas an Ghaeilge nó an Ghaeltacht a chosaint. Tá sé sin lárnach i mo chuid oibre. B'fhéidir go mbeidh seans againn an tsuirbhé shuimiúil ó Fhoras na Gaeilge, a foilsíodh an tseachtain seo, a phlé sa Teach. Leagann sé amach figiúirí an-úsáideacha don chomhrá seo. Leagann sé dúshlán amach agus cuireann sé na figiúirí ar fáil. Is é seo an chéad uair go bhfuil an t-eolas againn ar na dearcthaí sin agus beimid in ann cuidiú leis seo.

Mar a dúirt mé, tá na scéimeanna ann. Táimid ag cuidiú le daoine Gaeilge a úsáid taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht. Labhair mé faoi na scéimeanna sin freisin. Tá gradaim ghnó Ghlór na nGael ann do dhaoine atá in ann Gaeilge a úsáid gach lá agus iad i mbun gnó – i ngnóthaí beaga agus iad ag siopadóireacht. Tá sé sin tábhachtach freisin. Beidh mé i gcathair na Gaillimhe an tseachtain seo chugainn le haghaidh Ghradam Sheosaimh Uí Ógartaigh, scéim iontach a thugann aitheantas agus cuidiú do chomhlachtaí atá i nGaillimh ach taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht chun an Ghaeilge a úsáid i príomhchathair na Gaeilge. Tá an scéim sin tábhachtach. Beimid in ann an Ghaeilge a cheiliúradh taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht anseo.

Question No. 99 taken with Written Answers.

Departmental Funding

100. **Deputy Noel McCarthy** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht the measures being taken by his Department to alleviate the burden of community services programme funding recipients being required to provide fully audited accounts on an annual basis. [38218/26]

Deputy Noel McCarthy: Before I ask my question, I welcome to the Gallery pupils from St. Joseph's National School in Fermoy in my constituency and their teachers, Mr. Barry and Mr. Flynn.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: They are all very welcome. I hope they enjoy their day in Dáil Éireann.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: What measures is the Department taking to alleviate the burden of community services programme funding recipients being required to provide fully audited accounts on an annual basis? I ask the Minister to make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I welcome the students from Fermoy and their teachers. The summer holidays are ag teacht. Go n-éirí leo.

I thank Deputy McCarthy for this very important question. The Minister, Deputy Calleary, and I are working together in the context of the community services programme, which supports 453 services nationally through 434 community organisations to provide local social, economic and environmental services through a social enterprise model, with a budget of around €59.4 million. The requirement placed on organisations to provide audited annual financial statements comes from the Department of public expenditure and reform, through Circular 13/2014 on the management of and accountability for grants from Exchequer funds. Certain qualifying small-sized companies, including social enterprises, may be exempted from the full extent of the provision of annual financial statements to the Companies Registration Office, CRO. They are, however, required to provide audited financial accounts to their funding bodies if they are in receipt of Exchequer funding, in line with the Department of public expenditure's circular.

The detailed financial information contained in audited annual financial statements enables Pobal, which administers the programme on behalf of my Department, to monitor the financial performance of supported organisations, to review the notes to the audited accounts and to rely on the independent audit assurances provided. The abridged accounts acceptable under the CRO exemption would not contain this detailed information. In addition, the funding model introduced for the community services programme, CSP, in 2023 includes the level of retained income as one of the criteria used in determining the appropriate funding category to meet the funding needs of organisations. The abridged accounts that are permissible under the CRO exemption would not contain such necessary details.

On foot of the Deputy's question and ongoing conversations with him, I am aware of the additional costs being incurred by organisations in fulfilling this requirement. I fully understand, given my previous role as a member of a GAA club, that the cost incurred has increased over recent years. The Minister and I have asked officials in our Department to consider whether there are options available to support small-sized organisations.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I thank the Minister of State for his response. The reason I tabled a question in the first instance is that it was recently brought to my attention by members of a local community group that has long received CSP funding that a significant portion of this funding is taken up with providing the fully audited accounts. There is a requirement on this group to provide fully audited accounts on an annual basis. This is a local community group with, to my knowledge, no financial issues or irregularities, yet it is being requested to spend thousands each year on ensuring its financial accounts are fully audited. In the particular case I am familiar with, the costs are between €6,000 and €7,000 out of a funding allocation of €27,000. This is excessive and runs counter to the spirit of the community services programme and the important work local community groups do for communities up and down the country. I ask the Minister of State if such a requirement exists and whether it applies to all successful CSP funding applicants. Listening to his statement, I agree that we should find something else to help this group, rather than them having to face an annual burden of spending between €6,000 and €7,000 of its allocation on this.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy is absolutely right. All of us, in particular, the Minister and I, accept there is a responsibility, in terms of accountability and transparency, on organisations in receipt of public money. In saying that, if putting an onus and a financial burden on small community groups and organisations that get grants to be compliant with accounting procedures results in them spending a significant proportion of their grant on meeting that requirement, it defies the purpose of the grant scheme and the funding support to these organisations. However, none of us want to see the wild west when it comes to irregularities. We will have people coming into the House today who will question us on financial responsibility and the roles and functions of directors of companies. I know there is a burden and we will come back to that.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I thank the Minister of State for his very positive response. I understand the reasons for audited accounts but if he could speak to the Department, I am sure we could find a system which would not place a burden on community groups that do great work. If it costs them €6,000 or €7,000 out of €27,000 of a grant to do this, the Minister of State will see that they are under financial pressure. I welcome the positive response. I thank the Minister and Minister of State for their co-operation and help and I look forward to a positive reply on the matter.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: The Deputy may have heard the Minister and me speak this morning about the amount of money we are spending on community development and the importance of community. We are very much aware of the auditing requirement for moneys that are allocated and given and the need for transparency and accountability. In saying that, the Deputy has outlined, and we know from our own experiences, that some of the costs being incurred by organisations in fulfilling their duties and requirements do not make sense. The

Minister and I have asked officials in the Department to examine options whereby we could support smaller CSP-funded organisations in this regard. We fully accept the responsibility and duties but we hope Pobal and our Department will engage with CSP-supported organisations, which have raised concerns in recent weeks.

Social Isolation

101. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht if he is familiar with the farmers' yards initiative; if he sees potential for the initiative as part of wider rural regeneration and rural enterprise development; and if he has engaged with any Government Departments or State agencies regarding its future development. [38389/26]

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I ask the Minister of State about the farmers' yard initiative developed - in this country in any case - by Dr. Shane Conway and Dr. Maura Farrell, and piloted successfully in Mountbellew mart. I met recently with Dr. Shane Conway to discuss the model. It uses marts as trusted social spaces for older farmers, combining peer-to-peer support, information sharing, social contact and discussion around issues such as succession, ageing, isolation and farm life. As we discussed earlier, social isolation, particularly in rural Ireland, is reaching crisis levels, so this is a timely initiative. Is the Minister of State familiar with the initiative and does he see its potential as part of rural regeneration and rural enterprise development?

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I thank Deputy McGuinness for this very important question. He is right that Dr. Shane Conway in the University of Galway is taking a future-looking approach. I am aware of the initiative and know there is a similar synergy and relationship in the State of Pennsylvania. I certainly hope to explore that further.

12 o'clock

I will happily talk further to the Deputy away from what is happening in the Chamber because this is a social initiative for older farmers. As the Deputy well knows, farmers do not just retire. They have a lifelong love and grá for the land, farming and agriculture.

The Government recognises the importance of this scheme, but also the well-being aspect and the issue of addressing socialisation. I met the Deputy in Waterford. He mentioned the great work being done by community organisations to combat deprivation and social isolation. This is something the Government should look at further. It is the responsibility of the Minister for agriculture in the main, but it is about the farming community and working across the Government. For example, the Minister, Deputy Calleary, referred earlier to Our Rural Future. I am happy to converse further with the Deputy because what we are trying to do is to keep people on the land. It is about succession planning and ensuring we have regeneration and a new uptake of farming. In Pennsylvania, a similar conversation is taking place.

The On Feirm Ground initiative provides training for agricultural advisers and service providers. It helps them to recognise the importance of health and well-being. It works also with women's sheds and men's sheds initiatives. We have had conversations during questions previously about the seniors alert scheme.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: I will conclude on this point. We need to continue this conversation. Perhaps the Department and the committee could do further work on it as well.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I would welcome that engagement. The strength of this initiative is that it is not asking anybody to go where they would not ordinarily go or to go outside their comfort zone. It is meeting people where they are at, where they feel comfortable and where they are turning up anyway. It is not just about isolation among older farmers; it is also about connecting younger farmers and giving people who are still farming but would love to retire a way to find somebody who might take on the enterprise. They can share skills that they have learned throughout their life. It is a critically important initiative. I welcome the Minister of State's engagement. It would be good to discuss this to see how the State and society can support it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I ask the Minister of State to be very brief as the time is limited.

Deputy Jerry Buttimer: As the Minister outlined earlier, the approach being taken by the Government in Our Rural Future is one that we are looking to develop in terms of taking action to support further rural development and initiatives such as those we discussed this morning to combat social isolation. I will happily chat further with the Deputy on the matter.

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Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Before I turn to energy costs, I welcome the release this morning of Irish citizens who were illegally detained on the Gaza aid flotilla. Their illegal detention and treatment by Israeli forces was disgraceful, as were the actions and rhetoric of Israeli Minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir. They were utterly unacceptable and completely sickening.

If the Minister's comments this morning, that the time for words has passed and now it is time for action, are to mean anything, what we need is more than progress on the occupied territories Bill. I hope she will join our call for the decks to be cleared next week and that we pass the legislation and sanction Israel.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Ag buaic na ghéarchéime costais fuinnimh, tá €178 milliún á choinneáil ag an Rialtas ar leataobh. Bailíodh an t-airgead seo ó chomhlachtaí fuinnimh agus bhí sé i gceist é seo a thabhairt do ghnáthdhaoine le linn na géarchéime costais maireachtála. Ba é sin an cuspóir iomlán leis an scéim seo agus bhí sé i gceist cuidiú éigeandála tapa a chur

ar fáil do theaghlaigh a bhí faoi bhrú ollmhór de bharr praghsanna leictreachais a bhí ag dul i méid go géar agus do dhaoine a bhí ag titim i riaráistí agus i bhfiacha. Ach ní mar sin a tharla.

At the very height of a cost-of-energy crisis, the Government is hoarding €178 million of taxpayers' money that was specifically intended to help struggling households pay their electricity bills. This money was collected under an EU emergency intervention designed to claw back excess profits from energy companies and return that money to ordinary people during the cost-of-living crisis. That was the entire purpose of the scheme. It was supposed to provide rapid emergency relief for families who were being hammered over and over again by soaring electricity costs and were falling into arrears and debt. Yet, almost three years on, €178 million remains untouched in that fund. While the Government sits on the money, families are being absolutely crushed. Workers who never previously struggled are now under unrelenting pressure and they are being stretched too far. Workers and pensioners need direct relief. Families trapped in arrears need immediate support. Households facing disconnection need help to keep the lights on.

Almost 320,000 families right across the State cannot pay their electricity bill, right here, right now, at this moment. It is the second highest level ever recorded in the history of the State, and it has gone up by 58,000 families in one year alone. In the first two months of this year, electricity disconnections went up by a shocking 64% when compared to the same period last year. That is what is happening under the Government's watch, yet the €178 million goes untouched.

Ireland has some of the most expensive electricity prices in Europe. Families are rationing heat and electricity because they simply cannot afford the bills. While all this is happening, the Government continues to refuse point-blank to introduce energy credits for struggling households. Families across the State will conclude that the Government moved faster to protect the money than to protect the people the money was intended for. This is not an administrative delay. That is not what we are talking about here. This is a cold, hard political choice by Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil.

I am going to ask the Minister directly, on behalf of all of the people out there who are finding it really tough to pay these sky-high bills, why, under God, does the Government not use the fund for what it was intended, namely, to help these families pay the bills? How can it possibly justify hoarding this money when workers, families and pensioners are sinking deeper and deeper into energy poverty? Will the Government finally commit to using this fund for the purpose for which it was intended, that is, direct emergency energy credits and a cost-of-living support for struggling households?

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): I thank Deputy Doherty. If I can, I will take the opportunity to inform the House exactly what the current situation is with the 14 Irish citizens who have been detained. The Government has been very clear in condemning the actions of the Israeli Government and the illegal detention and detainment of our citizens and many others in international waters. The behaviour this week by an Israeli Minister has been completely appalling. My priority and that of the Government has been to make sure that our citizens are safe, that they are accounted for and that they can get home as quickly as possible.

I can now confirm that the 14 Irish citizens who were being detained in Israel have arrived at the airport in Ramon. They are all being transported by air to Istanbul. We will have an ambassador there on the ground to meet with them directly. We have consistently called for access and the ability to engage directly with them by our teams, and that has been denied to us. I utterly condemn these actions. Whether it is the Irish Government or any other government, it is not acceptable that we have been prevented from engaging and speaking directly to citizens.

I am also aware that there are reports that two citizens have been hospitalised. They are not Irish citizens. Again, this information has been brought to my attention. We are aware of reports that others have been injured. As soon as I can, I will provide an update to the House as to whether that includes any Irish citizens.

Again, let me be very clear about these actions. The illegal detention, the way in which our citizens have been detained - we all saw the footage and are horrified by it - and also the fact that we have not had direct contact with our citizens are completely unacceptable. Not only have I condemned this and engaged and written directly to the Israeli authorities, but I am working to build a consensus within the EU to make sure that this is not just words and condemnation, but that we respond appropriately. The most appropriate way in which we can respond to this is by making sure the proposal that has been on the table since last year, by the Commission, to suspend the trade element of the EU-Israel association agreement is voted on and that Europe sends a very strong message that we do not accept this kind of behaviour, but also that there is movement when it comes to the banning of trade with the illegal settlements.

From my perspective, I can confirm that I will bring forward the occupied territories Bill in the coming weeks, irrespective of whether we reach a consensus at a European level, and we will enact that legislation, as I have committed to do as Minister for foreign affairs and as the Government has committed to do in our programme for Government.

In relation to the overall crisis and the scenario that many people find themselves in, we all want to do everything we can to ensure we reduce the cost price and reduce energy prices for people, but also that we make energy more affordable in the long term. We all know that a number of different factors have impacted on the cost of energy, fuel and electricity, not least the conflict in the Middle East and the escalating conflict in Iran in recent weeks.

This is on top of the conflict that has been happening in Ukraine.

In my role as Minister for foreign affairs, my priority at a European level is to engage with our partners in the Middle East, the US and beyond to bring this conflict to an end because that is the first point in making sure that we can de-escalate the situation and see costs reducing overall for people in the immediate term. In the immediate term, we have introduced measures to support homeowners. The €750 million that we are providing directly to homeowners is on top of measures that have been introduced since last year. Excise is already zero rated on home heating oil. It is not possible to reduce it further-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is not true.

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----but we made a decision last year that we needed to respond directly and that is what we have done.

The fuel allowance, which supports over 400,000 people who are directly and most impacted by the increases in the cost of fuel, has been extended so a further 50,000 households have benefitted from that payment, and it has been extended by four weeks to take into consideration the situation that people are in. That is not to say that we will not do more. We have another budget coming up and acknowledge the stress the people are under, and we will continue to provide direct supports as well as trying to adjust the overall long-term costs that people are facing.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We will be writing to the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste. Next week the decks should be cleared and we should pass the occupied territories Bill. We should not be talking about progress. There should be no more delays. We need action. This has been going on for years.

In terms of the cost of energy, the Minister is missing the point and is trying to dress it up in a way that supports the Government's narrative but the fundamental facts remained unchanged. While families are struggling to keep the lights on, the Government is sitting on a fund of €178 million that was specifically designed to help these very same families to pay their electricity bills. Almost 325,000 households cannot pay their electricity right here, right now. Electricity disconnections are rising sharply, up 64% compared to this time last year, and many working families are now falling into debt by simply trying to pay basic electricity bills.

The resources are there. The fund is there but the Government has chosen not to use it in the way that it is supposed to be used. Instead of putting money back into the pockets of workers who are struggling, the Government has allowed this fund to go largely untouched while energy poverty is increasing.

Why under God is the Government not using the €178 million that has been sitting there for the past three years and was specifically designed to be put back into pockets of ordinary people to help them pay their electricity bills? Does the Government not understand what is happening out there in the real world?

Deputy Thomas Gould: Hear, hear.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Does the Deputy not understand that in the past month and a half alone, the Government has provided €750 million directly to homeowners, to people who get into their cars every day and go to work and to businesses that transport food and all of the commodities around the country and bring our children to school? That €750 million has not come nowhere. That is from our taxpayers, our Exchequer and this Government. That decision was taken, and it is not on its own. It is on top of the direct supports that we have provided.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What about this fund?

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy is talking about €178 million. Some €750 million has been provided in the past month and a half alone. That is on top of the additional fuel allowance that we have provided, and on top of the retrofitting-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What about the fund?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should allow the Minister to answer.

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----that is taking place because the best thing we can do for people is to make sure that their overall energy bills come down-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: When is the Government going to use the fund?

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----and we have a target of 74,000 homes that we want to retrofit this year. That is on top of the hundreds of thousands of people who have had their homes retrofitted and who are now seeing an overall and long-term reduction in the costs of their energy bills.

If we look at the ESRI report published in April, it said that the most effective supports-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Does the Minister know that there is money in the fund?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Deputy. Will he allow the Minister to conclude?

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Does the Minister's Government know?

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----are those targeting the least well off and that is exactly what we are doing. We are targeting those who need our help the most with-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Does the Government know that the money is sitting in the fund? Does it actually know that millions of euro is sitting there that should be in the pockets of workers?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Ged Nash.

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----with €750 million in the past month and a half.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Will the Minister please conclude? Order, Deputy Doherty.

I call Deputy Nash.

Deputy Ged Nash: Fifteen brave Irish people took part in the Global Sumud Flotilla, putting their own safety at risk to once again bring the eyes of the world back to Gaza. I commend the courage of the activists, and in particular Caitriona Graham. Her inspiring peaceful resistance, chanting "Free, Free Palestine" resulted in her being violently forced to the ground. We always knew those detained were treated despicably but this video that has emerged has shocked the world. It shows clearly the disgraceful actions of Israel and its far-right ministers. There are reports of sexual harassment, broken ribs, hospitalisations and more. However, this is nothing new. It is a deliberate policy by Israel to degrade and dehumanise those opposed to its crimes against Palestinians. The difference this time is that the victims are Europeans.

It is eight years since the occupied territories Bill was first introduced in the Seanad, and 18 months since the general election when both the Minister's party and Fianna Fáil promised to pass the occupied territories Bill. Since then, we have had vacillation, dilution and backtracking on services. I do note the Minister's update that was put on the record of the House earlier this morning and again a few moments ago.

In that time, nearly 30,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza and almost 70,000 injured. Seven months into a so-called ceasefire, aid is still restricted into Gaza resulting in an ongoing humanitarian disaster, and Israel has introduced the death penalty for Palestinians. When it comes to this regime of apartheid, when is enough, enough?

Let us be clear that the actions of Ben-Gvir are the actions of a fascist; no more, no less. The actions of a man who did and said the quiet thing, out loud. This should come as no surprise to any of us. This behaviour is enabled by a sick regime that knows it can commit genocide with no consequences, and Netanyahu's empty condemnation means nothing. This is political expediency. There is no sign of Ben-Gvir being sacked or tried.

It seems the Taoiseach has finally found his voice. It is high time he turned his anger into action but letters and words are no longer enough. The EU's approach to the systematic crimes of Israel has been contemptible; an abrogation of both our legal and moral responsibilities. If European values are to mean anything again and if we are to recover some moral authority on the world stage, the EU-Israeli Association Agreement must be suspended now, not in a month's time. This is a real test for Ireland, especially over the next few months. Will the Minister officially commit to this objective and set this as a test for the success of our EU Presidency? Ireland has given some hope to the Palestinian people by our actions but we need to do more.

My colleague, Deputy Smith, accused the Government of mothballing the occupied territories Bill and I note the Minister's comments earlier on. We have been told that we can expect the Bill soon. Why not pass the occupied territories Bill next week? Let us clear the decks and pass the Bill next week. Will the Minister also prioritise the suspension of EU-Israel trade agreement during Ireland's EU Presidency?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy. I fully agree with him and everybody in this House, in that I am equally appalled by the actions of the Israeli Government in the detention of our citizens and many others in international waters but in particular the footage we saw yesterday that clearly shows that people were not treated with basic human dignity or respect. As I said to the Deputy's colleague earlier, if this is the way that European citizens are being treated, we can only imagine the way in which many other citizens have been treated. I also agree with the Deputy that this is not just the first action by any one minister. The comments by Prime Minister Netanyahu really are hollow because this is just another action to add to a series of actions.

We see ongoing conflict in Gaza. Even though there is supposed to be a ceasefire, hundreds of innocent civilians have been killed. We are seeing a continued lack of aid and a blockading of aid getting to innocent civilians who are starving and who need this humanitarian aid. We are seeing a significant expansion in settler violence. Hundreds of thousands of people - not small villages or towns - are being displaced. We are seeing the death penalty being reintroduced and very public celebration of public trials and executions, all of which are

completely against international law and completely intolerable for each and every one of us in this Chamber.

Over the past few months, I have been building on the work that was done last year to try to build a consensus on how we can respond effectively at an EU level because I agree with the Deputy. Our words are not enough. I condemn the actions but that is not enough. We now need to show what we mean by our actions. I have been building a consensus and working to put more actions on the table that we can vote on and show that we are serious at an EU level. That came to pass last week when a proposal from the Commission that had been on the table last year was reintroduced at the request of myself and my Spanish and Slovenian colleagues. It proposed to impose sanctions on violent settlers in the West Bank and those in the Israeli Government who support them as well as the leaders of Hamas who have carried out atrocities in recent years. That proposal was agreed, passed and will come into effect.

I am now asking and pushing for a vote at the next Foreign Affairs Council, specifically on the suspension of the trade elements of the EU-Israel Association Agreement. This is an agreement that gives preferential treatment to Israel. If this element was suspended, it would impact the Israeli economy by billions of euro. It would send a very strong signal that we are serious, not just in our words but in pushing back on the atrocious actions that have been taken by the Israeli Government, many of which are in breach of international law.

On the occupied territories Bill, I have given a very clear commitment today that I will bring forward the legislation. I will not just bring it forward but will enact it. I look forward to working with colleagues across the House to make sure we can enact it as soon as possible. That is in tandem with the work I will continue to do at an EU level to try to build that consensus and make sure the EU is stronger in its response because, to date, it has not been and I think we all accept that.

Deputy Ged Nash: If the vote at EU level does not go the way of Ireland, Slovenia and others - I am assuming our colleagues in Spain will support that initiative as well - what will the Minister do? Will she take action to work unilaterally towards the aim she has expressed, namely, the suspension of the trade element of the EU-Israel agreement? We are at the point now that the mere suspension of the trade element simply does not go far enough. This is an apartheid state that does not share the same liberal, democratic values as the European Union. We use trade to promote the values of the European Union but make exceptions in this case.

I also note the Minister's commitment to finally bringing in draft legislation in respect of the occupied territories Bill. Can she commit on the floor of the House today to ensure that services are included in that Bill as she has committed to previously in the context of her party's manifesto and the commitments that were made in the programme for Government?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank Deputy Nash. The commitments I have made here do not depend on each other. If we do not reach a consensus on a European level, that will not prevent me and the Government from bringing forward the occupied territories Bill legislation and enacting it. Any legislation needs to be brought to Government beforehand, so I am not going to get into the details of it but I have been very clear. I have had engagement with the Attorney General to look at the overall legalities of what is being proposed and what is being asked by Deputies and what is within our legal remit, based on the fact that, as Deputy Nash knows,

trade is an EU competency. However, we are talking about the occupied territories and it has been made very clear through international law, and the EU has agreed with this, that the occupied territories are illegal and so trade with them is illegal. That is why we are bringing forward this legislation and that is why we have not supported other legislation because trade, as a whole, is an EU competency. However, I am determined, working with other countries, to try to build that consensus, so we will reach an agreement and we will be strong in our response to what we have seen, not just today, but the myriad of decisions we have seen taken by the Israeli Government that, essentially, have led to the suffering of hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I want to raise the treatment of the 14 Irish citizens and hundreds of other civilians illegally held by the State of Israel. After the genocidal campaign of violence mounted by the IDF in Gaza, much of it documented by Palestinian victims on the ground, we felt we could not be shocked any further. Yet, the images and videos of Israel's national security minister, Ben-Gvir, haranguing prisoners who were bound and kneeling before him reveals a new element of performative cruelty. It brings to mind the pictures of detainees in Guantanamo Bay or in Iraq that leaked online following the invasion of that country. Even the then American Administration had the sense of shame to try to conceal the images of abuse undertaken in their name but here, we see no shame. Instead we see an Israeli Government minister in a state that claims to be democratic and claims to uphold the rule of law brazenly parading his power over captives.

If we look at the current political situation in Israel, the reason becomes more clear. There is a debate going on in the Knesset about a Bill that could dissolve the Israeli Parliament early and force a snap election. This is while the current Israeli Government is behind in the opinion polls, so Irish citizens are being used as props by the minister, Ben-Gvir, in his pre-election campaign. This is a new low from the far-right parties that prop up Netanyahu's regime. While our immediate focus is on the treatment of these civilians, we must not forget why they are imprisoned in an Israeli port. While sailing in international waters, these civilians had their boats boarded and were captured and taken away at gunpoint. In any other circumstance, we would describe it like it is - an act of piracy by the Government of Israel which is again showing why that country has become a pariah in the international community.

Earlier this morning, the Minister clarified that the 14 Irish citizens are among those being deported to Turkey. Does she and her officials know if any of the Irish citizens have been physically harmed in any way while they were imprisoned? What meaningful steps will Ireland take against the Israeli Government for its brazen breeches of international humanitarian law?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy. The footage we saw yesterday speaks to the Deputy's point. One thinks one cannot be shocked further when it comes to the actions of the Israeli Government but then we see further footage that shocks again and again. While we do not have a direct report as to whether or not any of our Irish citizens have been physically harmed, because the Israeli Government has not let us to have direct contact with them, the very fact we saw an Irish woman in that video being forcibly shoved to the ground and all of the citizens being detained with their hands bound behind their back and faces on the ground in itself is treatment which is absolutely appalling. Of course, my priority is to understand as soon as possible whether or not there has been any further serious harm done to our citizens

and, indeed, any other citizens. When they arrive in the airport, they will be met by our ambassador in Istanbul. I hope before then we will have direct contact but, if not, we will have direct contact with our citizens then. I hope to get more information to the Houses beyond that.

The only way in which we can respond to this effectively is by making sure Europe uses its voice and takes action in response to what we have seen today, what we have seen in recent weeks and what we have seen in recent months. I stress again that the approach from Ireland has always been to try to build a consensus. I am not just saying it now because of what has happened this week. We have, for many months, been very clear in ensuring this remains on the agenda for the Foreign Affairs Council and advocating for a consensus, a joined up approach and response to what has been happening in Gaza, in the West Bank and more recently the actions we have seen around the death penalty, the public executions and prosecutions as well as the interception this week.

The best way we can show we are serious is by voting to suspend the trade elements of the EU-Israeli Association Agreement. It is by putting a new proposal on the table that would ban trade with the illegal occupied territories. We know it is illegal. Europe has accepted the international ruling in this regard. We need to be strong and we need to collectively respond to this ruling and then move on our own legislation as well.

I have always said that I believe moving on our legislation would be better if done in tandem, and I have not changed that position. That is why I am working with colleagues from the Netherlands, Belgium, Slovenia and other countries who are also progressing their own legislation, so we do this collectively and send a very strong message. The way in which we show not just dissatisfaction with the way in which the Israeli Government has been acting, but that it is something Europe will not tolerate is by imposing greater sanctions that will impact their economy overall. If we suspend the trade elements of the EU-Israeli Association Agreement it will, essentially, impact Israel's overall economy by billions of euro. I believe that is the strongest response we can take at this time.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I want to broaden this discussion to the future of the State of Palestine. In less than five weeks' time Ireland takes on the Presidency of the European Union. The Minister will personally chair meetings of the Foreign Affairs Council and the General Affairs Council. It is a unique privilege and it is a unique responsibility. Does the Minister intend to put the question of EU support for Palestinian statehood on the agenda of those meetings? Our recognition of Palestinian statehood in 2024 was an important moment but the Minister's Government cannot keep referring back to that as if our responsibilities are fulfilled.

To be clear, I am not talking about humanitarian funding or agreements on tax revenue withholding, I am asking if the Minister intends to put that existential question of Palestinian statehood at the centre of the EU meetings she will chair, where she will set the agenda over the next six months.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I will work closely with Kaja Kallas, who is the High Representative and who chairs the meeting but who I will be working closely with throughout the Presidency, to ensure that the situation in the Middle East, in Gaza and in the West Bank, is firmly on the agenda and that a number of actions will be taken. Ireland will have to be a neutral arbiter as we are for any of the files or Councils that we chair and that happen

throughout our Presidency. I assure Deputy O'Gorman, as has been the case in my discussions with Kaja Kallas, that we will have this particular issue firmly on the agenda. There are a number of things I believe we need to do more on.

We need to press not just the votes that I have spoken about on the EU-Israel association agreement, the banning of trade, the sanctions we approved last week, but also the need for greater levels of humanitarian access. At every single Council meeting I attend we get an update from the Commission saying that not enough aid is getting in. We are seeing figures being put out that do not reflect the fact that half of the trucks going in do not have food but only products that can be sold that people cannot afford. There is so much we need to do at a European level to keep this on the agenda. I am absolutely determined to do so and I assure the Deputy that this matter will be kept on the agenda during Ireland's Presidency.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I concur with my colleagues about the ongoing Israeli atrocities in Gaza and their mistreatment of 14 Irish citizens. I would like to see the Minister do as much as she can on this.

The issue I want to raise is that in Ireland right now, a worker can give 20 or 30 years of service, pay full PRSI, pay the higher rate of tax, contribute to the economy every single day and then the moment they face a serious illness, they are hit hard. After a handful of statutory sick pay days, they are pushed onto a flat-rate payment. That bears no connection to their original income or contributions or the financial responsibilities they have based on those ongoing contributions. It is a social protection system that is not fit for purpose. It is a bit of a patchwork that sees people who are contributing to the tax take hit hard at the very moment they are most vulnerable. I welcome statutory sick leave. It was a great first step but we need a new model, a bit like the pensions plan that was introduced. It has its critics but it is a model that could be replicated in this regard with a hybrid system where employers, employees and the State all contribute to a fair and sustainable sick pay structure that is to an extent based on income and replaces a realistic percentage of that income and protect affected low-, middle- and higher-income workers and recognise the decades of contributions they have made.

I recently got a message from a constituent who is battling hard against breast cancer, which, as the Minister knows, affects one in seven women. She is someone with a well-paid job. She studied and worked hard to get to the level she is at and she raises the valid point about helping those who have contributed over many years. She states:

I'm currently off work, My employer paid me a percentage of my salary for eight months. I got back to work for six months and then I had to go out again. I have had five surgical procedures in four months, including one major surgery. I am getting €250 a week. My medicine costs €170 month, as one of my meds is high tech and not covered. I have a mortgage, car, etc. I paid the higher rate of tax, I would say, for over 20 years, if not more. I worked very hard throughout my career. I made significant contributions along the way. Unfortunately, my recovery hasn't been straightforward. Work is an important part of my DNA and I miss all the social interaction. I was brought up to be independent. I've been fortunate enough that I did get some sick pay from my employer and I did have some insurance cover in place, savings for college fees. etc. However, I've been sick for over two years, I have been impacted financially and there are many, many people in the same boat I've met through my illness, some without any supports and it's not right. People who, like

me, paid taxes at the higher rate throughout. I think the State should provide, when needed, appropriate illness support, based on taxes paid and cancer should absolutely be seen as a long-term illness with appropriate supports, especially in this case, breast cancer.

I would like the Minister's thoughts on this and whether such a hybrid model could be looked at.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. While I know he is specifically talking about somebody with cancer or a long-term illness and the implications for them and their families long term, this could apply to a number of different scenarios for people. As a country, how we treat those who are at their most vulnerable is a testament to who we are. It is a sign of who we are as a Government, as a society and as a community. The Government that I have been a part of - not just now but in previous years - has always strived and focused on looking at how we can support those who need our help most, how we can support those who are not in a position to work first and foremost perhaps because of illness, a disability or other factors in their lives and how we can ensure that those who work for most of their lives and contribute at the higher or lower rate of tax but through no fault of their own find themselves in a situation where they cannot work and provide for themselves or their family are provided with the support they are entitled to. As the Deputy said, we have, I believe, made good progress in recent years. We have made good progress when it comes to supporting people who are self-employed, where before there was no ability to support them if they were suddenly not able to work. That is through a new contributory process introduced in recent years. We now have extended statutory sick leave in a number of formats. It is an area in which we always need to strive to do more. From the situation the Deputy has outlined, I am thinking in particular of somebody I knew myself, who sadly, has passed away. For this person, even things like getting home insurance because of a long-term illness became such a challenge, even with a partner working. The Government is moving to try to address this. We want to make sure that if people are in remission or on the mend, they are able to get on with their lives, because that is what people want to do. They do not want to be seen with a heading or a bracket over them for the rest of their lives.

The Deputy has made a proposal with potential changes that we could put in place to support people who cannot work, who are in long-term unemployment and where it does not look like returning to work is a possible avenue for them, where we seek to align the supports they get more in line with where they were in their previous career. Again, I think of an example in my own constituency, albeit not the same in terms of an illness. Workers in Tara Mines were on a particular salary and were laid off for an indefinite period. The Government came together to support them to try to put in place a mechanism that filled much of the gap between their previous salary and what they were getting from the State. The point the Deputy has made is one we all support and I have not doubt the Minister for Social Protection will do so in the upcoming budget. More generally, when it comes to our overall taxation measures, we should look at how we can support people who are at their most vulnerable and not in a position to go back to work because of health or other reasons but who want to be able to get on with the rest of their lives.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I am flagging the issue. I am not expecting overnight action but in the context of the budget, it could be a process moving on. I am a firm believer in

developing an entrepreneurial and creative society and giving people the opportunity to move forward. However, we have to protect the most vulnerable, as I and others have said all the time. The old Marx quote is probably the only bit of Marxism that is still relevant today: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." There are people who have contributed over many years who then get into a position of need. The reason I mentioned people with long-term illnesses and particularly the lady recovering from breast cancer, is as well as being out of work, they have additional costs and they do not have that support base at a time they have contributed and they need that little bit of extra help. It is a valid point to make and I take on board what the Minister has said. I hope that there may be some sort of a process that could help people in the short to medium term.

Deputy Helen McEntee: What we need to do is build on what we have and always try to improve the system. When we live in a country where our economy is growing strong because of the people the Deputy mentioned who have contributed to it for many years, we need to ensure that we are reinvesting in those people, our communities and our economy and, in particular, targeting those who need our help the most. I have no doubt that the proposal the Deputy has put forward could be the first step of a process. Everything starts with a process and it is about engaging with the right people and making sure that anything we provide is targeted. It is also about making sure that where there are opportunities for people to work perhaps in different fields or in a different area that might be less pressurised and might still provide them with some form of income, we do that. This has been a priority over the past number of years, particularly post the economic crash from 2011 or so. We need to continue to look at ways in which we can support people back into the workplace, into different types of work while recognising and acknowledging that there are some people who simply cannot and how do we support them at a time when they need it.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy James Geoghegan: This week we remember Garret FitzGerald, 15 years on from his death, and 2026 marks 100 years since his birth. I think we can all agree that the leadership he showed has shaped our national identity. We are a more tolerant, inclusive and open society because of him. We are also a country that embraces our European identity because of him. He was central to our own European integration story, which laid the foundations for our success. I am glad that the ambition Garret had for this country in Europe is still evident in our approach today. An *Irish Times* headline following Ireland's previous EU Presidency under Taoiseach Enda Kenny said that the EU Presidency displayed the best of what Ireland can offer. This time we have been tasked with advancing a transformative EU agenda and we can again display the best we have to offer.

Many of our priorities are worthy in themselves but can seem distant to many people on the ground. It is important to highlight the practical benefits of what Ireland can do during the Presidency. For example, the digital omnibus package is due to be finalised during our EU Presidency. This simplification agenda will be felt by employers and employees across the country. It should have knock-on economic effects that will ultimately see more and better jobs created in this country. Initiatives like the savings and investments union will have

similarly practical benefits. Businesses will have more capital available and over time as a result, we will see more companies scale up and stay in Ireland with more jobs created here.

Working towards the ratification of trade deals will also be an important element of the Minister's work during the Presidency. Everyone in Ireland, a small open economy that has been transformed by foreign direct investment, FDI, knows that these trade deals provide tangible benefits, more employment, more tax revenue to fund public services and a more diverse country.

Making this work relevant to people's daily lives is difficult but worthwhile. People need to know why the European project is so important to them and to Ireland. The EU Presidency presents an opportunity for renewal in our EU membership. To maintain the practical impact of the Presidency, I would like to ask the Minister about her engagements with stakeholders in Dublin city. As we know, 30,000 delegates are expected to travel to Ireland over a six-month period. For example, the AI summit will take place in November which I am particularly interested in, as the vice chair of the AI committee. In the preparations for the EU Presidency, has there been engagement with Dublin City Council, business representative groups and other stakeholders on the logistical challenges and the opportunity that hosting the Presidency brings to Dublin?

It would be remiss of me not to mention the Silk Road Café, which is facing potential closure as a result of the Presidency. I know that is not a message that we would like to send out from the Presidency.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Presidency offers three key opportunities and three key priorities for me. I also acknowledge the role Garret FitzGerald played not only in this country, but also when it comes to our position and the benefits that we have seen from the European Union over many years. This Presidency offers an opportunity to restate that. I grew up in a time where I have only known the European Union with the ability to live, to work, to study and to travel across the EU. We sometimes take that for granted. We have an opportunity to engage with students in our schools and universities to highlight the benefits we have seen from the European Union, including everything from the significant investment in our infrastructure to CAP funding to the fact that we now have plugs that everybody can use in the same way in all countries. All of this matters for people.

This is also about showing that we can share and steer the really big matters that Europe is facing and the opportunities that come with. We set out three priority areas that we want to focus on: competitiveness, security and values. The Deputy homed in on many of the areas under competitiveness. We want to make sure that not just Ireland but Europe as a whole remains competitive because it is good for business, good for consumers and good for the economy. It means we can reinvest in our society in all the areas we want to invest in.

The Deputy mentioned various different measures and it is really important to make it relevant to people. What are we talking about when we say competitiveness? We are introducing measures that will quite literally make it easier for businesses to set up in Ireland, which can then set up in France and do the same kind of business there without having to jump through hoops. We want to make it easier for more finance to be available to business and industry. We want to make sure that we have a strategic plan for the really important sectors, such as pharma, medical devices and life sciences in particular, which is crucial to our

economy. We are looking to see how we can have a more strategic plan for the sector in the time ahead where we remove what is sometimes arduous regulation without reducing our standards. We need to make sure that innovation is not stifled and that we allow it to grow.

Importantly we will be negotiating the overall figure for the next budget. A key priority for us is to ensure our farmers and those in our agriculture community get a strong CAP budget and that we have money for many other areas as well, including Northern Ireland and the peace process.

We will also be focused on ways in which we can support young people through Horizon funding and the Erasmus programme. The Minister, Deputy Patrick O'Donovan, is bringing forward ideas on how we can provide a safer space online for young people. At the beginning of our Presidency, Commissioner Von der Leyen will set out a number of options that Europe will move on to try to make the online space safer for young people. These are some of the practical things we will be doing during the Presidency and much more.

Beyond that, as the Deputy said, thousands of people will come to Ireland. We will have 22 informal ministerial meetings and about 370 associated and official events that are linked to that. All of this means people coming to Dublin and rest of Ireland, investing in our cities and seeing what we have to offer. Through these meetings there is a chance to show them culturally who we are and what we stand for. The engagement the Deputy mentioned is happening with Dublin City Council and with businesses around the city. I appreciate we need to do more in that regard.

Deputy James Geoghegan: It is good that the Government has set values as a key priority in this Presidency because we often take our membership in the European Union for granted. To some extent, we actually might take for granted the population's support of our membership of the European Union. In countries where governments withdraw their support for the EU, we see the relief that is felt from the population when another government comes in that is closer to the EU. We saw this most recently in Hungary with people waving European flags on the streets.

We need to remind people that European values are our values. A rules-based environment is better for all of us, particularly in the world we currently live in. The AI Act is a very good reflection of that. No other global power, including China and the United States, is trying to regulate the introduction of AI to the same extent that Europe is to protect people against the risks that AI poses but also to ensure we get the benefits of the innovation that AI can bring. I am very heartened to hear the priorities.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy is right that it is about trying to get that balance. In every decision we take we have to think of our core European values, our fundamental principles and why we do what we do. It is to make life better for all of the people that we represent, our citizens in Ireland and across the EU. We have seen a lot of backsliding in certain countries. Elections are taking place at the moment and I am concerned about some of the outcomes of the elections where we have heard very clear not just rhetoric but pronouncements from potential incoming governments, as happened previously in Hungary over the years. We are lucky that in Ireland the overall support for the EU has remained strong but there are many reasons not to be complacent.

We just talked about what is happening in Gaza and the Middle East and the fact that Europe needs to do more and be stronger. We need to make sure that those types of decisions and that type of focus remain on the agenda during our Presidency. I can assure the Deputy of that.

Coming to the final priority area of security, we also need to make sure that we are working together to respond to what are new and emerging challenges we have not seen in the many decades of our membership of the European Union. It is about our physical security and protecting citizens but also our economic security, which is essential if we want to do all the other things I have outlined.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: At a time ordinary workers and families are counting every euro, the Government continues to be a serial waster of public money. There is the €127,000 designer bike shed at the Kerry hospital, a bike shed that is actually letting water in - you could not make it up. Hot on the heels of that, we now discover that €50 million of taxpayers' money has effectively been torched on a failed IT system for Irish Rail. That is €50 million gone. While the Government burns through public money, ordinary people are being stretched like never before and it expects them to pick up the tab for this incompetence. It treats public money as if it were Monopoly money. The Minister knows it is not an isolated incident. It is one scandal after the other. It is one grotesque waste of taxpayers' money after another and the public are sick of it. Ministers come in here, shrug their shoulders and expect the people to pick up the tab, but it is not on. Who will be held accountable for any of this? This is €50 million of taxpayers' money being wasted again under the Government's watch. What is it going to do to end the culture of waste, incompetence and contempt for taxpayers and workers who are paying the price for what we are seeing over and over again?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I was also concerned by the reports that I saw on the front of newspapers today. I have spoken to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, who has informed me that the Department received the accounts for the CIÉ group only just this week and he has not had a copy at this stage. He will obviously read it and will have to take action or respond to what is in the report. I have spoken to the Deputy about this many times. The Government is absolutely determined to make sure that every penny that we spend is spent appropriately.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is €50 million.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I have been asked twice this week to open a Passport Office in Northern Ireland, which could cost up to €6 million. We know that fewer than 500 citizens---
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Deputy Pearse Doherty: Come on. There was €50 million of waste.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Order, please.

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----are using a front desk at the moment.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Do not justify that with giving Irish citizens the right to have their passport.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We now move to the next question, which is in the name of Deputy Robert O'Donoghue.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is ridiculous stuff from a Minister.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty, please.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Government burnt through €50 million and it blames citizens-----

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is disgraceful for the Minister to blame citizens in the North for the Government's complete and utter incompetence.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Sit down, Deputy.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Resume your seat, Deputy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: There was €50 million of waste and it was a cheap shot.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy O'Donoghue.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I did not blame anybody.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: You did.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Too often, we speak about domestic abuse as if leaving is a simple choice when for many, it is not. Coercive control and financial abuse mean survivors may have no safe access to money, even if they are in employment themselves. The safe fund policy launched recently by the Labour Party and Labour Women would provide a once-off, non-means-tested and rapid payment delivered in times of emergency and to help people to leave or to help with essential needs for those who have to stay. We already know this model works because front-line services have been delivering it through donations.

The existing supports *in situ* are vital but, at times, they are too slow and complex in emergencies. This is a practical, life-saving measure. I am calling on the Government to urgently bring forward the proposed €3 million safe fund put forward by Labour Women for victims and survivors of domestic violence. This must be prioritised in the next budget cycle. I acknowledge the Minister's work with Willow Meath refuge.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter. In the past week or two, we have seen the Go Purple Day but, more broadly, we should be talking all the time about how the number of women in particular coming forward who are victims of domestic and sexual violence is increasing year on year. In one way, I see it as a good thing because women are coming forward but the figures we are seeing are completely alarming. They highlight the fact that this is an epidemic and that we need to do everything we can to support women to get out of this situation. We need to be open to all proposals, including the one the Deputy outlined.

The Government has introduced different kinds of supports, such as safe houses, the investment in Cuan and the different funding available through different mechanisms, be it from social protection or housing. At the same time, as the Deputy said, this type of money is being allocated through many organisations and associations. If there is a way to put this on a more formal setting, we should absolutely look at this more broadly.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The Social Democrats and I welcome the release of the 14 Irish citizens who were illegally detained by Israel from the Global Sumud Flotilla. I appreciate the updates the Minister provided in today's proceedings. I listened to closely to them. I asked last week what Israel has to do or what atrocities it has to commit for us to see action from European leaders. Honestly, I have seen in the past 48 hours my answer to that because, apparently, when a fraction of the demonic *modus operandi* of this Israeli State is inflicted upon European citizens, we see strong responses but this is compared to the ongoing torture of thousands of Palestinian detainees when we see an absolutely muted response. Will the Minister acknowledge the two-tier response we have seen from European leaders? Will she go beyond what she said earlier is a strong message, which the suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement would be, to actual sanctioning of Israel and finally holding it to account for the constant breaking of international law that we see?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I cannot be any clearer in my view that Europe has not been strong enough. We have not responded effectively, and that is why we are where we are now. Ireland has not just woken up to this. At an EU level, we have consistently been advocating for the EU to step up and take a stronger stance. That is why we have been advocating - I have been doing so in the past few weeks - for the EU-Israel Association Agreement to be on the table and that we would ban on trade with the illegal settlements. We have finally agreed to sanction violent settlers but we need to do more. Europe has not been strong enough. I welcome the fact that there has been global condemnation of what we have seen this week but we now need to follow it through with action. That is exactly what I am trying to do. That is what I am prioritising.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Vulnerable people and families are now being charged up to €15 for blister packs. Medical cardholders, people on fixed incomes, sick people and people with disabilities must now pay this additional charge. As the Minister knows, there is a cost-of-living crisis and these groups are already under severe financial pressure, being hammered by increases across the board. Food costs over the past five years have spiralled out of control. Butter is up 42%, milk 43%, cheese 28%, chicken 33% and diced beef 48%, not to mention huge increases in gas and electricity prices as well as petrol, diesel and home heating oil. For low- and middle-income families, this charge is the straw that breaks the camel's back. This

service should and must be State-funded. It is a small ask in the bigger scheme of things. I ask the Minister to make sure the blister pack service will be State-funded.

Deputy Helen McEntee: This is an issue that my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has been actively pursuing. She is engaging in particular with the pharmacy associations. It has been the case that there were different charges being applied in terms of dispensing and the overall blister packs themselves. An unequal approach was being taken, depending on the pharmacy and its approach. The work the Minister is doing is to make sure there is parity and that people are not being charged on the double or triple or beyond what they should be because we know that is not the case through certain pharmacies. I will relay the Deputy's concerns directly to the Minister and ask her to give him a direct update as to where things are at now. I am not sure it is fully resolved but I know she is working to resolve this issue more broadly.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: We have seen from the Daft report that there have been brutal increases in the cost of rent. The average in Cork is €2,000 per month for a two-bedroom home. Behind those statistics are human lives. This week in my constituency office, I met a 79-year-old lady from the Mallow area who worked for decades, raised a family and contributed to the community and the State. She never asked the State for anything. Through no fault of her own, she had to sell her family home and has spent the past five years in private rental accommodation without HAP support. She has depleted and exhausted her savings, and her landlord is now selling. She has to vacate the property by 30 May. The State has offered this woman, who will be 80 by the end of the month, a place in a homeless hub in Cork city, which is a 20-minute drive from Mallow and from family supports and everything else are. This does not take into account her age, her mobility needs or the dignity of this octogenarian. I am asking the Minister today to directly intervene in cases like this across the nation, of which there are quite a few. People are ending up in homeless hubs at the age of 80.

Deputy Helen McEntee: No one wants to hear of somebody of any age, let alone an 80-year-old person, having to go into homeless accommodation. It is important to stress that we have cost rental in place, which we did not have a few years ago. That is helping a lot of people. Without knowing the exact details of this case, perhaps there is an opportunity for the local authority to step in with the tenant in situ scheme. I am not sure but I am happy to take the details of the case and relay them back to the Minister.

Deputy James O'Connor: I ask the Minister about the needs of the east Cork area. East Cork is one of the fastest growing regions in the country. It is expected to deliver 40% of Cork County Council's future housing target growth. We have a population of 50,000 people. There is a new town being constructed in Water-rock, while €1.4 billion is being invested in the new Cork metropolitan area rail corridor. The problem we have, unfortunately, is with capacity for recreational facilities in the east Cork area. We are competing with developers for access to lands for critical community infrastructure. We are lacking a community pool and an athletics facility outside of the Midleton-Carrigtwohill corridor. Will the Government support myself and groups looking for support from it in respect of acquiring land for future needs? This is very much-needed for recreational facilities and future population growth. We know from current figures that the need is acute for this facility.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We all know as local representatives, because first and foremost, we are local representatives, how important it is that when we build new homes, we build new communities as well. It is not just about houses but about shops, community centres, recreational facilities, playing pitches, schools and all of the things we need to build a new community. It is important to get that right when we are developing our county development plans and that the local authorities look at all of these different options. In my county, we are working on a variation of our current county development plan. There will be a process in place for every county to develop a new county development plan. That is the time, working with our local councillors and local authorities, to ensure that any new planning is supported with these facilities the Deputy mentioned, or the space and zoning for these facilities.

Beyond that, we have a national development plan, which does not just focus on our critical infrastructure alone. Within that plan, funding can be announced by different Departments, whether for sporting agencies, community centres, active travel programmes and various other initiatives that we all want to see advocated for. Working with the local authorities, it is important that work is put in place first.

1 o'clock

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: There are 139 special schools in Ireland today. They support students with highly complex needs. They need hoists, medical devices, outdoor regulation areas and access to nurses, therapists and clinicians. Their buildings, staffing and day-to-day operations all require essential additional resources to safely and effectively support their students who are just as deserving of an education as everybody else. We know from DEIS that targeted funding can help to make a difference when allocated where it is needed most. I ask for a special school designation in the education funding budget for 2027 as a fundamental acknowledgment that special schools have greater needs.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I concur with everything the Deputy has said. When I spent almost a year in the Department of education last year, special education was one area on which I really wanted to work and make greater progress. There is a greater level of need in special schools but there has also been an increase in need across mainstream schools, if you want to call them that, including special classes within those schools. We need to make sure every penny we spend in current or capital is targeted towards those who need it most. Perhaps there is more we need to do, for example by designating special schools specifically as requiring more and increasing what they receive. They already get greater levels of support in teaching and resources. In the same way that we have adjusted DEIS over the years when the environment, the population and the needs have changed, perhaps we need to take a further look at what is needed now - what further resources are required - and how to incorporate that into current and capital budgets which is important. Twenty new special schools have been opened since 2019-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Minister.

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----and four more will open later this year.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Conor McGuinness.

Deputy Helen McEntee: This is a priority for us and we need to enhance it in every way we can.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I raise the mobile maternity unit fundraised for by Gaeil ar son Gaza in west Waterford. It is now stuck in Egypt, prevented from entering Gaza by the Israeli occupation forces. I understand Irish diplomats in Egypt are seeking a resolution but will the Minister urgently intervene with Egypt, the UN and all relevant agencies to get this Irish-funded and much-needed mobile maternity unit into Gaza? In the same week that we saw the Global Sumud Flotilla illegally interdicted and humanitarian volunteers including 14 Irish citizens - who have since been released - detained, mistreated and denied proper consular access, it is clear that this is part of a wider pattern. I refer to Israel's genocide in Gaza, its destruction of hospitals, its murder of medics and its attacks on ambulances. This attack on medical and humanitarian facilities is part and parcel of the genocide. This punitive and exterminationist regime has to be called to heel. Ireland must act decisively. Will the Government make time next week to pass the occupied territories Bill, goods and services included?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: As Israel continues to thumb its nose at the international community, bask in its impunity and gloat in the face of the deepening humanitarian crisis it has created-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: -----will the Government finally concede that it is time for us to take unilateral action?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Minister, please.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: Our so-called European partners are continuing to enable and protect Israel in its colossal crimes against humanity.

Deputy Helen McEntee: My experience and what I saw when I was on the ground in Rafah at the beginning of the year was not inaction by the Egyptian Government or our own officials. It was a preventing of aid or these types of supports by the Israeli Government. I am happy to engage directly with my team on the ground to see what the current situation is. I am happy to engage with the Minister, Mr. Abdelatty, my counterpart in Egypt whom I met there, to see if there is any possibility. My experience is that this decision is taken solely by the Israeli authorities. As we have seen and as I have said a number of times today, they are prohibiting and preventing this type of life-saving treatment from getting in, which is completely unacceptable. I have also been very clear that I will bring forward legislation on the occupied territories Bill in the coming weeks.

Deputy Carol Nolan: Parkinson's disease is the fastest-growing neurological condition in Ireland. Unfortunately, people are without supports in many counties. In my own county of Offaly, there is no neurologist, specialist nurse or team and people have to travel. It really shocked me that the HSE responded to a recent parliamentary question by telling me it has no idea of the number of people living with Parkinson's disease in County Offaly. I find that very concerning because if it does not know the level of need, how can it measure the level of need or put services in place? This greatly concerns me. I ask the Government to urgently intervene with the HSE in terms of the data blindness - it is just unbelievable that no data is collected per county - and the lack of neurological services in county Offaly. We really should have a neurologist in our hospital in Tullamore along with a specialist nursing team.

Deputy Helen McEntee: While I am not aware of how information is gathered or whether it is held at a national level as opposed to a county level, I will ask the Minister to come back directly to Deputy Nolan to relay whether this is a practice that happens or does not happen at the county level, in particular, or at national level, or if there are plans to do this.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: On 29 April during the debate on my Private Members' motion, we had a very good debate on the need to reform the *in camera* rule in the family law system. Equally, the issue of court-appointed experts was also brought up. If someone wants to make a complaint about a social worker, for example, and they are trying to be in line with the *in camera* rule, they can do that by making a complaint to CORU. I am aware of a situation where people allege that they were gaslit and sometimes lied about during reports as children, when they were under age. Now that they have reached adulthood, they want to make a complaint. Unfortunately, CORU's fitness to practice powers did not come in until December 2014. Is there a mechanism whereby these individuals can make a complaint? If not, will the Government facilitate such complaints through the line Minister, for example?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this. For the first time, the most recent family law strategy - which I published two years ago, I think - places a greater emphasis on children, on the impact separation can have on them and, most important, on how we provide supports to young people as they go through the court process with their parents or outside of it where there are experts who engage with them. I have heard a lot of stories, as I am sure the Deputy has, about where engagement with families has not been done appropriately. The family court strategy was always to be a living, breathing document and if changes or adjustments were needed as issues arose, they could be included. I will ask the issue the Deputy has raised to be brought directly to the Minister for justice, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, to see if something can be done within the family justice strategy. Perhaps something is already in train that he can engage with the Deputy on.

Deputy Joe Neville: I raise the lack of childcare in north Kildare, where there is a growing population. Will the Minister provide an update on State-led childcare, which is desperately needed to address the shortages in towns like Kilcock, Maynooth and Naas? I get multiple emails each week from people who are struggling to get childcare in their areas and want to get back into the workforce. Many of them are mothers who are sacrificing their own careers. Often, both parents are struggling in this situation. I welcome that the State is for the first time

pushing towards introducing State-led childcare frameworks. I ask for a timeline on delivery and that a town like Kilcock could be set out as a pilot. I know Kilcock is very dear to the Minister's heart. It is close to her own area. She will know at first hand the issues and the experience in a town like it.

Deputy Helen McEntee: We have towns and villages that have seen significant growth in recent years, but where the provision of services has not matched it. The Deputy mentioned Kilcock in particular. There are a lot of young families where both parents are working. We need to make sure we provide support for them through childcare so they can continue in their work. As he said, some of Kilcock is in my constituency so I am very aware of the challenges and concerns that parents have. He mentioned that we as a Government and our party, Fine Gael, advocated strongly before coming into government for a State-led childcare scheme that would fill the gaps where we do not have services, where it is not possible for private providers to expand or grow, and where we need to see investment in particular areas with strong growth. The building blocks extension grant scheme is currently operating to try to support extension of existing premises and, in the case of community operators, the purchase or construction of new buildings. In addition, earlier this year the Minister launched a new programme of investment in State-led early learning and childcare.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank, you Minister.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Under the early learning and childcare capital programme, the Government and Department will select up to eight facilities a year.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy O'Rourke.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I will ask in my engagement with the Minister for these areas to be identified as there is large population and family growth-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Minister. I call Deputy O'Rourke.

Deputy Helen McEntee: -----in the areas the Deputy mentioned, such as Kilcock. However, I do not have a specific timeline for that.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: St. Joseph's co-ed primary school in East Wall in Dublin has been told it will lose two teaching posts from September. The school appealed the decision but was told last week that the appeal was unsuccessful.

The Department says it will cut one teaching post due to enrolment numbers. The school is one pupil short to retain the teacher - just one pupil. The other post to be cut is a legacy post that has been there for decades and covers the school's reception class programme. This programme does incredible work and plays an important role in supporting children's early language development, school readiness and transition into junior infants. This is a success story. It is a model for DEIS schools but it will be cut. These cuts are simply unconscionable. Will the Minister intervene to ensure they are reversed?

Deputy Helen McEntee: While the Deputy has outlined some of the details, I obviously do not know all of the facts of the case. I know that when it comes to teacher allocation, it is very much based on pupil numbers. Where you have such a small gap between what would allow the second teacher, there are always appeals that can take place. I know from experience that sometimes it is not fully understood how to put in the appeal because if your numbers are going to go up in the following year, if it is within a certain figure, you can retain the teacher. I ask the Deputy to engage with the school directly and to encourage it to look at the appeal process more broadly. I will bring to the attention of the Minister the other specific legacy post.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: This week, in Carlow, we received the news that Carlow College will wind down operation as a third level institution over the course of the next two years. This came as a tremendous shock to the 87 members of staff who went into work on Tuesday only to find out that they are losing their jobs. While consultation is under way, staff need clarity and they need it now. One staff member said to me that this is not just a job to us; it is their life's work. They have given years and, for some of them, decades to this college and now they are being asked to walk away without knowing how they will support their families or what comes next.

I would like it placed on the record of the Dáil that it is my strong view that statutory redundancy alone is not enough in the case of Carlow College. These staff members are dedicated, skilled people who deserve more than the minimum. They deserve a fair, enhanced package that reflects their contribution and supports them through this transition.

I am relieved that the campus and buildings are to be transferred to South East Technological University, SETU, so we will see lots of life in those lovely buildings for years to come. That is a positive in the long term. However, for now, my focus remains with the staff of Carlow College. I thank them for all their service and dedication to third level education in Ireland. Could the Minister support these workers who are losing their jobs?

Deputy Helen McEntee: The over-riding priority needs to be two things, and I know the Deputy will agree with this. First, we need to ensure the students currently in the college can complete their studies. I have been given assurances that that will continue. The agreed approach is to support Carlow College in delivering the existing programmes through to their completion to August 2028. Second, as the Deputy rightly said, we have excellent people who have been working there for many years and we need to make sure they are supported. I know the Minister has been engaging directly with the college because of the fact that it is a private, autonomous institution outside of the publicly funded higher education system. While there is a need to respect its autonomy, we need to make sure we support such highly skilled, educated and trained people and professionals, who have been imparting their knowledge to students for years, to apply for competitions to fill vacancies *in situ* that they will be working closely with, or to examine what other opportunities may be available to them. I can relay the concerns the Deputy has raised directly to the Minister.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I want to shine a light on the claim of our school secretaries and caretakers for access to the public sector pension scheme and other entitlements. I welcome the intervention of the Labour Court but for reasons unknown to me and ten months after their August 2025 strike action, we still await a recommendation. What I do know - I am sure the

Minister will agree - is the extent to which they are such a positive force in our schools and centres of educational excellence. In recent weeks, many secretaries and caretakers have been in touch with me and my office to say they are deeply frustrated by this delay. Can the Minister provide any update as to when we might receive a recommendation from the Labour Court?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I will start by fully agreeing with the Deputy. We all know that our secretaries and caretakers are at the very heart of our schools. They are the first people you meet on the grounds as you are walking in. The first person to welcome you is generally the secretary. They are absolutely invaluable in our schools. For me, and I think all of us, it is really important that a resolution is found to the ongoing dispute. The Department of Education and Youth has been engaging with Fórsa and the Department of public expenditure and reform for a number of months now. That was under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission. As the Deputy said, more recently, this has been referred to the Labour Court. My understanding is that the parties remain in this process. There is information that had to be provided but we should, hopefully, see a resolution and a recommendation from the Labour Court soon. While I do not have an exact date, I know there is a huge amount of effort being made to try and bring this to a conclusion as soon as possible.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: Over the past number of weeks, Meta and Covalen have announced redundancies totalling over 1,000 job losses here in Dublin. This comes on the back of a severe stalling in graduate hiring in Ireland, leaving many young people without an economic future, as if it was not hard enough under this Government. I have been speaking with many young tech workers in my constituency who are deeply afraid that the artificial intelligence, AI, bubble is bursting and they will be left with nowhere to go. I have to say that as the party with the Ministries in finance and enterprise, Fine Gael is asleep at the wheel on this. It has no plan for the jobs fallout from the AI revolution. It has doubled down on an economic model that exposes our people to the decisions of foreign boardrooms and it has no vision for the future of the Irish economy. What is this Government going to do to actually provide a robust jobs future for people in this country beyond mere words of sympathy?

Deputy Helen McEntee: First, I acknowledge that a number of hundred people have lost their jobs this week. I have no doubt that it is a very difficult time for them and many of their families. I stress that our enterprise agencies, first and foremost, are trying to assist in whatever way they possibly can those who are impacted to help them to find alternative employment. This includes sharing the skills profiles of the employees who have been impacted to companies who may be hiring with multinationals in IDA client-based or indigenous companies throughout Enterprise Ireland. On top of that, IDA Ireland is in regular contact with the leadership, as is the Minister, to offer any support we can in this regard. We all know that this something that has been coming down the track for some time. The introduction of AI means there is going to be a restructuring in companies like this. What we are trying to do - I mentioned this earlier - is focus on how we as a country and the EU as a whole can be more competitive. This means not only looking at other markets, but also embracing AI to see how new forms of jobs can come out of this as well. It is quite competitive and is one of our priorities; it is why we will be hosting an AI strategy summit in October of this year.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: Mere words, Minister.

Deputy Alan Kelly: I wish to briefly acknowledge the passing this morning of Liz Howard, a former president of the Camogie Association. She was a formidable - and I mean formidable - and passionate Tipperary woman. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a hanam dílis.

I want to raise an issue in relation to elderly care. A man I have known all my life, who has dementia and other issues, has ended up in a midlands hospital. He has been there for months because I cannot find him a nursing home. This is going on around the country. We need a plan for people with dementia. Trust me when I say I know what I am talking about here because I deal with it every day in my own life. We need a plan. It is embarrassing. I am embarrassed that I cannot help this man. The HSE is embarrassed. It cannot find a place for him. I am talking to it daily; I will be talking to it after I leave this Chamber. We, collectively here, need to put a plan in place because people are living longer. Dementia is growing because people are living longer as well. We need a plan. This gentleman paid his taxes, worked hard and raised a fantastic family and he deserves the dignity of being placed in a proper home to live out the rest of his days. Financially, this is bad for the taxpayer. He is taking up a bed in an acute ward at €2,000 a day. Can we please look together, collectively, to build for the future the proper facilities for people like this gentleman? Can we find solutions for people who are left in this unfortunate scenario, which is totally and utterly unacceptable?

Deputy Helen McEntee: The one thing we can all hope for when we get older is that we have the supports we need and that we are treated with dignity and respect. To the Deputy's point, what this gentleman needs is to ensure he has a place outside of a hospital, in a home where he is cared for and supported. I have no doubt he is being cared for in the hospital and in the setting he is in now by the fantastic staff we have in our hospitals but I agree with the Deputy that we need to make sure we are investing more in our nursing homes that are dementia-specific and dementia-friendly. I have many of them in my own constituency and where it is specific to that particular need, it is transformative for the individuals who are there. We also need to invest further in our dementia-specific hubs and carers within our communities so that we can support people in the community.

If the Deputy wants to pass on the specific details of the gentleman, I will be happy to pass them on to the Minister and ask her to contact the Deputy directly.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I want to raise the case of a 54-year-old man in Athlone, a constituent of mine who has now spent six and a half months in Tullamore hospital without access to the treatment he requires. He was told he would be transferred to St. James's Hospital for specialist care but it has since transpired that there is no pathway or any arrangement in place for that to happen. His treatment in Tullamore is complete. He is simply getting his wounds dressed. That is the only reason he is in the hospital six and a half months after first going in, despite repeated representations and efforts from the medical staff in Tullamore. My office contacted the HSE, the Minister and the hospitals but has received no response. It is grossly unfair on the man. He is sitting in a hospital where somebody else is waiting for the bed he is in. I implore the Minister to address this. Nobody should be left in this situation. There is a solution. The medical professionals in St. James's Hospital are aware of the man's situation. Tullamore hospital is aware of his situation. Things need to line up at this point because he cannot continue. It is having a profound impact on his mental health.

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy will appreciate that without knowing the details of the case as to why the man is not being released or sent home or another care facility I cannot comment. I am happy to take the details and pass them directly to the Minister.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: The Minister has the details.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I will flag it with her.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I want to address a tragic event that underscores the crisis in our prison system. On 1 April, 45-year-old Colm Connolly died in a padded close observation cell in Midlands Prison. Mr. Connolly was a vulnerable prisoner, diagnosed with severe psychiatric conditions, including bipolar disorder. His family, who were denied the opportunity to formally identify his body prior to a post mortem, are seeking transparency regarding his care and subsequent restraint. They received little help other than from Wexford Aontú Councillor Jim Codd. There are currently three separate investigations under way by the Garda, Prison Service and Inspector of Prisons. This fatal incident occurred against the backdrop of a prison system operating severely over capacity. The prison population reached 5,747, a thousand prisoners over capacity. The Office of the Inspector of Prisons has warned that the chronic overcrowding and deteriorating infrastructure is escalating risks for vulnerable prisoners and staff. How can we have prisoners in this overcrowding with acute psychiatric needs? When will the three investigations into the death of Mr. Connolly be complete?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I am very sorry to hear of this case and offer my condolences to his family. As the Deputy outlined, the Office of the Inspector of Prisons makes sure these types of cases and challenges in our prisons are highlighted and, most importantly, addressed. I can certainly raise the case directly with the Minister.

The wider point is that we have too many people in our prison system with mental health problems who should not be in prison. I know from my time in the Department of justice, and having visited prisons and engaged with prisoners, those working in prisons, including prison officers, feel the same. Investment in our new facility in Portrane will open new spaces so that we have fewer people in our prisons. More broadly, it is about making sure that when people leave prison, there is step-down support in the community, so that they do not become like a revolving door, and that mental health supports are provided outside the prison, which includes the wider piece of work the prison task force has been doing on mental health in prisons over the past number of years. While it will take time, it is something we need to continue to focus on and prioritise. I can certainly raise this specific case directly with the Minister.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Minister will raise it with the relevant Minister. I thank her for that.

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

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

Guardianship of Infants (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am very pleased to introduce the Guardianship of Infants (Amendment) Bill 2026. This Bill upholds a fundamental principle that those convicted of the most serious crimes should not retain automatic legal authority over the children left behind. This Bill delivers on the programme for Government commitment to "examine proposals to remove guardianship rights from those convicted of killing their partners or a parent of their child".

This Bill is not about additional punishment for a crime, rather it is about the welfare and protection of children. It is intended to protect vulnerable children from further trauma, to provide clarity for surviving family members and to prevent perpetrators from maintaining control over the lives of their children. I welcome David French and his sisters, Suzette and Hilary, to the Visitors Gallery and acknowledge his other sister, Veronica, who is watching in Australia. The reason this law is being brought forward today is because of the campaign David and his siblings launched, arising from the murder of his other sister, Valerie French. David French and his family have campaigned tirelessly for a change to the law in memory of his sister, Valerie, who was murdered by her husband seven years ago. Valerie's husband still retains all guardianship rights over their three children. I supported David in his campaign and since becoming Minister for justice, I have worked to change the law. There are other families in the same terrible situation and this Bill acknowledges their circumstances and I hope, in some way, ameliorates their difficulties.

This important Bill will give the State the necessary power to ensure that the safety and welfare of the children left behind by such horrendous crimes are protected. It will do so in a manner that ensures that their voices are heard and ensures that their best interests are the paramount consideration at all times. The State must play a role here. Guardianship, when one guardian kills another, should not be regarded as a matter of private law to be determined between the families concerned but must be regarded as a child protection and welfare issue. As I said earlier, this Bill delivers on the programme for Government commitment to "examine proposals to remove guardianship rights from those convicted of killing their partners or a parent of their child". It is part of the ongoing work to implement appropriate recommendations from the independent Study on Familicide and Domestic and Family Violence Death Reviews, published in May 2023. This study was commissioned by my Department to analyse and present recommendations on how the State's response could be more effective, both in terms of response after an incident occurs but also how systems could be put in place to learn lessons with a view to reducing future incidence of domestic homicides, insofar as this may be possible.

The Bill ensures that following the conviction of a parent or guardian of a child for the murder or manslaughter of another parent or guardian of that child, Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, will make an application to the court. Tusla will be required to make that application as soon as is practicable for an order which may remove or restrict the guardianship rights of the convicted guardian. My Department has worked with the Department of Children, Disability and Equality to ensure that the Bill is focused on child welfare, ensure that the voice of the child can be heard in proceedings and that Tusla will be best placed to make the applications provided for in the Bill. I thank and commend my colleague, the Minister, Deputy Norma Foley, the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, who has been centrally involved in this legislation and has been completely supportive of its introduction.

The role of Tusla in making these applications recognises its important role as the State agency with primary responsibility to promote the safety and well-being of children. Given the tragic and serious circumstances addressed by this Bill, Tusla will, in many cases, already be involved in providing support to the children and their caregivers. In some cases, Tusla may be making use of its powers under the Child Care Act 1991 to safeguard the safety and welfare of the child in the immediate aftermath of the crime. This is in keeping with Tusla's functions to promote the welfare of children, to identify children who are not receiving adequate care and protection and co-ordinate information, as well as to have regard to the rights and duties of parents, whether under the Constitution or otherwise.

This Bill is a short one but it deals with fundamental rights under our Constitution, including Article 42A, which provides that the State recognises and affirms the natural and imprescriptible rights of all children and shall by its laws, as far as practicable, protect and vindicate those rights. The Bill will apply to both married and unmarried guardians. Children will have a voice in proceedings and the courts will ensure that the child's best interests are balanced against the rights of a guardian who has failed in their duty towards their child by their horrific crime of killing that child's parent. Importantly, the provisions of this Bill will apply also to cases where one guardian killed another before the commencement of the legislation.

This is an essential element to ensure that Tusla has the power, where it considers it necessary in the best interests of the child, to make an application to restrict or remove guardianship in the circumstances.

The Bill provides for a mechanism to remove or restrict the rights of a guardian who has been convicted of the killing of, or a serious offence causing harm to, the other guardian of a child. It amends the Guardianship of Infants Act 1964 by the insertion of a new Part IIA to that Act.

The Guardianship of Infants (Amendment) Bill contains four sections.

Section 1 is a provision defining "Principal Act" as the Guardianship of Infants Act 1964, which is the Act to be amended by this Bill.

Section 2 inserts a new Part IIA into the Guardianship of Infants Act 1964. Part IIA is the Part that gives effect to the programme for Government commitment to remove guardianship rights from those convicted of killing their partners or a parent of their child. This is in implementation of the recommendations in Study on Familicide and Domestic and Family Violence Death Reviews.

This new Part IIA contains nine sections. The first of these, section 12B, defines terms that are used throughout the new Part.

Section 12C is the principal operative provision of the Bill. Tusla must apply to the District Court within six months of the conviction of a guardian for the murder or manslaughter of another guardian of the child. This application must be made where the agency has reasonable cause to believe that the convicted guardian has failed in his or her parental duty to such an extent that the child's safety or welfare is likely to be prejudicially affected. An order may be made by the court that will be suspended and take effect once an alternative arrangement is in place, either where a care order under the Child Care Act 1991 has been made or where another

guardian of the child is already in place. The court must consider both the failure of duty and the best interests of the child before making such an order. An order may either restrict the convicted guardian's powers and duties or remove the convicted guardian from office as a guardian. The court may impose such conditions as it considers necessary in the best interests of the child relating to the review of the order.

It is important to emphasise that Tusla is required in these circumstances to make an application. However, it will be a matter for the court to determine the form of the order to be made, considering the best interests of the child, whether that order is one to restrict or to remove entirely the convicted guardian from office as a guardian.

The court has the power to consider the totality of the circumstances in relation to any case before it may determine that it is not in the best interests of the child to make an order. The requirement is that this application be made as soon as practicable after the conviction, but in any case within six months of the conviction. This requires swift action, but the circumstances that give rise to such an application are thankfully rare.

Section 12D provides for the same procedure and powers on the part of Tusla and the court in circumstances where the other guardian of the child has been a victim of a serious offence but has not been killed. A serious offence is defined as an offence causing serious harm that carries a sentence of at least ten years' imprisonment. In these circumstances, Tusla may apply to the court for an order removing or restricting guardianship of the guardian who has been convicted of a serious offence. Tusla may make such an application where there has been a failure of parental duty, as in section 12C, and there has been a change in the care arrangements or guardianship of the child as a result of the serious offence, for example, where a new guardian has had to be appointed or care arrangements under the Child Care Act 1991 are being put in place in respect of the child.

Unlike section 12C, regarding murder and manslaughter, the provision here will be a discretionary power for Tusla. This is to ensure that guardianship of the convicted guardian can still be removed or restricted only in situations where the victim guardian has not been killed but is not in a position to exercise his or her guardianship.

Section 12E provides for the procedures for a review of court orders under the Part. Applications may be made by Tusla, the convicted guardian, another guardian of the child or the child concerned where there has been a significant change to the circumstances of the child that is capable of affecting his or her welfare. Tusla must, and the convicted guardian may, make an application for such a review by the court where the conviction of the convicted guardian has been quashed or set aside. The court may determine that the order made under section 12C or section 12D should remain in place, having regard to the best interests of the child, and must provide its reasons for doing so in writing.

Section 12F provides for the appointment of a guardian *ad litem* to represent the voice of the child in proceedings under this Part. This section applies the relevant provisions of the 1991 Act, as amended by the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2022. This will ensure that the practices for appointment of guardians *ad litem* under this Part, once the relevant sections of the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2022 are commenced, are in keeping with best practice. This includes a requirement for the court to appoint a guardian *ad litem* unless it is satisfied that the best interests of the child can be determined without such an appointment and that it has

determined that there are other means to facilitate the expression by the child of those views. Where a court has decided not to appoint a guardian *ad litem*, it will be required to give reasons for its decision in writing.

Best practice also includes powers to procure reports, allowing a guardian *ad litem* to make an application for procurement of a report on any question affecting the welfare of the child where there is no such report, or where it is out of date, after consultation with the parties in the proceedings. It should be noted that the Minister for Children, Equality and Disability will pay the costs or expenses incurred by a guardian *ad litem*.

Section 12G provides for jurisdiction and the conduct of proceedings. Proceedings under this Part will be heard in the District Court, and in the Family District Court on commencement of the relevant sections of the Family Courts Act 2024. This will serve to reduce costs and timelines, along with ensuring that proceedings are heard before the court that is most experienced in dealing with such matters. Proceedings will be heard otherwise than in public, as is standard for guardianship and care proceedings.

Section 12H provides for the necessary safeguards in relation to data protection and data sharing under this Part.

Consultation has been undertaken with the Data Protection Commission in developing these provisions. They will provide for the necessary legal basis to permit Tusla to share and receive data with relevant bodies to enable it to perform its functions under this Part. I will, in consultation with the Minister for Children, Equality and Disability, be able to make regulations under this section to specify the nature of and manner in which personal data may be shared and the measures to be taken to ensure that such personal data is shared only where necessary and proportionate.

Section 12I provides for individuals to be made notice parties to proceedings. Any guardian of the child must be made a notice party to proceedings. Any relative of the child may seek leave to be joined as a notice party to proceedings, and this is broadly defined. This section implements a request of stakeholders and a recommendation of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration that family members be in a position to be made notice parties to proceedings.

Section 12J provides for the retrospective application of this Part to cases in which a conviction predates the commencement of the provisions of this Bill. In such circumstances, where a convicted guardian was convicted of the murder or manslaughter of another guardian of the child, Tusla will be able to apply for an order, as set out in the provisions of section 12C, where there is reasonable cause to believe that there has been a failure of duty on the part of the convicted guardian and Tusla considers it appropriate to apply for such an order.

Section 3 is a technical amendment to section 8A of the principal Act to acknowledge the new Part IIA inserted by section 2 of the Bill.

Section 4 is a standard provision relating to the Short Title of the Bill and its commencement. The Bill will come into operation on a day to be appointed by me after consultation with the Minister for Children, Equality and Disability.

I will speak briefly about the amendments I intend to make on Committee Stage. At the request of the Minister for Children, Equality and Disability, I intend to provide for the

inclusion of a short set of technical amendments to the Child Care Act 1991. While further detail will be provided on Committee Stage, these amendments will ensure that the policy intent in respect of the appointment of guardians *ad litem* and the provision to them of legal advice and legal representation under the guardian *ad litem* national service are further elaborated in the legislation. These amendments are necessary for the proper operation of this Bill.

Many details will merit debate and I look forward to working constructively with Members as the Bill progresses. I am aware that there is general acceptance across the House that measures are needed to ensure the welfare and safety of children are protected in the wake of what are, thankfully, rare but incredibly serious and tragic circumstances. This Bill has a narrow scope. It seeks to deliver on a well-defined and much-needed recommendation in Study on Familicide and Domestic and Family Violence Death Reviews.

The Bill has been carefully calibrated to make sure that it reaches the appropriate balance between the constitutional protection of the family and the constitutional imperative that the best interests of children are the paramount consideration when it comes to their guardianship.

This Bill is a significant and important development in giving the State the tools that it needs to ensure it is the child's best interests, welfare and safety that are prioritised in the aftermath of these horrific crimes. Everyone in the House will agree that this is a worthy purpose and that is why I commend this legislation to the House.

Deputy Máire Devine: I thank the Minister. I send a céad míle fáilte to the people in the Gallery, including Valerie's brother and sisters, and to SiSi, which is a collective of women survivors of intimate partner violence. I thank them for their unceasing work. Sincere thanks resonate from this Chamber for its protection of women and children as a priority.

Sinn Féin welcomes the progression of legislation to restrict guardianship rights in situations where a person has murdered a child's other guardian. I commend Mr. David French, brother of Valerie, who was murdered by her spouse. His love for his sister and nephews, his tenacity and relentless campaigning are largely why we are having this debate today. Déanaim comhghairdeas le David agus a chlann.

Mr. French was an integral witness before the Oireachtas justice committee when it conducted pre-legislative scrutiny of the Minister's general scheme. My party colleague and Cathaoirleach of the Oireachtas justice committee, Deputy Carthy, highlighted that it was essential that the committee should hear directly from those ordinary people with real-life experience of the matters being discussed, rather than just from the statutory agencies, NGOs, academics and Government Departments. The insights that Mr. French gave to the committee in respect of the impact that this legislation would have had for his family and the welfare of his nephews were invaluable. The testimony, alongside the written submissions received by the committee, provided for a report on pre-legislative scrutiny that identified a number of areas in need of consideration but which can serve as the basis of a strong and robust piece of legislation.

I also commend my party colleague and Sinn Féin finance minister in the Executive in the North, John O'Dowd, who has committed to progressing similar legislation known as "Jade's law". I hope we will have tied-up all-Ireland legislation to enact.

What this law will do is to recognise, as David French told the committee, that to murder a parent is to grievously abuse a child. It would facilitate the restriction of guardianship rights from those who kill their partners or the parents of their children.

I welcome the Bill that now reflects the concerns of recommendation 2 of the committee's report and provides for a review process in case of a later acquittal of the guardian. That makes sense. However, a number of other areas were touched on in the report and I do not see them reflected in the Bill. Recommendation 3 suggested that parties beyond Tusla, such as relatives, should be able to submit applications to the court. It would be useful if the Minister were to outline his rationale for limiting this to only Tusla. While recommendation 8 does allow for relatives to seek leave to be joined as a notice party, it falls short of the committee's report recommendation that they would be a notice party.

Some concern was expressed by the committee regarding the resourcing of Tusla, in particular in relation to the terms of applications generally being time-bound to six months. As such, I think that recommendation 6, which was that a specialist unit be established within Tusla that would have the responsibility of submitting any applications, could bring multiple reassurances in terms of the successful operation of this Bill.

It is widely known and accepted that Tusla is under enormous and severe pressure from unprecedented child protection referrals, severe social work shortages and a crisis in emergency placements. Reassurance is needed that it will be competent. At times, it has been found not to be competent. We need reassurance that it will be competent in this instance to act on this legislation as laid out without delay and to act in a fair and equitable manner, given its remit and terms of reference as the Child and Family Agency.

Recommendation 4 advocates that a register of guardians be established to aid State bodies. I know that in recent weeks campaigners have been highlighting an issue whereby widowed parents must provide death certificates to the passport service every time the child's passport is renewed. I ask the Minister if this is a matter he may be willing to review, in conjunction with his colleagues, as something that could bring greater benefit. To bring a death certificate every time is a painful and reminiscent requirement. It does not make sense to do it for the length of a child's life until he or she turns 18.

I will ask the Minister about his position on recommendation 7, which sought to safeguard that this legislation could not be applied in cases where a person is convicted of manslaughter when acting in self-defence or where there has been a history of domestic abuse towards the alleged perpetrator. I would appreciate if he would address these matters in his closing remarks.

Sinn Féin welcomes the progression of this legislation and stands ready to work with the Minister to ensure it is as robust as possible. We hope it will see a swift but detailed passage through committee. I pay tribute to Valerie, a woman, mother, caregiver and professional therapist dedicated to affirming life and love. Cuimhneoidimid uirthi. To Valerie.

Deputy Alan Kelly: It probably does not happen often, but this is a matter that we, collectively, as a Legislature and a body politic, are glad to see happening. I welcome Valerie's family. They are very welcome. I commend Valerie's brother, David, to whom I listened on multiple media appearances over recent years and during pre-legislative scrutiny in committee. His testimony was compelling. His steadfast determination and resilience are completely

admirable. I say "Well done" for the fight. He has ensured that legislation that is absolutely necessary is coming forward because of his advocacy and strength, and the way in which he has pushed for it.

I also commend the Minister, which does not happen every day, as we know.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Alan Kelly: We have to acknowledge when legislation is necessary and we all agree that this legislation is necessary, and the Minister has brought it forward. We will tease it out. In the main, I support it. I will obviously be supporting it, but we will tease out a few things. The Minister and his Department are to be commended on bringing it forward in a pretty quick manner. I hope we will bring it through the Houses relatively quickly.

I have a few issues. The Minister went through section 12D, which relates to the issue of being able to take away guardianship where there is a situation in relation to the second guardian as well. He outlined that comprehensively in his few words, but we might look to see how we can tighten it up on Committee Stage.

There has been some commentary from Tusla, probably not on the record, relating to resources and so on. It is not something that I believe we need to get overly concerned about because in truth, it must be the agency to deal with this. That is the way it should go.

There are issues with the constitutionality of the legislation. My concern when this legislation was being drafted was whether there would be a constitutional test.

Article 42A was inserted by the referendum on the rights of the child. Article 42A.2.1° states:

In exceptional cases, where the parents, regardless of their marital status, fail in their duty towards their children to such extent that the safety or welfare of any of their children is likely to be prejudicially affected, the State as guardian of the common good shall, by proportionate means as provided by law, endeavour to supply the place of the parents, but always with due regard for the natural and imprescriptible rights of the child.

This test, that a parent has failed in his or her duty towards the child concerned to such an extent that the safety or welfare of the child is likely to be prejudicially affected, is recited throughout the Bill. That is necessary just in case of constitutional challenges, which we know can happen quite frequently. From a Labour Party perspective, we are watching out for that but we do feel that it is covered as part of the Bill. As Professor Louise Crowley argues, in the event of a challenge, the court will very likely have very strong grounds to say that it was in the best interests of the children to have someone else acting as their guardian or custodian. That is in relation to interaction with Article 41. That puts that to bed and I expect that we will be covered.

Having gone through the pre-legislative recommendations, I am glad that a review mechanism is in place whereby there is an acquittal. We cannot foresee all circumstances as to what will happen in this country in years to come, so where there is an acquittal, we need to make sure the legislation is safeguarded for such scenarios. I am glad that is there.

There were some other recommendations, which the Minister might discuss. When we went through this, there was a specific kind of onus put in on the voice of the child. We might discuss that on Committee Stage as well. I might bring forward an amendment relating to how children can be better involved, how they can be better brought through and how there can be a mechanism to hear the voice of the child or children through the Bill. That was something we specifically went through when we discussed this previously. There was consideration also of a register of guardians to aid State bodies implementing the legislation. I do not know whether the Minister has considered that. There was also the issue discussed earlier of the consideration of explicitly excluding victims of domestic violence convicted of manslaughter when found to be acting in self-defence from having guardianship rights removed. That is quite a delicate area but that needs to be teased through.

In relation to the timeframes, currently, the Bill's only time limit is a six-month deadline after conviction, during which Tusla can apply for restriction or removal of guardianship rights. This takes no account of the time it takes to charge and convict or the time for the application to be decided. This means the child would likely remain under the guardianship of their parents' killer for many months. Can we tease that out? Can there be a period when there is something else in place, or can we define even what that is? I do not have all the answers to this but it is certainly that six-month period. Are there any guardianship issues that will still remain with the person who will have the guardianship rights removed? I acknowledge we have to have a time period, but does the Minister see what I am getting at? I do not know if, from a legislative basis, we can even provide an answer because there has to be some sort of timeframe. This is something that cropped up when I was discussing this with some people. Maybe there could be a suspension of guardianship once a guardian is charged rather than convicted, and then there would be the overlap of the six months. Maybe something like that could be considered. That might be appropriate.

Maybe child impact assessments should be completed ahead of an application to court as well. That is something else we might discuss.

By and large, however, I and the Labour Party are one hundred per cent supportive of this. There are some issues that I have just raised and that I will tease out on Committee Stage. We will look at amendments. I would rather work with the Minister on amendments than table amendments myself. We could maybe discuss that and get to the right wording, but I wanted to put out those issues, which are the ones we should consider. In particular, I have a concern about the issue of the six-month period. Maybe there should be a way in which that is covered. Furthermore, the voice of the child, as part of this process, is the second most important issue, which we may need to look into again. I thank the Minister again. I thank David and the family of Valerie. It is appropriate that this Bill is named after her. I hope it will be put through in a very speedy manner. The Minister will get the full co-operation of the House. I expect and hope we can do this in a short time. I commend the Minister and his officials.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this important legislation. I join colleagues in welcoming Mr. French and his family and colleagues to the Gallery. We are here to honour Valerie and her family for their enduring commitment and to honour Valerie's children. This is a very rare occasion, certainly in my short spell as a TD, to see such overwhelming support across the House for legislation. I commend the Minister and his officials on the short time it has taken from the publication of the programme for

Government to bringing such detailed legislation before us today. Having been a youth worker and taught child protection to many volunteers for so many years, it is really welcome to see this type of terminology and language in legislation in Ireland today whereby the welfare of the children of this State is of paramount importance to us. We have come an awful long way and we still have a long way to go in that regard, but when we hold the welfare of children at the core of the decisions we make as legislators, we will never go too far wrong. That is why, notwithstanding I am sure the many constructive amendments that might be tabled on Committee and Report Stages, the Social Democrats are very much behind and look forward to supporting the basis of this legislation.

With regard to child and youth participation, since becoming the Social Democrats' spokesperson for children and young people, I have heard from many organisations and many young people about their ability to be informed participants in legal proceedings. That is not for today but it is something we might consider in the ways in which we can ensure that young people are given the capacity to participate and to share their experiences and their feelings in a way that is safe, ethical and heard. That is certainly something we will consider.

Similarly, today we have heard from the Ombudsman for Children that one in five complaints that it received to its office last year related to Tusla. While we acknowledge and agree that Tusla should be the body in this legislation that is the primary actor, we cannot ignore what is a significant concern about resourcing. When we put in a timeframe like six months from conviction, I just think we need to all be assured that the agency has the resources and the competencies to be able to act from day one of that conviction at least. Again, that is something we will consider and discuss, I am sure, in future.

Many others want to speak. I just want to take the opportunity to offer our party's full support. Deputies Gannon and Cairns tabled similar legislation in the past. It does not matter how we get there as long as we get there, and that is why we will support this Bill and we look forward to supporting it and working in earnest with the Minister and others. I commend the French family and all who have campaigned on this for so long at this point. It is a position that no one should be in, but today marks a very important day in that journey, and I commend them all for that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Although we are in a different order now, Deputy Devlin is next.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. While it is a short Bill, it is a very significant one. I thank the Minister and his officials for bringing it forward. It delivers on a clear programme for Government commitment. It implements a key recommendation of the independent Study on Familicide and Domestic and Family Violence Death Reviews. It does so under a name, Valerie's Law, in honour of Valerie French, killed in June 2019 by her husband, James Kilroy.

I welcome David French and the wider French family to the Gallery and I offer my deep condolences to them. I commend them on their commitment, courage and persistence in relation to this legislative change. Valerie's brother David, whose advocacy has carried this issue through years when it could easily have slipped down the agenda, has spoken with dignity and persistence. The State owes him a debt of gratitude and we remember Valerie and her loved ones today.

Fianna Fáil supports this Bill. The principle at its heart is straightforward. A person convicted of killing the other parent of their child should not automatically retain guardianship rights over that child. A person convicted of a serious offence causing serious harm against the other parent should not by default continue to hold those rights either. Until now, the law has been almost silent on this. Families have been left to navigate it themselves. That is not acceptable and this Bill ends that practice.

The legislation is built on three sound foundations. First, the best interests of the child are the paramount consideration, and rightly so. Section 12C and Section 12D both require the court to weigh both the failure of duty and the welfare of the child before any order is made. The court can restrict a guardian's powers or remove the guardian entirely. It can impose conditions, which can be reviewed over time. Second, the voice of the child is heard. Section 12F provides for the appointment of a guardian *ad litem* in line with the Child Care Act 2022. The child is not a footnote in proceedings about their own future; he or she is a party to them. Third, Tusla is placed at the centre. Section 12C requires the agency to apply to the District Court within six months of a conviction where there is reasonable cause to believe parental duty has failed. This is appropriate. Tusla is the body with the expertise, the statutory remit and the institutional memory to make these applications properly. The data-sharing provisions in section 12H, developed in consultation with the Data Protection Commission, will allow it to do that work on a sound legal footing. I welcome too the retrospective application provided for in section 12I. There are families already living with the consequences of these convictions. They should not be excluded from this protection because their cases predate commencement.

Taking a step back for a moment, guardianship is defined by the Courts Service as the rights and duties of parents in respect of the upbringing of their children. Rights and duties are the two halves of the same legal status. The Bill addresses the most extreme end of the spectrum, where the duty has been violated in the gravest way imaginable, but the principle that guardianship carries responsibilities as well as rights is one this House should be willing to examine across the spectrum, not only at the extremes. There is a real concern in communities across the country, including in my constituency of Dún Laoghaire, about a small but persistent cohort of young people who are engaged in serious antisocial and criminal behaviour. We all know the pattern. It is the same names, the same addresses and the same incidents. In too many of these cases, the guardians of those children have effectively disengaged from any role in steering their behaviour. Will the Minister to examine, as part of the ongoing implementation of the Youth Justice Strategy 2021–2027, what further measures can be brought forward to hold guardians meaningfully responsible for their children who continue to engage in serious antisocial and criminal behaviour? Section 111 of the Children Act 2001 provides for a parental supervision order where the court is satisfied that a wilful failure of a parent to control the child contributed to the child's offending. The principle is on the Statute Book. The question is whether it is being used, whether it is being resourced and whether it can be strengthened.

The vast majority of parents of children in difficulty are doing their best in circumstances none of us would want to face. The answer for them is support, not sanction, but that is why this conversation cannot be separated from continued investment versus intervention. I welcome the record €43 million allocation for youth justice services in budget 2026, which is a 22% increase on the previous year. I welcome the achievement of full nationwide coverage of youth diversion projects, with 94 in operation. I also welcome the continued funding of the Greentown programme, which targets children subject to coercive control by criminal gangs.

These are the right investments. They must continue and they must reach communities such as those in Dún Laoghaire and across the country. However, intervention works best when responsibility is shared by the State, the community and the guardians of the children concerned. The aside I am asking the Minister to consider is the third leg of that stool.

To return to the Bill before us, this is good legislation. It is carefully drafted. It has been developed in consultation with the families who lived through events it addresses, with civil society and with the Data Protection Commissioner. It places child welfare where it belongs, in the public law arena, not in the private negotiations of grieving families. It honours Valerie French. It honours every child who has been left in legal limbo while the State worked out what to do. That is welcome in this legislation, and I am pleased to support it.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important legislation. I acknowledge the work the Minister has done in bringing forward this necessary change to the laws around guardianship. Guardianship currently refers to the set of legal rights and responsibilities to make major decisions about the upbringing of a child or a young person. This includes everything from what school they attend, what religion they are raised in, major medical decisions, whether they are allowed leave the country for a holiday or for other reasons and all that set of significant decisions in a child or young person's life. We separate out the power to make those big decisions from the day-to-day decisions about a child, which are governed by the rules surrounding custody. The Bill provides that new power at law, namely, that a court can make an order suspending the guardianship held by a parent who has been convicted of killing the child's other parent. It is a very significant interference and significant restriction with guardianship rights but one which is necessary and for which there is a basis. The Bill would give that power to Tusla within six months of a conviction for the killing of a child's parent to bring forward an application to the court seeking such an order and that application could be made within a further six months if there were particular circumstances for that. Ultimately, the Bill recognises that the killing of a child's parent by the other child's parent represents an abuse of that child and it is for that incredibly severe reason that this significant restriction is being proposed.

On behalf of the Green Party, I will support this Bill. I will make points. First, has the Minister considered the possibility of providing for an interim order? A former colleague of mine, Dr. Brian Tobin, in the University of Galway has made the case that there should be provision for an interim order, particularly if there is a lengthy trial or a length of time between conviction and sentencing. Any additional time period in which a parent who has undertaken this grievous crime has guardianship over a child represents a longer period within which the potential abuse that we are recognising in this Bill and are legislating to restrict could take place, and in which additional traumatising of that child and additional damage to their welfare could take place. I am sure the Minister has given this some thought but I ask him, particularly as he brings this Bill through Committee and Report Stages, to give some consideration to that particular point of an interim order. There are other jurisdictions which implement it and perhaps we can look at that model there.

Second, I step back to a slightly wider point. The Minister's predecessor commissioned research and a wider analysis of guardianship in infancy. This legislation has been with us for some time, since 1964. My understanding is that this report, which has not been published yet, contains some recommendations, particularly around the acquisition of guardianship duties. It

is probably a good time to consider that. Recognising the different ways across which families are formed these days, it is fair that we look at how guardianship duties are acquired. I have tabled a number of parliamentary questions to the Minister over the past 18 months about where this report is, whether he will publish it and whether he will implement all, or, indeed, some of its recommendations.

To date, his replies have not been hugely illuminating. It would be valuable to publish that report. It is my understanding that it is completed and it is on the Minister's desk. It was even on his predecessor's desk as well. It may be that he does not wish to follow some or all of the recommendations in it. If so, it is legitimate for him to make that decision. I do not propose that we delay the Bill in any way on foot of that. This Bill has merit to work on its own. Perhaps in his wrap-up or in the near future, he would set out his proposals regarding the potential publication of the draft report on the wider question of guardianship.

Deputy Paula Butterly: First, I thank the Minister for the work he has done on this Bill. I acknowledge the relentless work and advocacy of David French and his family in regard to the work behind the Bill. When we talk about laws like Valerie's Law, we are ultimately asking a difficult but essential question. What does justice mean for a child whose parent has committed the most serious harm imaginable, killing the other parent? There is often an instinct in law to preserve parental rights wherever possible. This is right because the Constitution recognises the importance of family. The bond between parent and child is one that should never be lightly broken but we must be clear about one thing: parental rights are not absolute. They exist alongside and must sometimes give way to the rights and well-being of the child. In situations of domestic homicide, it is simply not acceptable to assume that a perpetrator should always have access to their child.

First, we must consider the psychological reality for the child. A child who has lost one parent at the hands of the other is not just grieving, they are dealing with a profound trauma. Forcing or even allowing contact in all cases risks reopening that trauma, creating fear, confusion and emotional harm that will be felt not just today or tomorrow but well into the future. Access in these circumstances is not always a benefit. It can be a source of significant psychological damage.

Second, we must look at the nature of the crime itself. The act of killing the child's other parent represents a fundamental breach of trust, responsibility and care. It is not just a crime against an individual but it is a violation that directly affects the child's sense of safety and stability. In many ways, a person who has committed such an act compromises their role as a caregiver.

Third, there is an issue of power and control. Even limited access can allow a perpetrator to continue exerting influence over a child or even over the wider family. In cases of domestic violence, control does not always end with the criminal act. It can continue through legal processes and claims of parental involvement. The law must be careful not to become a tool that extends that control.

Fourth, we must prioritise the best interests of the child as the overriding principle. While this is the fourth point, it is the most fundamental and important one. This is not a moral claim: it is a legal standard. The child's welfare must always come first, ahead of any entitlement the parent may claim. In many cases of domestic homicide, maintaining contact simply will not

meet that standard. There is nothing to argue that access should never be allowed, there may be rare, exceptional circumstances where carefully managed contact is appropriate but the key point is that access should never be assumed or automatic. Instead, it must be carefully assessed, strictly controlled and only permitted where it clearly benefits the child. Valerie's Law reflects this shift in thinking. It moves us away from a system that prioritises parental status and towards one that centres the child's safety, dignity and emotional well-being.

In conclusion, we must recognise that in extreme cases the question is not what the parent is entitled to but what the child needs in order to heal, feel safe and move forward. Sometimes that means recognising that no access at all is the most favourable outcome in these scenarios. I again thank the Minister. I also again acknowledge the French family for all their efforts. It is quite extraordinary. I reiterate the point that the child's interests has to always be at the centre of argument we make.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I welcome the core intention of the Guardianship of Infants (Amendment) Bill. Any measure that seeks to strengthen the legal framework for protecting our most vulnerable children from those who would do them harm deserves full support. The provisions aimed at safeguarding children from the influence of individuals guilty of major crimes, enhancing care orders, and promoting better interagency co-operation are, on paper, positive steps. We must always strive to put the welfare of the child first in our laws. However, I must speak plainly. Many people across this country will find it profoundly galling that Tusla, the agency entrusted with child protection, is being further empowered and charged with making these orders, when it stands accused of being institutionally unfit for the task it already has. There are many serious questions about Tusla. As a public representative, I certainly have no confidence in it. Time and again we have seen failures that should shake the confidence of every parent, child and citizen in this country.

Just last year there was an horrific alleged rape of a ten-year old child in the care of the State at Citywest - a young girl who was under Tusla's guardianship. That is the fact of the matter. She absconded and was allegedly assaulted in circumstances that raise the most serious questions about supervision, placement safety and basic duty of care. How does a child in State care end up in such danger? This was not an isolated tragedy. It is in fact symptomatic of a deeper systemic problem within the system.

Let us not forget the ongoing scandal that I have consistently highlighted in this House, which to my mind has not been effectively addressed. The findings of the sexual exploitation research programme, SERP, report were very disturbing. The report was carried out by academics from UCD and it was entitled Protecting Against Predators. The report raises serious questions for Tusla that have not been adequately addressed. The State should hang its head in shame that it has not adequately dealt with this report, when the facts and evidence are laid bare in the SERP report. The report clearly laid out how predatory gangs, often organised groups of men, are targeting and sexually exploiting vulnerable children, particularly girls, while they are under the care of Tusla. That is under the State's watch. Children are coerced into sexual acts in exchange for gifts. They are preyed upon because of their vulnerability, instability and the gaps in the system that is meant to protect them. This is grooming and exploitation on a scale that should urgently demand a full public inquiry. It should demand decisive action because the report is very disturbing, yet the response has been nothing short of criminally inadequate.

This Bill is about protecting children from the influence of those guilty of major crimes. That is certainly right and necessary but even as we debate these measures here today, unknown numbers of vulnerable children remain in the care of the State - in the care of Tusla, acting as the State guardian, and they are being failed day in, day out. Young girls are being raped and exploited day in, day out, under the State's watch. Children are going missing from placements and are exposed to exploitation. The basic safety of these children cannot be guaranteed, yet the Minister wants to give Tusla more power, even though there are serious questions hanging over it already. It does not make sense to me. The State has taken on the role of parent for these boys and girls, yet too often it fails in that most fundamental duty. We cannot pass legislation that expands Tusla's role without simultaneously demanding radical reform, accountability, transparency and a proper inquiry.

3 o'clock

We need independent oversight, proper resourcing of front-line staff, rigorous vetting of placements and a zero-tolerance approach to failures that put children at risk. The public rightly expects that when the State removes a child from their family, it provides something better, something more stable and not a new set of dangers.

I support the Bill's protective aims, but I urge the Minister to address these uncomfortable truths about Tusla. Our children deserve far more than fine words and amended legislation. They deserve a child protection system that adequately protects them. Anything less is a betrayal of the most vulnerable in our society, and it is neglect.

I ask once again for the disturbing findings in the Sexual Exploitation Research Programme, SERP, report, which was compiled by UCD academics, to be looked at and for Tusla to be brought to an inquiry as soon as possible because it has to be. It is going to be a big scandal in years to come. There is no doubt about that. By ignoring it, it is making it worse, and it is certainly making the suffering more unbearable for all of those victims who are mainly girls.

Deputy Réada Cronin: I am happy that Sinn Féin is supporting this Bill on its way through the Houses. I also want to remember Valerie. I have an older brother, and I am sure that Valerie's three sisters are very proud of the fact that their big brother has led on this. I am sure that it means a lot to Valerie, wherever she is, and to her children as well knowing that they have an uncle who went out to bat for them like this.

Regarding the legislation to protect children, it is going to take ongoing efforts from the Members in these Houses and from our communities. Lifting the lid on the scourge of femicide uncovers layers and layers of needed legislation. I know that my colleague an Teachta Devine will continue to work with SiSi and others in drafting legislation for femicide given that every ten minutes across the world a woman is killed by her partner. We have to work towards zero tolerance in this House.

In addition, could the Minister detail how Tusla will operate robustly given its overburdened workload? It is a fact that mishaps occur from time to time and "mishaps" is a word that puts it lightly. I welcome this legislation but we need to know that Tusla will be resourced and held accountable when it is needed.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I welcome the Bill. It has been a long time coming. Two things were very striking when women in particular were murdered in the past. One was the fact that the partner who may have killed them could inherit the family home and other wealth, and the other was that they could be the immediate first guardian. This Bill deals with the latter.

I commend the relatives and in particular David, the brother of Valerie French Kilroy who was murdered by her husband. David has battled to get this Bill passed. It is that type of activism that leads to legal changes because for many years this has been demanded and called for. The idea that the birth father has a divine right to the custody of their children and access to their children has to be challenged.

We heard a while ago from Deputy who talked about Tusla. She talked about rape and child sexual abuse without any care for the impact it has on people who are listening as well. She also spoke about the child sexual abuse of people in State care. Let us be clear: most child sexual abuse takes place within families. Let us nail this one on of the head because it is a constant mantra from a few parties and Deputies in this House. It is just a common refrain. For all the faults and issues relating to Tusla - and there are many - the idea that it should not be able to remove a child or take a child away from the natural father is something that we should challenge. We have all read about and seen sisters and so on coming out onto the court steps and talking about how abuse continued for many years. It is very relevant because it is the mindset that led to this law taking so long to come about.

We need Tusla to be properly resourced. We need all of the child State agencies to have the ability and staffing, which is a huge problem because of burnout as well, to be able to intervene to protect children, no matter where it is coming from.

We see the same phenomenon in the family courts. This is something that more women are coming out and talking about. Children are being forced to stay with abusive fathers in cases of separation because the patriarchal family has such a huge power and status in our society and in our legal systems. The claims regarding parental alienation are all related to the philosophy that has led to this law taking so long.

As has been mentioned, femicide is a huge problem. It is a global epidemic related to gender-based violence. The UN says that every ten minutes a girl or woman is killed by a relative somewhere in the world. That is a shocking and stark statistic. It is more commonplace in some societies and cultures than in others but we are far from immune. Northern Ireland is the most dangerous place for women and historically the Republic of Ireland has been a very patriarchal and sexist culture as well.

I welcome this Bill. I give huge credibility to David French and others who have campaigned for it. It has been a long time coming but we need much more legal change in the area of gender-based violence.

While I welcome this Bill and also welcome the fact that other Bills such as Jennie's Law are being looked at, we also need huge change in the area of the misogyny in the court system. It is something that has come up, and I know that the Minister is dealing with the counselling notes issue, and we had a debate only the other day on this. Survivors and therapists were hugely upset and disappointed after that committee meeting. In fact, rather than seeing progress, they feel that it is going backwards, and I feel that too. Deputies Simon Harris, Micheál Martin, Helen McEntee and others talked about the need to remove counselling notes

from the courts system, but the Minister seemed to defend the practice the other day. That was hugely disappointing for so many people, and I just have to relay that.

It is good that this is happening but we need a lot more innovation in our courts system as well because if we keep gender-based violence silent and secret, people will not report and will not come forward if these really traumatising practices are maintained in our system. I welcome the Bill.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before the Minister stands to conclude, I must outline the Topical Issue Matters as we are way ahead of time and Deputies should be on notice.

Debate adjourned.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

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

Deputy Michael Collins - To discuss the proposed autism centre in west Cork.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue - To discuss funding for family resource centre buildings.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss reforming the method of funding of local government through commercial rates.

Deputy William Aird - To discuss vacant properties.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss the urgent need for a person (details supplied) to have treatment under the EU cross-border health directive.

Deputy Tom Brabazon - To discuss the relocation of the An Post sorting office in Harmonstown, Dublin 5.

Deputies Richard Boyd Barrett and Paul Murphy - To discuss the rights and treatment of Oireachtas TV workers and their evolving situation.

Deputy Barry Ward - To discuss allowing for the inclusion of parental details on children's passports in cases where they do not share the same surname to allow for easier international travel.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss supports for people with frontotemporal dementia, FTD.

The matters raised by Deputies Michael Collins, Robert O'Donoghue, Aird, Malcolm Byrne and Brabazon have been selected for discussion.

Guardianship of Infants (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome the French family.

I would like the French family to understand that even though the Chamber does not have a lot of Deputies present, that is not because of a lack of interest. It is because they are busy at other committees and Stages of legislation that operate throughout the House. I commend the French family on being here. It is very difficult to sit through this but it is a good day. I call the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to make his closing remarks.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank colleagues who have spoken and contributed to the debate. It is notable that everyone who spoke and every political party represented in this House - indeed, every Independent TD - is supportive of this legislation. That is unusual. The reason there is such support for it is significantly because of the memory of Valerie French. The campaigning of David French and his sisters is something at the forefront of the minds of legislators when we are considering this issue. It is generally the case that when there is a human story behind a piece of legislation or when somebody is prepared to advocate from a personal point of view, it can have a very significant impact on the Houses of the Oireachtas. That has certainly happened in the case of Valerie French and the campaign put forward by David and Valerie's sisters.

I want to deal with some of the points raised by colleagues. There were some very worthwhile points made that I would like to reply to. I welcome Deputy Devine and Sinn Féin welcoming the legislation. Deputy Devine referred to the Oireachtas justice committee. I want to thank the members of the Oireachtas justice committee for the work they did and the recommendations they made. Very many of those recommendations have been implemented and all were considered by me. Deputy Devine questioned whether a family member should be permitted to bring the application as well as Tusla being able to do so. I think that would be unwise because it would put a lot of pressure on family members and there could be disputes within families as to whether such applications should be made. The legislation as it is drafted at present means that Tusla must bring an application. In many respects, Tusla's function is to get the issue before the District Court. It is then the court that will determine the matter. There is a logic to have a mandatory requirement imposed on a statutory body to bring the issue of removal or restriction of guardianship rights before the District Court.

Another issue Deputy Devine raised was whether there should be a specialist unit within Tusla. Fortunately, these applications will not be very large in number. They will still be very significant and very important but it will be the case, I think, that the resourcing within Tusla will be well able to deal with it.

Deputy Devine also asked whether there should be a special exemption in the legislation, say, for somebody convicted of manslaughter but it was in self-defence because they had been subjected to domestic abuse. That point was also raised by Deputy Kelly. The reason there is no mandatory requirement on a court to remove the guardianship rights is because there is a recognition that circumstances in these cases will differ and, as everyone has said, we need to hear the voice of the child as well in terms of these applications. Obviously, if there was a situation that arose as suggested by Deputy Devine, that would be given consideration by the District Court.

Deputy Kelly raised some issues about section 12D. I will have a look at that. He raised the issues of Tusla and talked about the constitutionality of the legislation. If there had been a

mandatory requirement in this legislation that said that if somebody is convicted of murder or manslaughter, they automatically lose guardianship rights, that would have been constitutionally questionable. That is why it was so important to give discretionary power to the court so it could take into consideration all of the individual circumstances.

Deputy Kelly also raised the issue of a register of guardians. That is a recommendation which was given serious consideration but, while not trying to disown the necessity for it, it is something beyond the responsibility of this Bill and that would require a considerable body of work as well.

Another issue raised by Deputy Kelly was around the timing. Under the legislation an application must be made within six months of conviction. Obviously, that is going to take a period of time. There is going to be a period of time from the date of the murder or manslaughter until a person is convicted. However, in truth, what happens on an immediate basis, if there is a terrible event that happens - a murder or a manslaughter - measures are immediately put in place in order to put a childcare plan in place for the children. Obviously, the guardianship issue can be dealt with at a later stage but there is literally an immediate requirement to find out who is going to care for the children on the night or for the following number of weeks. That is an issue where the Childcare Act already operates.

Deputy Farrelly made points in relation to the Ombudsman for Children and Tusla. There was criticism of Tusla by a number of Deputies. I must say I do not think there is a statutory agency in the State that has a more difficult task than Tusla. It is also important to point out that abuse of children and the need for the State to intervene happens not just within areas where the State has responsibility for children but it happens within families as well.

I thank Deputy Devlin for his contribution. Obviously, guardianship is about making decisions as to how a child should be brought up. In many ways it is different from access and custody. Custody is about with whom or where a child should be brought up but guardianship really relates to some of the most fundamental decisions to be made about a child.

Deputy O'Gorman also recognised that there needed to be change here. He spoke about consideration being given to an interim order. As I said a few moments ago, it is the certainly the case that once a terrible event happens when a guardian kills another guardian, in advance of the determination of criminal liability measures will have to be put in place immediately from that night onwards and that sometimes happens as a result of applications made under the Childcare Act. That is what happens. I will get back to Deputy O'Gorman in respect of the report he mentioned about guardianship.

Deputy Butterly also spoke about recognising that it is, in effect, a form of child abuse for one parent to kill another parent. That has an extraordinarily damaging impact on the children left behind. That is why I keep emphasising that this legislation is not about imposing a further punishment on a person who has been convicted of murder or manslaughter. It is about ensuring the best interests of the child are protected.

Deputy Nolan is in favour of the legislation but was very critical of Tusla and made some allegations in respect of events happening to young girls in the area. Obviously, if anyone has any information on this it needs to be brought to the attention of An Garda Síochána. However, I do think that Tusla is the appropriate statutory body to bring this application before the District

Court. The alternative was to go out of our way to set up a new statutory agency that would simply have responsibility for this and I do not think that was feasible.

Deputy Cronin was happy to support the Bill. She spoke about femicide. We do have a problem throughout the world in respect of femicide. We have to confront the problems that this Legislature is responsible for in Ireland. Regrettably, it is the case that violence against women is a problem that needs to be confronted and responded to, not just through legislation but also through education, information and ensuring that domestic violence is recognised as the scourge it is and is not tolerated.

Deputy Coppinger spoke about violence within homes and familicide, and referred to Northern Ireland. It is the case that Northern Ireland is the most violent place in the United Kingdom for a woman. If we look at the statistics in respect of the killing of women in Northern Ireland, they are significantly higher than they are here in Ireland and they are significantly higher than in Scotland, Wales and England. There is obviously a reason for that. We need to do research into this because we are never going to be able to resolve the problem by simply punishing people after the terrible events occur. We need to investigate and research why it is that men, and predominantly it is men, engage in violence against women. That is something that requires further research and we should not shy away from it.

Deputy Coppinger also mentioned issues about the miscellaneous provisions Bill, but we will have an opportunity to discuss that even further when we are back here for Report Stage.

Question put and agreed to.

Guardianship of Infants (Amendment) Bill 2026: Referral to Select Committee

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration pursuant to Standing Orders 103(2)(b) and 188(1).

Question put and agreed to.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Family Resource Centres

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I would like to highlight the vital role family resource centres play in communities across the country, particularly at a time when more and more families are struggling and looking for support close to home. Family resource centres are often the first place people turn to when they are facing difficulties. They provide practical help, emotional support, family services, youth programmes, counselling, and community connections. Most importantly, they offer early intervention and prevention supports that help stop problems from snowballing into crisis situations.

In recent years, centres have seen a significant increase in demand. Families are dealing with rising living costs, housing insecurity, mental health challenges, social isolation, and

increasing financial pressure. Many parents and young people are now presenting with more complex needs, and communities are relying heavily on family resource centres to respond.

Despite their importance, many centres are operating under severe strain. Staff are working tirelessly, but waiting lists for counselling, therapeutic supports, family programmes, and youth services continue to grow. Rising operational costs, staffing shortages, and limited space are restricting the ability of centres to meet the growing demand. These centres save the State money in the long term by providing support early, before problems become more serious and require costly statutory interventions. They strengthen communities, support vulnerable families, and create safe, inclusive spaces for people of all ages.

In my constituency of Dublin Fingal West, Aster family resource centre in Balbriggan is a vital pillar of the community's social infrastructure. However, as demand continues to grow, it urgently needs sustained investment in both its premises and front-line services. Every day, it is supporting a record number of families facing housing insecurity, poverty, domestic violence, caring pressures, and serious mental health challenges. Its work is indispensable. While funding has increased, much of this progress has been wiped out by soaring rents, rising utility bills, and escalating operating costs. Without meaningful and sustained support, centres like Aster family resource centre will struggle to keep pace with the growing needs of the communities they serve.

If we are serious about supporting families, tackling inequality, and improving community well-being, then sustained investment in family resource centres must be a priority in budget 2027. The reality is simply that when communities are supported, families are stronger and when families are stronger, society as a whole benefits.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank Deputy O'Donoghue for raising this important issue and for offering the Minister the opportunity to respond. As the Deputy outlined, when families are stronger, they work very well. I have full confidence in and great time for the family resource centres. When I started out in politics many years ago, they were known as family life centres. I remember as a councillor, before I became a Senator in 2002, issues came to my attention in my office that maybe I did not have the skills to deal with. It was wonderful to be able to ring the family resource centre and ask for assistance. At all times that assistance was brilliant. It was confidential and it was very helpful. I am one who believes in the family resource centres.

Budget 2027 negotiations have not yet commenced and it is expected that, as in previous years, the Department will work to secure a level of funding that will ensure the continuation of established services, with potentially some scope also to develop services that respond to emerging needs and increased demands, as the Deputy referenced. The family resource centre network is an increasingly important component in how issues that arise across the entire age spectrum - from early years to old age - are responded to. The Minister is very committed to the programme, and cognisant of the benefits that family resource centres bring to their communities.

Following on from core funding increases and the expansion of the family resource centre programme in 2026, made possible through budget 2026 funding, the Minister has indicated that she will continue to pursue the expansion of the family resource centre programme through

the budgetary process and in line with the programme for Government commitment to work to increase funding and expand the capacity and network of family resource centres. Improvements to core funding for family resource centres will also remain under consideration.

Any positive developments for the family resource centre programme that come out of the budget 2027 negotiations will build on achievements in the programme over the past number of years. This includes the expansion of the family resource centre programme in 2026, from 126 to 136 members. This followed expansion of the programme in 2025, from 121 members to 126 members. There was an increase in the minimum core funding level for family resource centres from €160,000 to €180,000 from January 2026, also secured as part of budget 2026. The core funding increase benefitted approximately 100 family resource centres around the country. Funding was secured for counselling providers, many of which are family resource centres, offering counselling and therapeutic services at no to low-cost for the communities they serve.

In addition to Tusla's family support services counselling funding, in 2025 30 family resource centres were allocated €292,500 from a total allocation of €1.5 million in additional funding. That benefitted a total of 73 community and voluntary organisations delivering essential counselling and therapeutic supports to children and families. This funding, which was formerly allocated under the Dormant Accounts Fund was provided to family resource centres to allow them to continue their important work of providing counselling and therapeutic services to children and young people in the community. The funding helps to address unmet need and reduce waiting lists for community-based counselling services.

In relation to capital funding for refurbishment, extension or construction of family resource centre buildings, I wish to inform the Deputy that neither the Department nor Tusla currently has capital funding to support the purchase or building of new facilities, or the refurbishment or extension of existing family resource centres.

Tusla does not have a dedicated budget for capital or building works for third party organisations, such as family resource centres.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I want to take a moment to appeal directly to the Minister of State to recognise the importance of this. Some of that funding is greatly welcomed for centres like the Aster resource centre in Balbriggan, the only family support service based in north County Dublin. It serves mainly Balbriggan, but also covers Rush, Lusk and Skerries. Those are smaller towns but there is no similar service there. It is not just a service provider; it is a lifeline to countless people across Balbriggan and the wider community. Every day, staff and volunteers support people facing housing insecurity, poverty, domestic violence, mental health challenges and pressure for caring responsibilities.

The demands for these supports have never been greater. It is a rapidly growing area and yet the reality is that rising rents, old buildings, utility costs and operational pressures are eating away at their already stretched resources. Increasing funding on paper means little if organisations are spending more on rent and upkeep.

I welcome some of what the Minister of State said. I urge him to champion sustained and long-term investment in family resource centres like Aster so they can continue to provide essential care, support and stability for the many families who rely on them.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: The Minister and I thank the Deputy for engaging in this important issue. He outlined how important the family resource centre is for Balbriggan and north County Dublin. It is quite obvious that more is probably needed. The Minister is very pleased with the range of recent developments across the family resource centre programme. Core funding increases and expansion over 2025 and 2026 have been very welcome for the programme, its members and the communities served by the centres.

The Minister fully supports the family resource centre programme. She has first-hand experience of the positive impacts that family resource centres have had around her own county and nationally. The centres are a great endorsement of what can be achieved locally and the associated goodwill that permeates among communities. Family resource centres foster cohesion and collaboration and ultimately enhance the communities they serve. Many family resource centres become indispensable with clients engaging with the centres across all stages of life.

The Minister is aware of the funding challenges being faced by community organisations to sustain and expand their services. She is also aware of the strong level of interest in communities around the country in establishing local family resource centres. She encourages family resource centres to engage with Departments and Government agencies where funding mechanisms exist for local service delivery. The programme for Government commits to increase funding across this term of Government. I have been pleased to outline the positive measures being taken in this respect.

The family resource centre is a community development programme and it is financially supported by many State agencies in a partnership approach. Centres may draw on various sources of funding provided by other Departments, Government agencies and private sources. In relation to any immediate urgent issues, I suggest that the local authority be considered as a starting point regarding capital funding requests. Tusla also recommends that family resource centres look to any Government schemes available, such as rural integrated development schemes operated by the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht. I again thank the Deputy for his comments.

Postal Services

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I am absolutely sick and tired of coming into this Chamber to complain about basic services not being delivered correctly or being removed to satisfy a corporate need rather than a public service. It seems to be a constant. I am in here every other week giving out about various emanations of the State. I am fed up with it and my constituents are fed up with it. Here we are once again and I am back to give out.

This time it is about An Post threatening to close its sorting office in Harmonstown and relocate it to Finglas. This sorting office services parts of Coolock, Artane, Raheny and other areas covering a very significant population. Reports of its moving to Finglas are particularly concerning because there is no direct public transport link from Raheny, Coolock and Artane to Finglas. This proposal makes absolutely no sense. The local community relies on having accessible postal services and moving this service to Finglas would place an unnecessary burden on local residents, especially on older people who already struggle with accessing

public transport and their own mobility. Finglas is simply not well connected to our community. There is no straightforward public transport link that would allow people to travel there easily and independently. If this daft proposal proceeds, people will have to travel by car which will just add traffic to the M50 carpark at a time when the country is trying to reduce our carbon footprint.

My constituents are very worried about how they will collect parcels, deal with registered post, deal with missed deliveries and access postal services if this goes ahead. These are very basic services that people should be able to access within their own local community. Indeed, the EU proximity principle that is applied in many instances should be applied in respect of these services. Reducing accessibility is the wrong approach entirely. This idea has to be scrapped and I am asking the Minister to intervene on this and impress on An Post the value placed on the sorting office in Harmonstown and the damage that will be caused if it is to be relocated.

An Post claims it requires bigger premises. There is a site owned by Dublin City Council right next-door to the sorting office. If An Post purchased a small piece of that site and a delicately planned planning application was made, I am sure it could be the solution. However, not having considered an extension and moving everything over to Finglas is daft.

People are sick and tired of services being pulled from their communities and this will be another valuable amenity lost in the area I represent. This is an awful proposal and it needs to be stopped. The Minister, as shareholder on behalf of the people, needs to intervene.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I welcome the opportunity to outline the position on this matter today. As An Post is a commercial State company with a mandate to act commercially, day-to-day operational matters, including decisions on the size, distribution and future of the network, are matters for the board and the management of the company and not ones in which either the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, or the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, has a statutory function. The Ministers are very aware of the impact that decisions relating to changes in An Post operations have on communities and individuals in both rural and urban areas. As this is a matter for the company, it would be inappropriate for the Government, as shareholder, to comment on or prejudice decisions which are for the board and management of An Post to consider.

Notwithstanding this is an operational matter, officials have engaged with the company. An Post has advised in the case of Harmonstown, the move is very much in the future and there is much to be considered before then. This includes which facilities in the local area will be utilised for undelivered mail. An Post has advised it is in consultation with its staff and unions on the details of the move.

An Post has noted it is consolidating its national network of local sorting offices, also known as delivery service units. An Post advises it needs larger and purpose-fitted premises to manage increased parcel volumes. An Post further advises it is hiring 300 additional postmen and postwomen across the country, some of whom will be working in this area, to manage the massive growth in volumes.

The Government is committed to a sustainable An Post and post office network as a key component of the economic and social infrastructure throughout Ireland. The programme for

Government states that the Government will continue to provide a nationwide network of post offices with funding to ensure their sustainability and enhance the value they bring to local communities. The Department of Culture, Communications and Sport is working to deliver on this and an enhanced amount of €15 million per annum has been allocated for supporting the network, subject to all legal requirements being satisfied.

In line with the programme for Government, the funding will support the stability and sustainability of the nationwide network of post offices, protecting and nurturing a commercially focused post office network. It will also support access for citizens to the key social benefits of the post office network and help citizens to access services effectively and equitably.

The Government also agreed the principles on which the funding model will operate, which include: maintaining access to the network across urban and rural Ireland, ensuring no community is left behind; aligning individual funding with criteria, including the degree of isolation and the sustainability of each post office; ensuring a minimum revenue threshold for post offices; and recognising offices of cultural or geographic significance, such as those on inhabited islands or in Gaeltacht areas. Over the past couple of years, An Post has been transforming its business by delivering new products and new formats in the way it operates. This includes, among other things, diversifying and growing the financial services products it provides for individuals and SMEs. An Post is also providing agency banking services.

The Deputy has outlined his concerns and wants the Minister to intervene. I will bring those concerns back to the Minister. I thank him for his contribution.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I am not happy with this hand-wringing exercise to say there is no statutory function. As a shareholder in the company, the Minister has some influence over decisions that are being made. If a State-owned body or a semi-State body in which a Minister has a shareholding is not influenceable, there is a serious issue. I welcome, however, the Minister of State's remarks that he will bring the concerns to the attention of the line Minister. I look forward to hearing further in that regard.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I have listened with interest to the points the Deputy raised. Decisions on post offices, as we have indicated, are operational matters for An Post and are not a matter over which the Minister has statutory function. The Deputy outlined clearly that the Minister and the Government have a shareholding. He has asked them to use that leverage to make his views known. As I said, however, he cannot intervene. An Post has an independent board with a clear mandate but both the board and management are doing all they can to maintain the company's sustainability and relevance to customers in the future. The Minister, his officials and Cabinet colleagues are working to support the company to that end.

The Government is committed to a sustainable An Post and post office network as a key component of the economic and social infrastructure throughout Ireland. The Deputy has raised a social issue in this regard, and it should be heard by the board of An Post.

The programme for Government states that the Government will continue to provide the nationwide services. We need to continue to fund them to ensure their sustainability and enhance the value they bring to local communities. The Department of culture and

communications is working to deliver on this. We will work closely in this regard. The Deputy's views are known and they will be raised with the Minister. I will ask the Minister to at least discuss these things with An Post management to alleviate these issues in the Deputy's area.

Commercial Rates

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: In 1826, 200 years ago, King George IV decided to sign into the law the government valuation of Ireland Act. That set in train the process of commercial rates. This was the way in which local government was funded. A decision was taken to levy rates on all properties. Those rates were determined based on the floor space of properties. In 1979, commercial rates were removed from domestic properties and, following a court challenge in 1984, they were also removed from agricultural properties. We are still in a situation whereby one of the main ways in which local government in Ireland is funded, to the tune of some €1.5 billion per year, is through commercial rates. This is a system that has existed for 200 years, in spite of all the changes that have happened in business since.

The Minister of State knows how enterprise has transformed in that time, particularly with new technology. For example, in my home town of Gorey, there is an Eason and a Bookstation shop, which are both good book shops. They pay commercial rates to Wexford County Council but they compete against the likes of Amazon, the world's biggest book seller, which does not pay any commercial rates because it does not have a main street presence. Those same main street retailers - it applies to every other sector as well - are also expected to contribute to our communities and sponsor local events, which they all do. Similarly, cafés and restaurants in the hospitality sector rely on large amounts of floor space. The bigger the restaurant, however, the higher the commercial rates. It is not based on turnover.

Many forms of taxation work on the basis of income levels or turnover. I know the Minister has looked for a review around the functioning of local government more generally but this issue relates specifically to how we fund local government. I totally accept this is a political hot potato but in the modern world in which we live, we continue to decide a sizeable junk of local government funding on the basis of the floor size of a particular premise. We should also bear in mind that constituencies offices of TDs are exempt from commercial rates.

From talking to businesses, I know they view this as exceptionally unfair. During Covid, we rightly took the decision to help businesses by suspending the payment of commercial rates. In order to support our main street businesses that we all enjoy and to make it a level playing field with the online world, can we move to a situation where we either assess local taxation based on turnover or find a more appropriate way of funding local government? It is bizarre that a system that is nearly 200 years old still underpins the funding system we use. I have raised this issue on a number of occasions. In order to give businesses a break, I urge the Minister of State to move away from the current commercial rates system.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter and giving me the opportunity to clarify the position regarding the basis for the assessment of rateable property for commercial rates purposes and the role of Tailte Éireann in that regard. I am taking this

Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy James Browne.

Tailte Éireann is an independent Government agency that provides a property registration system, property valuation service and national mapping and surveying infrastructure for the State. Tailte Éireann is independent in the exercise of its valuation functions under the Valuation Act 2001, as amended. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Browne, and the Department do not have any function in decisions in this regard. Tailte Éireann has overall responsibility under the Act for the maintenance of all valuation lists used by local authorities in the calculation of rates liability.

I thank Deputy Byrne for the information he provided. I did not realise that it was King George. Am I correct that he said it was King George?

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: Yes. It was King George IV.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: It was King George IV who introduced the valuations in Ireland 200 years ago. There has been a lot of change on the island of Ireland. Maybe we need to look at the rateable valuation of all property a bit more closely.

A valuation for commercial rates purposes is arrived at by estimating the net annual valuation, NAV, of a property, at a specified valuation date during the revaluation of a local authority area. The term "net annual value" has a legal definition and is set out in section 48 of the Act:

The rent for which, one year with another, the property might, in its actual state, be reasonably expected to let from year to year, on the assumption that the probable average annual cost of repairs, insurance and other expenses (if any) that would be necessary to maintain the property in that state, and all rates and other taxes payable in respect of the property, are borne by the tenant.

This definition of NAV is applied to all rateable properties across the State. The assessment of the NAV of any property is grounded in analysis of the available market evidence at the valuation date and relative to other properties on the list in the relevant rating authority area.

Estimating the NAV of a rateable property, including determining the appropriate valuation methodology, is an evidence-based exercise. The floor area of a property is only one of many factors considered when arriving at a net annual value. During a revaluation, Tailte Éireann analyses relevant market rental transactions for all rateable properties in accordance with the legislation and well-established valuation principles as well as case law arising from the independent valuation tribunal and the higher courts.

Various methodologies may be used in estimating the NAV, which is the rental value of a property. The most common methodology used is direct comparison with other similar properties which, by necessity, includes consideration of the floor areas. In some instances, the receipts and expenditure method of valuation, which relates to the turnover - or potential turnover - generated by a trading property, is particularly relevant in the assessment of NAV.

In other cases particularly for highly specialised properties, a construction cost-based approach in accordance with the provisions of section 50 of the Act may be employed. For the

majority of properties such as retail units, offices and industrial units, rental evidence at or close to the valuation date is collected and analysed to establish the appropriate valuation levels to be applied on a rate per square metre basis to similarly circumstanced properties. The rates have been evaluated since 2001. I have heard it myself on the ground that a lot of businesses are quite unsatisfied and that it should perhaps be on turnover. It is a system that perhaps need to be looked at again.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: The response provided by the Department sets out the process by which it is carried out. I have no question about the professionalism of the public servants who carry it out but it is the principle. The Minister of State made the point about similarly sized businesses with regard to floor space. A bookshop in Gorey, Arklow, Wexford or Sligo is likely to be assessed in broadly the same way but the problem is their competition is the likes of Amazon and online sellers which are not subject to commercial rates. If we want to protect our main street business, which we all do, we have to have a level playing field. When it comes to infrastructure, for example, telecoms towers, rates are often based on turnover of the companies. I ask the Minister of State to take it back to the Minister. I feel passionately about this. The Minister of State knows how important main street shops and businesses are. This is an unfair cost on them. It is not that they are opposed to contributing but why are they put at a disadvantage when it comes to an online space? I could operate a multi-million euro businesses just from my phone and I would not need any floor space but if someone operates in our communities, providing vital services in many cases, it is ridiculous that the tax they have to pay is based on floor space. That was fine 200 years ago; it is certainly not in the case of a modern economy.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: To clarify the position, regarding the basis for assessment of property for commercial rates, I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister, Deputy James Browne, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. While it is not my area, there are areas on which I agree with the Deputy. A lot has been done in updating but perhaps a lot more needs to be done because we are online now with Amazon, etc. The main street needs every support it can get. I was a retailer once. I had two or three retail businesses. Rates were always an issue along with many others. The assessment of NAV is grounded in analysis of the available market evidence at the valuation date. For the majority of properties such as retail units, offices and industrial units, rental evidence at or close to the valuation date is collected and analysed. While it is the Minister's Department, there is a case to have a look at how we rate properties. I was canvassing for the by-election in Connemara in the Gaeltacht area. It came up in a shop and we discussed it. They felt turnover might be better. I speak as an ex-retailer not a politician or Minister of State. I value the Deputy's views. Perhaps it is time to have that discussion again.

An Ceann Comhairle: I welcome some Polish friends who are in the Gallery with the chargé d'affaires, Mr. Artur Michalski. You are most welcome. It is lovely to have you here.

Vacant Properties

Deputy William Aird: The housing crisis continues to affect every town and village across Ireland. It remains one of the biggest challenges facing families, young people, older people

and workers. As a TD, I hear every week from people struggling to find a home, buy a home or to cope with raising rents. The message is clear - more houses and more needs to be done. There is no single solution to the housing crisis and no silver bullet. We need a mix of actions. We must increase supply, support first-time buyers, improve infrastructure, speed up planning and make better use of homes we already have. One of the most urgent issues is the number of vacant and derelict properties. CSO figures - not my figures - show there are almost 70,000 vacant homes nationwide. This is a shocking figure at a time when homelessness is rising and families are in desperate need of housing. In Laois alone, there are almost 963 vacant properties. These homes are sitting empty in our towns and villages while people are struggling to find somewhere to live. Many are tied up in probate or legal issues and others need major renovation that owners just cannot afford.

At the same time, more than 17,000 people are living in emergency accommodation, including 5,000 children. If even a portion of these vacant homes were brought back into use, it would make a real difference. It would provide homes for families, ease pressure on emergency accommodation and help bring back life to the towns and villages not alone throughout my county of Laois, which I represent but every county in Ireland. This is a problem that can be seen in all towns and villages.

I welcome the grants for vacant properties and over-shop conversions. I also want to be very positive about the steps already helping to bring them back into use. I thank the Ministers and the Government agencies working on this. We must accept that land will not always be available for the development of houses. This is why we must focus more on the homes we already have which are lying idle. We need stronger supports for that and less bureaucracy, faster planning and probate processes and more incentives to bring vacant properties back into use. At a time when so many people are looking for a home, we cannot allow thousands of properties to sit empty and fall further into decline. Vacancy and dereliction must be a central part of the national response to the housing crisis.

I would like to take this opportunity to advise everybody to reflect on their nearest town or village, take a walk through it and see how many vacant properties there are. Putting aside probate and all the difficulties as regards ownership, there must be something that can be done with a short timeline of 12 or 24 months to see work carried out on them. I do not mean taking them from people but what was done all my life on the council - a valuer values the property at its value on the day. That money is put aside and when the owner comes forward, they are paid the money.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank the Deputy for the opportunity to update the Chamber on what is being done to address vacancy and dereliction. I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy James Browne. The Deputy rightly said we want less bureaucracy and more assistance. Working to end dereliction and vacancy is a key priority of the Government's new housing plan, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities*. The plan will ensure the activities and resources used to address vacancy and dereliction are co-ordinated and that legislative powers are used to make a serious impact on the level of dereliction and vacancy while also being a catalyst to revitalising communities. It is a blight on our cities, towns and villages and especially galling when we are under so much pressure to deliver housing for our people. A range of measures have been introduced, as the Deputy outlined, by the Government to address vacancy and dereliction.

4 o'clock

These include the vacant property refurbishment grant and the newly launched vacant above the shop grant and expert advice grant. These grants, coupled with the repair and leasing scheme, planning exemptions for the conversion of vacant commercial properties and the compulsory purchase order, CPO, activation programme, are all working to get as many vacant properties back into use as possible.

A number of national structures have been established, including the dedicated vacant homes unit in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, a property optimisation unit in the Housing Agency and full-time vacant homes officers in each local authority. In addition, the Government's town centre first policy, introduced in 2022, provides a whole-of-government framework to address the decline in the health of towns and support measures to revitalise them. To drive the delivery of town centre first, dedicated town regeneration officers are now established within local authorities, working with vacant homes officers and other local authority staff, to tackle dereliction and develop regeneration initiatives.

The vacant property refurbishment grant, introduced in July 2022, is making a huge difference across the country. The grant provides up to €50,000 for the refurbishment of vacant properties for occupation as a principal private residence and for properties which will be made available for rent. A top-up grant of up to €20,000 is available where the property is confirmed to be derelict, bringing the total grant available for a derelict property up to a maximum of €70,000. At the end of quarter 1 of 2026, 17,400 applications had been received for the grant, more than 13,000 approved and over 5,300 grants paid to date as refurbishment works have been completed, with a value of over €284 million.

Another important programme changing how local authorities tackle this issue is the CPO activation programme. The programme requires local authorities to take a proactive and systematic approach to tackling vacancy and dereliction, identifying properties and engaging with their owners. Local authorities are encouraged to use their compulsory purchase powers if engagement is not successful, with funding available for them to do so. Support and guidance are provided to all local authorities in implementing the programme by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Housing Agency. These measures are proving effective in reducing vacancy levels and there is real momentum developing right across the country in bringing empty properties back into use as homes.

The Deputy also talked about buildings being in probate. This is another issue we need to tackle but, again, a lot is being done by the local authorities, the Department of housing and all the agencies. I wish it had been done 15 or 20 years ago but a lot is happening. I thank Deputy Aird for his comments.

Deputy William Aird: As I said, I welcome the introduction of the new grant supports aimed at turning vacant buildings and above-the-shop spaces into liveable spaces. I also welcome the €70,000 grant. However, if the Minister of State goes to any town and village in his local area, he will see, given the cost of building and everything else, that despite the €70,000 grant to do up a house, where the individual owns it, it is still very difficult to do. I could cost anything from €270,000 to €300,000 to do up any of these buildings.

We talked about acquisition payments. On the CPO, I thank everybody in Laois County Council who is involved in this. It is a tremendous concept and the council has done an awful lot of work but we need money from the Department. We can have headings and the Ministers, in fairness to them, can do their level best to bring out schemes but the bottom line is this is taking far too long, from the announcement of the scheme to the time a local authority can take it up, get the money and get blocks and boots on the ground. That is not the Minister of State's problem; it is problem in the Department of housing. In regard to the acquisition payments, I guarantee the Minister of State that when a house is subject to a compulsory purchase order, it has to be perfect for living in because you get no money to do up the house. That is a fact and the Minister of State needs to know that. People accuse local authorities of not acting fast enough but if the house is not in turnkey condition, they get no money from the Department to do it up.

On the buy and renew scheme, where a council can CPO houses, while I agree with it 100%, I will give the Minister of State an example. In the case of the County Hotel in Portlaoise, this has been going on for over 12 years and we still do not have confirmation to do it. That is what is really killing people in my area. Why is it taking so long?

It is a no-brainer to do up houses. I remember the main street in Portlaoise. I can remember the main streets in Mountrath, Mountmellick, Portarlinton, Abbeyleix and all these places. If we are serious about bringing people back into the heart of a town-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Thank you, Deputy. The Minister of State has two minutes to respond.

Deputy William Aird: The Minister of State only said it himself a minute ago. We knew everybody who was there-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): You are way over time, Deputy. I am sorry. The Minister of State has two minutes.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I again thank Deputy Aird for the passion he has shown on this very important issue.

Deputy William Aird: There is no need for the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach to shout and roar at me.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: The Deputy rightly raised the issues and the range of measures being taken by the Government to address vacancy and dereliction, which are a huge success. Vacancy levels are declining. An historical level of funding has been made available and this significant investment, through schemes such as the urban regeneration development fund and the vacant property refurbishment grant, is having a serious impact, bringing vacant and derelict properties back to use and revitalising towns and villages across the country.

The Government's new housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030, reinforces and expands the range of existing measures being implemented by Government to tackle the issue of vacancy and dereliction. The Deputy is absolutely right. I

grew up over a shop, a newsagent on a corner in Boyle, County Roscommon. Three of us lived over the shop. There was no back door and there were 100 people on the street and 100 people on the other street. It was the same in every town and village in the country. It is galling to see that a lot of properties have fallen into disrepair. From a planning point of view, people did not want to live over a shop. The new €95,000 grant for over-the-shop living is going to be a major benefit and will help bring those town and village centres into play. People will also get €5,000 for architect's fees. The measure has only started but I think it will make a big difference.

I would love to see the towns and villages coming back into play, as has happened around Europe. Much of this housing is of a good quality and we need to do an awful lot more. I thank the Deputy for raising an issue that is close to my heart as well. A lot is being done and these new grants will certainly help bring over-the-shop houses back into play. The other grants for refurbishing older buildings have certainly helped. As I said, there have been 17,400 grants paid in the past six or seven years. We are in a better place but we need to do a lot more.

Report on Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the Revised General Scheme of the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill: Motion

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I move:

That Dáil Éireann shall take note of the Report of the Joint Committee on Arts, Media, Communications, Culture and Sport entitled "Report on Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the revised General Scheme of the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill", copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 17th September, 2025.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to discuss in the Dáil the report on pre-legislative scrutiny of the revised general scheme of the broadcasting (amendment) Bill, which was published in September of last year. The revised Bill was referred to the Joint Committee on Arts, Media, Culture, Communications and Sport by the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport, Deputy Patrick O'Donovan, at the committee's first meeting, on 14 May 2025.

This report represents an opportunity for a once-in-a-generation step-change to the governance and support model of public service media in Ireland. The far-reaching significance of the report is reflected in the volume of work that has informed the committee and the volume of recommendations made by the committee.

Some of the major themes and provisions of the Bill addressed in the committee's recommendations include: the reform of corporate governance and performance measurement of public service media providers; meeting the needs of under-served audiences; a transition to multi-annual funding settlements; the new platform-neutral media fund; protection of employment standards; the role of public service media in investing in independent media; and the need for strong protections relating to copyright and intellectual property.

The committee engaged with 19 key stakeholders at four pre-legislative scrutiny meetings in public session. Written submissions were received from these stakeholders and a further nine stakeholders to assist the committee with its pre-legislative scrutiny. The stakeholders

were invaluable in the scrutiny of this Bill and I will provide an overview of what was brought to light following their engagement.

The first was the inclusion of geography as a key criterion for supporting under-served audiences. Trusted media organisations must be sustained to guarantee meeting the needs of under-served regions and calls for the provision of schemes supporting local publishers, a fair share of State advertising, fair remuneration from big tech platforms for use of news content, and defamation reform.

There is a need for inclusion of human resources, trade union affairs and governance and risk as relevant areas of expertise on boards, noting that the tradition of appointing persons with industrial relations backgrounds has been diminished.

RTÉ welcomed the transition to multi-annual funding, which it states has enabled it to plan its transformation and give clarity to independent producers. Multi-annual funding gives certainty to public service broadcasters and independent production companies on the funding likely to be available, allowing for investment and development.

There are long-standing concerns about the regulatory gap relating to online forms of content. The proposal to extend Coimisiún na Meán regulations to all forms of content published by broadcasters was welcomed as it will prevent duplication and the risk of diverging regulatory decisions. Many stakeholders noted the benefits of increased spending on independent commissions and that, accounting for inflation, RTÉ investment in the independent sector is lower than in 2008. Screen Ireland noted that creating further opportunities for the independent sector will increase the sustainability of Ireland's screen sector.

The engagement allowed stakeholders to bring a number of important issues to the attention of the committee. These included the Community Television Association, CTA, and Community Radio Ireland, CRAOL. They stated concerns about the lack of specific recognition afforded to the community media sector in the revised general scheme. CTA and CRAOL stated that community media has a distinct legal status and that references to local and regional media in the Bill may be understood in a way that excludes community media from supports.

The National Union of Journalists, NUJ, raised a further issue of terminology, stating a preference for the term "private commercial sector" rather than "independent sector". NUJ stated that the term "independent sector" implies that in-house content produced by RTÉ and TG4 is not independent. Screen Producers Ireland noted the definitions applied in determining what constitutes an independent production company for funding purposes can have a significant impact on the ecosystem of the sector and called for any debate on definitions to take place with careful considerations of the current national and European debates on this issue.

The DCU Institute for Media, Democracy and Society questioned the definition of "public service user generated content". It welcomed the intent to permit public funding of content intended for online distribution but noted that the popular understanding of the term "user generated" may imply that funding could be afforded to non-professionals working outside of the appropriate regulatory structures.

Dr. Harry Browne stated that the definition of "public service content provider" is more limited than it appears as many producers of content are not regulated by Coimisiún na Meán or subject to a self-regulatory mechanism such as the Press Council of Ireland. He proposed that amending this restriction would be in keeping with the spirit of pluralism.

The written submissions and evidence presented to the committee resulted in a number of recommendations. I will briefly outline a number for the information of the House. Our report calls for a recognition of community media. This recommendation is born out of community engagement with CRAOL and CTA, which highlighted concerns to the committee regarding the lack of specific recognition afforded to the community media sector and stated references to local and regional media in the Bill will be understood in a way that excludes community media from supports. We agree that this needs to be addressed in recognition of the immense service community media provides in our communities throughout the State.

The committee recommends that Coimisiún na Meán be empowered to establish a dedicated media funds scheme to support existing public interest current affairs content at risk of becoming commercially unsustainable and that such a scheme should be assessed for state aid compliance on a stand-alone basis. Stakeholders expressed much concern and, indeed, confusion regarding the interpretation and implication of additionality rules. The committee believes ways must be examined to support public interest current affairs content that may be at risk.

Furthermore, our report calls for the introduction of a content levy in line with the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act 2022, which will be used to assist in the funding of the production of Irish content. This issue deserves serious consideration. It builds on a recommendation made by our predecessor committee, which also called for the expedition of such a levy being introduced. It was a common call from the wide-ranging stakeholders with whom we engaged.

The committee recommended that the protection and promotion of sustainable employment and the principle of equal pay for equal work should be included as a duty with the boards RTÉ and TG4. The committee also recommended that the Bill require RTÉ and TG4 to publish the objective criteria it uses to determine employment status and for using contracts of service and to ensure these criteria abide by the Karshan decision of the Supreme Court and the code of practice. The committee requested that the Minister, Deputy Patrick O'Donovan, considers the content of the report before the Bill commences the formal legislative process. The committee can speak with one voice in welcoming many of the broad principles of the Bill and share the commitment of the Minister to enhancing trust and support of our public service media. We present these recommendations in the hope that our report will be a constructive contribution to the drafting of the Bill and the reform of public service media in Ireland.

I welcome that colleagues across government and opposition have come together to recognise that the geoblocking of audiences, exclusion from competitions and erasure from maps of the Six Counties by RTÉ needs to be addressed. This recommendation was one of a number of Sinn Féin proposals accepted on a cross-party basis at committee and demonstrates a unity of purpose among Deputies and Senators to make sure national broadcasters serves the whole of the nation.

The committee also agreed with a Sinn Féin proposal that regional public meetings be held across Ireland, including in the Six Counties, as part of nationwide consultations by the audience councils of RTÉ and TG4 to ensure the input of audiences when providing feedback. I encourage the Minister to heed the call from Government colleagues to implement these proposals to end geoblocking and include audiences from across the island when he drafts the final Bill.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis an tuarascáil ghrinnscrúdaithe réamhreachtach ar scéim ghinearálta athbhreithnithe an Bhille craolacháin (leasú) a phlé tráthnóna. Ar an gcéad dul síos, tugaim aitheantas don méid oibre atá déanta ag an gcoiste agus an tuarascáil seo á hullmhú. Ba mhaith liom aitheantas a thabhairt freisin don rannpháirtíocht fhairsing agus chuiditheach a bhí ag an gcoiste le páirtithe leasmhara.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the pre-legislative scrutiny report of the revised general scheme of the broadcasting (amendment) Bill. I would like to acknowledge the amount of work the committee has done in preparing the report. I would also like to recognise the extensive and constructive engagement the committee had with key stakeholders. I thank Deputy Byrne for her submission and informative contribution.

The Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, obtained Government approval to publish the Bill on Tuesday. The Bill meets a key programme for Government commitment to enact new legislation to reform the corporate governance model of RTÉ. The Bill also implements the key legislative recommendations of the report of the Future of Media Commission, transposes those elements of the European Media Freedom Act that relate to safeguarding of the independence of public service media and implements the legislative recommendations of the expert advisory committee on governance and culture in RTÉ, chaired by Professor Niamh Brennan.

Taken as a whole, the Bill will enhance transparency, accountability and value for money in RTÉ and TG4 across five different areas. First, it will reform the statutory basis underpinning the corporate governance of RTÉ. A key element of this will be the assignment of the Comptroller and Auditor General as auditor of RTÉ to carry out annual audits of their financial statements and, where the Comptroller and Auditor General considers it appropriate, a value for money examination. The Bill will also make the director general of RTÉ directly accountable to the Committee of Public Accounts for RTÉ's annual finance statements and value for money matters.

Second, the Bill will enhance the framework for assessing the performance and funding of RTÉ and TG4 by providing Coimisiún na Meán with greater authority to identify performance targets and hold RTÉ and TG4 to account for their performance.

Third, the Bill will provide a legislative basis for greater transparency in respect of the anonymised reporting of remuneration by RTÉ and TG4.

Fourth, the Bill will strengthen the role and independence of the audience councils of RTÉ and TG4.

Fifth, media service duties and codes that currently apply to broadcast content, such as those which apply to fairness, impartiality and objectivity in news and current affairs, will be applied to non-broadcast content.

The Bill is not only about public service media providers. We need diverse journalism and programming to be provided by diverse providers locally, regionally and nationally.

In our digital age and to reach the widest audiences, public service content cannot be confined to any single medium. For that reason, the Bill will convert the existing broadcasting fund to a platform-neutral fund known as Ciste na Meán, which will support the production, distribution and archiving of public service content across all formats by the wider media sector. This will ensure an enduring legislative basis for the continuing provision of high-quality programming and print journalism across our country. The Bill will also require RTÉ to allocate 25% of its public funding to commission audiovisual and audio programming from the independent sector. This target will no longer be confined to broadcast material but will also cover podcasts and audiovisual programming to be made available on the on-demand player.

In terms of regulatory powers, Coimisiún na Meán already has extensive powers to require information from a provider following the opening of a formal investigation. Outside of investigations and as part of its supervisory function, it also has the power to require, by notice in writing, a regulated provider to provide Coimisiún na Meán with information relating to compliance with the online safety code. The Bill will extend this information-gathering power to require regulated entities to provide information related to compliance with other elements of the online safety framework and media service codes and rules.

Following its establishment in May 2025, the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, submitted the revised general scheme of the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill to the Joint Committee on Arts, Media, Communications, Culture and Sport for pre-legislative scrutiny. As I said, I recognise the extensive consultation undertaken by the committee in its work. Each of the 85 recommendations in the pre-legislative scrutiny report reflects the serious approach adopted by the committee in carrying out its task. On receipt of the report of the committee, the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport carried out an analysis of each recommendation to assess whether it could be provided for in the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill in the course of detailed drafting. The Minister provided a summary of this analysis to the Cathaoirleach in February and set out his intentions regarding the recommendations at that time. Following the publication of the Bill on Tuesday, the Minister wrote to the Cathaoirleach to provide an update.

In summary, the Minister considered that 68 of the recommendations made by the committee can be or already have been implemented. Of these, 34 have been incorporated in the Bill, with one recommendation to be addressed on Committee Stage and a further recommendation to be considered at that point following further analysis. Eleven recommendations can be implemented administratively by the Department, RTÉ, TG4 or Coimisiún na Meán, as appropriate, and 21 recommendations are already implemented in broadcasting legislation or were covered in the general scheme of the Bill. In terms of the remaining 17 recommendations, seven were considered more appropriate to legislation which has horizontal effect across many sectors, such as employment, tax, social insurance and copyright law. It was decided not to accept ten of the recommendations. On the media funding

schemes and the assessment of the performance and funding of RTÉ and TG4, in terms of the specifics of the committee's recommendations, 17 related to the funding of the wider media sector and 11 related to the assessment of RTÉ and TG4 by Coimisiún na Meán. Thirteen of these have been addressed through the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill.

In particular, I highlight that the Bill will now align the triennial appraisal of the performance and funding of RTÉ and TG4 by Coimisiún na Meán with the triennial review of public service content, so that the reviews will cover the years 2028 to 2030. Coimisiún na Meán will now submit both reports on 30 June 2027. The triennial appraisal of RTÉ and TG4 will identify the performance commitments, outputs, associated financial inputs, performance indicators and metrics which shall apply to RTÉ and TG4 for each three-year period and include a funding recommendation to Government on that basis. The triennial review of public service content will assess the position regarding the supply of such content on a national, regional and local basis by the wider sector. In line with the committee's recommendation, this review will now specifically include a review of public service content provision in the Irish language. It will also contain recommendations to Government on measures which could increase the supply of public service content.

Receiving both reports together will facilitate a coherent response that takes into consideration the funding needs of RTÉ and TG4 and the support needed to ensure the commercial sector provides sufficient public service content and, in particular, public interest journalism. The Bill further takes into account the committee's recommendations by requiring that both triennial reviews are submitted to Government no later than six weeks after the annual budget and Estimates.

One of the key objectives of the Bill is to ensure and enable the support of a diversity of providers. To that end, and in line with the committee's recommendations, the Bill now specifies that Coimisiún na Meán may introduce funding schemes to promote the development of community broadcasters. Funding has already been secured for specific supports for community media, with an Exchequer allocation of €1 million in budget 2026.

I am conscious that there was an extensive discussion during the pre-legislative scrutiny of the requirement for additionality in media funding schemes and whether State support could be provided to fund existing activities undertaken by commercial media. This requirement stems from state aid rules and domestic guidance on the appraisal and implementation of public expenditure set out in the public spending code. The European Commission typically describes the additionality principle as requiring any state aid to change the behaviour of recipients in such a way that they carry out an activity that they would not carry out without the aid. Departmental officials set out the current technical position in a note to the committee in July 2025. There are very limited circumstances in which a scheme which supports the existing activities of the commercial sector would be compliant with state aid rules. Notwithstanding the complexities of designing such a scheme and difficulties of securing approval at EU level, we do not want to rule out the possibility in our domestic legislation. For that reason, the Bill now provides that schemes which support existing content may be funded from Ciste na Meán, in line with the recommendation of the committee.

The reform of the legislative underpinning for the governance of RTÉ and TG4 is at the core of the Bill. The functions and duties of the boards of RTÉ and TG4 will be strengthened in accordance with recommendations of Professor Niamh Brennan's expert advisory committee.

This will include a specific function to put in place arrangements for the management and accountability of the directors general in their capacity as chief executive officers of the public service media providers. The Bill also provides for expanded functions and duties of, and accountability provisions for, the directors general of RTÉ and TG4. It also sets out the process for their appointment and dismissal in detail. In accordance with the European Media Freedom Act, the Government will no longer have a role in consenting to the appointment of a director general. However, the approval of the Minister and Minister for public expenditure will still be required to determine the remuneration and terms and conditions of employment of a director general.

The committee made nine recommendations in respect of corporate governance. A number of these related to matters already covered by employment law or the code of practice on determining employment status are not appropriate for media legislation. However, I emphasise that RTÉ must comply with all applicable employment, tax and social protection law. We have strong protections in law in this country and the Revenue Commissioners, the Department of Social Protection and the Workplace Relations Commission have issued clear guidelines in their respective areas. It is particularly important that RTÉ, as a State body, adheres fully to these laws and guidelines.

I will address the recommendation that the Bill provide explicit clarity that the restriction on directors general to comment on policy matters at the public accounts committee. It is without prejudice to their editorial independence as directors general. In response to this recommendation and as a general approach, the editorial independence of the directors general as editor-in-chief has been significantly expanded and clarified in the Bill.

At the same time, their accountability as chief executive officers for the administration of the providers to their board and to the Committee of Public Accounts has been strengthened. The Bill also provides for the responsibility of the director general, as editor in chief, to put in place a statement of principles and procedures to ensure high standards in its content and for compliance with the media services duties set out in law, such as fairness, impartiality and objectivity in news and current affairs. Both RTÉ and TG4 will continue to be accountable to Coimisiún na Meán, as regulator, for their adherence to these duties and any media service codes made by Coimisiún na Meán.

As public service media providers, RTÉ and TG4 are an essential part of the democratic, social and cultural life of our country. They play a vital role in providing programming that informs, educates and entertains, and in acting as sources of trustworthy and reliable information for the public. As we have been reminded this past week, to be effective our public service media providers must be trusted. This requires that they, in particular RTÉ, be open and transparent and demonstrate the very highest standards in corporate governance. The broadcasting (amendment) Bill will fundamentally reform the governance and regulation of RTÉ and provide a legislative foundation for RTÉ to rebuild the trust of the public.

Once again, I pay tribute to the work of the committee, which is demonstrated by the incorporation of many of its recommendations into the Bill.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): As we have no other Members present for the debate, I call the Minister of State to make his closing remarks. He has ten minutes. I will then give Deputy Byrne ten minutes for her final remarks.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank Deputy Byrne for her contribution this evening. It reflects the level of scrutiny already undertaken of the provisions of the broadcasting (amendment) Bill. In my opening statement, I did not have the opportunity to discuss some of the areas raised by the committee in the pre-legislative scrutiny report, so I will turn to those first.

The committee made 12 recommendations relating to the audience councils of RTÉ and TG4. The audience councils play an important role in representing the views of the people of the island of Ireland to the boards of RTÉ and TG4 in respect of the activities of the providers. The Bill will expand the role of the audience councils by providing for the independence of the audience councils of RTÉ and TG4 and the selection of members of both councils by Coimisiún na Meán following a public competition.

Eight of the committee's recommendations have been addressed through the broadcasting (amendment) Bill. In particular, the Bill now requires that RTÉ and TG4 must respond to every annual report prepared by an audience council, in addition to any special report. An audience council plays a role structurally distinct from that of Coimisiún na Meán as regulator, adding an additional and different level of accountability. The Bill clearly provides for those three separate and distinct roles.

In addition to strengthening the independence of the audience councils, the Bill seeks to ensure they are representative of the people of the island of Ireland, including certain under-served audiences, such as those who may be under-served by virtue of their age or where they live. In that context and in line with the recommendations of the committee, the Bill now provides for specific reference to ensuring membership of the councils of those who are under-served by virtue of a disability.

The Bill is intended to provide a robust legislative foundation for the growth in Irish-language programming and journalism. Central to this is a requirement that a minimum of 25% of funding disbursed through media schemes must be made available for Irish-language content. The committee made six recommendations aimed at further promoting the Irish language in the media sector, five of which the Minister has addressed directly in the Bill. In particular, the review of public service content undertaken by Coimisiún na Meán will now specifically include a review of public service content provision in the Irish language.

The Bill also provides that the Broadcasting Fund will remain Ciste na Meán rather than the media fund, as recommended by the committee.

Given that the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act was enacted only three and a half years ago, the Bill includes limited provisions for media regulation, focusing instead on ensuring that Coimisiún na Meán has sufficient powers to ensure the online safety framework and sufficient powers in bringing RTÉ's and TG4's non-broadcast content under the ambit of media service duties and codes.

However, there is one area I would like to take the opportunity to highlight. The committee recommended that provision be made in the Bill for the monitoring, reporting and setting of targets relating to airplay for Irish musicians on radio, including diversity of musical forms, artists and experience. As Deputies are aware, airplay quotas based on the nationality of a

musician are contrary to European law. As an alternative, the Bill provides express authority to Coimisiún na Meán to make media services codes to promote a diversity of music composed or performed by persons with a connection with the island of Ireland on radio. It also provides that the codes include provisions to measure the level of diversity, which will enable us all to assess how radio broadcasters are performing in showcasing Irish musicians.

The main focus of the national reaction to the broadcasting (amendment) Bill has been on the appointment of the Comptroller and Auditor General as auditor of RTÉ. This is understandable given the events of the past week. The reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General on the annual financial statements of RTÉ and the direct accountability of the director general to the Committee of Public Accounts are central to the reform of RTÉ. The Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, is therefore hoping to progress the Bill and commence the relevant sections as quickly as possible to provide the necessary authority to the Comptroller and Auditor General to audit RTÉ's 2026 financial statements. However, as the extensive pre-legislative scrutiny report of the committee attests, this legislation is far-reaching and intended to comprehensively address transparency, accountability and value for money in our public service media providers and support for public interest journalism and quality programming more generally.

The provisions of the Bill are intended to be complementary and reinforcing. With regard to value for money, while the Comptroller and Auditor General will be auditing RTÉ's accounts on an annual basis, we are also strengthening the role of Coimisiún na Meán in assessing the annual performance of RTÉ and TG4 against the statutory public service remit.

On transparency, RTÉ will be required to publish information not only on the remuneration of staff and contractors but also on the cost of commissioning from the independent sector, including information on the contribution made to commissioning costs across the public sector.

On accountability, Coimisiún na Meán, rather than RTÉ and TG4 themselves, will now ultimately determine the performance commitments of our public service providers and will hold them to account for that performance.

The Bill, First Stage of which will commence shortly, reflects the vital role of pre-legislative scrutiny in our legislative process. The Bill takes account of many of the committee's recommendations and is stronger and more robust for it. I know that the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, looks forward to working with the committee to bring the Bill through the legislative process to enactment.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, for being here this evening, for his contribution and for his acknowledgement of the work of the committee over an extensive period in recent months. I also thank the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, for acknowledging that work.

Given the controversies around RTÉ and the fact that it is back in the headlines this week, I very much welcome the decision that it will finally come under the remit of the Comptroller and Auditor General. It is just a shame that the Government voted down Sinn Féin's Broadcasting (Oversight of RTÉ Accounts) (Amendment) Bill only last year. We could have moved on this prior to this latest controversy in the headlines.

Regarding the response to the committee's report, given that the committee members are not here this afternoon, I am not going to speak for them. However, it should be noted that the Minister has acted on only 68 of the 85 recommendations of the committee. That leaves 20% of them not included in the Bill, which I believe we will debate on Second Stage next Thursday. Some of them are relevant to different sectors, including employment, tax, social insurance and copyright law, as outlined by the Minister of State. I understand that, but my understanding is that it has been decided not to accept ten of the recommendations. I am sure committee members will want to make their own contributions on this on Second Stage.

I will not hold everybody up too late. Suffice it to say it is disappointing that geo-blocking was not mentioned in either the opening contribution or closing comments of the Minister of State.

I understand they are not coming directly from the Minister of State himself but I sincerely hope that is not a reflection of the Government's intent with regard to this Bill. If it is, Deputy Ó Snodaigh and I have introduced the Broadcasting (All Ireland Service) (Amendment) Bill at First Stage and will have to pursue that if this is not included in the Bill next week. I put that on the record. I thank the Minister of State for his time. I know it is a busy week and there are other things going on. I appreciate his contribution.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 4.41 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 26 Bealtaine 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 4.41 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 26 May 2026.