



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 28 Bealtaine 2026

Thursday, 28 May 2026

Chuaigh an Ceann Comhairle i gceannas ar 8.40 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Departmental Budgets

1. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the way in which the projected overspends of his Department will impact the budgets of other Government Departments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40817/26]

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Will the Minister give us an update on the projected overspends of the Department of education and how they will impact on the budgets of other Government Departments?

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Jack Chambers): What I have is a question relating to overspends in my Department, which is the wording of the question.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: That was incorrect.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I will respond to it as it is written, and I am happy to engage. I know what the Deputy is raising.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: That mistake was not on my side.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The latest fiscal monitor published on 6 May showed that the end of April gross voted expenditure amounted to €36 billion. This is a €2.9 billion or 8.9% increase compared with April 2025 and reflects the implementation of the priorities set out in budget 2026, and the significant uplift in expenditure to support programme for Government

commitments. Compared with the profiles set out by Departments for their planned spending over the year, this was €0.6 billion or 1.8% below profile.

For my Department's Vote, end of April gross expenditure of €593 million was €39 million or 6.2% behind the profile set out. The public expenditure group comprises eight Votes, which are my Department, superannuation and retired allowances, the Office of Public Works, the State Laboratory, secret service, Public Appointments Service, shared services office and the Office of the Ombudsman. None of these were over profile at the end of April. Ensuring that public money is spent efficiently and that taxpayers see clear outputs and outcomes from public spending is a core priority for my Department and for Government. The Government agreed a medium-term fiscal structural plan in December last year. It sets out expenditure ceilings to 2030 and provides significant uplifts in expenditure over the coming years, with gross voted spending to reach €147.3 billion by 2030. In April, Government agreed that additional funding of €646 million will be provided to the Department of Education and Youth in 2026. To accommodate this reprioritisation and to deliver on the 2027 ceiling agreed under the medium-term fiscal plan, other Departments have been asked to deliver a levy focusing on efficiencies and reforms, which will total €446 million from 2027. This should be considered through the lens of an overall uplift of €7 billion for expenditure in 2027. It will not impact the 2026 allocations.

The delivery of reforms and efficiencies supports adherence-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Deputy Farrell to respond.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: That was not the question I submitted, but I understand it is what the Minister has been told. I do not know if we should skip this question. I might just ask my question and if the Minister cannot answer it is not on him, which is totally fine. I accept that he was not aware. It is a bit of a mess, like this mess. My question relates to overspends in the Department of education and specifically how this will impact on other Government Departments, including Transport, justice and housing. My concern is that this will leave communities worse off in the long run, which is something we do not want to happen. My core question really concerns what looks likely to be cut. Of what those Departments felt was so important to get funding for on budget day, what is no longer deemed necessary? I am aware the Minister was not aware of the question.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The wording of the question is as it is printed on the question paper, which I have to respond to factually.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I know.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I am happy to respond to the question on education that was raised at the budgetary oversight committee too. First, it is being done in the context of the Estimates process for budget 2027. Transport is at 1.4%. Housing is at 0.1% and justice is at 0.7%. We have specifically provided a carve-out for housing for obvious reasons and similarly for justice pay so we do not affect front-line areas. This is obviously in the context of a growing budget. I see this differently, through the lens of driving efficiencies, advancing reforms and enhancing productivity across these areas of public expenditure. I think we can improve outputs in the

context of an efficiency and expenditure levy. New priorities emerge in the context of expenditure and that is why we were right to provide that additional funding to the Department of education. That is within a new and agreed fiscal framework. In the context of budget 2027 we will engage with the Departments through the Estimates process. However, each of them has an objective now to drive those efficiencies across these respective areas.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: To be clear, the question the Minister received is not the question I was asking. I thank him for the answer, but the issue is that if you look at it in the context of what he is saying here and what is being done, things do not really add up. In January, the Minister said that the Government's massive expenditure on consultancy services was adding cost, delay and significant fragmentation to infrastructure delivery. However, we now hear he is spending €25,000 on a consultancy firm to try to garner public support for his infrastructure plan, all against the backdrop of cutting spending across other Departments. It seems like cuts for everybody except the Minister's Department. If the Minister wants to run an advertising campaign, he should use the policies he has. I do not understand spending €25,000 on a consultancy firm. Does the Minister think his Department should be spending €25,000 on a marketing campaign?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Deputy is misrepresenting what that is. It is independent research and analysis to advance the objectives set out in the accelerating infrastructure report where there are three or four recommendations or actions in respect of driving public acceptance of infrastructure in the country. It is important because that is an issue across communities where people have concerns. It is about how we build better public acceptance of that. They are doing a piece of work in that context. When you take a €275 billion infrastructure plan over ten years, it is important that we implement those recommendations and actions in the context of the evidence base being built out. In the context of the efficiency levy, it is important that all Government Departments, in as much as they are looking for more, also drive a greater focus on efficiencies and reforms. That is what we are seeking to do across government and that is why we are doing it in a context of the levy we have introduced.

Public Services Provision

2. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the action he has taken to protect public service provision in light of recent levies put on other Departments to make up for overspends in the Department of Education and Youth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40991/26]

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: My question is related and asks the Minister what he is doing to protect public service provision in light of the levies he has put on other Departments. We keep hearing about efficiencies and reform, and we are all for that, but it is quite vague. There has been strong criticism of his budgetary process from the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council. Has he taken on board its criticisms and what changes will he make in light of that?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Government agreed a medium-term fiscal structural plan in December last year. This sets out expenditure ceilings for the period to 2030. It provides significant uplifts in expenditure over the coming years, with gross voted spending to reach

€147.3 billion in 2030. As set out in the plan, the ceiling for 2027 will increase to €125.5 billion. This is an uplift of €7 billion over the 2026 expenditure ceiling of €118.5 billion. Delivery of the plan over the medium-term horizon will require enhanced expenditure control, reducing and avoiding in-year decisions with carryover costs for subsequent years and robust oversight mechanisms. In April, Government agreed that additional funding of €646 million will be provided to the Department of Education and Youth in 2026. To accommodate this reprioritisation and deliver on the 2027 ceiling agreed under the plan, a levy has been introduced across other Departments, which have been asked to deliver efficiencies and reforms totalling €446 million from 2027. This should be considered through the lens of an overall uplift of €7 billion for expenditure in 2027 and will not impact 2026 allocations. The delivery of reforms and efficiencies supports adherence to the expenditure ceilings set out in our plan. It reflects the need to moderate the rate of expenditure growth across Departments to facilitate the decision to reprioritise and provide additional investment to the education sector within our wider fiscal framework out to 2030. The scale of the efficiencies to be found ranges from 0.02% to 1.4% on the 2026 current funding across all other Vote groups. The distribution of the levy has been designed to protect certain areas, which are the social protection Vote group non-pay allocation, Department of Health pay allocation, the specialist disability services subhead in the Department of Children, Disability and Equality, the Justice, Home affairs and Migration group pay, Housing, Local Government and Heritage group non-pay and pension funding across all Votes.

My Department wrote to Secretaries General following the Government decision, informing them of the need to identify efficiencies and reforms, and that this would form a key element of the Estimates engagement for budget 2027. Each Department will now have to determine how the levy will be applied across the Vote group and identify the efficiencies and reforms required to ensure this.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I appreciate that, but this is what the Minister has been saying publicly for the past number of weeks. What I am seeking to address with him is strong criticism of him and his Department in terms of their budget allocation process.

For example, the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council points out that the Minister's Department got the allocations and estimations in terms of what we would spend on doctors and nurses in the last three months of last year wrong and that every year his Department does not base its budget allocations on what was spent the year before and often reducing them back to an unrealistic level. The council said:

The budgetary allocation was too low from the start. Delivering planned services on budget becomes nearly impossible if funding was never sufficient. That responsibility lies with the Department of Public Expenditure.

It went on to accuse the Minister and his Department of "bad budgeting". The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council doing that is very serious, so what is the Minister doing to address this? The council made recommendations to him on what he should do. Are he and his Department listening to the council and taking what it says on board? Are he and his Department going to change their process or will they continue to just blame the Departments when the independent body is clearly saying the responsibility lies with them?

Deputy Jack Chambers: We take everything the council says seriously in the context of its independent role. I am also conscious of what it says on the medium- to long-term horizon about how we manage overall expenditure to ensure it is on a safe and sustainable path. I do not think the council is arguing for a much bigger overall allocation. The Deputy is giving one side and reflecting one side in that context. On the Department of education, the allocation going into 2026 was a 10% allocation, which was far in excess of the overall expenditure growth rate, because of the need to respond to the specific necessities around education within our society, and Government prioritised that over other areas. When it comes to the Department of Health, it is on the back of exponential growth in health expenditure in recent years. There is a need in that Department, and indeed in other Departments, to focus on how we can improve the overall outputs, efficiencies and reforms in the context of the growth in spending in the last five years so we can achieve our overall ambition and objective, which is to moderate current expenditure so we can have the fiscal space to ramp up investment in infrastructure.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I thank the Minister. What we are lacking here is any clear information from him or the other Ministers about what is actually going on, why this is happening, what he and his Department are going to do correct it in terms of their budgeting process and where these savings, efficiencies and reforms are going to come about. A senior economist at the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council said:

A better and more transparent approach would be to:

Estimate the cost of existing services based on actual year-to-date spending—not original allocations, as is the current approach

Publish estimates of the change in cost of existing services, decomposed into its causes: demographics, pay, and price pressures [Then we would have transparency around this.]

Only then, set and publish estimates of savings targets (following negotiation) ...

The economist has given very specific advice on what the Minister and his Department need to do to correct this. We need that information and that transparency, so why are the Minister and his Department not providing it? Why is it just the same talk of how we are doing levies, efficiencies and reforms? We do not know what that means, what impact it is going to have and what the Minister and his Department are actually doing to get under the bonnet to fix this budgeting process.

Deputy Jack Chambers: What we did very seriously in budget 2026 is ensure most Government Departments are within profile and that their allocation is successfully delivering across what was set out in the budgetary context. The issue with what the Deputy has presented is just taking ELS as it is today and saying you are going to add more avoids the need to drive efficiencies within the current base of spending and the need to drive reforms within the current base of spending so we improve the qualitative outputs that come from that. By just looking at-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Nurses' and teachers' pay is fixed though.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Looking for just additionality in the context of a current expenditure track for a particular policy area does not allow for an overall better evaluation of how we can get more for the current base of spend. That is how we have changed how we have approached overall expenditure policy. We are looking at the total expenditure rather than just looking at ELS and adding more. In the medium term that will improve the overall sustainability of our expenditure-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: It will not drive down wage growth.

Deputy Jack Chambers: -----but also improve efficiencies and strengthen the focus on reform. That is my priority in the months ahead.

International Bodies

3. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if he will report on his visit to the Bilderberg conference in Washington DC in April 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40659/26]

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Farrell. The annual Bilderberg conference is a forum to foster dialogue between Europe and North America on major issues facing the world, with attendees from industry, finance, government, academia and the media. The meeting was first held in 1954 and has been regularly attended by Irish Government Ministers on many occasions in recent years.

I was invited and attended this year's event, held in April 2026, in my capacity as Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation. This year's meeting was held in Washington DC and the agenda included a variety of topics such as AI, Arctic security, digital finance, energy diversification, Europe, global trade and the Middle East. While in Washington I also met the US Chamber of Commerce. Both engagements and events provide an important opportunity to engage with the international political and business community on Ireland's foreign direct investment potential. IDA Ireland reported that in 2025 a record 323 investments, which was a 38% increase over 2024, were achieved and this is expected to create over 15,300 new jobs. Total employment in IDA-supported firms reached a new high of over 312,400 people last year. This underscores the economic value of FDI and engagement with the international community.

There is additional information about the event on the official Bilderberg website, which includes information on the organisation's history, governance, steering committee, meetings, agendas, attendees and press releases.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The issue here is that in the spirit of the Bilderberg conference, which is a secretive conference, the Minister has not given me a full breakdown of exactly what he did and what he was discussing. It is only through a freedom of information request we have an insight into what he got up to. We also need to see it in the context of the time. When fuel protestors were out on the streets demanding the Minister's Government intervene just so they could make ends meet he was in Washington DC spending \$760 a night of taxpayers' money on a luxury five-star hotel. While working families up and down the State were unable

to afford to fill their tanks with fuel he was spending money on business class flights to the tune of thousands of euro and in total the trip cost the taxpayer €6,800. During a cost-of-living crisis why on Earth should taxpayers fund that type of trip while still not being aware of exactly what was being discussed?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The Deputy and her party fully understand, in the context of the party's participation in the Executive in the North, the importance of international engagement, foreign direct investment and engagement with the business community. As I said, the role in the context of the attendance at Bilderberg and meeting the US Chamber of Commerce is always to promote Ireland, to engage with many people who invest here and also political leaders in Europe and elsewhere. It is important, as an open, trading economy that we do that. I fully participated in the Cabinet meeting held on Sunday which obviously had advanced the discussions relating to our response and the important interventions we made. The Deputy's approach here, in undermining international engagement, is not fair.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I did not ask the Minister about his discussions with the US Chamber of Commerce. I asked him specifically about the Bilderberg conference. The focus on militarisation was absolutely clear from the agenda, which included discussions on the transatlantic defence industrial relationship, the Middle East and the future of warfare. As he is the Minister for public expenditure I find it concerning he would foster a close relationship with bosses of military companies, which is not in our national interest. I am concerned about the threat to our neutrality from this Government. The Minister will know there are no minutes or media coverage recording what was discussed in these sessions, so I would like to know what was discussed. The public paid nearly €7,000 for this trip and we have a right to know exactly what sessions the Minister attended, who he met and what he discussed.

Deputy Jack Chambers: All the attendees at the conference are published on the Bilderberg website, as is the specific agenda across many topics. As I have said it was AI, Arctic security, digital finance, energy diversification, Europe, global trade and the Middle East. It is attended by public representatives - members of government - from parts of Europe and the US, industry leaders and also by members of the media. The wider organisation's meeting agenda, respective press releases and what is discussed are set out. It has been attended by many members of Irish Governments in the past. As I said, it is important, as an open, trading economy that we engage with business leaders and members of government from across the world. It provides an important forum to do that.

Public Sector Pensions

4. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to provide an update on overpayments made by the NSSO to former Government Ministers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41064/26]

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Have all former Ministers either paid any money owed or set up repayment plans with the NSSO with regard to the pensions overpayment issue?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The National Shared Services Office, NSSO, a body under the aegis of the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, provides HR, pension, payroll and finance shared services to Government Departments and offices. As part of its remit, it transacts HR, payroll, pension and finance administration for public and civil servants on behalf of 54 client public service bodies.

In relation to pension and additional superannuation contribution, ASC, contributions for Ministers, Ministers of State, former Ministers and officeholders, a review into the application of the relevant pension schemes and additional superannuation contribution rates was carried out by the NSSO. The review identified 82 individuals where there was an under-deduction or over-deduction of pension and/or additional superannuation contribution. The NSSO has reached agreement with all current Ministers and Ministers of State in relation to payment of pension contributions due. Agreement has also been reached with the majority of former Ministers and other officeholders impacted by the review.

The NSSO is fully committed to ensuring that all moneys owed to the State are fully recouped, with 83% of the moneys owed now paid or in an agreed recoupment plan. It has informed me that there are a small number of outstanding cases where those impacted have yet to commit to a recoupment plan. Engagement is ongoing, with the latest correspondence issued from the NSSO this month.

These matters related to pension and ASC contributions and, in cases such as these, the NSSO adopts a consistent process of engagement to ensure the moneys owed are recovered. The NSSO works with each individual to address the error identified. An independent external audit of the NSSO retirement and pension processes is being overseen by the chair of the advisory board of the NSSO, and I have been told it is nearing completion.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: To be honest, I assumed the Minister was going to tell me that they had all engaged in a repayment plan. Am I correct that 17% have not engaged in a recoupment plan? I have raised this with the Minister numerous times, and I know he is in agreement with me. However, it is outrageous that 17% would not engage in a recoupment plan. This is a time when, as we were just discussing, people are struggling to make ends meet. Ordinary workers who go out and work every day of their lives cannot pay their bills or their rent. We now have a situation where former Ministers did not engage in a recoupment plan to pay money back into the State coffers, when they know this is the middle of a cost of living crisis and they know they were not due this money. We have been talking about this for months on end. I find it shocking. I genuinely thought the Minister was going to tell me they had all engaged in that recoupment plan.

Deputy Jack Chambers: As the Deputy knows, given its remit, the wider work of the NSSO is done independently of me. I am not aware of who the current or former Ministers are. The NSSO is trying to progress the remaining number. They all should and must enter into a repayment plan. The NSSO said that the latest correspondence has issued this month. There needs to be full repayment, and I have said that consistently. All current Ministers and Ministers of State have entered into a repayment plan or have fully repaid it, or have been repaid themselves where there was an over-deduction in certain instances. It is important that the remaining number of former Ministers and Ministers of State enter into a repayment plan. I know the NSSO is determined to do that. I am not privy to the correspondence with specific

individuals, except to say that the NSSO is progressing work to ensure that people enter specific plans.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Is the Minister aware of how many former Ministers are in that 17%? My God, this has to undermine public trust and public confidence. If anybody is overpaid anything, they are pursued with legal letters and threatening letters when these things happen through no fault of their own. They are pursued very quickly and in a very difficult way for many people who are not used to dealing with this. We are talking about people who were in a position of power, making decisions over other people's lives, who now feel they are a class to themselves, and who feel they do not need to engage in the recouping of this money. I understand that the Minister is not aware of each individual case, and that it is done in an independent way. However, can the Minister tell us how many people are involved? This means it is going to be difficult to maintain essential public confidence in public life.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The total number of individuals was 82, which included current and former Ministers of State, officeholders and a small number of civil servants. Some 17% of that is what remains. We know that the cohort relating to current Ministers has been accounted for. I do not have the specifics. What I have been told is that the aggregate miscalculation was €359,000, and that 17%, or €62,000, remains. The vast majority of what was owed has been repaid or is in a recoupment plan. Of the 82 cases identified, 63 are now closed. The NSSO is repeatedly finalising this. Although I do not know, there may be individuals who are getting advice or getting it checked to see what is owed. I do not know the specific interactions that are ongoing because I am not familiar with the individuals, and it is confidential information for any individual. I know the policy and direction of the NSSO is to ensure that where anyone owes anything to the State where there has been an under-deduction, that is fully repaid. It is pursuing and engaging with all of the individuals with respect to that.

Question No. 5 taken with Written Answers.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Ethics in Public Office

6. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if he will provide an update on reform of the ethics in public office legislation, given that the review of the statutory framework was completed in December 2022; the reason for the delay in publishing the heads of a Bill; if he expects this Bill to be introduced this year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40505/26]

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: As the Minister knows, the ethics in public office legislation is very important in terms of public confidence in officeholders and public bodies. The review of the statutory framework was completed in 2022, almost four years ago. The heads of Bill should have followed quickly after that, yet here we are, in the middle of 2026, and there are no heads of Bill. What is causing the delay? When are we going to see the heads of Bill? We were promised two years ago by the then Minister, Paschal Donohoe, that it was almost ready.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The programme for Government commits to updating the ethics in public office legislation. I assure the Deputy that this remains a priority. I have updated Government colleagues this week with a memorandum for information on the progress that is being made. However, as the Deputy is aware, this is a complex area and careful consideration is required across a range of issues before detailed proposals are progressed.

I want to advance the programme for Government commitment, which represents an opportunity to make real and meaningful long-term change and reform to our current system. I am determined that this should happen in a way that is coherent from a policy perspective, but also streamlined from an operational perspective. As the Deputy mentions, my Department has already prepared the ground through a comprehensive review of the legislative framework for ethics. Very broadly, this found that the legislative framework for ethics should be underpinned by a set of integrity principles; that disclosure requirements should be strengthened to improve transparency; that consideration should be given to whether the regime should encompass more officeholders; and that the Standards in Public Office Commission should be strengthened. A variety of significant operational and policy considerations flow from this review and its recommendations.

I brought a memorandum to Government this week, and my officials will undertake further engagement with affected end-users of the system. This includes, at the outset, both Committees on Members' Interests. The purpose of this exercise is to gain insight into the practicalities of how the ethics system works. This outreach is a limited, targeted exercise. It is not a re-opening of the broader consultation process, which is now complete. My officials are seeking to understand how the processes and procedures of making ethics returns could potentially be streamlined and modernised. I want to ensure that those procedures, under a reformed regime and new legislation, are efficient, user-friendly and future-proofed. Following this, I hope to conclude the process around the drafting of the general scheme, which will then progress in the context of the programme for Government commitment.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: With respect, the Minister has talked a lot about the need to speed up the delivery of critical infrastructure, which I support. Yet here he is, giving an answer about how he is slowing down this process. The statutory review was completed almost four years ago, and the heads of Bill were promised by the Minister's predecessor, Paschal Donohoe, as almost ready in May two years ago.

These processes were substantially concluded four years ago but now the Minister is saying that we need to do more. Meanwhile, the Government is setting up more public bodies year after year and the number of such bodies that escape the SIPO requirements under legislation grows year after year. We now have 49 public bodies not covered by SIPO because of the inaction of the Minister and his predecessors. It is growing year by year and that is not acceptable. Every year SIPO publishes a report saying that it needs stronger powers. The substantive work on this was completed four years ago. When are we actually going to see the heads of a Bill? When is this going to come into force or is the Minister just going to slow this down and delay it further? That is what is happening now.

Deputy Jack Chambers: The purpose of bringing a memorandum to Government was to update colleagues on the progress being made around the policy context here. What we are seeking to do, rather than just adding additional legislative provisions, which obviously will be

advanced through a general scheme, is to ensure that we digitalise and simplify the process of making a return and that has to be future proofed around particular legislation. It will make it a much better and more transparent system. What we are seeking to do in the context of ensuring we have a positive and strengthened general scheme is to do a direct engagement with all parties and members through the Committees on Member' Interests on the current end user interface and reflect that in a general scheme. That will help the progression of the work. My plan then would be to bring the general scheme to Government, having concluded that exercise, and then progress the legislation. It is not a reopening of the consultation process, to be clear. It is simply to ensure the legislative provisions reflect a streamlined and modernised system that actually makes it easier for people to use. We have a predominantly paper-based system today which can be improved when people are making submissions and returns.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: When the Minister issued a press release on it this week, I was genuinely delighted. I thought this was finally coming to fruition and completion but then I read the press release and saw that was not the case. The rationale the Minister is giving is that we are going to move from a paper-based system to an online system, which is absolutely correct but at the same time, we are not able to get on with what was completed four years ago. We are in 2026 now. How does it take so long to develop a digitised system? Meanwhile, year after year, more and more public bodies escape the provisions of the ethics legislation. Is the Minister not really concerned that we now have 49 public bodies not covered by the ethics legislation? Under his watch this is getting worse, as year after year more and more public bodies are set up but are not named as being covered. This is urgent. Surely the Minister agrees this is urgent. Every single public body should be covered by the ethics legislation. Surely there should be no more delays in that. If the Minister is not able to get his act together on the digitisation, he could always come back to it later and get it done through additional legislation.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It is important to ensure we future proof the legislative provisions or a general scheme. Even in the past year or two there has been a change of context. If we look back at the experience with the 2015 public sector standards Bill, it did not progress and it lapsed. It is important to ensure that any legislation or scheme we introduce is progressed and enacted. There is no reopening of it, to be clear. What we are trying to do is ensure that we draft the scheme in the context of future proofing it. It should be simplified and strengthened in terms of a digital interface. That has to be underpinned through a legislative context. We are getting direct feedback from members who make the current submissions on how that will be strengthened. In the aftermath of that, my plan is to conclude the work on a general scheme and progress it. I want to ensure we enact a Bill. The last time we actually had a Bill progressing was the 2015 Bill, which was not enacted. It was criticised for being overly complex and difficult to comprehend during debates in the Oireachtas. I want to ensure we have a system that is reformed and can work for those who are making submissions.

Capital Expenditure Programme

7. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to provide an update regarding investment in critical infrastructure in the west of Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40153/26]

Deputy Jack Chambers: As Minister for public expenditure, I am responsible for setting the overall capital allocations across Departments and for monitoring monthly expenditure at Departmental level. As part of the budgetary process each year, my Department sets overall expenditure ceilings for each ministerial Vote group. These are laid out at Vote level in the budget day expenditure report published in October, with further detail provided in the Revised Estimates for public services published in December.

Following the allocation of each ministerial expenditure ceiling, it is a matter for Ministers to assign funding as appropriate at programme and subhead level for their Departments and for the agencies and bodies under their remit. They must account for the demands for services in different areas and regions, having regard to demographics and other relevant factors. Within this process, both current and capital expenditure are allocated on a departmental basis.

Balanced regional development is a key priority of this Government and is at the heart of the national planning framework, NPF, which sets out the overall spatial strategy for the next 20 years, along with the national development plan, NDP. Each Minister is responsible for deciding on the priority programmes and projects that will be delivered under his or her remit within the NDP and for setting out the timelines for delivery.

Since Project Ireland 2040 was first launched in 2018, the Government has overseen the delivery of many impactful NDP projects across the West. For example, in transport we have the N17-N18 Gort to Tuam project comprising 54 km of motorway and 3 km of dual carriageway; the N59 Moycullen bypass; the Salmon Weir Bridge in Galway; and the Killaloe Bypass in Clare. Other projects include the upgrade and rehabilitation of the Roscommon sewer network; the development of the Oweninny wind farm; the development of enterprise centres in Boyle and Tulsk in Roscommon and in Belmullet and Swinford in Mayo; as well as heritage and tourism projects in Portumna in Galway and Aghleam in Mayo. There have also been numerous projects delivered in the housing, education, health, and rural development sectors.

The programme for Government set out the clear prioritisation for the NDP review to ensure that investment can be maximised in the coming five years across strategic infrastructure. This includes the key energy, water and transport networks on which all future development relies.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I want to focus on healthcare in the west because the masterplan for University Hospital Galway, UHG, and the redevelopment of the hospital is a critical project for our region to ensure that we have a modern, resilient, future proofed, model 4 hospital and to ensure that staff and patients get the facilities they deserve. It includes 300 new inpatient beds, a new emergency department, critical care, surgical theatres, a cancer centre, maternity and children services and much more. In recent weeks a design team was appointed for the 300 bed ward block at UHG. It is crucial that all of this is delivered in a timely manner but, unfortunately, people in Galway have little faith in the Government's ability to deliver on critical infrastructure. One just has to look at the ring road saga, which has dragged on for two decades, to understand why. They want assurances that the redevelopment of UHG will be progressed quickly and will not face delays. The Critical Infrastructure Bill has gone through this House. The Minister has indicated that certain projects will be fast tracked under that legislation. Will he give a commitment today that the UHG plans will be designated as critical infrastructure?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy for the question. I met with some of the management team for the development board with our by-election candidate, Councillor Cillian Keane, Deputy John Connolly and Senator Ollie Crowe in recent weeks. I fully appreciate the need for improved bed capacity for the west of Ireland and for Galway. It is absolutely required, which is why the Government and the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, have significantly strengthened the capital allocation to the Department of Health to ensure we build much-improved bed capacity for areas like Galway and the west of Ireland. I want to work with the hospital to ensure the design phase, which it is currently in, is progressed quickly. The Government wants to see some of that progress to construction. Similarly with the ring road, we want to see that built. Planning permission is now in place and we need to ensure it is built.

The Critical Infrastructure Bill is in the Seanad. We will stand up a process, following its enactment, on what projects are designated and when. Speaking generally, obviously if a project is in the early phase of design or development, it may not be ready for designation. We want to ensure that across the transport, water, and energy sectors and in certain instances, in health infrastructure, we designate and fast track projects. Part of that will be through the provisions of the Critical Infrastructure Bill and part of it through the wider reforms we are introducing to cut timelines. I share the Deputy's objectives for both of the projects he mentioned.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: This is very important. There are regional inequalities in the area of healthcare, and these are particularly stark when it comes to cancer care. We do not have any PET scanners in public hospitals in the west. In many cases, patients can wait weeks before starting treatment for cancer. It is right across the board. We have seen elective procedures postponed at UHG due to overcrowding, with patients on trolleys and long waits in the accident and emergency department. We need the best possible facilities for people in Galway and right across the west of Ireland. It is what they deserve. A person's post code should not determine the quality of care that he or she receives, but that is the reality at present.

If we are serious about addressing this, the redevelopment of UHG has to be fast-tracked, it has to be made a priority and the necessary investment has to be forthcoming. There are real concerns that the Government has not budgeted sufficiently for the infrastructure either. This cannot be another project that is held up indefinitely. I understand that it is at an early stage, but I still ask the Minister to give a commitment that this is going to be fast-tracked as a critical infrastructure project. It is so important for the west of Ireland.

Deputy Jack Chambers: It absolutely needs to progress quickly. Part of that is to do with ensuring that the HSE is efficient in how it turns around the design proposals. We must also look at how we get it into the planning process and turned around quickly. In what we set out in the infrastructure reforms, part of the improvement to accelerate infrastructure may involve designation for any project. The other elements are about ensuring that we have better performance across the lifecycle of a project from the point at which someone has a concept in order that we save more time before the planning application is made. We must also standardise the overall construction aspect of particular projects in order that they will be built quicker.

I share with the Deputy the objective of improved bed capacity for the west of Ireland and Galway and in the next number of years. I had a very good meeting with the development board on their next steps. I have not set out any designation at this point because the Bill has not yet been enacted. The process will follow when that happens.

Public Services Provision

8. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the way in which digitalisation of public services is being managed to enhance service delivery for rural people, taking into account that those with limited broadband access or digital skills will not be left behind; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40066/26]

23. **Deputy Catherine Callaghan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation for an update on the inclusion strategy to ensure that no one is left behind by the move to a digital society; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40754/26]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: In the move to increasingly digitalised services, it is hugely important that people are not left behind, including anybody who is not able to partake of such services. Digital by default cannot mean digital only. There are large numbers of people in different areas who are finding things more and more difficult. Will the Minister of State outline the efforts the Government is making to ensure that everybody is included?

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 8 and 23 together.

The Government's better public services strategy commits to delivering inclusive, high-quality and integrated public services that meet people's needs and improve the delivery of services. The Digital Public Services Plan 2030 advances this ambition by embedding a life events methodology whereby services are designed around moments in people's lives, for example, the birth of a child and supporting the bereaved, rather than administrative structures.

With regard to the issues raised, there has been significant progress in digital infrastructure with the roll-out of the national broadband plan, which, I am sure they will agree, has been a huge success, and broadband for schools and related supporting programmes such as the public library strategy. National Broadband Ireland, NBI, has passed almost 460,000 homes, farms and businesses in rural Ireland, with 170,000 connected to high-speed broadband.

Our approach is very clear. We are digital by desire as opposed to digital by default. As part of the service design and delivery, we actively consider the needs of all people, including older people. Part of the dialogue in the Department is to consider the needs of people, including older people and those who are not confident using digital channels. To that end, we examine the use of blended and complementary channels and support, building on the work we are already doing to increase accessibility, for example, through our public libraries network, which is a nationwide service that continues to provide support for digital inclusion and literacy

activities at its branches. We are in a much better place when we look at the roll-out of the national broadband service. Deputy Moynihan will see it in his constituency, even in the context of small houses or people working from home. This is the way forward, but we need to include everyone in order that no one will be left behind.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: It is interesting that the Minister of State put a lot of focus on the NBI roll-out across the country. The NBI starts in one place and finishes in another. Guess where the last places are that are getting it? They are located in the area west of Macroom. Our three switches remain to be activated, along with some of the other communities across the country that have yet to get be given access to broadband by NBI. It would be helpful if we could put in an extra push to encourage NBI to finish it out. It is currently working on some of the switches in Dunmanway, Carriganima and Ballingeary. This would be a great example of how we could push to make sure that digital services are available to people. Is it possible to engage with NBI to ensure that we get delivery on the service locally this year?

Deputy Frankie Feighan: We all have issues, and the Deputy has rightly articulated the issue relating to his area being included. If we look at it from a positive point of view, I understand that NBI is ahead of schedule. However, there are a few areas in respect of which we may need to contact NBI. We talk about public infrastructure. This is public infrastructure that is ahead of what was planned for.

Enabling access to public services is very important to the Government as we work together to accelerate transformational change in how we deliver public services. We are trying to digitalise public services and the Department is taking the life events approach, as outlined in the digital public services plan. We want to reorient the service around key moments in people's lives and ensure a more proactive approach by the Government in providing services. All of this is done with inclusion and accessibility as the guiding principles in order to ensure that no one is left behind. The better public services programme involves a clear and explicit commitment to redesigning public services around the needs of users in order to ensure that services work equally well for both people who engage digitally and those who do not. We want to bring in all the stakeholders and try to make things as easy as possible for people across the country, especially older people.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Will the Minister of State outline the level of co-ordination with the larger stakeholders such as banks, financial services companies and the Department of Social Protection? Unfortunately, across my community, we have had bank branch closures in Dunmanway, Millstreet and Kanturk. In addition, the public counter in the PTSB branch in Macroom has been withdrawn. Just recently, the ATM in Newmarket was removed. This puts extra pressure on people. It pushes some individuals who are not entirely comfortable operating digitally and who would prefer to do their business with a person over the counter. It puts them in a more difficult position. Will the Minister of State outline the co-ordination taking place with banks and financial services companies to ensure that rural communities and people of all ages who may not be comfortable operating in this space, whether it is as a result of literacy issues or the fact that they may not be digital natives, are not left behind?

Deputy Frankie Feighan: It is an interesting question. The Deputy has seen that the Government can consult with banks, but we have a very limited role in that regard. I would like to think that banks would consult with each other. Consider the position of towns where there clearly is no need for two bank branches and both are closed. Instead of talking to each other and saying "Look, we will close our branch in this town and you close yours in the next town", they close both branches. Bank of Ireland could keep its branch in one place and AIB could leave its branch open in another location. There does not seem to be any consultation. If consultation has taken place, it does not, as the Deputy outlined, seem to have taken the needs of the people in rural communities into account.

It is good to see that the credit unions, for which I have a great deal of time, have taken up the challenge and are providing a banking culture and ATMs. The banks were a little hasty. They have their own business models, but I do not think they considered the needs of the people or discussed the matter with each other. Again, I want to pay tribute to the credit unions for stepping up to the plate and providing the services to which I refer.

Question No. 9 taken with Written Answers.

Action Plan for Rural Development

10. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation for an update on implementation of the report of the accelerating infrastructure task force; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40723/26]

53. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation for an update on the accelerating infrastructure task force report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40806/26]

55. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if he will report on the implementation of the accelerating infrastructure plan. [40277/26]

61. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the work the Government has undertaken to improve the speed of delivery of vitally needed infrastructure projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40746/26]

Deputy Tony McCormack: Can the Minister report on the implementation of the accelerating infrastructure plan?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I propose to take Question Nos. 10, 53, 55 and 61 together.

As Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitisation, I am responsible for setting the overall expenditure allocations and monitoring it at Departmental level. In the programme for Government, there is a clear prioritisation of the NDP review to ensure that investment for strategic infrastructure can be maximised in the

coming five years. This includes the key areas of energy, water and transport on which all future development relies.

These sectors were further defined as critical infrastructure in the Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan published last December. This report sets out 30 targeted actions grouped under four areas, with each addressing a key area of reform, and legal reform noted as a core element for accelerating infrastructure across the country. Among other measures, this work will include increasing exemption thresholds for critical infrastructure and reform processes with agencies and regulators, advocating for a new approach to legislation at EU level and creating a duty for State bodies to co-operate in making land available and accessible for critical infrastructure. At the end of quarter 1, strong progress was recorded across the 30 actions in the report, with many legislative, regulatory and process changes delivered. All commitments for target delivery by end of quarter one have been completed, and all remaining commitments for quarter 2 and beyond are currently on track.

With regard to legislative reform, the Critical Infrastructure Bill has been approved by the Government. The Bill is before the Seanad. It passed Second Stage there on 20 May. It was passed by the Dáil in recent weeks.

In the context of regulatory reform, certain revisions of existing licences through the Environmental Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2026 have been signed into law. This will mean that small scale water discharges can now be registered by means of a short online administrative process rather than requiring a certificate of authorisation, which could have taken up to 150 weeks to process. These changes are giving quicker decisions to licence-holders and more certainty on timelines.

The Maritime Area Regulatory Authority, MARA, has made progress with granting fit and proper designations to Uisce Éireann and local authorities. This move is estimated to have reduced the average time relating to the granting of new consents and licences by more than 30%. Changes that have been made to project delivery have seen an estimated average saving of 26 weeks on projects, such as the Waterford wastewater treatment plant, which is now at detailed design stage.

The Department continues to progress with planned actions for quarter 2 and beyond. We remain committed to the delivery of the plan. The Cabinet committee on infrastructure is updated regularly on progress, with the accelerating infrastructure task force, AIT, meeting monthly and continuing to support the delivery of the plan.

As regards our commitments across infrastructure delivery, we said we would prioritise an early review of the national development plan. This was completed and published in July 2025. We also said we would review and reform the prioritisation of capital projects in key agencies. This was completed through the publication of sectoral investment plans last year. We have established the Cabinet committee on infrastructure delivery and broadened the remit of the National Development Finance Agency, NDFA, to provide expert advice for major infrastructure.

As the Deputy will be aware, the infrastructure division of my Department has been stood up. The Department is working to drive multiple reforms across all of the areas to which I refer. We can have confidence that the cumulative impact of all 30 actions will make a significant difference in accelerating delivery across this year. To give an example, we have

been informed by Uisce Éireann that we should have 12 months off the greater Dublin drainage project, a change made with confidence due to system changes and reforms we introduced. The timelines for marine area consents have also been reduced by 30% for fit and proper bodies. We want to simplify wider processes, which is why the Critical Infrastructure Bill is progressing at pace through the Houses. We also have the joint utilities and transport clearing house, which has started reducing co-ordination delays that are an issue across different areas of public administration.

We are working with the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, to simplify certain key licences, and we have got several major projects that should advance much quicker in that context. That is a broad overview of some of the areas involved.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I welcome the fact that all of the targets relating to the infrastructure plan are being hit. The Minister and his staff are to be complimented on ensuring that this has happened. I also welcome the Government's continued focus on accelerating the delivery of crucial infrastructure projects, particularly in view of the importance of housing, transport and utilities to economic growth and regional development.

One issue that is occasionally raised by communities, businesses and local authorities is the need for greater co-ordination and faster decision-making across the agencies and Departments involved in major projects. Delays in infrastructure delivery can have very real consequences for housing supply, inward investment and regional growth.

Can the Minister outline what practical improvements are being seen on the ground as a result of the implementation of the accelerated infrastructure plan? Can he indicate whether measurable timelines for delivery are beginning to improve as a result of the reforms and co-ordination measures introduced?

Deputy Jack Chambers: A practical example is the wastewater treatment plant in respect of which 26 weeks have been saved due to the removal of the external assurance process and reviews, as well as changes to the thresholds that I introduced in reforms to the infrastructure guidelines. The latter was an additional step that added time. Under the wider assessment carried out last year, we had to measure the time it had taken some of these processes against the cost of delay. That example of the wastewater treatment plant should be replicated across other projects Irish Water will be progressing through its project development lifecycle.

Similarly, the greater Dublin drainage project, is a multimillion megaproject being done by Irish Water. Due to some of the changes we have made, Irish Water has, with confidence, been able to bring the completion date forward by 12 months, which will give greater confidence in the context of construction and housing supply in the medium term. This is a critical project for the delivery of housing supply along the east coast. However, we also have multiple other areas across transport and energy. We have work ongoing by the joint utilities and transport clearing house, which has identified ten specific barriers or challenges to co-ordination across utilities or delivery bodies in Departments and agencies. These are being worked through by my Department in order to save time and improve co-ordination.

We are seeing improvements, but we have other changes we have to make. I have spoken about improved risk appetite in the public service, and I will be publishing risk appetite

statements and bringing them to Government in the coming weeks. This will ensure that we increase the risk appetite to get things done and to deal with some of the risk aversion we have seen.

We have also made changes to environmental legal fees. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and I signed the regulation in that regard to cap fees, which was one of the legal reforms referenced.

The Minister for justice, Deputy O'Callaghan, is advancing the placement of judicial reviews on a statutory footing with the civil reform Bill. Obviously, once we enact the Critical Infrastructure Bill, we will be able to commence a process of designation which will help to fast-track several projects.

I know from our engagement with utilities in the context of energy, transport and water sectors, that there is much greater confidence in the construction sector because of what we progressed under the national development plan. Planned projects in regions, towns and villages now have the headroom and pipeline from a sectoral investment perspective, which will help bring confidence to this.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I thank the Minister for that. It all sounds great. I appreciate the 26 weeks and the 12 months that have been saved by Uisce Éireann. However, one of the biggest concerns I hear from councillors, other public representatives and communities is not simply the level of investment going into Uisce Éireann - and very significant State funding was put in by the Minister in the budget - but, rather, whether the organisation has the operational capacity and responsiveness necessary to manage that investment effectively and to communicate clearly with communities.

For instance, in my county of Offaly, Edenderry, Birr, Banagher and other areas are already at capacity in the context of wastewater. This is directly impacting future housing and development potential, yet there remains a lack of clarity around timelines and planned upgrades. Similar concerns are arising in other places, including Tullamore and Tyrells Road. The improvement of water infrastructure in Tullamore was supposed to start in the final quarter of this year or the first quarter of next year, but it has now been pushed out to 2028.

Does the Minister accept there is a need for stronger accountability, engagement and transparency from Uisce Éireann with elected representatives from local communities in order that people can clearly understand what infrastructure projects are planned, what stage they are at and when delivery can realistically be expected?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I know the matter of Irish Water and its engagement with public representatives has been raised a number of times. Irish Water is on the infrastructure task force, and I will take the Deputy's comments away as a need to strengthen engagement. The challenge last year was a funding one. There had been consistent issues and concerns within both the construction sector, which works in partnership with Irish Water, and Irish Water itself about the level of funding and its capital plans. We responded to that with a €12 billion allocation. Some €2 billion of the €12 billion is even additional headroom for housing supply. We want to ensure that Irish Water builds and advances many of these projects. I do not have a specific breakdown with respect to its wastewater treatment plants or some of its water supply plans at a local level with me but I have heard a number of times the challenge the Deputy has

referred to. It has been raised with the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste in other questions about the public engagement piece and the clarity of project delivery in certain towns and villages. I will engage directly with Irish Water on that because there should be clarity with respect to capital plans also across housing development. People need to know their ability to connect into a wastewater treatment plant and how that meets their objectives with respect to planning permissions they may want to commence. I will take that away. Now that we have responded to the question of funding, the question about reforming the delivery system to make it much quicker to deliver across many of the barriers and the areas which were identified in partnership with Irish Water, which has been very positive and constructive on the infrastructure task force, there is a need to ensure that communities and those in the construction sector have a sense of what is possible with particular projects. We will take that away and reflect the Deputy's feedback. I will come back to him directly on the matter.

Public Expenditure Policy

11. **Deputy Catherine Ardagh** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if overall public expenditure is within profile to date in 2026. [40338/26]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Since the beginning of the year, there have been significant spending shocks, including the likes of the Department of education and the war in West Asia, driving fuel prices and the need for a support package as a result for so many users. Will the Minister advise if overall expenditure is still on profile?

Deputy Jack Chambers: The latest fiscal monitor, published on 6 May, showed that at the end of April gross voted expenditure amounted to €36 billion. This is a €2.9 billion, or 8.9%, increase compared with April 2025 and reflects the implementation of the priorities set out in budget 2026 and the significant uplift in expenditure to support programme for Government commitments. Compared with the profiles set out by Departments for their planned spending over the year, this was €600 million, or 1.8%, below profile.

Looking at the composition of spending, current expenditure at the end of April was €32.3 billion, which was €250 million, or 0.8%, below profile. Capital expenditure was €3.8 billion, which was €400 million, or 9.5%, below profile.

It is early in the year to say what spending levels seen to date might mean for the end-year position. My Department is in ongoing contact with all finance officers to monitor and review expenditure trends. While the overall expenditure position at the end of April is within profile, the end-of-April current expenditure year-on-year growth rate of 9.3% will need to moderate over the year.

Ensuring that public money is spent efficiently, and that taxpayers see clear outputs and outcomes from public spending, is a core priority for my Department and for the Government. The Government agreed a medium-term fiscal and structural plan last December, which set out ceilings for the period to 2030. It provides for significant uplifts in expenditure, with gross voted spending to reach €147.3 billion in 2030. To ensure we progress across this structural plan, there is a need for strengthened expenditure control and renewed fiscal discipline. It is

the responsibility of the Accounting Officer in each Department to ensure that they manage their expenditure allocations sustainably and in accordance with the allocation approved by the Dáil.

My Department recently issued Circular 21/2026, Expenditure Control and Escalation Process, to all Government Departments. It reinforces other recent measures to strengthen expenditure control, provides a clear framework for managing expenditure and sets out phases for escalation if spending overruns emerge. Where expenditure pressures persist, the circular sets out a framework for when and how my Department will engage with respect to other Government-----

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

Deputy Jack Chambers: I will come back with a supplementary answer.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: A significant support package had to be put in place for fuel and transport earlier this year arising from that conflict in West Asia. I am conscious that the date for the agri scheme has been extended from Wednesday through to next Tuesday to ensure that the maximum number of farmers and contractors can get their applications in. I understand that a Supplementary Estimate on that is due in the weeks ahead. I am conscious that no matter how quickly that conflict in the Gulf were to be resolved - and it needs to be resolved sooner rather than later - elevated fuel prices would continue for some time and likely feed through into so many other costs for people. Does the Department have space to extend the schemes that are there if the conflict and the high pressure continue through the summer? Many of those schemes are due to end during the summer.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Obviously, that was and is an important fiscal intervention to respond to the energy spike we have seen, particularly with respect to the transport and the agriculture sectors. We are following the wider guidance we see from the IMF and others, that is, that schemes should be temporary, targeted and time bound in order that they do not involve permanent expenditure implications. We have said consistently that in July, when some of the interventions are due to lapse, we will assess that in the context of the energy position globally and make an informed decision in that context. I brought to the Government the two Supplementary Estimates relating to transport and agriculture on Tuesday of this week. We are conscious of continuing to review the overall position. Some of the schemes - for example, in the agriculture sector - have a five-month timeline as regards their wider implementation. We will assess that in July. We are not making any commitments until we can assess the position in July because some of the decisions run to that point.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Yes, it is right to focus on where the greatest need is. So many farmers and contractors were under phenomenal pressure. They are getting their applications in at the moment. It is a very busy time of year for them. We are also all watching that date in the summer when the schemes and the supports would be expected to finish out. The Minister is right that the Department will have to review the position at that point. The key question, then, is whether the Department has the fiscal space or the funding available or whether it will

need further Supplementary Estimates at that point to return and to review those supports or any other supports that might be needed later in the summer. Is the funding there?

Deputy Jack Chambers: As the Deputy knows, in the annual progress report that is published, we expect to run a general government surplus of about €9 billion this year. We are running a surplus, which makes the case for the importance of having fiscal buffers in a world which is so uncertain in the context of geopolitical conflict and when we have spending demands every day in this House across multiple areas. It is important that we review that in July and that we are careful in the context of further interventions. We know from the Covid pandemic and the cost-of-living period in 2022 that, notwithstanding the temporary nature of some of those schemes, they had permanent expenditure implications in certain areas, which then created trade-offs or constraints in future decisions that could be made. We will review that and take an informed decision in July. We are conscious of the dynamism of the global energy market and the need to respond with respect to particular sectors but it is important we implement the schemes being applied for presently, which may reflect more support here than in many other countries, and then take an informed position in July. We will know where the position is at that point.

10 o'clock

Weather Events

12. **Deputy Noel McCarthy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation the engagement he has had to date with a group (details supplied); if his Department is in a position to provide funding for the reimbursement of repaired infrastructure damaged in the wake of storm Babet; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40451/26]

Deputy Noel McCarthy: What engagement has the Minister has had to date with the Willowbank residents' association, Willowbank, Midleton, County Cork, which spent €7,752 on repairing the estates wall in the immediate aftermath of flooding caused by Storm Babet? Is his Department in a position to provide funding for the reimbursement of repaired infrastructure damaged in the wake of Storm Babet?

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: I am aware of the devastating impact flooding had on homeowners, businesses and the communities of Midleton and across east Cork during Storm Babet. While the issue raised is a matter for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, my office in October 2025 corresponded directly with the Willowbank residents' association secretary, following contact between my office and Cork County Council. Cork County Council advised the OPW that funding had been made available to the council by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to assist with the repair of damaged infrastructure across east Cork following Storm Babet. Cork County Council further advised that the repair of the wall at Willowbank, which was commenced by the residents, was completed using this funding.

The strategic emergency management framework sets out the emergency management practice at national level and designates lead Departments for a range of emergency types.

Under this framework, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage leads the response to severe weather events through the national directorate for fire and emergency management. Accordingly, there is no emergency response funding mechanism available in the OPW that would see emergency response actions such as those undertaken by citizens in Willowbank being refunded by my office. The Government is fully committed to providing support through the national development plan, providing €58 million for the Midleton flood relief scheme. A planning application is estimated to be submitted by Cork County Council to An Coimisiún Pleanála in quarter 3 of 2026 and be completed by 2031, protecting up to 750 properties that flooded during Storm Babet. The scheme will protect Willowbank residents going forward.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I thank the Minister of State for his response and acknowledge his impact and that he met the residents of Midleton. He was in Midleton and I acknowledge that and thank him for that. I understand he is familiar with the situation in Willowbank because they have been in touch with his office. The Willowbank housing estate was affected by flooding following Storm Babet in October 2023. Several houses were flooded when one of the walls in the estate gave way under pressure from the overflowing Owennacurra river. Willowbank residents carried out repairs to the collapsed sections of the wall in the days afterwards as they were fearful of a repeat flooding. Financing of the repairs of the wall was provided by the residents' association at a cost of €7,752 through the estate's fund. The association has yet to recoup any of this expenditure and this shortfall has severely impacted estate maintenance. I acknowledge the OPW does not have a funding emergency response but has the Minister has any engagement to date with Cork County Council or with his counterparts in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on this matter? What is the situation going forward?

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: As I set out at the start, this falls under the Department of housing. That is not me passing the buck. There is no mechanism in the OPW to refund the residents. I respect the work the residents took it upon themselves to do, and I give great credit to them. I met them in Midleton. Somebody must have advised them when they did this work that they would recoup the money and that is the area they should be focused on, and whether it is through the local authority. In fairness to the local authorities, they are very much engaged with my office. They looked to see whether we could fund it and we said, "No, there's no mechanism in our funding stream to allow us to do that." The job has been done. Funding was received from the Department with responsibility for the emergency response to support the local authorities going forward but there is no mechanism within my remit to support the residents. While I would love to, I am afraid I do not have the mechanism to do so.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I acknowledge there has been some improvement in east Cork with the continued roll-out of flood barriers through the individual property protection scheme. I thank the Minister and his Department for that. However, every effort should be made to reimburse the residents' association for such a small amount in the grand scheme of the €50 million-plus Midleton relief scheme. That is where the residents are mixed up. There was so much money but they cannot recoup €7,700. The residents find that hard to understand.

I know my colleague, Councillor Rory Cocking, has raised the answer regularly at the quarterly Midleton flood committee meetings and has written directly to the Minister of State's office and the Minister for housing. However, the situation remains the same, as the Minister of State acknowledged.

We have seen other instances of extreme flooding across the country in recent times; surely similar flood protection works by residents have been undertaken elsewhere. Are any measures being considered by the Department that would see emergency response actions, such as those undertaken by the citizens in Willowbank, being refunded? Will the Minister of State or his Department officials consider meeting with residents to further discuss this matter? I thank the Minister of State for all his input so far.

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: The Deputy has put about seven questions in a couple of lines there. I give him credit for that. As I said at the outset, there is no mechanism. I am fully focused on protecting the people of Midleton and east Cork. I have put huge efforts in, as has my Department, in relation to working with the council to get our planning applications submitted quarterly. I am advancing on that and want to see it happen as fast as possible to protect people.

On the question the Deputy keeps raising, there is no mechanism. I am sorry to say that but there is no mechanism. I have no issue, when I go back down to Midleton, with meeting the people. I think the only option available to them is through the local authority and to see if the council has a discretionary fund that may be able to help them. I do not know if that is possible. It is something that has happened in my constituency over the years and we reached out to help. I give credit to every residents' association up and down the country that takes interim measures. Since coming back into the role involving the Office of Public Works, I have brought in many changes in recent months. I have been meeting people in all the areas flooded since Christmas and providing interim measures. That is a way forward. As those measures are being rolled out, it is open to Cork County Council to look at interim measures to support people in those areas.

Departmental Contracts

13. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation Digitisation if he will consider instructing Departments and bodies under his remit to include an additional column in their published purchase order reports to indicate the specific contract under which each payment is made; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40546/26]

Deputy Albert Dolan: Will the Minister consider instructing Departments and bodies under his remit to include an additional column in their published purchase order reports to indicate the specific contract under which each payment is made? From a purchase order report, I can see who was paid, how much they were paid and when they were paid but I cannot see what they were paid for. The only way we can do that is by linking it back to the original contract.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Dolan. I am committed to ensuring transparency and accountability in public expenditure, including in relation to the publication of purchase

orders over €20,000. In this context, my Department has an effective process in place to produce the quarterly purchase order report in a timely manner.

The publication of purchase order data over €20,000 stems from a commitment in the programme for Government and public service reform plan in 2011. Since then, my Department, in common with many other public bodies, has developed standardised reporting processes to enable timely and efficient publication of this information. In line with evolving best practice, my Department has enhanced the accessibility of these reports, including by making them machine readable, aligning with open data guidance and principles. Furthermore, my Department has recently written to Secretaries General of all Departments reiterating the statutory obligations of public bodies under the open data directive and the Freedom of Information Act 2014. In the context of continuing to enhance transparency, I am open to examining how additional information could be provided in a meaningful way.

In respect of the Deputy's proposal to include an additional column identifying the contract under which each payment is made, I acknowledge the potential benefits to transparency and expenditure reporting. However, I have been informed by officials the feasibility of implementing such a requirement across Departments and agencies is contingent on the configuration and capabilities of existing financial management systems. Any proposed change of this nature would require further detailed consideration, including clarification of the specific information requirements, assessment of system capabilities and evaluation of associated costs and administrative impacts.

My Department will continue to engage with stakeholders on opportunities to improve reporting in a manner that is practical, proportionate and sustainable and in line with the wider direction the Deputy has outlined.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I thank the Minister for his work in writing to all the State bodies to remind them of their obligation under the EU open data directive that they have to publish their purchase orders in machine-readable format. To give the Minister an example, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, the children's hospital and the Arts Council were not publishing but once he wrote to them, this ensured that they did start publishing. We had written to them as well. The Minister will be aware of my work with my team in collating all the information to get over €100 billion in procurement spend tracked over the past decade. It goes back to the fundamental point that the State can tell us that a payment was made but it is not easy to see which contract authorised it. Some entities and some suppliers have multiple contracts with multiple State entities and it is actually really difficult to see exactly what they were doing or what they provided. For Ministers and for everyone to be able to assess what value was actually provided, we need to know which contract underpinned that spend. That is where I am going with this and that is where that additional column needs to come in.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank the Deputy. I commend all his work and policy proposals in this area. I think we can all agree that enhancing transparency is absolutely a desirable objective. I am open to examining how additional information can be provided in a meaningful way to achieve that. In terms of wider moves towards standardisation, part of what my officials are now examining is what the various systems and operational capacities are in particular Departments and agencies to achieve that. More broadly and in line with the focus of transparency, I am conscious of the critical role public procurement plays, particularly in

maintaining and building public trust in Government. Billions of euro are spent on public contracts every year and, as the Deputy said, the public need to be confident that their money is being spent in a judicious and fair manner. Likewise, suppliers need to trust the integrity of the procurement system if we are to drive participation and increased competition. In that line, I am concluding a new national procurement strategy, which I hope to bring to Government before the summer recess. There are different elements, with transparency-related procurement processes and data and organisation planning being consolidated into a broader pillar, again, to strengthen trust and transparency.

Deputy Albert Dolan: The Office of Government Procurement stopped centrally collecting procurement spend data in 2019 citing general data protection regulation, GDPR, concerns and six years later, nothing has replaced it. The Department is estimating its procurement spend using estimated tender values on eTenders, not actual expenditure data. I believe this is a structural governance problem and a very practical step is adding one additional column to published purchase order reports identifying the relevant contract reference or contract award notice. It sounds small but it would be transformative. It would begin creating that golden thread from tender to contract award to payment because public money should be traceable from beginning to end. I will say this plainly: we cannot govern a system that we cannot see. I greatly appreciate anything the Minister can do in this regard. This is an opportunity to provide a greater level of transparency and I know the Minister is committed to that as well.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Absolutely. As I said, it is something I have asked my own officials to strengthen in the context of particular procurement processes to see what the outputs and outturns are and the transparency connected right through that. Part of delivering across that objective will be set out in a new national procurement strategy on how we can strengthen transparency and trust but also then improve competition and the integrity of competition within the market, ultimately, to provide better value for money. These are critical priorities of mine. I am happy to continue to work with the Deputy in this area.

Wastewater Treatment

14. **Deputy Joe Cooney** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation if the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026 will apply to wastewater projects irrespective of their scale or geographic location; if he will consider a programme-level designation for wastewater treatment infrastructure across the country rather than limiting fast-track status to individual large-scale projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40521/26]

Deputy Joe Cooney: Many towns and villages lack adequate wastewater treatment, with a significant number discharging raw sewage every day. The planning process is one aspect where long delays can occur in the delivery of wastewater treatment plants. Given the huge issues we have with water quality and our failure to comply with EU legislation, will the Minister consider a national designation for all wastewater treatment plants across the country, regardless of their size, under the Critical Infrastructure Bill?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I thank Deputy Cooney. Allowing the Government to designate certain projects or programmes as critical infrastructure is the core of the Critical Infrastructure Bill. By establishing a clear legal basis for prioritisation, the legislation will reduce ambiguity and ensure that critical projects and programmes receive focused and co-ordinated attention across Departments, regulators and agencies. It will address the unacceptable delays in our infrastructure approval processes by mandating whole-of-State co-operation and creating a fast-track pathway for critical projects and programmes without skipping any steps in the approval process or weakening safeguards. I have consistently stated in the Oireachtas that the designation process will not commence until after the Bill's enactment. However, I have also stressed the need for restraint in the designation process. If too many projects or programmes are afforded critical status, the impact of designation will consequently be limited. As I outlined in the Oireachtas, while the designation process has not commenced, when it does, my focus will be on recommending a small number of critical projects or programmes that will facilitate the acceleration of infrastructure across the energy, transport and water sectors, in particular, with a focus on infrastructure that will support housing. Section 1 of the Bill specifically identifies wastewater and waste management systems as being included within the definition of infrastructure. It is in that context that I will be assessing this when the Bill is enacted.

I recognise the importance of wastewater infrastructure but I also note that this Bill is just one of the vehicles being pushed to accelerate the delivery of infrastructure. In the report and action plan, 30 actions were identified to address the 12 barriers to infrastructure delivery and we are keen to advance all of them to ensure that we deliver the transformation and scale that is required.

Deputy Joe Cooney: I thank the Minister. I have to be direct with him. Wastewater treatment is named in the Government's own Bill as critical infrastructure. Logic dictates, then, that individual rural schemes should not have to make their own separate case for designation under the Bill. As far as I am concerned, they should all be included. The communities I represent in County Clare are not asking for special treatment. They are asking that a common application of this Bill will be applied to them. A programme-level designation for outstanding wastewater schemes, regardless of their scale, would cost the Exchequer nothing and could profoundly affect the delivery timeline. Can the Minister give this serious reconsideration? Will he reconsider that all these small schemes be included.

Deputy Jack Chambers: First of all, we have not yet commenced the process of assessing what will or will not be designated, and when we designate a particular project, when it can be fast-tracked. For example, if something is at a very early stage, it does not necessarily benefit from particular designation.

Second, we are prioritising water and wastewater systems because they are critical to housing delivery in villages and towns and for economic development across the country. This is an enabler for ensuring that we reduce the time taken to build these in various parts of the country. However, there has not been a decision on a project-specific basis and on a regional basis except to say that the area the Deputy is speaking about is one of the areas we will be seeking to prioritise in the context of the Bill. We have yet to conclude that assessment, however.

Deputy Joe Cooney: I thank the Minister. Again, this question is not about Uisce Éireann's capital programme. It is about whether the Minister will look at the current status of wastewater treatment as a national scandal, one that has huge negative consequences for the environment and all our communities, whether rural, coastal or urban. The Minister accepts that wastewater is critical infrastructure. All that remains is for him to determine whether a large project in a city has more virtue than a smaller one in rural communities. I hope he will also give that consideration. It is about the Government using its own Bill to put the solution to this problem front and centre. It would be a significant statement of our commitment to finally take this problem seriously. If the Minister is not willing to give me a commitment to extend the programme-level designation to all wastewater projects regardless of scale or location today, maybe he would respond to me within three months with an update.

Deputy Jack Chambers: To be factual about it, we have not decided designation on any project in any area up to now. We are going to conclude the legislation, which passed this House and will pass in the Seanad in June. I am familiar with parts of the Deputy's county and indeed across the west of Ireland, the midlands and elsewhere, where people have been waiting on wastewater treatment plants for far too long. There is huge environmental damage in some of the rivers and the water systems which is connected to the delays that we are seeing where that infrastructure has not been built. We will work with Uisce Éireann around designation when we conclude the Bill but also on other barriers to delivery. The legislative path is one path that will improve speed but there are other areas where we have to drive reform. The added capital allocation to Uisce Éireann should significantly improve the throughput and the scale of what is delivered but we will work with the Deputy constructively on that.

Question No. 15 taken with Written Answers.

Public Expenditure Policy

16. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation in respect of his responsibility for infrastructure delivery, his plans to ensure that all other Government Departments will receive enough funding for essential infrastructure projects and services in the next budget and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40612/26]

69. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation in respect of his responsibility for infrastructure delivery, his plans to ensure that planned investments in necessary infrastructure projects and services by other Departments will not be reversed or cancelled due to newly proposed overspending rules by his Department and if he will make a statement on the matter. [40613/26]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Minister has indicated that a levy of more than €446 million will be imposed on Departments to pay for an overspend in the Department of Education and Youth yet he suggests that this will not really have any impact because we are going to spend more next year anyway. In reality, will it not mean that there will be less money available than was projected for multiple Departments to undertake key infrastructure or projects or to provide services?

Deputy Jack Chambers: I propose to take Questions Nos. 16 and 69 together. We agreed a medium-term fiscal and structural plan in December of last year that provides for significant uplifts and expenditure over the coming years with gross voted spending to reach €147.3 billion by 2030. The key element of the expenditure strategy underpinning the gross voted expenditure ceilings included in the plan was the prioritisation of capital with ceilings agreed as part of the NDP plan review and an additional increase in capital from 2028 onwards. Over €65 billion in capital investment has been delivered in the past five years out to 2025 and €19.1 billion was allocated for capital investment in budget 2026, which was an increase of €2.6 billion or nearly 16% over 2025. The capital ceiling will grow by a further €1.2 billion or 6.3% in 2027 to €20.3 billion. In total, the Government has committed €275 billion under the NDP from 2026 to 2035. We have published sectoral investment plans to deliver infrastructure at scale year after year. This can be achieved. This will strengthen co-ordination and build capacity in the construction sector.

The significant investment made by Government to deliver housing and fundamental infrastructure has been complemented by a considered programme of reform to address challenges within the infrastructure delivery ecosystem. The Government has already made significant efforts to orient itself towards infrastructure co-ordination delivery. The NDP review and sectoral investment plans are providing multi-annual funding certainty and a strong pipeline of projects. My Department has been tasked with identifying and addressing the most significant barriers to delivery. The infrastructure division in my Department has taken a stronger oversight and monitoring role for this action plan with all commitments by quarter 1 of 2026 fully delivered. This is a proactive role that allows my own Department to take action where barriers arise in the delivery of critical infrastructure programmes. We have published and brought the Critical Infrastructure Bill through the Dáil and it is now progressing in the Seanad. I can come back when I have further time but the figure of €446 million is all on current expenditure. We have completely protected capital expenditure lines so capital expenditure lines are not affected by the efficiency levy.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): I welcome the students and teachers from Tonragee National School all the way from Achill in County Mayo. We hope they enjoy their day in the Dáil. They are here with the Minister of State, Deputy Alan Dillon.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Is there enough then to deliver the critical infrastructure that we know we need? I will give one example where I cannot understand frankly why the money was not made available, namely, the case of The Complex. We need arts infrastructure. We had the Government bringing in stuff yesterday about drinking on the streets because we need greater vibrancy in our city centres and I agree that we do, so how could the Government let The Complex close down in Dublin's north inner city when all they were looking for was €6 million and they offered a win-win? It said that rather than sell it to a developer that was going to get rid of an art space, if the Government gave it €6 million on top of the €4 million it already had, we could retain a multidisciplinary art space and build social and affordable housing on top of it, so we would get a win-win. We would get a community, arts and cultural space, which we badly need, rather than allow it to be lost, and we would get social and affordable housing in the city centre for €6 million. Instead despite the promises of the Minister's predecessor to

that community, it has been allowed to close down. By the way, it is not yet over, so it is something the Minister could reconsider.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I welcome all the people from Achill who are here and I hope they have a very good day. Both my parents from County Mayo so I always welcome everyone from that great county. We will not talk about the All-Ireland but we are still waiting-----

Deputy Kevin Boxer Moran: Not with Westmeath.

Deputy Jack Chambers: We will see how it gets on at the weekend. I understand the issue around the arts complex. There was extensive engagement between Dublin City Council, the Arts Council and the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport. We have significantly increased the capital allocation to the Department in recent years, which has to manage its overall location in that context. Part of that relates to the extent to which the local authority would prioritise it, for example, in the engagement with those who run The Complex in particular. If the Deputy looks at our record, uplift of capital across the arts community has significantly increased in recent years and overall funding for arts has significantly increased in recent years. It is a decision of those who are prioritising within the Department, the Arts Council and Dublin City Council, which, obviously, has an important interface in running services.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: This is the game of pass the parcel that led to The Complex being closed down. If one goes to the Department, it says that it would love to leave The Complex open but it cannot buy properties, which is something I did not know, so what the Minister just said is complete nonsense. The Department is not allowed to buy properties. Dublin City Council said basically it did not have the money for it. The Minister is the Minister for infrastructure. We need housing, social and affordable housing in particular, and we need arts and cultural spaces, which are being closed down left, right and centre in the city centre. That building has not been sold. Apparently, the sale has not gone through so it is not over yet. That space could be saved and we could get a site for social and affordable housing for the small figure of €6 million. I suggest that the Minister, as Minister with responsibility for infrastructure, cracks the whip and says that it is madness to let this thing go and that we should save that site and save The Complex for all the artists and the local community and to deliver social and affordable housing on the site.

Deputy Jack Chambers: I provide an overall allocation to different Departments, which have to prioritise within that, and that applies to the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It cannot buy stuff.

Deputy Jack Chambers: Similarly, Dublin City Council has a very significant annual budget and has to prioritise across its objectives in any given year. The overall increase in capital expenditure and day-to-day expenditure for arts has significantly increased in recent years, and rightly so. I support the objective to continue to improve that in the years ahead but

it is an issue between Dublin City Council and the Department in the context of that particular proposal. We provide the overall funding. We have provided multi-annual certainty to the Department and it concerns how it prioritises that in the context of what is available.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Special Educational Needs

80. Deputy Darren O'Rourke asked the Minister for Education and Youth the total number of applications made to date to the National Council for Special Education from parents seeking a special class or special school placement for their child; the number of applications made since the deadline of 1 October passed; the status of the roll-out of new special class and special school places to meet that need; the number of those children who do not have an offer of a school place on 25 May 2026; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40992/26]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): The Department of education and the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, continue to work closely with school patron bodies, school management bodies and schools to confirm new special classes for the next school year 2026-27. The NCSE began sanctioning new special classes in January of this year, which is several months earlier than was the case in 2025. The NCSE advise that 7,860 verified notifications were received by 1 October. The vast majority of the notifications are for the 2026-27 school year, but some are for beyond that. In addition, we recently announced inclusive special classes as part of a new approach to supporting students with additional needs. This is one of the many ways the Department is actively engaging to meet the increased demand. As of 28 May 2026, 546 new special classes have been sanctioned, including 47 inclusive special classes, which is 32 at post-primary level and 15 at primary level.

I expect schools opening new special classes to move forward now with the admissions processes for these new classes. In addition to providing additional special class places, four new special schools are being established. These schools will be established in Balbriggan, CityWest, Bray and Monasterevin.

Data continues to be reviewed and analysed by the NCSE, which continues to engage with families. It is the experience of the NCSE that some families who contacted them may decide not to apply for a special education place. This may be where a place is not in a particular school of choice or where the student is already being supported appropriately in their existing placement. The Department and the NCSE will continue to closely monitor the need for further special class and special school places nationwide as part of forward planning for the 2027-28 school year. The NCSE continues to engage closely with schools and families to track the placement of children and young people and determine the current remaining level of need for specialist places at local level.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. It is reassuring to hear that the Department tracks the numbers and the placements. It would be more reassuring if it would make those public and provide them to Opposition politicians when they ask questions on them.

I will ask again in relation to the figures. The last time we were here the Minister of State indicated there were 7,860 notifications to the NCSE before 1 October, that about 75% of those children were already in school and that he was dealing with around 2,000 new applications. Based on 546 new classes sanctioned, the Minister of State has 3,276 places to address that need. How many children do not have an offer of a school place at this stage?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: We have the additional capacity that is being brought on between 2025 and 2026 and we have over 1,000 special classes opened across the country. We have new capacity and then there is additional capacity which is from the movement of students from primary into second level and from those leaving education. Just to reassure Deputy O'Rourke of the figure prior to 1 October, the NCSE and Department of education are continuing to liaise with families who being notified and contacted on an ongoing basis. We are ensuring we have places at primary, post-primary and special schools. That work has been intensifying right through the last number of months, into this week and beyond. We are working meticulously. I could not use any other word. There is engagement between the National Council for Special Education and the Department with families and with school communities to ensure we have appropriate school places for September 2026. That work is ongoing.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: There are a couple of things there. We do not have the figure for the number of children who do not have an offer. We do not have the figure for the number of children who were notified to the NCSE after 1 October. I presume the Minister of State does have those figures but is not making them publicly available. That raises very significant concerns. Based on my estimation, we are talking about hundreds of children without an offer and thousands of children in inappropriate school placements - nearly 4,000 based on the applications prior to 1 October.

It is the Minister of State's formula of words that he "encourages" schools to go now and begin their admissions policy. Is he tracking that at all? Of the 546 classes that have been sanctioned, how many have their admissions completed or ongoing? Does the Minister of State know?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I can assure Deputy O'Rourke that we are tracking. We are opening the special schools and we have engaged with the special classes. Yes, of course we are tracking the admissions policies because the admissions policy is the enabler from the sanction of the special class, the physical building, the teacher and the two SNAs, and also to ensure there are students in it. It is being tracked at all times.

We are constantly asked about numbers. The Minister and I are acutely aware of the need to make sure children have school places and we are working extremely hard on it. We are across this, day in, day out, right across the Department and the NCSE. I assure Deputy O'Rourke that the NCSE is meticulously working with families and with school communities. When sanctioning takes place, it is then on to the admissions policy to enable that class to be populated by students and to ensure they are in for the school year. The vast majority of those that have been sanctioned have the admissions policy up and running and most of them have it completed at this stage.

Special Educational Needs

81. **Deputy Eoghan Kenny** asked the Minister for Education and Youth for an update on the revised 2014 SNA circular, the workforce development plan and SNA redeployment scheme; when these will be published; the consultation that has taken place in creating these documents; if they will genuinely reflect the reality of the role of an SNA in a modern educational environment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [39683/26]

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I ask colleagues to excuse my voice. I must be spending too much time talking in here. I wish to ask about the update of the revised 2014 SNA circular, the workforce development plan and the SNA redeployment scheme. When will these be published along with all of the consultation that has taken place in creating these documents, if any has? Will they genuinely reflect the reality of the role of a special needs assistant in a modern educational environment and in a modern classroom?

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I thank Deputy Kenny for his question. My Department is in the final stages of work on the first special needs assistant workforce development plan and associated documents. The plan provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and supporting SNAs, children with special educational needs and school communities. It will, through a co-created series of policy developments, strengthen, clarify and offer clear direction and consistency to the SNA workforce.

Significant research and collaboration have been undertaken in preparation of the plan. This includes significant engagement with focus groups of SNAs, students, school leaders and teachers as well as a national survey of SNAs. Published reports on each are available on the Government website.

The plan is also supported by collaborative working groups established for each of the five pillars of the work. Membership of these working groups include school management bodies; Fórsa, the trade union representing SNAs; school staff; the National Parents Council; and the Children's Rights Alliance. The working groups examined every facet of the SNA role in 55 meetings with a view to enhancing support to children and young people with special educational needs.

The Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, and I recently met with stakeholder representative groups and SNAs in a day-long engagement to discuss this important work and look at any outstanding gaps that may be within these documents.

The key outputs from the plan will include a new circular on the role of the SNA, an SNA redeployment scheme and a review of the SNA employment contract. I very much value the contribution of SNAs and the role they play in schools across the country to make sure the overall well-being of students and pupils is at the forefront of everything we are doing. I am pleased to confirm that the drafting of the plan, the circulars on the SNA role and the SNA redeployment scheme are at an advanced stage. I intend to publish them in the coming weeks.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: That is very good. In the next couple of weeks before the Dáil summer recess, we can expect that the redeployment scheme, the revised 2014 circular and the

workforce development plan will all be published and available to be viewed by all SNAs, educational stakeholders and politicians right across the country, and of course parents as well.

Consultation has obviously been extremely positive, and that is to be welcomed, as is the fact we are now at the final stages. It is not before time at all in relation to the workforce development plan and the redeployment scheme. I do not want to go over again what happened to SNAs at the beginning of 2026. The significant issue remains. I completely understand, as do SNAs, that redeployment has to take place but it has to be given to SNAs before any sort of correspondence is sent out to schools to say that the SNAs within the schools have to be redeployed.

It is positive that these will be published. Can the Minister put it on the record that they will be published before the summer?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I thank the Deputy. I want to publish these documents within the coming weeks. They are at an advanced stage and they were codesigned with SNAs, stakeholders and advocacy groups. The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and I met with them all again recently. We did a day-long session looking at all of these documents to make sure we get this right. The new circular to replace Circulars 30/2014 and 71/2011 on the role of the SNA will be published. There will be an amalgamated circular published and a guidance document will be published for that as well. The redeployment of SNAs will be delivered by the NCSE and it will, for the first time, allow SNAs in posts that may no longer be required for reasons such as falling enrolments, reduced care needs and changing demographics to be redeployed. This is something SNAs have asked for as well. There has been significant engagement and it will be published. There is also an SNA hub online. It will be published there as well as on Government websites.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Very good. It is only positive that it will be published. It will give SNAs and school management right across the country greater clarity on how many SNAs they will be able to have in the school system. We also cannot lose clarity on the fact that we need to continue adding to our SNA workforce across the country. While I appreciate and fully accept that we have the highest number of SNAs we have ever had in our education system right now, needs are only growing right across our education system and the 4,000 schools we have nationwide. Needs are presenting far more than they previously were, which is only positive in one aspect because we are getting to the needs of children and providing them with the services. I am very hopeful - I am not asking the Minister to put it on the record but, rather, just to have it in the back of her head - that there will be a further allocation of SNAs in budget 2027.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I should have said at the outset that we have more SNAs now than ever before. There were 24,896 SNAs in our schools. We will have over 26,000 this coming September. I absolutely know, as a former teacher, the value and the role of the SNA. I do not need to tell the Deputy, Members of this House or indeed parents or young children and students themselves who need the support of SNAs working with the class teacher, the special educational teacher and the school community. We intend to improve their conditions around training and we have been listening to SNAs themselves, who come from a wide variety of life experience and have a wide range of qualifications. We want to make sure that in the

documents we are producing now, which are codesigned with them and the school communities, we are enabling them to get access to the training and giving them the redeployment benefits they wanted and have long sought, which is equivalent to teachers across the country.

School Staff

82. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Education and Youth to provide an update on the ongoing negotiations with school caretakers and school secretaries; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40993/26]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I wish to ask the Minister to provide an update on the ongoing negotiations with school caretakers and secretaries.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I thank the Deputy for his question. School secretaries and caretakers are at the heart of schools in this country and they are the key interface, as we all know, between students, parents, school leaders and other staff. Without them, our schools would be unsustainable, given the value of what they contribute, so supporting our school staff is an absolute priority.

My Department has been engaging with Fórsa and the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation over the past number of months under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission and the Labour Court in relation to a number of claims, including a claim for a comparable pension entitlement. The matter of comparable pension entitlement was referred to the Labour Court. The parties remain in process, and my Department remains committed to reaching a resolution on this very important matter. As with any industrial relations matters, where engagement is sensitive and complex, the matters under discussion are confidential until the process concludes.

I want to reassure the Deputy, from my perspective and that of the Government, of the value we place on our school secretaries and caretakers. It is absolutely imperative that we get this matter resolved.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. The reason I raised this issue is because we are coming towards the end of the school year. This will be our last opportunity at priority questions before the school year ends. At the start of the school year, school secretaries and caretakers reluctantly went on strike outside schools in pursuit of pension parity. We could all see - I hope Government could see it, and it surely knows it - the level of public support, particularly within school communities, that there is for school secretaries and caretakers. Their claim is a just one. It is for pension parity. The deep concern at this stage - and I take on board every word of the Minister's response - is that time is moving on and these individuals, in some circumstances, are making decisions about when they will retire and be able to move on. Time is of the essence.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I concur with everything the Deputy has said there. I met with the school secretaries and caretakers in my own constituency at the time. I know many of them. They are very familiar to me. They do not take going out on protests lightly. They

did not want to be there. I heard that loud and clear and I recognise that a comparable pension entitlement and enhanced terms and conditions are, understandably, important objectives for our secretaries and caretakers. That is why my Department has been engaging with Fórsa over the past number of months under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission and the Labour Court with the support and input of the Department of public expenditure and reform. Parties remain in that process and my Department remains committed to reaching a resolution on all these matters. As with any industrial relations process, I cannot comment on it.

By way of background, the Deputy may be aware an agreement was reached in 2022 that provided for the assimilation of school secretaries to a payroll administered by my Department, which has provided significant benefits in respect of pay and access to leave. We are committed to ensuring that grant-funded school caretakers will be afforded the opportunity to avail of an agreement similar to that offered to grant-funded school secretaries.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: In this, I want to make the case for the Minister to play whatever helpful role she can with the parties involved to try to move things on and bring them to a successful resolution. We are aware of some of the issues at stake here: access, for example, to a public service pension scheme versus auto-enrolment versus a third, bespoke model. I will make a strong case, and I hope the Minister hears it and can pass it on to her ministerial colleagues.

There is a real concern that there will not be any recognition of years of dedicated contributions, and that, for example, those people who have longer service, fewer years left on their contracts and are closer retirement will be disadvantaged. It is important that any pension scheme recognises the years of dedicated service that people have given. This cannot be about a future scheme for new people coming into the job.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: Regarding secretaries and caretakers being given access to the single public service pension scheme, engagement, supported by the State's industrial relation bodies, has been ongoing. As with all industrial relations processes where engagement is sensitive and complex, discussions remain confidential.

My Department welcomed the commencement of the auto-enrolment retirement savings scheme, which is administered by the National Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings Authority, NAERSA, in January. Responsibility for employer compliance with the scheme lies with NAERSA. Revenue provides payroll data to NAERSA, which uses this to identify and enrol eligible employees. Employers were required to complete their profile on the My Future Fund employer portal using their Revenue online services credentials before January this year, to ensure that they are compliant with their obligations under the legislation. Employers are required to ensure that their payroll systems are capable of calculating and submitting contributions and that employee contributions are matched in accordance with the scheme's requirements. It is important to note that all employers, regardless of their status, are required to comply with the legislation underpinning My Future Fund. The Department has enrolled approximately 2,000 eligible secretaries since 1 January this year.

School Enrolments

83. **Deputy Jen Cummins** asked the Minister for Education and Youth her plans to publish the number of children awaiting appropriate school places on a regular basis. [37945/26]

Deputy Jen Cummins: I would like to have a conversation about the Minister's plans to publish information on the number of children awaiting appropriate school places on a regular basis. This would be similar to how the relevant Department issues the homeless figures every month. It is in order to show transparency as to where the Department of education is with regard to being able to tell everybody how many children throughout the country do not have appropriate school places.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The National Council for Special Education, NCSE, has verified that 7,860 children and young people notified to it by 1 October 2025 meet the requirements for special classes or special school places for the 2026-27 school year. Further children came forward after that date, and this will continue right up to September. Approximately 7,000 of the 7,860 children in question and young people have a diagnosis of autism. There is generally an adequate number of available places for children and young people with other diagnoses. The focus, therefore, continues to be on providing new places for children and young people with autism. That data continues to be reviewed and analysed by the NCSE, which will continue to engage with families.

It is the experience of the NCSE that some families who contacted it may decide not to apply for a special education place. This may be where a place is not in a particular school of choice or where a student is already being supported appropriately in his or her existing school. Data available to the NCSE shows that approximately 75% of the children and young people who came forward by the 1 October deadline are already enrolled in school. As in previous years, the priority groups for access to specialist placements for the 2026-27 school year comprise those without school places, namely young children moving into primary school, children moving from primary to post-primary, children moving from one area to another or those who need to be accommodated where previous placements have broken down.

Budget 2026 initially provided for 3,000 new places. There are over 2,500 places available through the normal annual movement of students from primary to post-primary and finishing schools. The additional funding for which the Department received approval from the Government last month will allow us to provide further new specialised classes and special school places over and above the 3,000 new places already budgeted for. The NCSE can confirm that there are 546 new special classes for the next school year. I will come back to that point in my supplementary response.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I am delighted that there is portal methodology and all of that. It will allow us to get a handle on what the picture is. In the context of children who have not yet got a placement, the question remains as whether the schools involved need new buildings. If they do, how long will that take? Where will the children involved be housed or educated while that is happening? Did the Minister of State have to use his powers under section 37 to ensure that schools open appropriate places? We still do not know what the number is. I could use the power of deduction. I am not great at maths, but it would be really helpful if we knew what that number was.

Why did the Minister of State refer to the number who applied as opposed to the number who do not have places? Anecdotally, there are children who do not have appropriate school places. Why are parents applying via the portal? I know they have to notify the Department, but is there a box on that portal that they can tick to indicate that they do not need a place and are fine or do they have to trawl through the whole thing, which creates a lot of difficulty? Would it be better to have a box for them to indicate that they do not need a place and are just letting the Department know their child has an additional need?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: Over 80% of the 546 new special classes that have been sanctioned to date are located in existing buildings. We are working extensively on this. We are acutely aware of where additional accommodation has to be made available. That is a factor in how fast we can put a class in place. We take a number of issues into account when we talk about new special classes. These include the need in an area to have the class as close to the children as possible. Since 1 October, the portal has given us great insight into the level of need that exists. When parents indicate on the portal that their children have special education requirements, it behoves the Department and the NCSE to reach out and understand the need of the families involved. The important piece is the fieldwork and groundwork that are taking place between the special educational needs organisers, SENOs, and families to understand the need that exists and parents' concerns.

We used one section 37A procedure last year. We are continuing to engage with schools and school communities to ensure that we use the minimum number necessary.

Deputy Jen Cummins: It is good to hear that the Minister of State is using section 37A. It is important that all schools take their fair share of caring for children in their communities, particularly in areas where there might be a high number of fee-paying schools. If it is a fee-paying school that is located nearest to a child, the child also needs to be given a place. It is the same with every school. As we move towards a model where the local school is where the child goes, we still have a long way to go to get there. I am glad that the portal is creating options for parents to know what the situation is, because that was the whole plan the Department had. I am glad it is working out. I would obviously like more information, particularly as I am in opposition and am contacted by so many people. If the Department has a handle on this and is able to work with every family, it gives me great solace coming into the summer to know that every family will have a place for their child come September and that if a school building is not ready or there are glitches, there is a plan.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The Minister and I are acutely aware of the issue. The Minister has experience of this because in the previous Dáil, she held the position I currently occupy. When the numbers come through from the portal, we are acutely aware that we need to make sure that we have an appropriate number of places.

A total of 407 extra special classes were announced in 2025. We have 546 today. Between 2025 and 2026, we will have over 1,000 special classes across the country. We have inclusive special classes, with 15 at primary level and 32 at post-primary level, which are being welcomed in the community. It is important that the portal allows the parent or guardian to notify the Department of a child with additional needs. The NCSE has to work through that and engage with the families. We also have to engage with school communities. A huge

volume of work is happening with in the Department and the NCSE at all times across the year. There are bodies in schools to make sure that we are doing the right thing. We have a lot of capacity this year. We are working through every family and every requirement.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Schools Building Projects

84. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Education and Youth to provide an update on the way in which plans can be advanced for a new school (details supplied) on the new site offered free of charge to the State, within the town boundaries of Milford. [39850/26]

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: First, I thank the Minister for visiting Scoil Mhuire Milford last Friday – it was really appreciated - and seeing for herself the serious challenges that they face with the existing site. As the Minister knows, they have a new site secured. There will not be any issues with planning. It is across the road from Loreto Community School in the existing school environment up there. I hope the Minister can continue the momentum the previous Minister, Helen McEntee, brought and work towards a new school site for Scoil Mhuire Milford.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I had a wonderful visit to Scoil Mhuire Milford last week with Deputy Mac Lochlainn, Senator Manus Boyle and other Deputies. I want to commend the work of the school. You can see the fantastic ethos there, the learning and teaching and the warmth that is evident there. I always say it is very clear when you walk into a school the atmosphere that is there and that was very apparent in Scoil Mhuire Milford.

My Department has received an application for large-scale capital funding from the school. The officials have corresponded extensively with the school following that application. They met the patron and other school representatives. Discussions have been ongoing between the Department and the school around providing more information around enrolment patterns. From our discussion that day with the school, it will submit that.

As the Deputy will know, the Department provided additional capacity at the school through a significant modular accommodation project that was completed in November 2024. In terms of managing remaining capacity pressures at the school, the Department understands that around 20% of the school's current enrolment consists of pupils for whom it is not their nearest school. The school wants to come back with figures and evidence around that. We would really welcome that information.

My Department's NDP rollout places a very strong emphasis on maximising existing capacity and the prioritisation of school building projects to meet the most urgent needs. All applications from schools for major capital works, including Scoil Mhuire, must be considered in that context. My Department will continue to liaise with the patron and school authority within this context but we are also awaiting that information around the enrolment figures.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: It really was helpful for the Minister to be there and see for herself. She can see the location of the school in relation to the roads outside is entirely inappropriate. The school was built back in the day and does not reflect modern needs at all. The school site has no green area whatever for children to play. These are basic rights. The toilet areas are totally inadequate. The Minister will have seen the inadequate nature of the classrooms and the areas for children with special needs just are not there.

I am really glad the Minister said at the outset that it is a tremendous school. The Minister saw the culture that day. The teaching staff are really proud of their educational environment but they do not have the amenities they deserve. The standard of education they are providing and the support with the community is notable. The fact the school got the site tells the Minister about the support it has in the community. It is a remarkable thing to offer a greenfield site free of charge. They have done the work with the local councillors on planning. It is a really unique case. I cannot think of a stronger case in terms of national schools in Donegal. I ask the Minister to continue the good work of her predecessor. She was moved to another portfolio and now Deputy Naughton is the Minister. I am delighted she came to visit the school to see for herself. Let us keep the momentum going now.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: As the Deputy knows, the school operates on a tight urban site which adjoins a relatively busy road than most rural schools. The school has identified various issues with accommodation, including traffic management, uneven and small internal floor areas and, as I could see for myself, a sloping site topography and a limited play space. The school also referenced expected future housing growth and the urgency of acting on the offer of a local landowner to swap a greenfield site for a new school in exchange for the current site. The Department will continue to liaise with the school.

Since 2020 we have invested €228.24 million in capital funding for schools in Donegal. Seventy-three schools have been upgraded either through a new building, a large-scale extension or modular accommodation and there are eight school projects under construction. I know the Deputy's question related to this school - I will continue to work with it in order to try to progress this.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I checked with the school last Friday. Deputy Naughton is the fourth Minister for education during this process. That says a lot. The public representatives in Donegal - cross party - have come together and appealed to Ministers to come and see the school: Joe McHugh from Donegal was there as were Deputy Norma Foley, Deputy Helen McEntee and now Deputy Naughton. I appreciate every one of them came to the school to visit but the reason we have impressed on the Minister about this is that we feel so strongly, as a cross-party group of TDs and Senators, that this school is a unique case. The school has waited a long time. They thought when they were posed with the challenge of getting a site that when they secured a site free of charge to State - it has all the amenities, is across the road from the existing secondary school, is the perfect location and planning will not be an issue – they could get momentum. I ask the Minister to continue the positive mindset she brought last Friday and get a new school for that town.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I thank the Deputy. He will appreciate I cannot confirm anything there in the Dáil Chamber. All I can say is it was great to see the school for myself.

I know the great work happening there, the constraints the school is working within and the fantastic job it is doing in relation to teaching and learning. The enrolment figures are important. I understand the school says it has that work completed and will send it into the Department in relation to the review of enrolment patterns in the area and looking at the current enrolment coming from areas served by other schools. That is important in terms of trying to progress this. I thank the Deputy for his time.

Departmental Circulars

85. Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett asked the Minister for Education and Youth when the promised SNA circulars to replace 30/2014 and on redeployment will be released; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40714/26]

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We are all aware how the failure of the 2014 circular and the Government to recognise the evolved role of the SNA and what the meaning of inclusion in education really means led to in the crisis we had earlier this year. When will the promised new circular be out? I think I heard the Minister say it will come before the summer recess. Will she confirm this? Will it reflect the needs and aspirations of SNAs, school communities, parents and children?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: My Department is in the final stages of work on the first special needs assistant workforce development plan and associated documents. The plan provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and supporting SNAs, children with special educational needs and school communities. It will, through a co-created series of policy developments strengthen, clarify and offer clear direction and consistency to the SNA workforce.

Significant research and collaboration have been undertaken in preparation of the plan. This includes significant engagement with focus groups of SNAs, students, school leaders and teachers as well as a national survey of SNAs. Published reports on each are available on the government website.

The plan is also supported by collaborative working groups established for each of the five pillars of the work. Membership of these working groups include school management bodies, Fórsa, the trade union representing SNAs, school staff, the National Parents Council and the Children's Rights Alliance.

The working groups examined every facet of the SNA role in 55 meetings with a view to enhancing support to children and young people with special educational needs. Recently, the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and I held a full day-long engagement with SNAs and other education stakeholders on those documents, making sure there are no gaps and that we get this right. It was a very productive, positive meeting. The key outputs from the plan include a new circular on the role of the SNA, a SNA redeployment scheme which is long sought after by SNAs and a review of the SNA employment contract. I very much value the key contribution that SNAs. This was co-designed by them and by education stakeholders to make sure the educational experience and overall well-being of our students, which is what we are

all here for, in our schools and to make sure our pupils are getting the resources they need. It will be published in the next couple of weeks.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It is coming out over the coming number of weeks. That is good. It happened because the Government got it so badly wrong. There were massive protests and there was fear and anxiety but it is good that we have moved on. The question is really whether it will be maximalist in terms of the need to include children and genuinely recognise the role of the SNAs and how it has evolved, and genuinely recognise what inclusion means. It is not just physical presence in the school. It is emotional well-being, genuine support and communication. Just because a child is doing well does not necessarily mean an SNA has to be taken out and moved somewhere else because a child who might need that support to continue flourishing could regress because they do not have SNA support. All of this was reflected in the alternative proposed circular put forward by parents' groups. Obviously, teachers have to have input and have to teach. However, this has to be maximalist in terms of inclusion and genuinely recognise the importance and role of SNAs. Will it be?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: "Yes" is the short answer. This has been the result of a huge amount of collaboration and engagement and has been co-designed by SNAs and education stakeholders. The Deputy is right about the evolved role of the SNA. It goes beyond the primary care needs. There are the social, emotional and behavioural supports that young people and students require. We also want to make sure SNAs are getting adequate training. These are things they have looked for. SNAs come from a wide variety of life experiences. There are varying qualifications out there and they bring so much as things stand. It is to elevate their position and make sure we are getting this right. There has been a huge amount of co-design with them and with educators. We have also listened to the voices of students and young people. There has been huge collaboration with them as well. For example, almost 7,500 SNAs responded to the national survey. There are focus groups with more than 310 SNAs, over 200 teachers and 250 school leaders. We consulted with almost 150 children and young people about the role of the SNA and what they want to see to support them as well.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: That is all good and not a moment too soon. However, we know there is always a tension between budgetary constraints being imposed, the needs of the children and a genuine recognition of the importance and role of SNAs and what school communities really need. It is absolutely critical that the needs of children, a genuine recognition of the importance and role of the SNAs and what school communities need trump any budgetary pressures being imposed. The concern is that these delays and what happened the last time was ultimately driven by budgetary constraints, and it led to the sort of crisis we had. It is good we have had the conversations but let us hope people have genuinely been listened to and that there is no diluting happening for financial reasons, and that this does the job it needs to do for children, SNAs, teachers and schools.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I am glad the Deputy raised this issue because we are increasing the number of SNAs. There are 24,896 SNAs in our schools. By next September we will have over 26,000 SNAs. Between this year and next year, we have funding for 3,000 SNAs. We will be continuing to invest in our special needs assistants. They value and provide support for our children and students, particularly children coming into primary school and

those transitioning from primary to post-primary level. Making sure the resource, which is the SNA, is moving with the young person is absolutely key. The Deputy is correct that the class teacher and special education teacher are key here as well but the SNA plays a key role. When teachers do student support plans the SNA will feed into that. That is the important role they play in the social, emotional and behavioural, as well as the primary care needs of our young people. We want to make sure we are not only validating them but recognising the important role they play. That is why the new workforce development plan, and the circular will reflect that through co-design and engagement with the sector.

Schools Building Projects

87. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education and Youth her plans to provide the funding to allow all school building projects in Carlow and Kilkenny to move to the next phase of the process; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40603/26]

Deputy John McGuinness: I ask about schools in Kilkenny that are on the list waiting to be approved to move forward. I want to raise serious concerns in the school community regarding the Kilkenny City Vocational School, which is a DEIS school. Alongside that there is Coláiste Pobal Osraí. These will form the Kilkenny school campus. We spent €3.5 million on the grounds work. The planning permission expires in 2027 and the lease in 2028. The Minister visited recently, and I would like to hear that this will make progress.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: As the Deputy will be aware, I have recently published the €7.55 billion NDP sectoral investment plan for the education and youth sectors for the period 2026 to 2030. Of that €7.55 billion investment, €5 billion will be used for project rollout to support the delivery and modernisation of school buildings. In this regard, I published a list of the 105 school building projects in the first tranche to proceed to construction or tender over this year and next year, of which four are in Carlow and two are in Kilkenny. These projects were prioritised with a strong focus on maximising existing capacity and prioritising project rollout to meet the most urgent needs. These projects are in addition to the €253 million in capital funding for Carlow-Kilkenny schools between 2020 and 2025. Over that period, a total of 70 schools has been upgraded either through provision of a new school building, a large-scale extension or provision of modular accommodation. There are currently seven school projects in Carlow-Kilkenny under construction. My Department will continue to engage with patrons and schools in Carlow-Kilkenny and across the country to inform targeted and prioritised capital investment. That will include the identification of any urgently required works or capacity needs with stakeholders, and that consultation will commence in June.

With regard to Kilkenny City Vocational School and Coláiste Pobal Osraí, they form part of a single campus development. I had the pleasure of visiting them with Deputies McGuinness and Callaghan, and local representatives. I know there is a devolved delivery to the Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board. The brief for Kilkenny City Vocational School provides for a new post-primary school building with a long-term projected enrolment of 550 pupils, including a two-room special education provision. The brief for Coláiste Pobal Osraí provides for a new post-primary school building with a long-term projected enrolment for 400 pupils. The project is at stage 2B. I will come back in and say more.

Deputy John McGuinness: It is extremely important that this project moves forward because it has a huge impact on the schools and their development. The lease expires in 2028, and the planning permission is due to expire in 2027. The Minister is right to say investment has been good in Carlow and Kilkenny but there is always a focus on the ones we are waiting for. The Minister met with the community school in Castlecomer when she was there. I also drew her attention to Church Hill National School and Scoil Mhuire in Mooncoin. Given the numbers and because they are ready to go and are trying to accommodate special needs and so on, it is important that these schools be given a clear indication through the course of this year as to their standing and the possibility for funding. I hope the Minister will engage directly with those schools I have mentioned to ensure they are moved to their next phase, and to keep focus on the Kilkenny school campus.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: There has been significant investment in Carlow and Kilkenny due to the demographic changes there. I am aware that across the country there are many schools. Some of them were happy they were on that list, and others were disappointed that there were not. There is work under way in my Department on a new prioritisation list of schools. There was a conditional energy survey carried out across all schools in the country. That will be completed this year and feed into our new prioritisation list. The Department of education will be contacting patrons shortly for their views on the new prioritisation list and that work will be ongoing.

Obviously, we have an NDP right out to 2030. I could not announce all the projects in one go. In an ideal world, we would have loved to do that. This has to be done on a phased basis. The first tranche was announced and the Department will be working with patrons and schools on the next prioritisation list.

Deputy John McGuinness: There are capacity issues in some of the schools I have mentioned, like Church Hill National School in Cuffesgrange and Scoil Mhuire in Mooncoin. Then there is the issue of Castlecomer's school, which has 634 students. That project is shovel-ready and the school wants to get on with that work. There has been such a long wait for the Kilkenny school campus. Planning permission is there. Some €3.5 million has already been spent on the groundworks and the planning permission will expire. I keep on emphasising that and will continue to because the school needs to know where it is going before the end of July. It cannot be left until next year for the school to be given some sort of indication, because that will force it back into the planning process. The school will also lose time and see site costs increase. The other interesting thing about schools is the renting of prefabs. This has cost Church Hill National School €480,000 to date. As such, there is a really urgent case for investment in all of those schools.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I thank the Deputy. In general, the Department works with schools on planning permissions that may be due to expire. That work happens all the time. With the priority list, we look at a number of issues, including: demographic pressures; schools that may not have their own home, in that they may be working out of a sports facility; whether they are ready to proceed to stage 3; whether they are maximising the capacity within their existing school footprint; and, importantly, where there is a focus on special educational needs, SEN, classes. This is a top priority for the Minister of State and me and it feeds into our

building projects as well. We want to ensure our children and students can attend their local school. That will require special education classes to be prioritised as part of our building projects.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): We will now go back to Parliamentary Question No. 86 from Deputy Ó Muirí.

Special Educational Needs

86. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Education and Youth if she will provide an update on the SNA review for a school (details supplied) in north Dublin, recognising the uncertainty families are facing; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40716/26]

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: My question is on the provision of SNAs in a school in my community and the need for better communications from the Department of education. Will the Minister of State provide an update on the SNA review for Gaelscoil Ghráinne Mhaol in Domhnach Míde, Baile Átha Cliath, recognising the uncertainty families are facing, and will he make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy for the question. The Government is fully committed to supporting children with special educational needs to fulfil their full potential and the programme for Government makes a number of commitments to deliver on this objective. The National Council for Special Education has responsibility for co-ordinating and advising on care support for children and young people with special educational needs in our schools, including the allocation of special needs assistant support to schools. It has responsibility for managing and processing requests from schools for a review of their SNA allocations.

I fully understand and have seen the critical role special needs assistants play in the successful inclusion of students with additional and significant care needs in schools. The Department has been steadily building the level of SNA support in our education system. By the end of this year, there will be over 24,896 SNAs in our mainstream classes, special classes and special schools. That will grow to 26,000 or more over the next while. This represents a 46% increase since 2020. The Minister and I have been engaging intensively to ensure all the concerns raised are understood.

The Deputy raised an issue with a specific school. I will ask the NCSE to ensure that that review is taken out as soon as possible. If the Deputy has more details, we could follow up afterwards. I reassure the House that the value we place on the role of the special needs assistant in the school system is huge. SNAs have contributed enormously to the provision of specialised education. We are going to continue to grow those numbers into next year and beyond to ensure we are meeting the needs of children and school communities.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. I spoke earlier this year about the importance of that trust between SNAs and students, which I know he understands, and how central that is to a child's school experience and their broader development. I welcome the commitment to engage specifically on this item and will follow up with him separately. I

also welcome the target of 26,000-plus SNAs. Communication earlier in the year between the Department and the NCSE was very poor and we are heading for the same problem again. That is where Gaelscoil Ghráinne Mhaol is struggling. It wants to plan for its SNA numbers and allocations for next year. I will pick up with the Minister of State separately on that. We need to address this for the future. I do not want Gaelscoil Ghráinne Mhaol or any other school in the area heading for the June bank holiday still not clear on its allocation, so it is really important that we try to bottom out that process so schools can have certainty as soon as possible.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: On decisions that were made earlier this year, there will be no change. There will be no reduction in the number of SNAs who will be in school communities from 2025-26 to 2026-27. We are committed to growing the number of SNAs because we see the role of the SNA as a huge enabler in providing specialised education in school communities. They have contributed enormously to allow a child with special educational needs to reach their full potential within the education system and the work that is being done by the special needs assistants across the school communities, in collaboration with the teachers and school leaderships, is second to none. We understand that at ministerial level, across the Department and in the NCSE as well.

It is important that we are communicating our information and our story across the school communities because nothing can be more frustrating than not understanding the information. I take the point on that but we are communicating right across the system. A huge volume of work has been going on for a number of years and is being brought to a conclusion over the next number of weeks in terms of the workforce development plan, the redeployment plan and the circular.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. The same school has an issue with the summer programme as well. On the school's notification of the summer programme, the quantum has arrived three months later than last year and the school still does not know how many places it can offer. It has only been told that this information will be confirmed this very week. This is an issue that came up during the general election campaign. I remember talking to teachers who were really struggling to make their plans for the summer programme because they were hearing about their resources quite late in the cycle. Will the Minister of State give us any assurance or information? What can we do to make sure that that school can accommodate and plan the summer programme, given it is just around the corner, so that there is not that stress on families and they can make their summer plans as well?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: The summer programme is hugely valued within school communities and families. That just goes to show the huge number of families and students who have applied for the programme across the system. It came up again at the Oireachtas committee on education yesterday when the Minister and I were reflecting very carefully on the concerns that were raised about the summer programme into 2026 and the challenges there were for a number of schools and students. We are reflecting very carefully on that but of course we have to be very mindful also that we have a specific budget for it and we have those limits we have to work in. We are working with every school community to bring certainty over the next short while. We are acutely aware that it is only a number of weeks before the

summer programme will kick in. I assure the Deputy we are reflecting very carefully on what he is saying and also what others said at the committee yesterday and will be giving it due consideration over the next day or two.

Special Educational Needs

88. **Deputy Noel McCarthy** asked the Minister for Education and Youth her current views on the availability of special education placements in the east Cork area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40462/26]

Deputy Michael Moynihan: My Department and the National Council for Special Education continue to work closely with school patron bodies, school management bodies and schools to confirm new special classes for the next school year, 2026-27. The NCSE began sanctioning new special classes in January of this year, which is several months earlier than last year. In addition, we recently announced inclusive special classes as part of a new approach to supporting students with additional needs. This is one of many ways my Department is actively engaging to meet the increased demand.

To date, 546 new special classes have been sanctioned, including 47 inclusive special classes. Of these, 63 are sanctioned in County Cork. Some further new special classes will be confirmed in the coming weeks. These new special classes will be in addition to the 617 already in operation across schools in County Cork. In the Cork East constituency specifically, there are 145 special classes in mainstream schools this school year. Some 87 of these have been newly established since 2020. In addition to providing additional special class places, four new special schools have been established in County Cork in recent years, including one in east Cork. The East Cork Community Special School continues to grow and expand to meet the increasing level of need.

My Department and the NCSE will continue to closely monitor the need for further special class and special school places in east Cork over the coming months, and as part of forward planning for the 2027-28 school year. The NCSE also continues to engage closely with schools and families to track the placement of children and young people and determine the current remaining level of need for specialist places at a local level.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I wish to highlight the need for the provision of a special education placement in east Cork, where children and their parents are currently travelling long distances to secure a place. People are travelling daily from east Cork to special schools in Cork city, Dungarvan and further afield, often resulting in an almost 100 km round trip. Does the Minister of State agree that it is unfair that children with complex needs have to travel long distances, far from familiar surroundings, while their siblings attend school nearby? We have long had a lack of special education facilities in east Cork. This was somewhat addressed by the opening of a special school in Carrigtwohill in recent years. However, local demand for these places, unfortunately, far outstrips current supply, with waiting lists putting huge pressure on parents. These parents are already under enough stress in dealing with children with complex additional needs. There is, therefore, an acute need for the establishment of a special school between Carrigtwohill and Youghal in east Cork. Given the travel times for special students in towns

like Youghal, does the Minister of State see Youghal as a viable option for the establishment of a new school?

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I am well aware of the campaign and discussions. I have met with the group and have committed to meeting with it again to discuss this further. In east Cork and the area the Deputy represents, there has been a huge growth in population, which increases the need for specialised education. One of the issues we have been looking at in the Department is people travelling long distances for specialised education. Between 2025 and 2026, almost 1,000 special classes have been opened across the country to try to meet the needs as locally as possible. In east Cork, the opening of the school at Carrigtwohill has met the needs within that community. We are acutely aware of the growing needs in this regard. We are continuing to monitor and study the figures to ensure we have specialised education as close as possible to the children, so we can eliminate the need to drive long distances. Those issues are getting careful consideration across the Department.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: The Minister of State is aware of the Bridging the Gap Youghal group set up by local parents, who are doing tremendous work in advocating strongly that local gaps in special education provision be addressed. These parents are concerned because there is currently only one special school place available for the 2026-27 school year in the only secondary school in the Youghal area. Does the Minister of State appreciate the serious and legitimate concerns raised by these parents? The need for places is evident and only seems to be increasing. With this in mind, I ask the Minister of State to outline the dialogue he has had to date with this group, and his plans and the plans of his departmental officials to further engage with Bridging the Gap, the NCSE and the education and training board, ETB. If the Minister could arrange a meeting with them, I would really appreciate it.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I can confirm that we met the group some time ago, and we are committed to meeting it again. We are monitoring this across the country, and Youghal and east Cork are no different. We are watching the number of children who have applied through the portal for specialised education, whether in special schools or special classes, to ensure we are meeting the needs in those communities. The data from the portal allowed us to have a lens into how we were tackling specialised education. The aim across the education system is to reduce the travel time. The special school has opened in east Cork. I offer my thanks to Cork ETB for the work it has done in collaboration with the National Council for Special Education and the Department. It has opened a number of schools and taken on a hugely valued role that other patrons would have had heretofore.

I am committed to meeting the groups. I understand the challenges. Entry into primary school or secondary school is a flashpoint for families. We will engage further. I assure the Deputy that we are aware of the concerns and the campaigns that are ongoing. We are reflecting very carefully on all of that.

Schools Building Projects

89. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Education and Youth an update on the new build for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40803/26]

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I ask for an update on the new build for Gaelscoil Choláiste Mhuire in the city centre.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: The new build for Gaelscoil Choláiste Mhuire is a large-scale capital project for the construction of a 16-classroom primary school in Dublin 1. The building project to complete the new build for Gaelscoil Choláiste Mhuire, Dominick Street, is at stage 3 of the architectural planning process - tender action and award. The Department can confirm that following a confidential conciliation process concerning all matters in dispute between the Department and the original contractor, the conciliator has now issued a formal recommendation for the resolution of those disputes, and that recommendation has now been accepted by both parties. Following the conclusion of the conciliation process, my Department has instructed the design team to ready a tender for the completion contract for the school in Dominick Street. This process is expected to take four to six weeks to publish the tender, with a view to having a contractor on-site in early quarter 4 of 2026.

It remains the Department's priority to deliver a new school building for Gaelscoil Choláiste Mhuire as quickly as possible. Departmental officials will continue to work closely with the school authority.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I thank the Minister for that information. The status of Gaelscoil Choláiste Mhuire was a very significant issue in the recent by-election. When I was out canvassing with my colleague, Councillor Janet Horner, it was coming up at many doors.

As the Minister knows, the works were suspended in May 2025 by the Department, which was in dispute with the contractor. There was a conciliation process and the school moved to its current temporary site in December 2025. The Minister has made the point that we now have the recommendation. The fact that a recommendation was made by the conciliator was conveyed to the board of management and, in turn, it went on to convey that to the parents. The Minister has provided some further useful information today. However, the fact is that the parents have not had a clear update since March of this year. It would be useful if the Department could write clearly to the board of management and ask it to convey the information it has just given to me. I will put this up on social media, which is fine, but they should hear officially what the status of this project is right now.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: As the Deputy said, the design team has been instructed by the Department to ready the tender for the completed contract. It will take four to six weeks to publish the tender, with a view to having the contractor on-site in quarter 4 of this year. Each stage of the process is subject to due diligence by the Department within the context of the overall programme and budgetary parameters. However, it remains the Department's priority to deliver a new school building for Gaelscoil Choláiste Mhuire as quickly as possible.

Departmental officials will continue to work closely with the school authorities and will meet with them on a regular basis.

As the Deputy said, a number of issues arose on site and the Department actively engaged with the design team and the contractor to discuss matters. Those unforeseen matters led to a delay in the project and, as a result, the Department entered into a conciliation hearing to try to reach agreement on a solution to ensure the earliest possible delivery of the school, while respecting its statutory obligations.

Deputy Roderic O’Gorman: I thank the Minister for the detailed information but I come back to the point about communication. That information needs to be communicated to the school management team and board of management, and it needs to be clear to them that they can share that information with parents. This has been a very difficult situation. In fairness to the Department, a lot of work has been done but there are no clear lines of communication for getting that information to the parents. I ask the Minister again to ask her officials to communicate with the board and the principal. Sometimes, principals in a difficult position like this are worried about sharing information when confidential discussions are going on. It is important that they know they can share this information with parents.

The students are in a temporary premises on Cathal Brugha Street at the moment. Obviously, the build is going to take longer now but it will, hopefully, recommence in quarter 4 of this year. Do the students have permission to stay in their current temporary accommodation until the build is finalised? Is that certain?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: We can contact the school in relation to this but it is important to say that, in accordance with standard practice and contractual requirements, the conciliation process is of a confidential nature and, therefore, it was not appropriate to comment on the process. The conciliator has issued a formal recommendation for the resolution of the disputes and that recommendation has now been accepted by both parties.

The Department is providing accommodation more suitable to the current needs of the school on Cathal Brugha Street. Some small-scale refurbishment works at the building were carried out to provide a good interim accommodation solution for the school. These include teaching and learning spaces for the classes, education supports and sensory spaces, adequate meeting and office spaces, a staff room, a communal area and access to a safe outdoor space for the students. The school moved into those premises in December of 2025.

I will ask departmental officials to engage directly with the Deputy on his last question.

Educational Disadvantage

90. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Education and Youth the reason a school (details supplied) has been excluded from DEIS and DEIS plus; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40726/26]

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I have raised the unsustainable situation at Roxboro National School in Ballinrobe with the Minister’s office numerous times since last November. I have visited the school, spoken with the management there and seen the urgent need for additional resources. That is why I was extremely disappointed to hear that the school had been excluded from the DEIS programme. I ask the Minister to explain to the school community why

Roxboro National School has been excluded from DEIS and DEIS plus despite the obvious resource pressures that this particular school is facing.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I thank the Deputy for her question. Ensuring that every child and young person can reach their full potential is a key priority for me as Minister and for my Department. The DEIS programme and the new DEIS plus scheme, which will begin this year as part of the DEIS strategy to 2035, are key initiatives in my Department's approach to addressing educational disadvantage.

Schools were identified for inclusion in the DEIS and DEIS plus programmes using refined, rules-based approaches built on nationally available pupil-level administrative data that was applied consistently across all schools in the country. The DEIS identification process is based on the principle of concentrated disadvantage and the proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds within a school. The DEIS identification process is based on the HP deprivation index assigned to the area where individual students reside, and on Traveller and Roma ethnicity.

It is important to stress that although a school is not included in DEIS or DEIS plus, this does not in any way imply that my Department is saying that disadvantage does not exist within that school community. I absolutely recognise the important role that schools like Roxboro National School in Ballinrobe, and the staff therein, play in supporting children who reside in international protection accommodation, for example. That is why, under the DEIS strategy to 2035, which is my Department's long-term vision to address educational disadvantage in all schools, I announced a pilot scheme to extend home school community liaison, HSCL, provision to schools outside of the DEIS programme that have significant cohorts of children that are at risk of educational disadvantage or who are from new communities. Roxboro National School in Ballinrobe is one of 130 schools that will be supported under this scheme. Any future allocation of resources to address educational disadvantage in schools will be considered over the lifetime of the DEIS strategy out to 2035 and in the context of available resources.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I will outline to the Minister how Roxboro National School more than meets the criteria for DEIS status. It is a two-teacher rural primary school serving one of the most diverse and disadvantaged school populations in the country. The school currently has 35 pupils; 17 are from the Irish Traveller community and 18 are either in the International Protection Accommodation Service, IPAS, system, refugees, homeless or living in emergency accommodation. Three children have moderate learning difficulties and 31 to 35 require daily special education teaching supports. Due to the diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds of the families within the school community, parent contribution funding is non-existent. There is no functioning parents association and the school is really struggling to maintain a board of management. This all adds to the strain on the already stretched and struggling teaching staff there.

I acknowledge the Department's efforts thus far to assist the school. The school was told that it would be added to the HSCL scheme earlier this year. However, that will not even scratch the surface.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The DEIS plus strategy was a commitment in the programme for Government, the aim of which is to target areas across the country where there are really high risks of educational disadvantage. The evidence from international assessments on literacy and numeracy finds that Ireland performs very highly compared to other OECD countries or EU averages. However, the assessments also find that there are gaps remaining in relation to outcomes for children from areas of high deprivation. That was reinforced by the 2024 review of resourcing schools to address educational disadvantage in Ireland, which recommended higher levels of support for a small cohort of schools supporting the highest concentrations of children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage. That was the purpose of the DEIS plus strategy, but I hear what the Deputy is saying about Roxboro and other schools across the country that are not DEIS schools but have children and young people who are at risk of educational disadvantage within them. That is why I set up that pilot scheme specifically for schools like Roxboro National School in Ballinrobe, to give them access to a home school liaison position.

We will be looking at the DEIS plus strategy and how it is being rolled out. I would like to make it more flexible.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: There is transition and integration funding that can be used for other purposes when we have extreme cases like this. The management feared that the inclusion on the scheme to which the Minister refers would lead to Roxboro's exclusion from DEIS, which has now come to pass despite every other school in its HSCL cluster having DEIS or DEIS plus status. The school management and I are really struggling to understand how a school like Roxboro, with such a significant and concentrated need, has been left out of the DEIS scheme.

In a letter from her office to the school on 21 May, the Minister acknowledged the level of disadvantage experienced at Roxboro, yet the school is still excluded from DEIS. This is an exceptional school that needs help. I ask the Minister to outline a clear pathway for Roxboro to achieve DEIS status in the short rather than long term. In the long term, all of these children will be gone and they will have been failed by the system because we are not targeting the investment where it is needed.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The commitment in the programme for Government was for the DEIS plus strategy aimed at those areas of most severe educational disadvantage. That is why I set up a pilot specifically for schools that are not in DEIS, understanding the needs that are out there. I will be looking at that into the future to see what more we can do and what more supports we can provide for schools across the country.

With regard to the data, this is nationally available data that is applied right across the country, and also the enrolment data coming from our schools from the primary online database, POD and the post-primary online database system, P-POD, from our post-primary schools. Priority and weighting was given to schools in areas where there was a high level of unemployment, a high level of Roma or Traveller children within those schools, and students with lone parents were part of that as well. We have to make sure that we are looking at nationally available data and at the HP deprivation index. We also work with the Central Statistics Office, CSO, in making sure that we are refining the data that is coming to us, specifically in relation to schools across the country, and the enrolment data that schools are providing.

Special Educational Needs

91. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Education and Youth if she is aware of the increasing pressure on schools due to the growing number of students requiring additional care and educational supports; whether her Department is satisfied that current special needs assistant allocations are meeting the needs of students and schools; the steps being taken to increase the number of SNAs available, particularly in schools experiencing significant demand; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40810/26]

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Tá mé ag iarraidh ceist a chur ar an Aire Stáit faoin bhrú atá ar scoileanna i dtuaisceart Bhaile Átha Cliath. Is the Department satisfied that the current special needs assistant allocations meet the needs of students? There are a lot of schools I could mention that have been on to me, but in the context of this main question I will mention the Stapolin Education Together National School. Also, Gaelscoil Ghráinne Mhaol is operating with one special needs assistant. What is the DEIS status of St. Joseph's in Fairview? Parents have other children, brothers and sisters, in another school that has DEIS plus status and yet that school does not have it. What is the DEIS plus status of St. Francis Junior School in Dublin 17? I know there is a lot there so we can go back and forth.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank Deputy Heneghan for the tour of the schools in his constituency. I do take his point on this serious issue. I welcome the engagement by all Deputies and political figures on education, which is hugely important. It is important that we engage as fully as possible with schools, school communities and families.

The Government is strongly committed to supporting children with special educational needs to achieve their full potential and the programme for Government makes a number of commitments to deliver this objective. In 2026 there will be 24,896 special needs assistants in our mainstream classes, special classes and special schools. This represents an almost 46% increase since the 2020 school year. The SNA plays a key role in the successful inclusion of students with additional and significant care needs in the schools. As part of the annual budgetary process I will continue to pursue the resources required to support the care needs for pupils with additional SNA resources when required.

In February we confirmed that there would be no reductions to the special needs assistants for the school year 2026-27. All schools were reviewed by the NCSE and schools allocated additional resources will receive them in the upcoming school year. The SNA redeployment scheme, the SNA workforce development plan, and changes to a 2014 circular outlining the role of the SNA will be advanced before any further decisions are taken.

The NCSE has responsibility for ensuring that all additional SNA posts funded through budget 2026 are allocated to mainstream, special classes and special schools to meet the care needs in these sectors. In all cases any school that believes it has insufficient special needs assistant resources to support the needs of the pupils should contact the NCSE for an SNA review. If on completion of the SNA review it identifies that additional resources are required, they will be provided.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: The Minister of State will be aware that I will always mention the schools in north Dublin to him. With regard to St. Francis Junior School, it had 165 registered instead of 166. In this school 40% of the current students are from the Traveller community. They cannot lose a mainstream teacher. It will put extreme pressure on them. The Minister of State will be aware, because I am always bringing it up, that the Stapolin Educate Together school needs to have that modular building sanctioned. It has the ability to do brilliant things. I thank the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Naughton, for her response to the parliamentary question today relating to Gaelcholáiste Reachrann. The addition of those two special educational needs classes is needed. It is great that the data has been shown in that area, and the parents are happy, but I would love to see that school moving forward. The response to the parliamentary question said that it would be moving and progressed.

The current SNA review for Gaelscoil Ghráinne Mhaol took place more than five months ago yet the school has received no formal communication of the outcome. In the meantime, staff are being left to manage impossible circumstances with one SNA.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: Reviews are ongoing and we will have further engagement, along with the schools the Deputy mentioned. Over recent weeks we have announced a number of inclusive special classes as well, which is 47 in total. Of those, 32 are at post-primary and 15 are primary schools. These have been welcomed by the school communities where we are providing the resources. The school communities should look at what we have done in other schools as well because this is a hugely important and significant policy change which is being welcomed across the school communities.

The Government is continuing to invest hugely in SNAs and in ensuring we have SNAs right across the school communities, be they special schools, special classes or in mainstream classes. The value of the special needs assistant and the role they play in enabling students to reach their full potential, and in some cases to allow them to engage within the education system, is hugely important to the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and to me. We understand that. A lot of work has been done on the workforce development plan, the circular and the redeployment. If there are existing schools that the Deputy needs us to look at, we can certainly do so. I can assure the Deputy that we are growing the number of SNAs into the future.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. Tá mé an-sásta é sin a chloisteáil. Tá na ceithre scoil sin an-tábhachtach. Bíim i gcónaí ag cur ceisteanna parlaiminte agus ríomhphost chuig oifig an Aire Stáit, ach ní bhíonn na freagraí sásúil. Níl siad maith go leor. The parents are exhausted from having to battle continuously for assessments, classroom space and SNAs. I welcome the addition of many SNA posts and additional classrooms but these schools need to be looked at and their DEIS status needs to be examined. Every child in north Dublin deserves these schools. They need the support as it will affect their development and their future opportunities. I am calling on the Minister of State to urgently engage with all of the schools I mentioned today. The staffing and the infrastructure required needs to be delivered without further delay. The children of north Dublin and across Ireland deserve and are entitled to better. I appreciate the engagement that the Minister of State has given so far and I welcome that he has visited these schools, particularly St. Michael's House in Baldoyle. They were very grateful for the Minister of State's visit, and for the compassion and information

he gave to them, along with the understanding of it. I really welcome the work the Minister of State will do with all of the Dublin Bay North TDs on that matter.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: I thank the Deputy. As I say of all Deputies across the House, the engagement they have with the education system is crucially important. We are able to have very informed debates here in Leinster House with Deputies' contributions. Deputy Heneghan mentioned a number of schools. We will certainly follow up on them. We are acutely aware of the challenges in the context of the SNA role. We have invested. There are 46% more SNAs since 2020, which is only six years ago. We have grown the number of SNAs. We are committed to having more SNAs and we will have a considerable amount of SNAs, literally thousands more, over the next number of years. The Minister, Deputy Naughton, and I are acutely aware of and understand the role the SNA provides and we will fight at all levels to make sure we have funding for SNAs into the future.

Questions Nos. 92 and 93 taken with Written Answers.

Schools Building Projects

94. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education and Youth if she will ensure that approval issues at an early date in respect of a building project for a school (details supplied) taking into account the accommodation needs of this school which have been outlined clearly to the Department and that the school is seeking basic accommodation and replacement of a much outdated prefab which was, in effect, a multi-purpose room; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [40549/26]

Deputy Brendan Smith: My question refers to Curravagh National School at Glangevlin in County Cavan. It is a small school and it has a 25-year-old prefab that needs to be replaced. It is 25 sq. m but the Department has offered a 19 sq. m replacement permanent building. On the advice of the Department the school partitioned that prefab some years ago so that it would have some accommodation for shared special education teacher, English language teacher, secretary and principal space. The school is requesting that the additional accommodation to be provided would equal the size of its existing prefab. It is a very basic ask. I ask the Minister to ask her officials to revisit the approval that has been issued by her Department.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are short of time so I ask for a single reply.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: Okay. I can come back to the Deputy with further information. I can confirm that my Department is in receipt of an application for accommodation under the additional school accommodation scheme for the school referred to by the Deputy.

12 o'clock

The application relates to the replacement of a prefab which is used as a special education tuition room and ancillary accommodation. The Department's assessment of this application needs to reflect the fact this is a two-teacher school, with a current enrolment of 20 pupils. While the school has two classrooms, it has very limited ancillary accommodation and my

Department previously indicated to the school authority that it is prepared to approve a small special education tuition room for the school. While a special education tuition room does not reflect the full scale of additional and ancillary accommodation sought by the school authority, my Department considers this is the most important aspect to be prioritised at this time. However, my Department will continue to engage with the school authority on the matter, and I can come back to the Deputy on that.

Is féidir teacht ar Cheisteanna Scríofa ar www.oireachtas.ie.

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Message from Select Committee

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Education and Youth has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending 31 December 2026: Vote 26.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I would like to extend a welcome to Aisling Dunne and her son Jack, on behalf of Deputy Ó Súilleabháin. They are very welcome to the Public Gallery, and I hope they enjoy their visit to Dáil Éireann.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Cuireann an scéim fhoráil Iúil tacaíocht ríthábhachtach samhraidh ar fáil do pháistí a bhfuil riachtanais bhreise acu. Níl na tacaíochtaí seo roghnach le haghaidh roinnt páistí; tá siad riachtanach. Go fóill ar fud an Stáit, tá an Rialtas ag insint le teaghlaigh go bhfuil na tacaíochta seo á gcailliúint acu. I mbliana, níor osclaíodh an tréimhse iarratais don scéim fhoráil Iúil ach ar feadh seachtain amháin. Sna blianta roimhe seo, bhí míonna ag na scoileanna leis an bpróiseas a chur i gcrích. Beidh páistí a bhfuil riachtanais bhreise acu fágtha ar leataobh anois gan na tacaíochtaí ríthábhachtacha seo don samhradh. Is iad na páistí féin a bheidh thíos leis.

The July provision scheme provides vital summer educational supports for children with additional needs, and for many children, these supports are not optional; they are absolutely essential. They provide structure, routine, stability and continuity during the summer months. Yet, right across the State, families are now being told their children are going to be denied and will lose out on these vital supports because of a deeply unfair and badly handled decision by the Department of education.

I have been contacted by principals, teachers and parents who are deeply distressed. They are all telling me the same thing; they are angry, upset and desperate to be heard. Parents are lying awake at night, worrying about what will happen to their child now. How can a Government, which constantly proclaims to include and support children with additional needs, allow this to happen? Schools and families have been pleading with the Department to intervene but their appeals are falling on deaf ears over and over again.

This year, the application window for the July provision was open for just one week. In previous years, schools had months to complete this process. Many schools simply did not have sufficient time to process applications, gather the paperwork and complete the registration before the portal was closed. The real life consequences of all this is that children with additional needs are now locked out of vital education support this summer. It is absolutely appalling.

However, it is not an isolated problem. This is happening to families right across the State. Parents are facing enormous battles accessing services for their children. As we know, they are already struggling to secure assessments, therapies, tutors and SNAs, and many feel they are constantly being pushed from one waiting list to another - from one bureaucratic process to another. Meanwhile, supports remain under-resourced and out of reach for many of them, and now we have this on top of all that, with more stress, worry and upset.

These are children with additional needs. We have to think about that for a minute. These are children with additional needs, and their families are already carrying a huge emotional and financial burden. These are parents who spend every day fighting for supports and services, simply to ensure their child is treated with dignity. Now, Government is effectively telling them their child will lose out on support that they so desperately need and have relied on year after year because of an unreasonably tight deadline, bureaucracy and red tape. Families do not understand it, teachers do not understand it and, for the life of me, I do not understand it. This is mean spirited and penny pinching. It is penny pinching at the expense of vulnerable children, and it is not on.

We have raised this again and again. Teachers have raised this and parents have been pleading with Government to act but it refuses to do so. Yesterday, my party Leader, Deputy McDonald, raised it with the Taoiseach and he ignored her question. Is the Tánaiste going to listen and do the right thing? Will he acknowledge the hurt, anxiety and anger at the decision Government has taken and will he listen to the pleas of the parents, teachers and principals? Will he immediately reopen and extend the application portal, so that no child with additional needs will be denied supports this summer? We need certainty right now.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: Yes, we will. I thank Deputy Doherty and Deputies across the House, including on the Government benches, for raising this issue. We will reopen the portal. The Deputy is right; on occasions we can agree in this House. This is a vital programme that plays a very important part in the lives of children with additional needs, be they special educational needs or children from areas of economic disadvantage. The summer programme is a vital support for families. It is specifically designed to support children with complex educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage. We are very much committed to continuing to expand and grow the programme, and the facts will show this is exactly what has happened, which I will get to in a moment.

The Minister for education has very much listened directly to the concerns of schools, principals, teachers and parents. I am pleased to confirm the portal will be reopened to allow further schools to apply. The Minister will announce details of the extension shortly because everyone in this House knows the summer programme is an absolutely crucial support for

families over the holiday period. It has huge benefits for children in their social and emotional well-being. We are absolutely committed, as I believe everybody across this House is, to growing and supporting that summer programme.

You only have to look at the numbers to show the growth in the programme. In 2020, 545 schools and nearly 23,000 children took part in the programme, and just five years later, last year, more than 1,800 schools and almost 71,000 children participated. That is a 210% increase. This is a scheme that is rightly growing year-on-year. The intention and continued emphasis of that programme is to mitigate the impact of learning loss, if you like, on those children while the school is closed. All schools can participate in the programme, with a particular focus on increasing participation in special schools.

As the Deputy correctly said, the online portal for the summer programme, including the home-based summer programme which is another element of it, was open from 6 to 15 May. I am told all stakeholders were made aware of the timeframe for the portal but I am also very aware that it is a particularly busy time for schools and the community. There is a lot going on as you get towards the end of the school year. A reminder was sent to schools but that is somewhat missing the point. The point is there is a need for a longer period of time for schools to apply to get this up and running.

For the information of the House, I also understand the Department has received more applications this year across primary, post-primary and special schools compared to last year. In addition, the number of home-based applications has also significantly increased on last year. Perhaps because of that, we want to make sure the children who need this programme get it. That is why my colleague, the Minister for education, will announce that short extension shortly, so that schools that have missed the deadline for very genuine reasons - and the Deputy has highlighted some of those reasons, such as it being a shorter window than previous years - will have the opportunity to reapply.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I welcome the decision to reopen the portal, and I ask that clarity be given to schools and parents immediately. The Tánaiste talked about a short extension but it needs to be long enough to deal with the process. As a result of the botched situation this year, there is now huge pressure to allocate tutors, so this cannot happen again.

I want to raise an additional issue relating to this year. My understanding is the scheme has also changed, in that there is now only one option, where all the pupils take either the school-based or home-based programme. That locks medically vulnerable children out of the system. If the school decides on a school-based programme, you cannot have a home-based programme for that medically vulnerable child. I spoke to a parent of a child who is 13 years of age and who has missed a lot of school because of their medical vulnerability. They have care every night from the HSE, which proves their medical vulnerability. As the portal only allows you to do one or the other, they cannot avail of the school-based programme.

They need a home-based programme. I ask the Tánaiste, in examining this issue, to also examine that issue and make sure that medically vulnerable students are not denied the option, which until now was always the case, to avail of either-or.

The Tánaiste: I do not want to mislead the House. On the last issue, I need to talk to the Minister for education and ask that she comes back to the Deputy, as I am sure she will. I take the seriousness of the point he makes. Schools will be contacted today because the Deputy is right that they need that clarity. My understanding is that, while the schools will be contacted today, the portal will open next week.

This is a programme that is growing very significantly in terms of the numbers of children. We all know in our own constituencies and in our own communities the very significant difference it is making to children as well. Looking back, in 2016, 8,767 children benefited from that scheme. Like I said, last year it was over 70,000. That is a sign of a programme that is working, and I thank all those around the country who provide this programme. It is also a sign, though, of the need, the fact that there are now so many children with those complex additional needs. I share the Deputy's view that this is not a discretionary extra or a nice-to-have but a vital part of education provision and family support.

Deputy Ged Nash: It is important that the Opposition keeps the Government honest on public spending. It is important too that reliable figures are given to the Opposition ahead of the annual budget so we know exactly what it costs to fund education, health and other important services. That has not been the case in recent years. We need to know exactly what it costs to fund existing services, the extra money that is needed to keep the show on the road and what money is needed for new measures. We in Labour believe honest politics means keeping the Opposition honest too. Last year the Department of public expenditure and reform refused to give out these demographic costs or information as to what it would take to maintain existing levels of service. We were met with triangulation and obfuscation. We ask every year how much is needed to meet the growing needs in special education. In budget 2026 we were sold a pup but, more importantly, so were the very families and children who need that support. Weeks ago we were told of an astonishing €646 million black hole in the Department of education. How did the Tánaiste and his colleagues get budget 2026 so badly wrong?

What is the Government's answer? A levy, effective cuts by another name, in 2027 to every Department's budget, even before pre-budget talks open. Getting direct answers from various Ministers over the past few weeks on how this will work has been like pulling teeth.

What do we know? We know that the Minister for Health, for example, has said in replies to me that she will have to find €175 million in savings to plug the hole in education. This is on top of the fact that the HSE has overspent to the tune of €250 million in the early part of this year alone. Taken in the round, then, as we speak, the Department of Health and the HSE are now on the hook for at least €425 million this year and next. The Government says that pay in health will remain untouched. That will be the case for the Department of justice as well. Which services, then, will be cut or scaled back? Which planned new services will be stalled? All of us who are health service users have a right to know. It is more money, not less, that our under-pressure health services need, and there is a limit to the efficiencies and reforms that can be extracted from a service that is already under very significant pressure. The problem is that the Minister, Deputy Chambers, has put a deadline of 17 July on Departments coming back to him with their cost-cutting proposals. I am no conspiracy theorist, but that is the day after the Dáil rises - zero accountability from this Government over the summer on the kinds of cuts we will see next year.

Will the Tánaiste commit to giving us honest figures on demographic costs and the cost of maintaining existing levels of service this year and next? Will he confirm that there will be no further asks through significant supplementary budgets being brought to the House this year for various Government Departments? I directly ask him the following question and I expect a response. What kinds of cuts does he feel need to take place in health to fund the costs in education?

The Tánaiste: I believe in honest politics as well, and I think everyone in this House engages in good faith on behalf of the people they represent, as the Deputy does too.

I reject the assertion that this is in any manner of means a cut because that would suggest that the budget of one Department will be lower than it currently is. The budgets of all Departments are growing. I do not need to remind the Labour Party, which served in government at a very difficult time, what cuts are like, when we had to make extraordinarily hard decisions to get this country out of the depths of an economic crisis. The level of public expenditure in Ireland has risen. Voted expenditure the year before Covid was €67.4 billion. Voted expenditure is now due to be €147.2 billion by 2030 and €125.5 billion next year, so the budget for every Department - he referred to the Department of Health - will be higher in 2027 than it is in 2026. It is higher in 2026 than it was in 2025. I do not believe there is anybody in Ireland watching in on these proceedings who does not believe that savings, efficiencies and reforms can be found in the public service. People do this in their own lives all the time. I think people remember the times when the Deputy and I were in government and we were asking people to find savings with less. We are now asking people to find savings with a hell of a lot more. Even if there were not a need for a levy, I think that is prudent, good management of the public purse. Every week, whether you go to the PAC or certain other committees, you can find examples of where the public service can do more and do better in terms of the expenditure of the public purse.

This will not impact 2026 allocations, and the Minister has been very clear about that. As to what Government colleagues are being asked, the Government is a collective. If we decide to do more here, it does not fall from a magic money tree; it has to be found somewhere. That is how the world works. That is how budgeting should work. That is how our medium-term fiscal plan works. Colleagues are being asked, though, in the context of 2027 budgets, where every Government Department's budget will increase, to find efficiencies and reforms. It is a very important moment of truth for the public service as well. This will not impact the 2026 allocations.

As the Deputy also rightly says, we have been very clear that the levy must not impact important areas. For example, the Minister, Deputy Calleary, is here. It must not impact the social protection Vote, people with a disability, carers or those weekly payments. It must not impact Department of Health pay allocations - in other words, staffing - or Department of justice staffing. It must not impact housing, disability services or a number of other carve-outs. This is a levy that ranges from about 0.02% to 1.4%. In the context of a budget this year of over €118 billion and a budget next year of over €125 billion, people are being asked to find that level of efficiency. We should and we will, of course, continue to engage honestly and transparently on all these matters.

Deputy Ged Nash: That commitment to engage honestly and transparently should extend to Government Ministers and the Departments being required to come back to the Minister for public expenditure and reform well before 17 July with their very clear plans as to how these levies will impact services in their respective Departments. The reality is that the Dáil is rising on 16 July, and I do not believe that it is a coincidence that the deadline of 17 July was set. We do need accountability in this House. We know that, for example, the medium-term expenditure framework was published the day after the Dáil rose last December. That is a very significant five-year plan from the point of view of the fiscal position of this country and how we sustain our economy going forward. This is very much on brand for this Government: make important decisions when the Dáil is in recess, with no accountability and with Ministers not being available to be held to account by this House for their own budgets for 2027 and their own Estimates in advance of budget 2027. This is a very significant development from the Minister for public expenditure.

There are alternatives to the introduction of levies across Departments. We could look at, for example, reforming our taxation system and ensuring we introduce tax on wealth and assets in a more significant way to pay for the increased public services we all agree we need to introduce, but the Government has decided not to do that.

The Tánaiste: Respectfully, Ministers not being held to account is baloney. We had a budget oversight committee meeting the other day. In fairness, the Deputy was at it, he contributed and he asked all his questions. Others did not bother turning up. The meeting ended 40 minutes early. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, and I were there looking for questions to take, and the Chairman-----

Deputy Ged Nash: I had to leave to speak here, actually.

The Tánaiste: I just want to be clear. The budget oversight committee met. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, and I were there to answer every and any question anybody wanted to ask, and it ended with 40 minutes to spare, which the Chairman then filled.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: It is Government TDs who do not turn up.

The Tánaiste: It does not matter who did not turn up.

A Deputy: It does.

The Tánaiste: People can come back in with further questions as well. There were 40 minutes of unallocated time there. We are very accountable to this Oireachtas, and I want people at home to know that.

I also want people to know that the rising of the Dáil has nothing to do with this at all because these are figures that will affect 2027, when there will be a significant opportunity. We will have a summer economic statement, a national economic dialogue and plenty of opportunities.

I believe in good, honest politics. So does Deputy Nash. I fully accept that. It is important we are transparent in relation to all these things, but it is also important, in the spirit of honesty, that we make the following point, and people at home know this. Public spending is growing very fast in this country relative to pretty much any other European economy.

It is a prudent and sensible thing to say to those charged with expending that money, "Can you do better? Can you reform? Can you get value for money?" That is what households and small businesses do; it is about time the public service did it.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: There is a brutal truth at the heart of our disability system. Families have been forced to say it out loud because the Government is not listening. The reality is the State is waiting for parents to die. Parents in their 70s, 80 and 90s must continue to act as full-time carers for sons or daughters with intellectual disabilities. Regardless of their age, health and ability to care for another adult, if they are still alive, the State looks the other way.

The system for housing adults with intellectual disabilities is both nonsensical and unusually cruel. When a parent passes away, only then will an emergency placement be found for their son or daughter. That placement is too often hundreds of miles away from their home. Within the space of a few weeks, a vulnerable person will lose their parent, their carer, their home, their friends, their community and any semblance of the life they once knew. No civilised society should treat its citizens like this.

There are more than 600 adults with intellectual disabilities in residential placements outside of their home county. Almost 200 are in placements that are over 100 km from their homes. There are people from Cork in Kildare, people from Waterford in Dublin and people from Kildare in Tipperary. Hundreds of vulnerable people are being ripped from their communities at the most difficult time of their lives. The Minister, Deputy Foley, recently announced that local authorities will be required to set disability housing targets, but people cannot live in targets and families cannot wait for to see if these homes will ever materialise.

The State's growing reliance on private operators is a symptom of a deeper disfunction. The Muiríosa Foundation, a progressive section 38 provider, recently told the Joint Committee on Disability Matters that it is forced to rely on the private rental market. This means that it invests tens of thousands of euro to meet HIQA standards, only to face eviction if a landlord decides to sell. At the same time, commercial companies funded by the Government can buy up properties far from a resident's home and community. This privatisation of care is of serious concern to parents. They do not want their sons or daughters outsourced for profit; they want them to be housed and cared for in their communities.

Adults with intellectual disabilities deserve to live with dignity, security and independence. Targets alone are not enough. The Before We Die campaign wants a disability housing plan that includes delivery timelines, clear reporting and multi-annual ring-fenced funding. Will the Tánaiste finally listen to these parents? Will he meet them? They have asked to meet with him but he has not arranged to meet with them yet. Will the Government introduce the ring-fenced funding that is clearly needed to provide homes for adults with intellectual disabilities?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. It is good to see his colleague Deputy Ennis settling in well beside him. I think I have been in touch to arrange to meet them. I will be meeting them in June. The Taoiseach has also met them, as have the Minister, Deputy Foley, and the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins. When I say "them", I mean the Before We Die group. I thank them for their work and advocacy and for shining a spotlight on this situation.

Sometimes you just have to stand up in this House and admit that where we are is not where we need to be. This is one of those occasions. I have a load of figures here and can tell the Deputy that we are going to do more residential placements this year, which we are. I can tell him we have increased the disability budget, and we have. None of that takes away from the point he has made, which is valid, accurate and reflects the lived experience of far too many people in this country.

We had a good meeting of the Cabinet committee on disability a couple of weeks ago in respect of housing specifically. This was motivated by the campaign of the Before We Die group. At that meeting, a number of things were agreed. I acknowledge the role the Ministers, Deputies Browne and Foley, and the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, will play in respect of this matter. We need everybody to pull together on it. A number of principles were set out in the context of shifting away from a crisis response to commissioning specialist residential places and towards a planned approach. The Deputy is right. There are far too many emergency situations whereby if the State had planned earlier and better, would not have needed to arise. Second, we need a rebalancing towards more placements with non-profit providers and social housing and away from privately funded housing.

The Deputy's point is right. If it is a criticism, it is right. We are using quite a lot of private for-profit providers. It is better to use them than not to have any option available, but the direction of travel is to ensure that local authorities, as the housing authorities in communities, are stepping up to provide housing for persons with disabilities in the same way they would when it comes to broader social housing. We can and should be doing more to support non-profit providers to build homes. This used to happen. I can think of where in my community there is a small housing estate with a relatively small number of homes and specialist staff in place, and it works.

The points the Deputy makes are valid. We will need a plan. I take the point about targets. We want to house people, but at the same time we need targets. The Deputy stated that there needs to be specificity around them in the context of funding and timelines. That is a fair point. Whatever is the best way to do this, whether it is at an Oireachtas committee or in this House, I am happy to have debate on how we get this right. This group is putting it up to us as a country to do better, and we simply have to.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I welcome that the Tánaiste is being frank about how appalling the situation is and is acknowledging that it has to change and is not acceptable. If the Government is serious about not-for-profit providers being able to play a better role, it must provide ring-fenced multi-annual funding in order that they can plan for services.

I will provide an example. Before the Tánaiste's party took office, St. Michael's House had five respite homes in 2008. It now has just one. There is a six-year waiting list for adults with intellectual disabilities to access respite. As parents are getting older and becoming exhausted,

they cannot even access respite for their loved ones. That is an appalling situation. Is the Government going to address that? There is no need for this to be happening. The HSE has been aware of the needs of adults with an intellectual disabilities for years. It does not need to wait for crisis situations to occur. This could be fixed and it needs to be fixed. Targets are one thing, but we need clear timelines and ring-fenced multi-annual funding. Will the Tánaiste commit to that? When are we going to get information about that?

The Tánaiste: I am going to commit to meeting the group in June. I am happy to engage further with the Deputy on this matter after that. This is an interesting area in respect of which extra funding is 100% required but where monitoring the impact of that funding on the systems in place also matters. For example, we are increasing respite funding by €25 million this year. We are also increasing funding for home support and personal assistance hours this year. I can say that, and it is true, but then there are demographic and planning issues and the issue of how the money is deployed. If it is deployed in an emergency capacity, it ends up having less impact because it costs more than in a planned capacity, which, I think, at a high level, is the point the group is making.

We need a housing plan when it comes to people with disabilities. It will need to have targets and specific timelines and the Government will need to fund it, but I want a better shared understanding of what the direction of travel looks like. Not every person with a disability is the same, and no one is suggesting they are. Some might be able to continue to live in the community and the family home, some might need a specialist residential service and some might need local authority housing. For some individuals, none of these options might work at all. A plan that tries to address that breadth is important. We should facilitate detailed engagement in this House on that.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Today in Ireland, a pensioner living alone or a family pays almost twice as much for a unit of electricity than a data centre. This is despite the fact many data centres are parts of the wealthiest corporations in the world. The demand from data centres is driving up the cost of electricity. In 2024, data centres consumed 22% of electricity in Ireland. That was more than every household in urban Ireland. That is an incredible figure. A report released today by Friends of the Earth shows that, on our current trajectory, data centres will add €1.4 billion to the cost of household electricity in the coming years. That is a hidden data centre tax.

Every week at my constituency clinic, this is a major issue. Last week, an elderly pensioner came to my clinic and showed me her electricity bill.

She asked me if it could be real, such was the extortionate level of the amount listed. The cost of electricity is a major issue in the cost-of-living crisis. Over 300,000 people are in energy arrears. In many cases, these are hard-working people and pensioners. They are really struggling. The policy of the Government has essentially been to offer energy credits before an election and then abandon them afterwards.

Data centres are paying about 50% less per unit of electricity. Families cannot understand this and are really frustrated. This is by design, in many respects. The trajectory is going to add more costs to households. When will the Government introduce legislation to

regulate the data centre sector in the context of electricity prices? When is it going to introduce a sustainable policy in this regard?

The Tánaiste: What was definitely not on my bingo card for 2026 was Aontú quoting Friends of the Earth, but politics throws new things at you every day.

The issue relating to the cost of electricity and the energy crisis in Ireland is a serious one. That is why this Government, through the Minister, Deputy Calleary, is expanding the fuel allowance. We extended the allowance for a further month in order to help people like those the Deputy referenced. It is also why we have taken a number of decisions to reduce excise on diesel and petrol. The benefit of that from an inflationary point of view is worth about 0.5% in keeping general downward pressure on a rising inflation rate. It is also why we need to accelerate the move towards renewables. There have been some constructive suggestions from Opposition and Government Deputies around how we can do more in relation to making it easier for people to make that transition in terms of their homes or businesses. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has already introduced a range of measures that are helping make their homes warmer. Hundreds of thousands of homes have now benefited from direct Government grants to retrofit and replace windows and doors. Of course, there have also been changes regarding electric vehicles.

I am interested in the Deputy's position on data centres. It is easy to say that data centres are bad or to make them the bogeyman. I am the Minister for Finance, and the evidence available to the Government is that across the six sectors in Ireland that are identified as being most dependent on data centres, it is estimated that of the order of €100 billion in annual gross value added, 875,000 jobs and €14.6 million in annual employment-related taxes were enabled by data centre capacity located in Ireland. It has also been identified that the hyperscale data centres sit at the heart of Ireland's global digital competitiveness.

When I make all these changes the Deputy is calling on me to make in relation to data centres, what does he want to do when we do not have the benefit of the taxes? What does he want to cut? What does he not want to fund? It is so easy to come in here and ask us to spend more. It is easy to slice up the pie, but it is a hell of a lot harder to bake the pie and bake a bigger pie in terms of economic success for this country.

It is also important to say that in the context of the Commission for Regulation of Utilities' large energy user connection policy, we have been very clear that data centres above a certain threshold will be required to meet at least 80% of their annual demand with new additional renewable electricity generated in the Republic of Ireland. Government policy firmly aims to enable the twin transitions of digitalisation and decarbonisation. We cannot pick and choose; we have to address both of them. We are talking about AI. We are talking how about how we support AI jobs and how we deal with the fact that there is going to be a significant churn in the labour market. Data centres play a very important role in having a competitive digital economy. We cannot just dismiss that or ridicule it. If we are going to do so, we must at least be honest with the people about the economic and tax impacts that could have on Ireland. If the Deputy puts it out there that a data centre is about four or five lads sitting around with a dog or something and nothing else in terms of economic activity, that is an economically illiterate point to make in relation to data centres.

Deputy Paul Lawless: If the Government is going to make Ireland the data centre capital of Europe, it better have a plan. A plan does not mean that ordinary households are subsidising data centres. That is currently what is happening. The report to which I refer estimates that the current trajectory in terms of data centres is 22%, and that this is on the rise and is driving up the cost of energy in this country. The truth is that this is going to mean an estimated €1.4 billion in additional costs to consumers over the next number of years. Some 300,000 people are already in energy arrears. Ireland has the most expensive electricity prices in Europe. The ESB is profiteering. It made €650 million last year. The CEO of the ESB earns over €300,000. Who is the ESB serving? Who is the Government's energy policy serving in a situation where data centres are driving up the energy costs for families and paying less per unit of electricity?

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is ignoring the point I am making. It sounds very good in short clips and sound bites, but the reality is that he is ignoring the economic benefit of the data centres. He is ignoring the economic benefit in terms-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is a cost too in the context of electricity.

The Tánaiste: I am sorry. Deputy Tóibín is giving Deputy Lawless a chance today.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is a cost.

The Tánaiste: He is giving him a chance today.

(Interruptions)

The Tánaiste: I did not think that the weekend went so badly for Deputy Tóibín that he has had a leadership heave against him. Anyway, he should give the man a chance.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Tánaiste is ignoring the cost.

Deputy Paul Lawless: I am talking about the energy crisis and families across Ireland.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Allow the Tánaiste to respond.

The Tánaiste: The rules are that the Deputy asks the question and I get a chance to answer it.

For people sitting at home, I want to outline the reality of the situation. Aontú, on behalf of Friends of the Earth, is suggesting that data centres are costing all of this money. That ignores the fact that I put on the record of the House the economic analysis available to me, as Minister of Finance, in terms of the benefit to this country in terms of taxes and employment. The Government does not have the luxury of ignoring that. If we did ignore it, the Deputies would be the first to come into this House and condemn the loss of jobs.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Tánaiste is ignoring the cost.

The Tánaiste: I want to say this. The Friends of the Earth report will be considered. That report says things the Deputy did not mention. It concedes that under the high renewable growth scenario, we actually see a situation where accelerated renewables are presented as sufficient to displace significant reliance on gas. The message the Deputy should have taken from the report is that we need to accelerate the move to renewables. That is what this Government is committed to. If Aontú is willing to finally step up and accept that climate action is needed, I welcome that conversion.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: As the Tánaiste is aware, many young people between the ages of 25 and 33 are leaving our shores. Many of them were in good, settled jobs. These are gardaí, teachers, mechanics and people with different trades. They are valuable individuals, and they are leaving because they simply believe that they cannot buy or build a house for themselves. They say that if they were not working at all or working only part-time, they would qualify to get on the local authority list and, eventually, get a social housing unit. In other words, they are telling us that there is no incentive for them to continue working in Ireland. I hope that the new planning Bill - there has been a lot of talk about it coming shortly; it cannot come quickly enough - will go far enough to ensure that people can get permission to build houses near or in their own localities and that they will be allowed to build entrances adjacent to national primary and secondary roads where it is safe to do so and where access already exists. The Government is encouraging people - as I said, nurses and mechanics and those with good qualifications - to come home from Australia, Canada, the United Arab Emirates and everywhere else and aims to halt the flow of the present crop of boys and girls who are leaving in their droves in the first instance. Both things will be achieved if the Government gets the planning right. I and many others have been asking for the planning process to be made easier for many years.

The other problem relates to mortgages. In the context of getting a mortgage, people can borrow four times the combined gross annual income of up to 90% of the value of the property. That is a big problem for many. People need proof of steady employment for at least 12 months and a deposit of 10%. Most mortgages now, because of the massive costs involved, are taking 30 to 35 years to pay back. Many people will have reached pension age before they fully own their houses. In the UK, there is no VAT on building materials. What can Ireland not be the same? The cost of the building is increased by one third as a result of tax, VAT and other levies.

There should be an incentive to build smaller houses. In County Kerry, the cost of building a new house is €220 to €280 per square foot, which means that the type of houses being built at present are costing somewhere between €200,000 and €280,000. That is on top of the cost of the site.

One will face a cost of €400,000 before the house is completed. I am asking the Government to look at these things to see whether we can stop people from leaving our shores.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for the question on housing and how we give our young people hope in terms of the ability to own or indeed in some cases to build their own home. I do not say this in any way disrespectfully to the Deputy but taxes are an important part of funding the State and we cannot just reduce or abolish them all. We have taken a number of

measures recently to reduce the cost of construction and to try to assist around viability but we have also taken a number of measures on the tax side, particularly the help-to-buy scheme, which has literally helped tens of thousands of people get some of their own tax back towards a deposit for their home. That is a scheme we are very committed to as a Government and we are committed to keeping it in place until the end of the mandate of this Government.

The Deputy made points regarding mortgages and the amount a person can borrow. These are issues that I genuinely hear from people but we also have to get the balance right because we do not want to arrive back at the place we were in the past with a very high level of mortgage indebtedness and the difficulty that arises from that. We, as a Government, have a number of schemes in place and have commitments in the programme for Government to keep them under review.

We have to do more on rural housing. We have to make sure that people have an ability to live in their own community. It is a really important part of balanced regional development and the regeneration of rural communities and we have got to get it right. It is not about a free-for-all and it is certainly not about people from one part of the country building a holiday home in the other. It is about people who have a social and economic connection with the community being able to live in their own community and build their own home. It is about people who are not asking the Government to do anything other than allow them to build their own home and if we are being honest, until now, the rules have been inconsistent. The rules depend on whether you live in this county or that county, which is not fair. This is a small country and it is a small island and we need to have a consistent approach to rural planning guidelines.

The intention now is to have a new national planning statement on rural housing prepared under section 25 of the Planning and Development Act, which will ultimately require Government approval and then will be issued by the Minister for housing. The new statement will refine, update and replace the existing guidelines as well as provide more clarity and more consistency across the planning authorities by defining where and how rural housing can be developed. I believe it will make it easier for people, including young people, to be able to build a home in their own community. The benefits of that socially and economically for rural Ireland, including parts of County Kerry, will be significant. We need to facilitate rural housing for those with a local housing need where they need to live or work in a rural area. Of course, we always have to balance that with protecting the rural character of countryside and preventing urban-generated sprawl as well. I am really looking forward to the new national planning statement coming to Government very shortly and I think it will be of significant benefit to rural communities.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The other thing is that the birth rate is falling yet our population is going up with a population increase of over 500,000 in recent years. This is putting pressure on house availability. With many vacant houses, there is no real incentive available to owners to rent them out but there is an incentive there that is working for the Ukrainian people, namely, a tax-free payment of €600 to the landlord. If we could do something like that for some of our own people, it would be great for them. People coming from other parts of the world are very welcome to come here if they are coming here to work but it should never be the case that they can come in here, get a payment right away, get on the social housing list and compete with our own people who were born and reared here. We must look after our own people first. I need to clarify something.

I said the cost of a house Kerry was €220,000 to €280,000. I meant it was €220 to €280 per square foot to build, so when we add that up, that comes to over €400,000. I am saying that too many people are having trouble getting the mortgage in the first place and we need to do something about it.

The Tánaiste: I always believe in an honest debate around migration but the honest debate has to be grounded in facts. People who arrive in Ireland from abroad through a variety of circumstances do not have an automatic right to social housing. The Deputy knows that too and he knows that in Kerry as well. People from Ukraine contribute very significantly to our economy as well. Obviously, they do have the right to work and indeed many businesses around this country tell me how reliant-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: They are costing us as well.

The Tánaiste: Please do not heckle me on this because we have to be respectful when we debate these issues. The Government is making a number of changes in relation to Ukrainian accommodation and some of the issues highlighted by the Deputy because, in our view, we do need to make the model sustainable because we want to be able to stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes. The emergency approach that we have had to date does need to be replaced with a more sustainable approach and that is how we are going to do it. In saying that, I acknowledge the positive contribution that Ukrainian people are making. As the Deputy pointed out, many people are coming to Ireland and are working in this country.

Regarding vacant homes, we have already seen 20,000 homes come back into use via the vacant property grant, we are bringing in a new derelict property tax in the next budget and we have also expanded grants for shop conversions. The issue of vacancy and dereliction in the housing emergency is rightly identified by the Deputy as a key issue on which we want to make more progress.

Ceisteanna ar Reachtaíocht a Gealladh - Questions on Promised Legislation

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I congratulate Jordan and Cian Adams, who are going to complete their incredible superhuman challenge of running a marathon every day for the past 32 days across 32 counties to raise awareness of frontotemporal dementia. Fair play to the two lads.

The Irish football team should not be playing Israel as it continues its genocide in Gaza and its brutalisation of the Palestinian people. Yesterday, the Minister of Culture, Communications and Sport, Deputy O'Donovan, and the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, confirmed that they will not be attending the match in Dublin but does it not stink of hypocrisy that the Tánaiste expects, on behalf of the Government, the Irish people to accept the match going ahead when his own Ministers are actually boycotting it? Meanwhile a letter has been sent to members of the FAI's general assembly demanding an extraordinary general meeting. The letter from the Professional Footballers Association of Ireland and others is very clear. It urges delegates to back a motion calling on the FAI not to participate. Séamus Coleman is right. This should not be landed at the feet of the players. Those with the power should take responsibility, so the Government must withdraw its support for the match going ahead against

Israel. I am asking the Tánaiste to take a stand for what is right and to stop the game because he knows that if the Government withdrew its support, this game will not go ahead.

The Tánaiste: I join with the Deputy in congratulating and commending Jordan and Cian Adams. They have inspired literally the entire country with 33 marathons across our island. I know many of us look forward to welcoming them to Leinster House later today but, more important or as important, is working with them on the issues around dementia, research and care pathways. I thank them for all they have done.

I agree with the Deputy on the point about Séamus Coleman. The Irish players who wear the jersey do so with pride and nobody should put any pressure on them at all. Séamus Coleman captured that very well in his comments yesterday. I would also make the point that the FAI gave its view on this. The FAI was very clear on this. UEFA as the governing body ultimately made that decision and that is the position. It is not a matter for the Government. It is a matter for the governing body, which in this case is UEFA. My views on the genocidal activities of the Government of Israel are very clear and I think this Oireachtas and the people of Ireland are utterly appalled by the genocidal behaviour being undertaken by the Israeli government.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: A report published today by Friends of the Earth has found that energy demand from data centres has added three quarters of a billion euro to household bills in Ireland since 2015 and could add a further €1.5 billion over the next decade. This is the equivalent of adding a week's wages to bills for the poorest households. All of us here acknowledge that data centres are part of modern life but the circle the Tánaiste and his Government need to square is that if it is their industrial policy to continue to roll out energy-intensive data centres around the country, it is becoming a cost-of-living issue. We have been going on for years about the climate impacts. The Tánaiste's former colleague, Paschal Donohoe, talked about the water demands of data centres but this is now becoming a serious cost-of-living issue. If it is Government policy to allow unfettered growth in data centres, what is it going to do to ensure that it does not impose additional costs on households already struggling to pay their bills?

The Tánaiste: The Friends of the Earth report needs to be read in the round. It does basically put it up to us, as a Government and an Oireachtas, that if we can do more to speed up the move to renewables, under what it calls high renewable growth scenarios, annual average residual demand, including data centres actually falls below zero in the years ahead.

In other words, accelerated renewable development is presented in this study as sufficient to displace significant reliance on gas as a dispatchable source of energy in the future. As the Deputy acknowledged, there is a genuine economic benefit to data centres but I would dispute the characterisation of the Government's position as an unfettered approach. The CRU's large energy user, LEU, connection policy very much shows how the Government intends to deliver on its renewable energy targets, with data centres above certain thresholds being required to meet at least 80% of their annual demand with new additional renewable electricity generated in the Republic of Ireland.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: At yesterday's health committee we learned something very concerning. Consultants on public-only contracts are continuing to do private work in the

Rotunda Hospital. This is despite the fact that treating private patients in public hospitals is a breach of their contracts. It is worth mentioning that these consultants are very well paid for giving up private work, with salaries of up to €260,000, and that is just the basic pay.

This is not just about a breach of contract. It is completely at odds with our national healthcare policy, *Sláintecare*, which is about creating universal healthcare based on need and not ability to pay and removing private healthcare from public hospitals. How can we ever have a well-functioning and quality public health service if private practice continues to leech resources from the system? Yesterday, we learned that the Minister for Health was told about this a year ago and she said she was not happy about it, but that appears to be it. No sanctions and no actions have been taken against the hospital. In how many other public hospitals is this happening and what is the Tánaiste going to do about it?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Rice for raising this. The Minister for Health and the wider Government expect the agreed terms of any contract to be applied fully and consistently across all hospitals. We expect everybody to comply with the terms of their contract of employment. That is a general basic thing, and just because somebody is a higher paid member of the public service does not mean they can deviate from their contract. If people have issues with their contract, that is a different matter, but actually signing up to a contract and then not adhering to its terms is not a small matter.

The Department of Health wrote to the HSE CEO on 18 March setting out concerns regarding the continuation of private practice and seeking full compliance with public-only consultant contracts, but I will ask the Minister to come back to Deputy Rice specifically in relation to her view on the implementation of the contract and how many other hospitals may have similar issues.

Deputy Charles Ward: The State recommended an external wall remediation only in a home where an internal wall was already cracking and carrying specialist hoist equipment used every day to lift and move a paralysed woman. The family were then refused access to see the full technical report so as to understand whether it was a safe decision to only give an outer leaf remediation. My constituent's home was adapted in 2017. She was paralysed after a car accident and it is designed entirely around her needs. Where the hoist system is used, inside the walls are cracking, not just the outside. Internal cracking has already been identified in parts of the structure holding the equipment that supports her getting out of the bed, to the bathroom and to the wheelchair. How can this be described as a safe decision when the family are being asked to accept the decision without actually seeing the technical evidence?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ward for raising this issue. I send my sincere sympathy and solidarity to his constituent and their family for all they have endured. The point Deputy Ward makes about being able to see the detail is an important one. I understand why any homeowner may wish to see a report from an engineer in order to really understand the rationale behind the option being recommended or proposed. That is understandable and logical. My understanding is that the Housing Agency will, upon request, issue the report to homeowners. That would be an important step to take because that would inform the homeowner in question as to the query raised.

In addition, and as Deputy Ward will know, there is a requirement in the 2022 Act to undertake a review of the operation of the Act. That review is due to commence shortly and the matter he has raised can also be considered as part of that. On foot of the Deputy raising this today, I will ask that the Minister, Deputy James Browne's Department note it for that purpose, too.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Just so the Tánaiste knows, Aontú does support the roll-out of sustainable energy across the country in partnership with local communities.

There is a major demographic change happening in Ireland at the moment. We had the GAA in front of the infrastructure committee yesterday to discuss it. Unfortunately, the lopsided development of the country is continuing apace. Two thirds of the population of the country now live on a very narrow strip along the east coast of Ireland. Most university-type jobs are going into the Dublin area. Most university graduates are, therefore, forced to work in the Dublin area but, of course, cannot afford to live there, so they have to live 30 km, 40 km or 50 km away and live in a commuter hell to be able to get to work. It is emptying a lot of regional areas of their young people.

Another aspect is that, in 2009, there were 75,000 children born in this State. Last year, there were 55,000 children born. That is an incredible collapse in numbers. Young people are losing the confidence to be able to have families at the moment. Plunging birth rates are already leading to some school closures and amalgamations in some parts of the country, and if it continues, it will lead to radically increased pension rates and healthcare costs for the generation that is already struggling to pay rent at the moment. What will the Government do to give parents the confidence to be able to raise families in this country?

The Tánaiste: There are a couple of aspects to that question. In respect of balanced regional development, the new national planning statement in relation to the ability to build a one-off home in rural Ireland will be a help. That is because there are many people finding themselves having to leave their communities due to a too-rigid planning system or at least an inconsistent application of the planning system across counties. That is one thing that can be done.

The Deputy will know I am going to continue to say that housing supply is really important, and we need to get 300,000 more homes built by the end of 2030. My Department has produced research in terms of Ireland 2040 and where Ireland will be demographically by 2040. It will be a very different place on the basis of a no-policy change. Therefore, I think of a number of policy changes. The Deputy mentioned the pensions issue. Auto-enrolment is a very important future-proofing step to take now.

I would also point out that there are many parts of this country well outside the Dublin area thriving. I spent a lot of time in Galway recently where there are key infrastructural projects we need to deliver, like the ring road and the BusConnects project. Down in Cork, there is the Luas project as well. I do not like the phrase "commuter hell". While there are very serious traffic congestion issues in this country, there are many parts of this country that are thriving and where people are proud of their communities, but they want to see us deliver infrastructure more quickly to help and we intend to do that.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I want to raise the issue of July provision. The summer programme is very important, providing additional educational supports to students during the summer months. Unfortunately, issues have arisen this year in relation to the application process. A very short window was open for schools to apply. Many received no notification and were not aware of the application process. Schools that have benefited from this provision in recent years have not had the opportunity to apply. This needs to be reviewed and schools need to be given the opportunity to apply. I ask that the Tánaiste take this message back to the Department and try to open up the application process again.

The Tánaiste: I fully agree with Deputy McGrath in terms of the importance of reopening the application process. I am pleased to tell him that will happen. The Government will be in contact with schools today and the portal will reopen early next week. We have seen an increased number of primary schools, post-primary schools and special schools applying this year. I see that as a good thing in terms of trying to meet the need. The portal will reopen.

Deputy Peter Roche: I follow on the same subject. I thank the Tánaiste for his continued engagement when I raised the issue of the summer programme, what was known as the July provision. In my constituency, I had one advocate who was representing ten families that were blocked out of the scheme. The stress, strain and torment that parents had to endure for the last few weeks were unbearable. A window of opportunity of six days was just unacceptable, to be brutally honest, because I, for one, appreciate the stress and strain that teaching staff are under in terms of managing all of this. I will continue to be a champion for children with disabilities and I want the Government to do likewise. We need to be mindful of giving them the best and first opportunity to thrive in life. Whether this is down to a financial issue or otherwise, we need to do whatever we can to resolve it.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Roche. He did indeed speak with me on this issue yesterday. I am pleased that the Government has decided that the portal will reopen in the coming days to provide a better window for schools to apply. This Government's record on special education and children with additional needs is one of investment and growth. There were 8,767 children benefiting from the summer programme in 2016. Over 70,000 benefited last year. I would be surprised if that number was not higher again this year. When it comes to things like special classes, the roll-out of therapies in special schools and the size of the budget in special education, we have a lot of work to do but it is a priority area, as it should be.

1 o'clock

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Givinostat is a potentially life-altering drug for children with Duchenne muscular dystrophy. The European Commission granted conditional marketing authorisation for givinostat almost a year ago, on 6 June 2025. There has been a frustrating delay, some of it on the company's behalf. I understand that the HSE's drugs group will review givinostat at its June meeting and make a recommendation to the senior leadership team to approve the medicine or not. There is a campaign, Time is Muscle. Every day counts for these children. I ask that a decision be made as early as possible. Children need access to this drug.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Rourke for highlighting this issue. I also wish to acknowledge the point that he made the point that sometimes delays can be on the side of the company. That is an important point of balance to make.

I do not actually have the detail in relation to this but it is important that everybody in the process work in an efficient way so that we at least get a decision and clarity as early as possible. The drugs budget is growing in this country, and quite rightly. I am sure this is a very anxious time for the families impacted and I will certainly convey the Deputy's views to the Minister for Health.

Deputy Pa Daly: Ballyduff National School has been serving the community since 1839 and has been in the current building for the past 60 years. There are currently 96 pupils attending. It has had an autism class for the past few years with six pupils, and that is full, but there are five other children who are currently struggling to access the curriculum because they do not have the supports that would be there from an autism class. There are five qualified children and two awaiting assessment. There will be an ongoing need into the future. They have a room and the changing facilities. All the resources are in place to do this and all the children, I am sure the Tánaiste will agree, should have the right to be educated locally in their own community. There is a want and a need. The school is ready, willing and able to provide it. It has the facilities but parents are very anxious that it has not been approved for a second class. I ask the Tánaiste to look at this and see what he can do to facilitate it.

The Tánaiste: I thank an Teachta Daly for raising this issue and I will certainly speak directly to the Minister of education on this. There was discussion earlier around the additional budget for education. One of the drivers behind that is the recognition that there will be a need for more special classes now than was even envisaged at budget time. If there is a school ready to assist in that and if there is a need in the community, I know that is something that the Minister will ask the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, to look at seriously. I will ask her to come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: The village of Ballivor has been without water for over four days now, but Uisce Éireann does not appear to be accountable to me as a public representative nor to this House despite the billions of euro we are giving it to invest in upgrading our water infrastructure. There have been really poor communications, there is no end in sight and the school has been closed for the past two days.

In 2019, when I was first elected a councillor, the Ballivor reservoir project was a priority. By 2021, Uisce Éireann told me it was shovel-ready. In 2024, it told me it would be on site by 2025. Here we are in 2026 without a shovel in the ground. What am I supposed to tell the people of Ballivor and the wider Meath West area, where there are issues in Clonard, Trim, Rathmolyon and many other places with frequent outages? We need the reservoir built in Ballivor but we also need to hold Uisce Éireann to account.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Dempsey for raising this issue, as I know she has on a number of occasions. On foot of her raising this, I will speak with the Minister, Deputy James Browne. I think there is a broad issue in relation to this. I have spoken to the Minister on this and he shares that view. We need to look at better accountability structures for Uisce Éireann to elected

Members of this House. It is not about us; it is about the people we represent and the Deputy is clearly vocalising, quite correctly, the frustration on behalf of her constituents.

I do not understand. I say it here regularly that Uisce Éireann should have to answer parliamentary questions. If you ask a question to the Minister for Health, she will say it is a matter for the HSE and refer it to the HSE, but you can ask a question and you will get a response. If you ask a question here under the rules of the House at the moment, it gets ruled out of order. There is no logic behind that. I have raised this in the Government and will continue to raise it. We should change it together. Uisce Éireann should be answerable to this House.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: On the specific issue the Deputy has raised, I will ask the Minister, Deputy Browne, to come back to her.

Deputy John Clendennen: I fully acknowledge the Government's commitment to education, with over €7 billion committed over the lifetime of this Government, including €1.6 billion in capital funding in 2026 alone. However, there are several schools across my constituency that have progressed to stage 2B in recent years and are now anxious to move forward to tender and construction but they seem to be stuck in a waiting area. Some examples of schools include Geashill National School, Scoil Charthaigh Naofa in Rahan, Scoil Mhuire Bainríoghan in Dunkerrin, Oxmantown National School in Birr, Scoil Naomh Seosamh in Gortnamona, St. Brendan's Community School in Birr and Oaklands Community College in Edenderry. These are important projects for the growing school communities, students, parents and teaching staff and they have already gone through significant planning work. Will the Government give consideration to bringing forward additional funding capacity so that these much-needed projects can proceed at the earliest possible opportunity?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Clendennen for raising this important issue and listing a number of the important school projects across Offaly that are in need of progression. Being blunt, quite a lot of schools are at stage 2B. We, collectively as a House, want to see as many of them move on as possible, and the Deputy has obviously advocated strongly for the schools in Offaly. The Minister for education has published what we can call the first tranche of a significant number of school building projects. I want to be very clear that this is not the final word on the matter and the Government will be making further allocations in regard to capital in the time ahead. Even in the medium-term fiscal plan we have published, there is unallocated capital during the lifetime of this Government. We will be considering that across the Government in the time ahead and I will keep in touch with the Deputy on those specific Offaly school projects, too.

Deputy Albert Dolan: An adult travelling daily from Athenry to Galway city currently pays approximately €5.10 each way by rail, despite the journey taking only around 20 minutes and the route increasingly functioning as a major commuter corridor for workers and students travelling into Galway. Meanwhile, a commuter travelling from Clonsilla to Connolly Station in Dublin, a journey of approximately 28 minutes, can travel for roughly €2.60 each way under

the Dublin commuter fare structure and the Leap card system. This is wholly inequitable. It is not fair on the people of Galway and it is not fair that somebody commuting in from Athenry has to pay almost double the price just to access public transport. Is there any consideration that the Government can give to allowing people in Galway to use the Leap card structure and avail of lower fares? This situation is not fair.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Dolan for raising the issue and the analytical approach he always brings to issues in this House. It is a fair point he is raising. We are obviously increasing our investment in public transport, but the affordability and fairness of public transport across all parts of the country is, of course, a legitimate issue that the Government will consider. On foot of the Deputy raising it, I will speak with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, in relation to this. I will also ask him to correspond with Irish Rail and ask it to give consideration to the matter, too.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I have been contacted by special schools in my constituency that have said that they have not been given their staffing allocations for next year. It is 28 May. It is very late. My understanding is that mainstream schools got their allocations in March and, on that basis, are able to plan for things like classroom allocation and supports. However, special schools do not know at this late stage when it is coming into the trips and all those things that go on in June and they will be very busy. They have not had time to do staffing allocations, so they cannot do timetables or classroom allocations. They are wondering what the delay is. I am aware that one in school in particular did not get its allocation until September last year. That is wholly unacceptable. There is also a knock-on effect for staff. If people do not know whether they are going to have their jobs come September, that is really unfair. Relationships and building relationships with young people, particularly in special schools, is important and we need to make sure that if any staff are to be reallocated elsewhere, it happens in a timely manner so that that relationship can be brought to an end and new ones brought in for the next year. What is the delay and when will they know?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Cummins. On foot of her raising this, I will ask the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to come back to her directly. I take the point she made. It is a very busy time for schools, with lots going on in the school community. However, we have also provided funding certainty to the Department of education and made a decision, which we debated earlier, to quite rightly provide significant additional resources to education this year. From a Government point of view, there is funding certainty for the Department of education. Therefore, we need to make sure that is conveyed to schools, particularly special schools, as a matter of priority. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to look at this and come back to the Deputy urgently.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: "One-way ticket I'd give her back to the shithole she came from". That is about the only thing I could repeat in this House among an awful lot of online abuse that was posted under the social media of our candidate in the Galway West by-election, Helen Ogbu.

I am asking the Government to take action against online hate. The Tánaiste is no stranger to social media, both the positives and negatives, and I acknowledge that. Coimisiún na Meán

needs the power to independently order the immediate takedown of individual posts. There is so much abuse under all of Councillor Ogbu's social media, to the point that we had a staff member who spent 40% of her time taking it down. We need to take action on this. It is undermining our democracy. It will stop good people from running for election in this country.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is so right. It is disgusting, despicable racism, and it is not who we are as a people. The people of Galway showed that with the very significant vote Labour's candidate received. I was pleased to meet Helen Ogbu over the weekend and to congratulate her on her campaign. The Deputy's point about the powers of Coimisiún na Meán are valid. I will ask the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, to come back to the Deputy directly but my view on this is that we should take a much more robust legislative approach. We ask social media companies nicely if they would mind doing this or that. It has gone beyond that now. I see huge benefits to social media. I also see the sewer that it can become, with toxicity, division, misinformation and disinformation. I will ask the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, to reflect on the Deputy's points. I am disgusted to hear the abuse that a public representative received.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: I would like to raise a proposal to reopen Kildangan train station, which has lain dormant since 1963. The population of Kildangan in south Kildare has doubled in the past ten years and is set to increase further on foot of recent rezoning. There is a huge rural hinterland and people would take the train from Kildangan if parking was available. Many of these people currently commute to Kildare town, and that car park is oversubscribed. We need more transport capacity to serve one of the fastest-growing population centres in the State and ease pressure on existing infrastructure. Reviving the old train station is a viable and constructive solution. Precedent exists. Adamstown train station was built before new developments. Dromod train station in Leitrim serves a population of just 500, with eight daily stops. A 2023 environs study examined reopening Killucan railway station. I ask the Tánaiste to raise this issue with the Minister for Transport and Irish Rail. Will he commission a feasibility study for the station's reopening in the medium term?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ní Raghallaigh for raising the issue. I truthfully do not know enough about that train station, other than that she makes a compelling case about how population growth needs to be met by improved public transport. Her suggestion that a train station that previously existed could be reopened certainly merits the Minister engaging with her on that. On foot of the Deputy raising it, I will engage with the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and ask that he come back to the Deputy with an informed view on the suggestions she made.

Deputy Mark Wall: I raise with the Tánaiste one of a number of emails I have received in the past week or so. The school informed someone's son that as he would now be going into fifth year, students would require a Chromebook when returning in September, at a cost of €540. The school commented that this is the only practical way to manage coursework due to the changes in the leaving certificate course. The school said it cannot afford the potential €80,000 expenditure to buy Chromebooks for every student. The email went on to say that this is the first year in which families would benefit from free schoolbooks, which is a fantastic initiative, but this is being eroded by the cost of €550. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission wrote to all schools, reminding them to avoid restrictive and costly

uniform policies. While we are serious about free education, we are eroding the good work that has been done by Government and the Department with what is happening on the ground. Can the Tánaiste comment on that? I received a parliamentary question reply from the Minister for education, saying that she has written to all schools about the cost of Chromebooks, and it is not related to the leaving certificate. The Tánaiste might confirm something similar.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Wall for engaging with the Minister for education on this. He is right that the general direction of travel that all of us in this House want to see is reducing the costs that families face when their children attend school. That is why we have had the hot school meals and the free schoolbooks. It is why we are genuinely trying to work with the CCPC and others on uniform costs. It would be extraordinarily disappointing and counterintuitive if we saw the cost of technology eroding some of that benefit to families. I share the Minister's view that there should not be a cause and effect between leaving certificate reform and the need for that technology. On foot of the Deputy raising this, I will speak directly to the Minister, Deputy Naughton.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: During the recent fuel protests, it became clear that we do not have enough oil reserve capacity. In the early days, there were mutterings that Europe could facilitate up to 12 months. There was no more about that then. What is the position regarding the massive storage tanks in Whiddy Island? We can all see them from the road from Kilgarvan to Bantry. What is inside those tanks now? Is it water, bird seed or what? Did the former Minister Eamon Ryan fill them with concrete? If he did, he should be given a lump hammer and a screwdriver to remove the concrete along with some of his supporters. He promised to do things like that. What are we going to do with the tanks on Whiddy Island? Are we making use of them? We need 12 months of a reserve. We would have no trouble in keeping down the prices while wars and other things are going on in other parts of the world.

The Tánaiste: One sure way to run down supplies is to not allow them in and out when we only had one refinery in the country. I am glad that situation is resolved because at a time of global insecurity regarding energy supply, it is important that we continue to make sure that supply of energy to this country continues. I recently met NORA, not a female but the National Oil Reserve Agency, and was pleased to say that it gave a significant assurance to the Government about our supply of energy, even with the disruption of the Strait of Hormuz. On the third point, truthfully, I do not know the answer, although nothing was filled with concrete by former Minister, Eamon Ryan, who served this country. We can agree or disagree with him but he was a good public servant and an honourable man. I will ask the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, to come back to the Deputy about the specific issues he raised.

Deputy Michael Collins: Over the past number of years, I have raised Keelbeg Pier in Union Hall with the Tánaiste, the Taoiseach and other Ministers on numerous occasions, and the urgency of commencing works on this pier. Several Ministers have come and gone after visiting the pier. Even the Taoiseach visited the pier recently. They all made promises to the local people but not a shovel has been turned in the many years that I have been involved. We have the Department pointing the finger at the council and the council pointing it back at the Department, and the local community is stuck in the middle. Keelbeg Pier is used by local fishermen and pleasure boats alike. It serves mainly the Union Hall and Glandore area and it

is vital that action happens on the ground. Can the Tánaiste update us on what exactly is happening with Keelbeg Pier? When will the shovels hit the ground?

The Tánaiste: In fairness, it is not the first time Deputy Collins has raised the issue with me. It sounds to me like he wants fewer political visitors and more political action on the pier, which is not an unreasonable thing to say. On foot of the Deputy raising this, I will ask the relevant Minister to bring together the stakeholders. It sounds to me, from previous engagement we have had on this, that a number of different people are involved but somebody needs to take hold of this rather than saying that is a matter for this group or the other. I will talk to the relevant Minister and ask that he convene relevant stakeholders and come back to Deputy Collins with a plan.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.18 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.58 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.18 p.m. and resumed at 1.58 p.m.

Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time".

I am pleased to introduce the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill 2026 for the consideration of the House on behalf of the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan. This Bill is a comprehensive legislative proposal which aims to improve transparency, accountability and value-for-money in our public service media providers, RTÉ and TG4, and to put in place a statutory framework to support the provision of quality programming and public interest journalism within a secure and sustainable media ecosystem.

The Bill implements the key legislative recommendations of two recent major expert-led independent reports: the report of the Future of Media Commission, published in July 2022, and the review of governance and culture in RTÉ carried out by an expert advisory committee chaired by Professor Niamh Brennan, published in May 2024.

The Future of Media Commission was tasked with developing recommendations on sustainable public funding and other supports to ensure media in Ireland remains sustainable, independent and capable of delivering public service aims. Fourteen of its recommendations will be given effect through the Bill.

2 o'clock

The expert advisory committee chaired by Professor Brennan was commissioned to examine the corporate governance failings in RTÉ in July 2023, following the revelations regarding presenter payments and other governance failings. The expert advisory committee delivered a roadmap for the reform of corporate governance in RTÉ. While many of the 90 recommendations were for RTÉ to introduce, eight required legislative change. They have been given effect in the Bill, including, most importantly, the assignment of the Comptroller and Auditor General as auditor of RTÉ.

The Bill also implements those elements of the European Media Freedom Act which relate to the safeguarding of our public service media providers, RTÉ and TG4. The European Media Freedom Act is a landmark piece of EU legislation designed to protect the independence and plurality of media services across the Union. It is vital that we implement it fully as soon as possible, particularly in the context in which Ireland will take up the Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Pre-legislative scrutiny has played an important role in the development of the Bill. I would like to acknowledge the work of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Arts, Media, Communications, Culture and Sport, which demonstrated the vital role that pre-legislative scrutiny plays in our legislative process. The Bill takes account of over 30 of the recommendations made by the committee as part of its pre-legislative scrutiny.

The Bill provides for reforms in RTÉ and TG4 across five key areas. First, the Bill will reform the statutory basis underpinning the corporate governance of RTÉ and TG4. Second, the Bill will enhance the statutory framework through which Coimisiún na Meán assesses the performance and funding of RTÉ and TG4. The Bill provides for greater transparency on remuneration of staff and relevant contractors by RTÉ and TG4 and reporting on the commissioning of independent producers, including information on the total cost of production in monetary bands and percentage of the Exchequer contribution. The Bill will strengthen the role and authority of the audience councils of RTÉ and TG4. The Bill will also extend content regulation by Coimisiún na Meán to all non-broadcast content made available by RTÉ and TG4.

While our public service media providers are important, we also need to sustain an assortment of content provided by a diversity of providers on local, regional and national levels. To support this type of public service content, the new framework for public service content set out in the Bill will convert the existing broadcasting fund to a platform-neutral fund known as Ciste na Meán. This expanded fund will support the production, distribution and archiving of public service content across all formats by the wider media sector. In addition to the new framework for supporting public service content, the Bill will also require RTÉ to dedicate at least 25% of its annual public funding to the commissioning of programming from the independent production sector.

The Bill is composed of three Parts. Part 2 of the Bill provides the entirety of the substantive amendments to the Broadcasting Act 2009 while Part 3 provides for a necessary technical amendment to the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act 1993 to allow for the assignment of that office as auditor of RTÉ.

I will outline the detailed provisions of the Bill focusing in particular on the key sections of the Bill. I turn first to the corporate governance of RTÉ and TG4. Sections 35, 41 and 62 of the Bill provide for the assignment of the Comptroller and Auditor General as auditor of RTÉ and for the accountability of the director general to the Committee of Public Accounts in respect of RTÉ's annual audited financial statements and value-for-money matters. Sections 32 and 33 of the Bill clarify and expand provisions relating to the functions, duties, accountability, appointment and dismissal of directors general of RTÉ and TG4. Section 32 provides that a director general is expressly accountable to the board for the efficient and effective management of the provider and the performance of his or her functions and expressly prohibits them from taking part in any board deliberations regarding their own performance, removal or

replacement. Section 33 clarifies a range of matters relating to the role of director general as editor-in-chief for their provider, following on from the principles set out in the European Media Freedom Act. Under the section, a director general will be vested with the editorial functions of a provider in terms of determining the providers' overall editorial policies, standards and priorities. In this context it is important to note that 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. This provision aims to balance editorial independence with accountability to an independent regulator.

Section 33 of the Bill also gives effect to Article 5 of the European Media Freedom Act by setting out in detail the requirements for an open and transparent process for the appointment and, in certain specified circumstances, removal of a director general. The Government will no longer have a role in consenting to the appointment of a director general. However, the approval of the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport and Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation will still be required to determine the remuneration and terms and conditions of employment of the DG. Given the seriousness of a decision to dismiss a DG, the section provides that a board must provide the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport with a statement of the decision and reasons for it, which must be laid before the Oireachtas.

In line with the recommendations of the expert advisory committee on governance and culture in RTÉ, sections 25 to 31 of the Bill clarify and expand provisions relating to the functions, duties, role and necessary expertise of the boards and board committees of RTÉ and TG4. In particular, sections 25 and 30 clearly set out and separate the functions of the boards on one hand and the duties of board members on the other. The duties in section 30 now include duties equivalent to those of a company director under the Companies Act 2014, an additional duty to represent the interests of the people of the island of Ireland and of Irish communities outside the island of Ireland, and a duty of confidentiality.

Section 44 of the Bill provides for the enhanced mechanism for assessing the performance and appropriate funding of RTÉ and TG4, which is based on the recommendations of the Future of Media Commission and requirements of the European Media Freedom Act. Under the framework, Coimisiún na Meán will assess and appraise the funding needs of and determine detailed performance targets for RTÉ and TG4 every three years. The first of these three-yearly appraisals is to be submitted to the Minister for onward submission to the Government by 30 June 2027 and cover the period 2028 to 2030. This replaces the current approach, under which Coimisiún na Meán appraises funding needs every five years and the public service media providers set out their own performance commitments. Section 44 of the Bill provides that the three-year appraisal will be underpinned by a detailed methodology which will be published by Coimisiún na Meán following a public consultation. This methodology is intended to provide clear guidance to RTÉ and TG4 in making submissions to Coimisiún na Meán as part of the three-yearly appraisal. The first three-year methodology will be published by the end of January 2027.

Section 44 also strengthens the yearly review process undertaken by Coimisiún na Meán, which will now be required to carry out two annual reviews. The first, due on 30 June of each year, will focus on the degree to which RTÉ and TG4 met their performance targets and received adequate funding for the previous year in line with the European Media Freedom Act.

The second, due on 31 October of each year, will examine compliance with various State aid requirements, such as the separate accounting of public service and commercial revenues and expenditure.

In terms of enhanced transparency, the Bill provides for additional reporting obligations on RTÉ and TG4 in respect of employee and contractor remuneration and commissioning activities. Section 43 of the Bill requires RTÉ and TG4 to disclose information on the remuneration of staff and relevant contractors in monetary bands, which shall be determined by the Minister. As the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, has said, this is an area he will consider further and, if necessary, will bring forward proposals to strengthen obligations on transparency and reporting obligations in this area, which will require engagement with the Data Protection Commission. Section 43 provides that RTÉ must disclose additional information in its annual report on the commissioning of independent productions.

This will include the total cost of each production in monetary bands which shall be determined by the Minister and the public contribution to the cost of production as a percentage of the total cost of production. Section 48 of the Bill will require TG4 to provide this information annually for the first time. Given the large sums of public moneys expended in this area, this transparency is both appropriate and necessary.

Sections 36 to 39, inclusive, of the Bill will strengthen the role and independence of the audience councils of RTÉ and TG4, following the recommendations of the Future of Media Commission. The audience councils were introduced in the Broadcasting Act 2009 and are intended to represent the views of the people of the island of Ireland to the boards of RTÉ and TG4. The Bill will expand the role of the audience councils by: providing for the statutory independence of the audience councils of RTÉ and TG4; requiring the selection of diverse members of both councils by Coimisiún na Meán following an open and transparent public competition; providing that an audience council may, in addition to the required annual report, prepare a special report; and requiring RTÉ and TG4 to respond to both annual and special reports prepared by their audience councils.

Sections 15 to 19, inclusive, and 21 to 23, inclusive, of the Bill provide for the extension of the duties and codes which currently apply to broadcast and video-on-demand content to all public service content made available by RTÉ and TG4, such as podcasts and written material. As public service media providers established in law, RTÉ and TG4 have a particular duty to their audiences. This will bring all of RTÉ and TG4's public service content under the regulation of Coimisiún na Meán and enable audiences to make complaints to Coimisiún na Meán regarding such content.

Sections 4, 5 and 54 of the Bill provide for the new framework to support public service content. Section 4 provides for a definition of "public service content" as any audiovisual or sound programme, anything published in a press publication and types of online content which inform, educate or entertain and which relates to an exhaustive list of categories of interest to Irish audiences. A key principle of public service content is that it can only be made available by public service content providers, as defined in section 3 of the Bill. Public service content providers may be either regulated entities, such as a broadcaster regulated by Coimisiún na Meán, or an entity subject to a recognised self-regulatory regime, such as a newspaper regulated by the Press Council. This is intended to ensure any funded content is subject to regulation, with a clear avenue for the public to make complaints. Section 4 also provides for

a definition of "under-served audience", which refers to audiences who may be under-served by virtue of a particular characteristic such as age, disability or geography.

Section 54 provides for the three main elements of the new framework. First, Coimisiún na Meán will be required to carry out triennial reviews of public service content provision to assess gaps in such provision in the Irish and English languages and to recommend measures to address these gaps. The reviews must have particular regard to the needs of the under-served audiences. The first of these will be submitted to the Minister by 30 June 2027 and cover the period 2028 to 2030. Second, the broadcasting fund will be converted into a fund known as *ciste na meán*, which will continue to be funded annually by 7% of net TV licence fee receipts and an Exchequer allocation. Third, out of the resources paid into *ciste na meán*, Coimisiún na Meán will prepare and operate public service content funding schemes to support the production of new public service content, measures to develop the capacity of public service content providers and measures to support the archiving of public service content. Over time it is expected that existing media funding schemes, such as the Sound and Vision scheme and the courts and local democracy reporting schemes, will be converted to schemes made under the Act.

Under existing legislation, RTÉ is required to provide an inflation-adjusted fixed amount of funding for independent programming. In line with the recommendations of the Future of Media Commission, sections 45 and 46 of the Bill will require RTÉ to allocate a minimum of 25% of its public funding to commission audiovisual and audio programming from the independent production sector. The 25% target will no longer be confined to broadcast material but will also cover podcasts and audiovisual programming to be made available via on-demand players.

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 investigations and as part of its supervisory function, it also has the power to require, by notice in writing, a regulated provider to provide it with information relating to compliance with an online safety code. Sections 20 and 60 of the Bill will extend this information-gathering power to require regulated entities to provide information relating to compliance with other elements of the online safety framework and with media service codes and rules. As a Government, we are committed to ensuring Coimisiún na Meán has all appropriate powers to carry out its functions in relation to online safety.

The Broadcasting Act 2009 currently provides Coimisiún na Meán with the authority to impose a levy on audiovisual broadcasters, such as RTÉ or VMTV, and video-on-demand providers, such as Netflix or the RTÉ Player. The proceeds of what is often called the Netflix levy may be used by Coimisiún na Meán or Fís Éireann to fund new audiovisual programming. The Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, has set out his view that it is appropriate any charge which may increase the prices Irish consumers pay should be subject to democratic oversight. For that reason, section 56 of the Bill provides that a levy may only be imposed by Coimisiún na Meán pursuant to a ministerial direction. The Minister has been very clear he does not intend to give such direction at this time. To ensure this position can be considered in light of up-to-date information and analysis, section 58 of the Bill provides for the ex-ante and ex-post assessments of the impact of a levy to be undertaken by Coimisiún na Meán every three years.

The first report will be due three years after the commencement of the relevant section, or earlier if directed by the Minister.

I am conscious the past three weeks have felt like Groundhog Day, which is a phrase used by both the Minister and the Tánaiste. In all of this, we must not lose sight of the essential role RTÉ and TG4 as public service media providers play in the social, cultural and democratic life of this country. They provide programming that informs, educates and entertains and ensure the public can have, and knows it can have, trustworthy and reliable information. However, to be truly effective our public service media providers must be trusted. To be trusted they must be open and transparent and demonstrate the very highest standards in corporate governance. This must be underpinned by robust legislation and that is why this Bill aims to fundamentally reform the governance and regulation of RTÉ and TG4. I look forward to working with all Members of the House as we progress this Bill.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for being with us and for her presentation. I welcome the progression of the Bill, though many of the items in it could and should have been implemented a long time ago, had Government not voted down many of the same proposals when they were made by Sinn Féin. This includes bringing RTÉ under the aegis of the Comptroller and Auditor General. Sinn Féin also proposed a significant number of amendments through the media committee, many of which were passed and are included in this Bill. We accept that on balance this is a positive Bill that makes long-overdue changes we have been advocating for years. Many of the items in this were necessitated by the multiple scandals in RTÉ and long-term mismanagement of public funding.

After last week's media committee performance and revelations from RTÉ I especially welcome the Bill will assign the Comptroller and Auditor General as auditor of RTÉ. The top ten earners' list we were presented with for the last eight years is wrong and 13 people at RTÉ are earning more than the €250,000 salary cap when entitlements such as pension contributions and allowances are taken into account. There is nothing like an RTÉ scandal to keep the focus off the Government's mismanagement of this State - Lord knows we have had enough of them by now - but I look forward to reading the Comptroller and Auditor General's report into RTÉ's accounts now he will finally have the power.

It is important to note the committee report on this Bill made 85 recommendations, thereby highlighting the Government's *laissez-faire* attitude to bringing forward such important legislation.

There are recommendations in the Bill that were previously included in the Future of Media Commission that have still not been progressed. The Government has dragged its feet in this regard, and by the look of this, it will continue to drag its feet as the Minister has refused to follow the recommendation to set targeted timelines for its implementation.

Of the 85 recommendations carefully considered and agreed by members of both the Opposition and the Government at committee, the Minister says that 68 can be or already have been implemented. He says there are seven more that are appropriate to legislation that has horizontal effect across many sectors, such as employment, tax, social insurance and copyright law, which I completely understand. In that regard, he says he has brought the recommendations relating to copyright legislation and policy to the attention of the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, who I hope has a plan of action for them. We do not

want these recommendations to fall between two stools or to be sent back and forwards. It is something that I and, I am sure, many other members of the media committee will be watching closely because there was genuine intent and diligence offered in the drafting of these recommendations across the board.

I take particular issue with the Minister for choosing not to action recommendation 13, which seeks to end geoblocking on the island of Ireland. We in Sinn Féin have long called on the Irish Government to end the geoblocking of RTÉ content from its viewers in the North. The Minister's conscious decision not to accept this recommendation goes to the heart of the southern establishment's disregard for and perception of Irish citizens in the North. As Ireland came to a standstill to cheer on the boys in green only weeks ago, it was wrong that so many people in the North were unable to watch our national football team play their World Cup qualifier free-to-air on RTÉ because it is geoblocked. This was Ireland's biggest international soccer match in decades. It is equally unfair to block them from watching Irish athletes in the North competing for team Ireland in the Olympics, or Armagh potentially winning an all-Ireland final.

The committee agreed the cross-party recommendation to recognise all users in the North of Ireland as underserved audiences, and endorsed the incorporation of provisions. It cannot be understated that colleagues from across the Government and the Opposition have come together to recognise that the geoblocking of audiences, exclusion from competitions and erasure from maps of the Six Counties by RTÉ need to be addressed. This recommendation to end geoblocking demonstrates a unity of purpose among TDs and Senators to ensure that national broadcasters serve the whole of our nation. The Irish Government has the ability and responsibility to address this issue, and it should be engaging further with the British Government, regulators, broadcasters and Internet service providers. Refusing to accept and implement this recommendation is a true reflection of intent when it comes to this Government's consideration of our fellow countrymen and women up North.

I would encourage the Minister, Deputy Patrick O'Donovan, to heed the call by his Government colleagues to implement the Sinn Féin proposal to end geoblocking and include audiences across the island. If he does not, Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh and I will pursue our Broadcasting (All-Ireland Service) (Amendment) Bill 2025 to ensure equal access to service across the whole island of Ireland. We have already introduced that Bill. If passed, this Bill would place an onus on national broadcasters to make every reasonable effort to end this exclusion. It would also require Coimisiún na Meán and the Minister for communications to identify and work to overcome licensing barriers to all-Ireland service in broadcast media.

This is not just an issue of concern for this House, but also an issue of concern for Stormont. The economy Minister, Dr. Caoimhe Archibald, confirmed in recent days that she has engaged with both the Irish and British Governments to help to bring an end to the unacceptable practice of geoblocking. This issue is not going away. When I presented the committee's report to the House this day last week, the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, was not present then either. I raised this concern in my opening speech with the Minister of State, Deputy Frankie Feighan. I also raised it in my closing speech because it was not referenced in Deputy Feighan's response. Again, today, despite that, there is no mention of it in today's presentation. That is deeply disappointing.

I also take issue with the Minister choosing not to progress recommendation 3, where the committee recommends that the Bill include a specific timeframe of dates for the commencement of its provisions. That the response of ministerial discretion will be retained in commencing the Bill does not inspire confidence that this will be enacted. All we want is a timeframe for things to happen. Waiting for the Minister to hit the right frame of mind or mood is not an adequate, effective or transparent method of governance. It is par for the course for this Government, but it is not good governance.

Anyone who knows me knows that I want to work in collaboration with people around me for the greater good, and that has been the case since I first went onto Louth County Council in 2016 and right up to this very day. The work done in the pre-legislative scrutiny of this Bill at the committee was a fine example of people with quite different mindsets working in collaboration with each other and agreeing a common way forward. That should not be forgotten, and it should not be pushed aside at a whim. It is the Minister's choice, of course, but he needs to make that a considered choice. While I recognise and welcome the many positives in the Bill, I urge the Minister to reflect on the positives that he has omitted from inclusion in the Bill, positives that would not only have strengthened the Bill, but unified the House in its drafting, consideration and implementation for the good of all of our people, North and South.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It is a pity the Minister is not present to hear this, although that is not a slight on the Minister of State, Deputy Niamh Smyth. We have had this engagement with the Minister, so he sometimes gets what I am talking about because I have had it out with him over a number of years, in particular over geoblocking. That is something that has not gone away and will not go away unless it is addressed. It needs to be addressed in legislative format at this stage because every other attempt by us to address it has been ignored. We had the ability to do this. We put forward the Broadcasting (All-Ireland Service) (Amendment) Bill last year, which was aimed at addressing it. The committee, in its pre-legislative scrutiny, looked at the challenges. The challenges are there, but they are not ones that cannot be overcome. There are simple solutions, and a simple approach is possible with the national broadcasters. The national authority of a Minister can overcome it, but if that is not the case, then we will have to ensure that our legislation comes in. That is where we are at currently.

Recommendation 13 from the scrutiny came on the back of a discussion that we had about programmes like “Bluey”, “Dora the Explorer” and so on. These are programmes that kids enjoy in this jurisdiction, perhaps during the summer months in Donegal. When they return home, they have no access to the RTÉ Player and these programmes that they have grown to love, and the characters who are speaking as Gaeilge to them. Those are not the only issues. We have already mentioned Olympic coverage, all-Ireland finals and other issues.

There is a need for us to approach broadcasting on this island as an island. We need a single approach to these issues to ensure we have commonality, that we address the issues in advance of a united Ireland and that we create an all-Ireland market for broadcasting rights. They can all be tied in together. When RTÉ or TG4 are making approaches to other broadcasters or making agreements, they can do so on the understanding that any agreement they get will allow broadcasts across the island. That goes for the Olympics and the all-Ireland finals, and there should be no differentiation of the different parts of this island. I am disappointed that the

Minister has not addressed this. Hopefully, during Committee Stage of the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill, he will do so, and we can have an amendment to address this issue.

The other issue is one where I welcome the approach that, at long last, a Minister has taken. It is an issue that has come up over quite a number of years, and the Minister of State mentioned Groundhog Day. It is the fact that the Comptroller and Auditor General did not have the powers to investigate or have oversight of the RTÉ accounts. The decision to address this is to be welcomed. It is a pity that, a year ago to this day, the Minister of State's party and the Government voted down a Bill that I had in the House which did exactly that. It was a very simple Bill. It was not party-political, as we can see from the fact that it is being brought in under this Bill. However, it is a year on, and by the time this is enacted, it will be longer than that.

Hopefully, this will address some of the scandals and the waste of money. This is public money, at the end of the day, that RTÉ has overseen in the past and right up to recent days. One of the examples I have seen lately is the amount of money being spent on consultants to distribute "The Late Late Toy Show" funds.

For God's sake, can someone not just sit down and work it out? Why is RTÉ paying consultants to distribute the charitable funds that are raised? The fact that consultants would even take the money to do that is an even bigger scandal, and it needs to be addressed. If RTÉ needs consultants to look over it, there are consultant firms out there that should be able to offer this as a service as part of a donation to the "The Late Late Toy Show" fund. That is a scandal in itself because, ultimately, it is money being taken out of the public purse or out of the fund itself.

We learned this week of the amount of money being spent on limousines and the likes. Hopefully that era is at an end and we are now seeing the end of the wasting of money that was happening, week in and week out, in RTÉ over the years, where some people thought they could spend public funds willy-nilly. We need a proper public service. That has to be paid for, and I have absolutely no problem with that. We need to ensure that workers are protected and paid correctly, that performers are paid properly, that their performances, writings and so on are properly protected under copyright. The era of bogus self-employment is well and truly at an end. There must be strict adherence to the Karshan decision which ensures that bogus self-employment will not happen again. In an era when RTÉ is moving towards a lot more outsourcing, there is a danger that this could lead to bogus self-employment such that people would be employees but would be told that they are not.

Another issue I want to raise is the recommendations the committee made in relation to the Irish language. The committee sought to ensure that TG4 will have independent editorial control over its news service.

Tá an fhadhb seo leanúnach agus tá sé ardaithe ag TG4, na coistí istigh anseo, agamsa leis an Aire don Ghaeltacht agus le Aire na meán thar na blianta agus fós nílimid tar éis déileáil leis an gceist. Níl an Bhille seo tar éis déileáil leis. Bheadh sé i bhfad Éireann níos éasca dá mbeadh sé seo déanta gan é a bheith sa reachtaíocht ach níl sé sin ag tarlúint. Sin an fáth go mba chóir go mbeadh an tAire ag teacht chugainn ag déanamh cinnte de go bhfuil an neamhspleáchas seo ag TG4 maidir leis an nuacht agus gur féidir leis a thaispeáint gur seirbhís nuachta ann féin é, seachas a bheith ceangailte le RTÉ mar atá sé faoi láthair. Tá costas i gceist leis sin agus bheadh

air caint le Coimisiún na Meán chun déanamh cinnte de gur féidir leis íocadh as seo. Níl sé sin ag tarlúint faoi láthair.

Recommendation No. 17 from the pre-legislative scrutiny process relates to the establishment, by means of the Bill, of a national Irish-language youth radio service. Tá sé seo mar cheist le tamall fada de bhlianta. Bíonn taispeántas nó scéim phíolótach ann nach mór gach bliain i gcomhar le Raidió Rí-Rá - tá stáisiún eile ann, ní gá go roghnófar an ceann sin – a léiríonn go bhfuil spéis ag daoine óga éisteacht leis an raidió agus le cláracha raidió dírithe orthu féin seachas ar lucht na Gaeltachta amháin. Tá Raidió na Gaeltachta tar éis sár-obair a dhéanamh thar na blianta ó bunaíodh é. Caithfidh déanamh cinnte de go leanann an cur chuige atá aige agus an ceangal atá aige leis an bpobal ar aghaidh. Tá a lán daoine óga nach mbíonn ag éisteacht le gnáth-stáisiún raidió, bíonn siad ag éisteacht le cláracha ar leith atá dírithe orthu. Sa chás sin, tá sé léirithe gur gá dúinn féachaint ar an gcineál sin stáisiún a bhunú. Níl a fhios agam an gá go mbeadh sé i reachtaíocht go bhfuil sé seo le bunú ach is gá go mbeimid, na polaiteoirí, ag tacú go hiomlán leis agus ag impí ar Choimisiún na Meán agus ar an Aire déanamh cinnte de go dtarlaíonn Raidió Rí-Rá amach anseo.

Recommendation No. 51 proposes that funding for TG4 be increased and that Coimisiún na Meán and the Government take account of the vital role of the media in intergenerational language transmission for our national and minoritised language when making decisions on funding. Cé go bhfuil ardú tar éis teacht thar na blianta ar an maoiniú do TG4, tá i bhfad Éireann níos mó ag teastáil. Is léiriú é nuair a fheicimid ar SociÉTé Radio-Canada, SRC, nó ar stáisiún teilifíse i dTír na mBascach go bhfuil gá déanamh cinnte de go bhfuil an t-airgead ann le gur féidir le TG4 bheith san iomaíocht ag an leibhéal ceart agus na cláracha is fearr a chur amach má táimid ag iarraidh níos mó daoine a mhealladh chuig an teanga agus chun líofacht sa teanga a fhorbairt. Cuideoidh sé chomh maith leis an gceangal idir an dúshlán atá ag an Stát tar éis glacadh air féin go mbeidh 20% dóibh siúd atá earcaithe sa Státseirbhís líofa sa Ghaeilge ag leibhéal B2. Chun go dtarlóidh sé sin, caithfidh daoine óga nó iad siúd atá ag foghlaim na Gaeilge í a chloisteáil i bhfad níos minice ná mar atá siad faoi láthair.

Thacaigh mé agus tacaím go fóill leis an gcinneadh a ghlacadh maidir le fógraíocht agus mar sin. Feicimid agus cloisimid fógraí trí Ghaeilge anois níos mó ná mar a chualamar riamh roimhe seo. Is léiriú é sin go bhfuil tionchar aige nuair a dhéantar craoltóireacht ar an nGaeilge - cloiseann agus feiceann daoine í. Má chuirimid airgead i dtreo TG4, beidh toradh air. Feicimid an dea-thoradh atá ar TG4 leis na duaiseanna atá bainte amach aige go hidirnáisiúnta mar gheall ar na cláracha ar thacaigh sé leo agus na cláracha spóirt atá aige. Ní hamháin go gcuireann sé an Ghaeilge chun cinn, ach tá sé ag cur spórt nach raibh ar fáil roimhe seo ar RTÉ ar fáil. Is féidir linn tacú leis an dá rud ag an am céanna má dhéanfaimid cinnte de go bhfuil breis airgid aige ionas gur féidir leis an t-airgead sin a chaitheamh ar an earnáil seo. Is earnáil í a bhfuil airgead de dhíth uirthi, go háirithe nuair nach bhfuil an tAire sásta díriú isteach ar an treoir a thabhairt “content levy” a chur chun cinn. Bheadh airgead breise ar fáil don earnáil ina iomlán dá mbeadh sé sin déanta.

Bhí cúpla moladh eile. Ar mhaithe leis an Aire, breathnóimid orthu arís agus déanfaimid iad a chur chun cinn nuair a shroichfidh Céim an Choiste chun féachaint an mbeidh athrú poirt ag an Aire amach anseo maidir leis an líofacht atá acu siúd atá ar bhord RTÉ ó thaobh an Ghaeilge de. Bhíomar sa choiste ag iarraidh go mbeadh níos mó fócas ag na craoltóirí náisiúnta ar na pleananna agus a leithéid timpeall na tíre. Nílím ag cur i gcoinne an Bhille seo; is Bille

maith é. Is féidir linn tacú leis ach caithfimid déanamh cinnte de go bhfuil athruithe ag teacht chun cinn ar Chéim an Choiste le cinntiú fad is atáimid ag gabháil don chraoltóireacht go bhfuilimid cinnte gurb é an Bhille is fearr gur féidir linn a chruthú agus go mbeidh sé sin rite ag an Dáil amach anseo.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I welcome the Minister of State and am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this important Second Stage debate on the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill 2026. This is significant and necessary legislation that seeks to modernise Ireland's broadcasting and public service media framework for a digital age that has changed fundamentally since the Broadcasting Act 2009 was first enacted. This Bill has long been in the making. It puts into effect many of the recommendations of the Future of Media Commission and of the independent review of the governance and culture of RTÉ. It also complements the Media Regulation Bill that was debated recently in this House by implementing the remaining pieces of the European Media Freedom Act. The Bill is important because it brings together lots of different pieces of work that have been ongoing for a number of years.

We can all agree that the media landscape today is unrecognisable from what it was even 15 years ago. Public discourse increasingly happens online. Audiences consume content not only through traditional television and radio, but through streaming platforms, social media, podcasts, digital publications, and on-demand services. Alongside these changes, public trust in institutions, including media institutions, has been challenged. In that context, the place of public service media in our society can be fragile but that makes it all the more vital.

We in the Labour Party believe that an effective public service media is a central pillar of our democracy. Amid a fracturing media and information environment, we need to support our public service broadcasters all the more. However, public service media bodies rely on public trust and accountability. In recent years, we have seen worrying signs of that trust beginning to fray.

Against that backdrop, this Bill represents an attempt to address three core issues. First, it strengthens governance and accountability at RTÉ and TG4. Second, it broadens and modernises the definition of public service media to include a framework for public service content. Third, it seeks to protect editorial independence and democratic discourse in accordance with emerging European standards. These are worthy objectives, and many aspects of the Bill deserve support across this House.

One of the strongest features of this legislation is its recognition that public service broadcasting must evolve into public service media. For too long, legislation focused narrowly on traditional broadcasting while public debate and cultural engagement migrated online. This Bill acknowledges that public service content now exists not only on television and radio but also through digital publications and platform-based services like podcasts. That is an important shift. The Bill recognises that Irish public service content should reflect the full diversity of life in this country, including our culture, language, history, sport, the arts, environment, science, education and communities at home and abroad. Importantly, it also introduces the concept of underserved audiences. That matters greatly. There are many communities in Ireland that do not see themselves adequately represented in media output, whether this is due to disability, geography, language, socio-economic background, ethnicity

or other factors. Public service media cannot simply serve the majority. It must serve the public in all its diversity. In that regard, the Government is right to place inclusion and accessibility at the centre of broadcasting policy via the Bill.

I also welcome the stronger recognition of the Irish language and Gaeltacht communities that is contained in the legislation. The provisions relating to TG4 are particularly important. Requiring stronger Irish-language competency among board and audience council members reflects the unique cultural role TG4 plays in Irish society. TG4 was proudly launched by former Labour Party Minister for the arts and former President Michael D. Higgins. The latter played a fundamental role in the establishment of the station. It was originally launched in 1996 as Teilifís na Gaeilge, which is what I knew it as, so I am showing my age. TG4 has consistently delivered innovation and cultural value beyond its size and budget, and this legislation rightly recognises that.

Another welcome aspect of the Bill is the strengthening of transparency and governance standards. In recent years, including just last week, we have seen serious controversies surrounding governance and financial oversight within RTÉ. Public confidence has been badly damaged and eroded. Regardless of political perspective, I believe that everyone in this House accepts that reform has become unavoidable and is absolutely necessary. This Bill responds to that reality by strengthening board responsibilities, clarifying the role of directors general, increasing transparency around remuneration and allowing greater scrutiny. It puts into effect the recommendation of the independent review that the Comptroller and Auditor General be appointed as auditor of the station. These are reasonable and sensible reforms.

Publicly funded media organisations must be accountable for the use of public money. I do not think that is controversial. However, what is not in this Bill is a fix to the fundamental problem that faces public service media in this country, namely that of funding. In 2023, RTÉ received some funding certainty via Government funds, but it becomes more clear year by year and month by month that in the long term a reformed funding model will have to be introduced. We need to begin to have the serious conversations about a sustainable funding settlement for RTÉ and TG4. Those conversations must not only recognise how vital good public service broadcasting is to our democracy and society; they must also take cognisance of the responsibility to ensure public finances are used responsibly and ensure that consumers' interests are taken into account.

It is disappointing to see that the Bill puts the stamp on the Minister's move to stall a levy on streaming services. A European works levy will now require ministerial sign-off. In reality, this will mean less investment in Irish content, fewer opportunities for creators and continued advantage for global streaming giants. The Labour Party supports a content levy that would contain proper safeguards to protect consumers. We do not need to have a binary approach here. It is perfectly possible to invest in Irish creativity, support public service broadcasting, hold major streaming platforms to account and ensure that consumers rights are protected. This is becoming the norm across Europe, yet Ireland continues to lag behind. We have been blessed with success in our TV and film industries in recent years, which is a testament to good policymaking but we cannot afford to be complacent.

Today may not be the time to have a fulsome debate on the issue, but I would like to raise another aspect of the existing financial settlement for public service broadcasting. Under section 145(12) of the Broadcasting Act 2009, the Department of Social Protection pays a lump

sum annually to the Department of communications in respect of free TV licences issued under the household benefits package. The amount that is paid over is fixed following consultation between the two Departments and the Department of public expenditure. In principle, providing free television licences to pensioners and older citizens is entirely right and proper. It is an important social support, particularly for people who are living alone or on fixed incomes. We need to be honest about how this arrangement has operated in practice, however. During the years of the financial crash, reducing the transfer became an easy Exchequer saving. Pensioners still received the benefit but the amount transferred did not necessarily reflect the cost of the licences issued. The consequence was that the shortfall was effectively absorbed by RTÉ, TG4, and, ultimately, the wider public service broadcasting sector. In other words, part of a social protection measure was effectively funded out of money intended for public service media and independent production.

As licence fee evasion increases and as Ireland's population ages, there is a risk that this funding gap will become more significant. That raises important questions that deserve scrutiny during the passage of this Bill. What exact amount is currently transferred annually by the Department of Social Protection? Does that amount fully reflect the value of all free licences issued? Do public service broadcasters effectively subsidise what is ultimately a social welfare support? I would respectfully argue that they should not. There is no reason why free television licences for pensioners should be paid for out of funding intended to sustain journalism, cultural programming, Irish-language broadcasting, children's content, regional reporting and independent production. If the State wishes to provide a universal social benefit, and I believe it should, then the State should fund that benefit transparently and in full. That conversation is central to the future sustainability of public service media. We cannot continually demand more from broadcasters while simultaneously allowing core funding streams to be eroded.

Equally important is the Bill's emphasis on editorial independence. In a time when media systems across Europe face pressures from political polarisation, disinformation, commercial concentration and foreign influence, protections for editorial independence are essential. The Bill explicitly requires boards to safeguard the independence of corporations from political, governmental, economic or private interests. That principle deserves strong support. Public service media must never become the voice of government, nor should it become captive to commercial interests or ideological pressure.

Its role is to inform, educate, scrutinise power and reflect society fairly and independently.

I also welcome the implementation of aspects of the European Media Freedom Act. Ireland does not operate in isolation. Our media environment is increasingly European and global. Aligning our framework with European democratic standards is both practical and desirable. While I support the broad direction of this Bill, however, it is also important that we scrutinise it carefully and acknowledge legitimate concerns. No legislation is beyond criticism. One concern relates to the expanded regulatory powers being granted to Coimisiún na Meán. The latter will gain significant authority to demand information, oversee compliance and regulate digital public service content. While accountability is necessary, there is always a balance to be struck between oversight and overreach. We must ensure that regulatory powers are exercised proportionately, transparently and with proper safeguards relating to freedom of expression and journalistic independence in place.

There is also a question of bureaucracy. The Bill creates additional committees, review structures, reporting requirements, audience councils, disclosure systems and compliance obligations. Some of these measures are justified, but we should ask honestly whether the cumulative effect could become overly administrative and resource heavy, particularly for organisations already under financial pressure. Public service media organisations should spend their time creating quality journalism and programming, not becoming consumed by governance paperwork and compliance exercises. The balance in that regard is important.

There is also the issue of cost. This legislation expands functions, reporting obligations, oversight systems and regulatory activity. We must question whether adequate and sustainable funding will accompany these expectations. We cannot continually demand more from public service media while failing to provide long-term financial certainty. If we value independent journalism, Irish-language content, regional reporting, investigative reporting, children's programming, arts programming and accessible public service content, we must be willing to invest properly in them.

Another area deserving careful examination is the definition of “under-served audiences”. The intention behind this provision is positive and commendable. However, there is a legitimate debate about how such categories will be interpreted and applied in practice. The public will rightly expect that editorial decisions remain grounded in journalistic judgment and public value rather than quota systems or political fashions. Representation matters, but editorial independence must remain paramount. Likewise, while audience councils could provide valuable public engagement, we should ensure that they enhance accountability without creating pressure groups that interfere improperly in editorial decisions.

There is also a broader philosophical debate that this Bill touches upon, namely that relating to the role of public service media in the modern era. Some argue that in an age of endless online content, publicly funded broadcasters are less necessary than before. I disagree. In fact, at a time of misinformation, algorithm-driven outrage, declining local journalism and growing distrust, the role of trusted public service media is arguably more important than ever. The answer to this is reform, accountability, transparency and renewal. This Bill attempts to provide that renewal. It is not perfect. It may require amendment and close scrutiny on Committee Stage. There are definitions that may need tightening, safeguards that may need strengthening and administrative burdens that may need reducing, but the central ambition of the Bill is correct. It recognises that democracy requires strong, independent and accountable public service media. It also recognises that Irish culture and identity deserve support in a crowded global media environment. It recognises citizens deserve transparency from publicly funded institutions, and it recognises that regulation must evolve alongside technology and changing patterns of media consumption.

As legislators, our task is not merely to criticise institutions when they fail; it is also to reform them responsibly. This Bill gives us an opportunity to do that. Therefore, while I believe careful scrutiny will be necessary, we in the Labour Party support the advancement of the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill 2026 and look forward to engaging constructively on its provisions as it proceeds through the Oireachtas.

Deputy Barry Ward: I will start by saying something relatively controversial. I do not think RTÉ does a bad job; I think it does quite a good job. As a public service broadcaster, the

difficulty it faces is that it is so often compared with international counterparts like the BBC, which is not perfect and which receives funding vastly beyond what RTÉ could ever expect to get in a small jurisdiction like ours. On the whole, I think it does a good job.

RTÉ does a good job in the public service broadcasting space. I agree with Deputy O'Donoghue regarding how public service broadcasting should never be the voice of the Government. I do not think it is. It is more critical of the Government than perhaps the Government would be happy with, but it should not be the voice of any particular sector. I would like to see much more reporting and less commentary in the context of public service broadcasting. Too often, opinions are reported and colour what is broadcast. RTÉ does a good job in providing good news and current affairs coverage and a good overall spread of the broadcast content.

That said, I welcome this important Bill which amends the Broadcasting Act and implements many of the new EU media rules under the European Media Freedom Act. While it is important to recognise the elements of the independent review of the governance and culture of RTÉ and the Report of the Future of Media Commission published in 2022, it is also important that this legislation has been brought forward. I acknowledge Shona Donnelly, who is in the Public Gallery and who is interning with me at present. She has done a lot of work analysing what this Bill does and where it succeeds.

The change in governance is one of the most important things proposed. In light of what happened recently in RTÉ, we have, to an extent, got carried away with examining individual pay rather than looking at the governance issues. I specifically welcome the provisions in this Bill that will change the governance of RTÉ, public service broadcasting and the safeguards for editorial independence, which will come through the official governing body. Describing the director general as the editor-in-chief and ensuring that his or her term of office shall only last five to seven years are good things. In that context, maybe we need to separate RTÉ out as being different from other media organisations because it is in receipt of so much public funding.

I also recognise the changes in transparency in respect of the commissioners within Coimisiún na Meán and the fact that RTÉ's accounts will be audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General. The difficulty with RTÉ has been less about the manner in which money has been spent - and the criticism in that regard is valid - but, rather, the changes in the appearance that perhaps what has been said cannot be relied upon. That is a problem from the point of view of public confidence. Transparency is a hugely important part of that public confidence in public broadcasting and public service media. The notion, for example, that the director general would be available to give evidence before committees is hugely important. There should not be any resistance to that; they should be available to answer questions when called upon to do so. Reviews every three years and annual reviews of the organisation's funding and performance are also important to inform and reinstate that performance. Obviously, this goes hand in hand with the disclosure of employee pay. As I said, this is less about individuals and more about the organisation.

One thing that is very welcome is the scope for greater focus on the Irish language. One of the things we have seen emerging in recent years, not in the context of this legislation but with regard to the Official Languages Act, is advertising and the fact State agencies have to spend 20% of their advertising on fógraíocht trí mheán na Gaeilge. That is extremely important.

Whether we realise it or not, we do notice it. We now have a situation where, if you are listening to or watching media, you will see advertising completely through Irish. That is something we did not really see before. You might have previously seen an advert that is targeted at the Irish-speaking community or that relates to an Irish-speaking product, but now it is wholesale.

3 o'clock

Irrespective of what Government programme it is or what a particular Government agency is doing, we will now hear that advertising to the tune of at least 20% as Gaeilge. That is hugely important because it normalises the existence of Irish within the media generally but, obviously, within our public service media as well. The make-up of the audience councils is really important in terms of including at least ten Irish-speaking members and at least five with Gaeltacht experience. That is progress, and we should actually be moving to increasing that 20% because I think it makes a big difference as to what we hear in media. Here is where it also makes a difference: now there is a funding stream for those involved in Irish language media production. People, particularly cainteoirí dúchais - Irish speakers - who can do that advertising and companies that are capable of doing production through Irish now have a guaranteed stream that comes into them. That is really important because it funds those companies in the longer term. It makes their existence viable where perhaps previously it would not have been, notwithstanding the presence of TG4 and its predecessor, Teilifís na Gaeilge, and indeed Raidió na Gaeltachta, which does not have the same extent of advertising in real terms. It is something that I think is a burden on presenters on Raidió na Gaeltachta. If you are presenting on most mainstream media programmes, there is an ad break where you get to put yourself together for the next segment. If you are presenting a programme on RTÉ Raidió na Gaeltachta, you do not have that chance; it just goes from one segment into the next. The professionalism then is also worth noting. The point I make about the importance of driving Irish language material, in terms of the presence of ár dteanga dúchais, is really important, but the point about how it drives production and capacity within the Irish language production centre is also important.

That extends beyond the language to Irish producers in general. One of my real bugbears is the notion that you turn on RTÉ radio, RTÉ television or any Irish indigenous radio or television station and there is an ad being run on that station that is 100% exclusively produced for the English market - English accents, English parlance, English slang, English personalities, produced in London by people who have no concept of what the Irish market needs. When that ad is run on Irish media, it frustrates me because it is a signal that the company running the ad really sees us as being part of the English or British market. That is one thing, but worse than that, it means that the Irish voice-over artists based in Dublin, the people who do the copy, the people who put together the filming of these things in Dublin, and the jobs that are based here in Dublin providing media solutions for Irish companies, Irish people and Irish media consumers are being overlooked. If a big multinational - I will not name any companies but there are lots of them - makes its ad in London and then runs it in Irish media, it is saying not only that it thinks we are an extension of the British market but also that it does not care to give work to Irish media companies based here in Dublin and elsewhere around the country. That is a real shame, and there is an obvious responsibility on the company itself to indicate that it has enough respect to produce an ad that is dedicated to this jurisdiction. I also think there is a role for the media companies, the radio stations and the television stations to say to those companies that come to advertise with them that those ads are not made for this jurisdiction. I

have raised this with media companies, and the response is understandably that they do not turn away business. The payment for those ads funds the activities of that radio station or television station. I get that. However, I do not get the sense that, at any point when an ad comes in, there is somebody in RTÉ or, indeed, any other media outlet in the country who says they think the advertiser should amend or change that ad or remake it in Ireland using Irish staff, Irish teams and Irish companies because it will land better with the people here. The problem for us is that because we also consume so much international media, particularly British media, we sometimes do not notice. If you are watching British television and then you switch to an Irish channel, you might not notice that the ad is exactly the same as the one you saw on the British channel.

I just think there is a real shame within the media landscape that we cannot strike out better for Irish media companies to ensure that the content we see, hear and have to listen to is indigenous content generated here for us, by us. I do not mean that to sound in any way isolationist because the reality is that we live in a global environment, and I do not have a problem with that. However, I do have a problem with the notion that we are an extension of another media market. I think there is something being missed by media outlets here but also by the companies that are advertising, and I do not know if they are even aware of how much it can sometimes turn off an Irish consumer that the product being advertised is actually being geared towards and aimed at a different type of consumer entirely. I do not know to what extent that can be addressed within this legislation, but in the same way that the Official Languages Act prescribed the 20% allocation for fógraíocht trí Ghaeilge, is there room, perhaps, for a portion or a requirement for a portion of advertising on any station to be made, for example, in this jurisdiction? That may interfere with competition rules within the European Union, but maybe if we just said that it had to be done within the European Union, that would specifically relate to the other major English language jurisdiction in this part of the world.

I started by saying that I thought RTÉ did a good job. I stand by that. I think that our news can sometimes be a small bit parochial, and I want to give a shout-out to a programme that I think is genuinely excellent. Unfortunately, it occupies only a 20-minute slot on a Sunday morning on RTÉ Radio One, and it is "World Report". "World Report" is a programme that goes around the world and uses reporters on the ground in places we do not hear very much from very often and it gives them an opportunity to set out a story that is happening in Kenya, India or Bolivia or somewhere like that that does not make the mainstream news - and, by the way, that includes print media. Particularly in an English language jurisdiction, where there is so much international media coming into our country through English, it is sometimes very difficult for consumers here to hear through that noise and see things that do not make their way into the headlines in our newspapers or notifications on our various media apps or whatever we look at online. Algorithms can sometimes kill your ability to see beyond what a particular platform thinks you should be reading. "World Report" cuts through that, and I really do not know why we could not do a "World Report" every day. On RTÉ Radio, before "Morning Ireland" starts at 7 a.m., for example, there is room there even to do one or two stories. It is an excellent programme because it also lifts us out of the parochial nature that is sometimes associated with news in this jurisdiction. I would love to see that happening.

This Bill, which is concerned primarily with governance and transparency, is good legislation and I welcome it, but there is so much more we can do in terms of improving our national media landscape to ensure that it serves the people in this country but also serves them

with a diet of information and media material that they will not get outside this country. Let us do better for them in that regard.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I just have a few short points to make, so I will not use my full time, just for the benefit of other speakers. I thank the Minister of State for being here in the absence of the media Minister. I welcome the progress of this Bill and I look forward to getting stuck into it on Committee Stage at the media committee. We are at a crucial juncture as to where broadcasting is and where streaming is, all the disruption we have experienced as a society from the Internet, essentially, and the companies that dominate that world, what that has meant for revenues for traditional broadcasters, legacy media generally, and what it means now for how we govern that space. I recognise that this is on the back of not only the Future of Media Commission but also the more recent governance report. Of course, it is also on the back of the governance and financial scandal, if you like, recently experienced by RTÉ and by this disruption I refer to.

I welcome the move to bring RTÉ under the remit of the C and AG. I have been an Accounting Officer under the remit of the C and AG. It is a rigorous body that I believe will assist us in bringing to where it needs to be the transparency and oversight of RTÉ as our national and State broadcaster.

I want to pick up on a couple of other specifics within this. Screen Producers Ireland has been in touch about the 25% funding minimum. Essentially, one of the issues it raises is that, within the legislation, we do not yet see a commencement date for that minimum. We need to look at that. This is a pivotal and fundamental measure for the commercial sector, which carries that public service broadcasting mandate through the commissioning process, and it is crucial that the sector be provided with as much information as possible as far in advance as possible in order that it can do the appropriate planning that it needs to respond to the call for public service broadcasting from our national broadcaster. That is very important.

I want to touch on the Irish language scope of this, as many others have. I have talked a lot with Irish language media providers recently, primarily on the campaign trail in the Galway West by-election, and it was an eye-opener to understand how difficult it had been for producers and professionals working in that space who were looking at dual or two-tier pay systems, essentially, often for twice the work. There is a feeling in some areas that professionals are paid less and asked to do more to meet not only the public service obligations in the Irish language sector, but also the ambition we have as a State to foster and promote our indigenous language.

It is a shame that the Minister has chosen not to place the levy entirely under the remit of Coimisiún na Meán. This is exactly what I am saying about disruption. We are seeing a disproportionate amount of the cost of disruption borne by legacy media rather than by the streamers and new platforms. That is where it needs to go to. I get the concerns about passing the cost on to the consumer but we are an outlier now. In other European countries, the streaming levy is available to fund independent and creative sectors. They could produce Irish media content. That is something I will be pushing hard on on Committee Stage. I have no doubt others in the Opposition will too.

Overall, I welcome the Bill and look forward to working on it further on Committee Stage.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: This Bill is a media governance and transparency reform package for public service media, designed to restore trust in RTÉ, strengthen oversight, support independent production and ensure public money delivers value. It heightens accountability and governance by assigning the Comptroller and Auditor General as auditor of RTÉ. Also contained in the Bill is an enhancement of the statutory framework from which Coimisiún na Meán assesses the performance and funding of RTÉ and TG4. It includes strengthened provisions relating to the duties, appointments and dismissal of the directors general of RTÉ and TG4 and provides for greater transparency in the anonymised reporting on remuneration of employees and contractors. It extends media service duties and codes to all non-broadcast content published by RTÉ and TG4 and strengthens the independence and authority of the audience councils. Given what we dealt with in the past week in the media committee, that is extremely important.

It is about strengthening transparency, accountability and governance while widening support for public service content across the media sector. It is about ensuring our public media provide accurate, factual news content on all platforms and provide high-quality media that is free and accessible to all of Ireland.

It is important to say that RTÉ provides a fantastic service. It provides trustworthy content and news, and that is something that is not provided across all platforms. We need to address that.

The Bill is about ensuring publicly funded organisations provide content related to the democratic, social and cultural needs of our society that is free at the point of consumption. It is about ensuring that people who receive taxpayers' money are accountable and adhere to good governance, and that public organisations are transparent in how they handle taxpayers' money. In the case of RTÉ, that is €725 million over three years, as well as the TV licence, which amounts to over €100 million, paid by people throughout the country.

We have seen scandals arise and it is important that the correct legislation and structures are in place to prevent their recurrence. The Bill will give greater accountability by strengthening the audit and governance rules surrounding the board and director general. RTÉ and TG4 will face strong reporting requirements, including anonymised pay reporting and annual reports on commissioning decisions and spending, heightening transparency and oversight.

The Bill goes even further than that. It outlines a new framework for RTÉ, TG4 and public service content in the wider media sector. There is also planned support for independent productions and provision for payment by RTÉ of at least 25% of its annual public funding into the RTÉ independent programmes account for the purpose of commissioning programmes from the independent sector.

The Minister has withheld a charging levy at this point but has not said it will not happen. We will wait and see. We want to see Netflix, etc., purchasing independent content in this country. If not, the Minister reserves the right to go to Coimisiún na Meán to impose a levy. Ultimately, we do not want a levy put on consumers; they are paying enough as it is.

Rules and standards currently applied to broadcast content will apply to podcasts and written content on both stations. There will also be a complaints pathway through Coimisiún na Meán. The Bill also clarifies the Netflix levy. That will only be introduced following a ministerial

direction, with impact assessments required before and after implementation. That will happen unless the likes of Netflix purchase Irish content, keeping people in jobs in Ireland.

The Bill provides Coimisiún na Meán with additional information-gathering powers for supervising Ireland's online safety framework. Online safety is a serious topic and we need to do everything in our power to make the online world as safe and beneficial to users, particularly vulnerable users and our children, as possible. This Bill will ensure we achieve that goal.

The Bill has been brought before the Government. The Joint Committee on Arts, Media, Communications, Culture and Sport discussed it and made 85 recommendations. The Minister has replied and 65 recommendations can be and already have been addressed, including in existing legislation and by incorporation into this Bill.

The Bill accepted in principle recommendations, published by the Government, of the Future of Media Commission. The Government published the independent review of the governance and culture of RTÉ, prepared by an expert advisory committee. It has received lots of scrutiny, recommendations, attention and discussion. It is ready to be passed and to strengthen the transparency, accountability and governance of RTÉ, TG4 and public media organisations and platforms more generally.

Legislative measures supporting this Bill include the Media Regulation Bill 2026 and the European Media Freedom Act, which aims to strengthen the internal market for media services and protect media pluralism and independence throughout the EU.

In conclusion, this is about ensuring that our media are transparent and accountable and taxpayers receive high-quality journalism, Irish-made television and increased content through our native Irish language. I thank Members for their attention and commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am against the legislation and I am a little surprised others have not stated their opposition to it. I urge people to consider opposing it. There are some good aspirations and aspects to it, which I would support. I am for greater transparency when it comes to the governance of RTÉ. I am for better financial management of RTÉ and of money put into public service broadcasting generally. I am also for more transparency - that is relevant to why I am against this Bill - and proper management of public funds going into the audiovisual sector, including the money to public service broadcasting but also the lots of money given to the audiovisual sector where there is no transparency. Some of us - me in particular - have been urging the Government to look at it and to have transparency, accountability and proper financial management, yet the Government does not do it. I do not believe this Bill is actually about achieving the things it says it is going to achieve.

I think it is going to do the opposite of that. That is why I am going to be opposing it, despite the aspirations. Do not get me wrong, I am happy to have the Comptroller and Auditor General look at and audit of the accounts of RTÉ. That is fine; no problem. If the Bill was just about that, I would be in favour of it. What I am not in favour of is an obligation of a minimum of 25% of all the money that RTÉ is going to be given having to be outsourced to the private sector. It is a minimum, by the way. That is back-door privatisation. There is no transparency once we outsource to the independent sector. Therefore, we will not know what is done with that money. If we think about it, and my worst fears are being realised, the bad behaviour and

obscene salaries of a small group of people at the top of RTÉ means that the ordinary workers in RTÉ, who are in no way responsible for that bad behaviour, and public service broadcasting itself are going to be the collateral damage. That is what is actually happening here. The net result will be that more money will go into areas in broadcasting and in the audiovisual sector where there will be no oversight whatsoever, namely, the independent sector. What oversight is there going to be of the independent sector? What oversight is there when the State outsources stuff?

Let me give the Minister of State one example that is, in my opinion, kind of relevant. I will just set it out. I screamed about it at the time but, as usual with Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, I was just wasting my time. I refer to the sale of Ardmore Studios, which was the national film studios, back in 2018. The Government had a 32% stake in Ardmore Studios when it was sold to Olcott, a private consortium that also owned Troy Studios. If we remember, a lot of money for Troy Studios had come from Limerick County Council, I think. It was owned, if I remember correctly, although I stand to be corrected, by Michael Noonan's brother. It became Troy Studios and Olcott then bought Ardmore Studios, the 32% remaining stake. Ms Siún Ní Raghallaigh was the CEO. That name should ring a bell; she was in charge of RTÉ later. Olcott got hold of what had been the national film studios and the remaining 32% Government stake. It gave commitments at the time, and some of us expressed concern about this, that it was committed to the people who were employed there and so on. I raised this at the time with the Comptroller and Auditor General, by the way. I went in and met him. In 2021, Olcott, headed up by Siún Ní Raghallaigh and a guy called Joe Devine, sold Ardmore for €100 million to Hackman Capital Partners and Square Mile Capital Management, which were US-based consortiums. There still is not full clarity on how much the State actually got for the 32% because it was writing off debts and so on for Ardmore. A lot of money had gone into Ardmore through section 41 and so on. I think it was in the region of €6 million. The State got €6 million and three years later, the consortium sold it for €100 million.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is this all on the public record?

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Yes. That is something that was public and where we had some oversight of it. There was some accountability. It went to a private company and then ended up in the hands of vulture funds, and a huge fortune was made in the meantime. There was no transparency around any of that. We had no real control over it or no oversight. That is what is going to happen, in my opinion, slowly but surely to public service broadcasting. This is an example of the requirement to outsource to the independent sector.

Who is going to check what the salaries are for the producers in the independent sector? Who is going to ensure there is not bogus self-employment, something we know was an element of what was going on in RTÉ with the disgraceful treatment of workers in there? By and large, however, most people have proper jobs. They paid tax, had pensions and so on. Some people were treated very badly and there was some route to try to resolve that and reclassify people who had been bogusly self-employed. What is happening in the independent sector in terms of employment for workers? What is going to happen is that proper paid jobs for crew in RTÉ are going to be progressively replaced by people in the independent sector. My understanding from talking to people is that the producers, that is, the members of Screen Producers Ireland, SPI, are basically telling people that if they want to work on their

productions, whether they are scripted or non-scripted - a lot of the new stuff is going to be in the non-scripted sector - but in either case, these individuals will be told they have to set themselves up as private companies. This is not PAYE employment, so they will not be paying PAYE tax anymore. If they were doing that job in RTÉ and if those productions were being made in-house in RTÉ, they would be paying tax and they would have some job security. Now, once it is in the independent sector and privately owned, who is going to make sure it is not bogus self-employment? From what I hear, it is rampant. Basically, people will not get to work in that sector unless they agree to set themselves up as a private company. Therefore, individuals, whether they are plasterers, riggers or whatever it might be, have to set themselves up as individual private companies, so they are not employees.

By the way, as well as getting money it seems from RTÉ, there is another source of money, which is interesting in and of itself. I think it is still going on, and maybe the Minister of State can clarify it. Certainly, a few years ago, about €400,000 or more was being paid by RTÉ to Screen Producers Ireland, which is the representative group of the private companies in the independent audiovisual sector, that is, the producer companies. Why is public money going to run a representative organisation of a series of private companies? I do not understand that. I do not think public money goes to IBEC, does it? I do not think so, unless I missed something. However, it is going to the screen producer equivalent of IBEC - I think that is been going on - which is very pleased about the commitment. I got its document. It is very pleased and very happy with the requirement in this legislation that 25% of all the money of RTÉ is going to go to it as well as the money it gets paid to run its organisation in a situation where nobody has a job in that sector and where workers are fighting to get proper employment because it is gig to gig. We have gone from people having jobs in RTÉ to this and just to reiterate, these are the workers who did not have obscene salaries whose jobs are being replaced. I am absolutely for capping the salaries of the top people in RTÉ; they were obscene. However, it is the jobs of the ordinary people - the crew, the camera operators and all these people - that are going to be replaced with people who will now work gig to gig. They will go from proper jobs into the gig economy. They will be totally vulnerable. Will they get on to the next gig? They not if they complain about the hours.

I mentioned a report to the Minister. Screen Guilds of Ireland did a survey, which it never published because the responses of the people who worked in the sector were so bad that it looked bad for the industry. It never published it because it was all about the long hours, poor pay, no career progression, how people were never listened to and how it was understaffed and under-resourced. It was absolutely damning, so it was never published. That was done a couple of years ago. Is this what is going to happen to people who are working in the independent sector where more money is going to go?

This is happening simultaneously when section 481, the film tax credit, which was previously for the scripted sector because it contributed to developing an industry and producing stuff in relation to Irish culture, is now going in the independent sector to stuff that does not necessarily do any of those things. I was reading an article a while ago about Gordon Ramsay's cooking show being produced in the independent sector.

What does Gordon Ramsay have to do with public service broadcasting? It is Gordon Ramsay or US quiz shows. Is that contributing to Irish culture? Are they going to benefit from tax breaks and money coming in that was supposed to go to public service broadcasting? Is

that where this is going? It looks to me like the bits in RTÉ that were making money are being asset-stripped out and decent jobs for ordinary people are now going to be thrown into this private sector where there is no oversight.

An Ceann Comhairle: Sorry to interrupt but I think the Deputy needs to clarify that he is making his point by using an example rather than an insinuation against-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: No, I am asking questions about what I think may be happening.

An Ceann Comhairle: But that individual-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am entitled to ask whatever questions I like.

An Ceann Comhairle: Yes, but the Deputy cannot bring somebody-----

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: What? Who did I mention?

An Ceann Comhairle: Mr. Ramsay.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am simply making-----

An Ceann Comhairle: That is what I am asking the Deputy to clarify.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: A Gordon Ramsay cooking show was made a couple of years ago down in Wicklow. Did it benefit from public money? Will the independent sector benefit - because that was made by the independent sector - now that 25% of RTÉ money has to go to these people, the producers? An awful lot of the stuff that is made here is getting section 481 money or Screen Ireland money and now it is going to get RTÉ money. Screen Producers Ireland, which is the representative group of the independent sector, has for quite a number of years been getting hundreds of thousands of euro from RTÉ - private companies. This looks to me like the hollowing-out of public service broadcasting using the excuse of bad governance and bad behaviour by a small group of people at the top. I am against that. I am against throwing out the baby with the bathwater. I am against public service broadcasting, decent quality employment and training and indeed the wider public interest being thrown out because of the bad behaviour of a small group of people, which could have been dealt with by imposing a cap and everybody being placed on salary scales that are transparent. The salary scales and the pay, employment and training conditions of people in the private sector - that independent sector - will not be transparent. Who is going to be checking on them? It will not happen. All that money will just go out and we will have no control whatsoever. It is not benefiting the public, it is not generating public service broadcasting and it is not generating quality employment and training - very much the opposite - so I am very concerned. I believe hundreds of workers in RTÉ are balloting for industrial action because of their concerns about this. Where will the RTÉ orchestra going to live? I could say more.

Deputy Brian Stanley: There are some good parts in this Bill but I have some serious concerns as well. The decision in the 1990s to remove the power of the Comptroller and Auditor General and indeed direct accountability of RTÉ to the Committee of Public Accounts was a huge mistake by the Government at that time. During the four and a half years when I was Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts, when we started looking at RTE, it got worse. What we met at the first couple of hearings was every attempt to not answer questions. I am trying to be charitable when I say that what was clear by the end of those hearings and that four and a half year period of the Dáil was that there was a cabal at the top of it that was run by the cabal for the cabal and anybody who agreed with it. That had to change. The Committee of Public Accounts produced over 20 recommendations. Central to them was something I proposed way back at the start. I was amazed to find that RTÉ was not accountable to the Comptroller and Auditor General or directly accountable to the Committee of Public Accounts. Indeed there was reluctance to come before the committee and we had to go to extreme lengths to actually drag the previous management of RTÉ in through the door initially, so I welcome that part of it. It is important that this second level of oversight is there and direct accountability to this House and the taxpayer in respect of public money. It is a key recommendation.

It is key for the Minister of State to make sure that the board is fully functioning and has its eyes on what is going on. It was clear that the connection between board and management was not great despite the fact that there were some good people on the board doing good work. It is the same with the audit committee. Appointments and decision-making are key. Pay for top earners is very important. All that was in the recommendations. I acknowledge that progress has been made on a lot of that. A lot has been done on presenters' pay but more has to be done. Regarding the issue of producers and presenters, if somebody is known as a presenter in the public mind and that is a huge part of his or her work then he or she should be counted as a presenter. The pay of at least the top 50 earners across the board in RTÉ should be published annually regardless of what their role is.

The issue of agents came up a lot. The one thing that came to light fairly quickly as the Committee of Public Accounts started a deep dive into it was the fact that one agent could get themselves into a position of being able to let the whole lot spin in the palm of their hand. That must never be allowed to happen again. The rules of engagement with agents need to be very clear. It was literally a game of bluff. If they were poker players, they would be very good at winning. To allow somebody to get that excessive control is wrong so there has to be transparency with regard to that, there need to be very clear rules of engagement and that requires continuous examination by the Minister of State and the Department to make sure that never happens again.

Transparency is obviously important in terms of accounts, remuneration and performance. I welcome the provision about the monitoring role of Coimisiún na Meán in the Bill. It involves assessing and appraising performance. Regarding spend on the overall media sector, including what is going to be independent sector, I am not going to argue against independent radio stations, etc., but that does need to be monitored. Regarding outsourcing production, one of the issues we came up with actually before we started diving into management was the issue of bogus self-employment. Regarding outsourcing the fat, make no mistake about it, it is the fat of RTE that is going to be privatised. There was bogus self-employment in RTE but this will not be counted as bogus self-employment when it is in the independent sector. As outlined already, there will be contractors and individual companies, they will not have union

representation or terms and conditions and they will have "if and when" contracts. That is a very uncertain way to live when the cost of a house in Dublin is so high and when someone has to have a permanent job and income to get a mortgage.

Coimisiún na Meán's broadcasting levy on independent radio stations increased by 29% this year. I know it is a bit detached from this Bill but I want the Minister of State to hear this. The figure is 69% on average over two years. The figure for the radio station in my area is 2.8% of turnover - not profit. We are talking about nearly 3% of turnover. That is a huge levy and that is on top of all the other overheads that have gone up, such as wages, although it is good that they have gone up, along with insurance and energy. They are competing with tech giants and other platforms and it is important that this is reined in. Coimisiún na Meán says it is committed to ensuring value for money by maximising cost-effectiveness. The Minister of State has a responsibility to make sure of that and I would ask her to address that latest hike. Could she engage with Coimisiún na Meán on that? The outsourcing is the main issue of concern in the Bill, however.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It will not come as a shock to Members that I have a particular problem with the legislation in that it does not deal with the issue of geoblocking, in respect of which Sinn Féin had proposed a measure, and how wrong it is that RTÉ programmes and particular events, including sporting events, are not available to those in the North. We hear the Taoiseach talk about the shared island unit and we do not actually see the proper outworking.

This is a very simple thing that could have been provided and it would show an interest in the North from the Government here. It is just another let down in a long number of let downs. I would like to think that the Minister of State would understand that, and have conversations with the Government about the fact that it is something that really needs to be looked at.

The only thing there will be consensus on is the idea of RTÉ coming under the Comptroller and Auditor General. We will all be happy when we are not dealing with further revelations around pay and whether someone is a presenter or a producer or not, and the ins and outs of sideways payments. That is all before we talk about those others who suffered under bogus self-employment. We know that is an issue that has been rife in many industries.

What did not come as a shock to me was the issue Deputy Boyd Barrett brought up not only in relation to RTÉ but those in the independent sector, and the fact we do not have a decent framework for those working in it. There are many crew and whatever else who work across the audiovisual sector in general who will speak about how they have never had their rights as workers. Now we are talking about a greater number who will not even have an opportunity for that if they are going to be recorded as self-employed.

We have seen the issue around producers who pull down State money and who create designated activity companies, DACs, for running projects such as film production. Then when somebody wants to use the industrial relations framework to ensure they have their rights, it is not available to them because they are not really an employee. How could they be an employee of a DAC that disappears after every project? The fact is that it is the producers that pull down the money.

There is a need to deal with this issue and, unfortunately, it is another one of these cases where we end up being like a broken record because the issue is not dealt with. That is why there is a huge amount of unease around the fact that Screen Producers Ireland, SPI, as producers and the representative body for producers gets State money. The Tánaiste and others have given promises in the Chamber to me, to Deputy Ó Snodaigh, in particular, and to Deputies Joanna Byrne and Boyd Barrett but we need to see the outworking and the results because that is what those who work in the industry require.

I thank the Ceann Comhairle for the flexibility she showed me by allowing me to come in at this stage. Given the day that is in it, I want to commend the FTD brothers, Jordan and Cian Adams, who finished off their marathon in Merrion Square Park. It is absolutely fabulous that they have completed 33 marathons in 33 days. I barely clung along with them in Dundalk.

An Ceann Comhairle: Broadcasting at its best.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I would like to think that RTÉ and others would follow it.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Public service.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It was in remembrance of their mother, Geraldine, who had frontotemporal dementia. She was diagnosed in her 40s and died at 52 years of age. Unfortunately for the two boys, they have that particular gene. Today was obviously a great day for them and for the whole community. There was great support shown across Ireland. In fairness, they spoke about the good news that their sister does not have it. I commend them.

Debate adjourned.

Estimates for Public Services 2026: Message from Select Committee

An Ceann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Education and Youth has completed its consideration of the following Revised Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 December 2026: Vote 26 - Education and Youth.

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 Joe Cooney - To discuss the need to provide funding to local authorities for the refurbishment costs of tenant in situ scheme houses.

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss the DEIS plus appeals process

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss engagement with the Before We Die Group, and plans for ramping up residential placements nationwide.

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

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl - To discuss the measures to put in place a new management system for the Curragh Plains;

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss the implementation of phase 3 of the bag-free streets programme, and the impact on households and businesses in the affected areas.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss the delay in funding BusConnects in Limerick.

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

The matters raised by Deputies Joe Cooney, Gary Gannon, Seán Ó Fearghaíl, Pádraig O'Sullivan and Jen Cummins have been selected for discussion.

Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I thank colleagues for their very heartfelt contributions today. Our officials present have taken copious notes on all the points raised. I have no doubt that they, along with myself, will relay them to the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan.

There are two colleagues who remain in the House. I take Deputy Boyd Barrett's point and his concerns on the 25% but it is important to acknowledge that a lot of that will go to independent Irish content creators too, and they are all creatives. I hear what the Deputy is saying. We are only on Second Stage of this Bill so hopefully there will be an opportunity to give the Deputy the reassurance that it will be used wisely and used in a way that helps our independent Irish creators flourish too. Not everybody wants to work in RTÉ. Deputy Boyd Barrett and I both know that being from the creative industries. It is not for everybody and there must be a funding source for those independent creators who want to work outside the bubble of RTÉ. We have to find a way to do that, to fund that and to find a way it can be done in a transparent way.

In respect of the geo-blocking raised by Deputy Ó Murchú, I concur with everything the Deputy has said.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Would that be in general?

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Deputy Ó Murchú.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I have some notes here in relation to the piece on geo-blocking. There is an existing legislative obligation on RTÉ and TG4 to make their television and services free to air to the whole community of Ireland insofar that it is reasonably practical. However, cases can arise where public service broadcasters cannot broadcast certain content outside the State due to rights restrictions, noting that the rights to content are often provided on a

geographic or territorial basis. There is further opportunity to engage with the Minister on this and I support Deputy Ó Murchú's views on that as a Border county colleague. I thank the officials who have sat here trying to feed information to me and, more importantly, who have been taking note of everything that is being raised and particularly the concerns. I have no doubt they will raise it with the Minister, Patrick O'Donovan.

I thank all the Deputies for their important contributions this afternoon. It is a little bit of *déjà vu* after the last term in the Dáil. I am hopeful for RTÉ's sake, because we know how important our public service broadcaster is given we live in a time of so much misinformation, with loud, algorithmic-driven outrage. It is so important the Irish public has objective reporting and not commentating, as Deputy Ward quite rightly said, with reporting on current affairs and reporting as is, so our general public have that. That is so important to our culture, our society and to democracy. I hope we are coming to a new dawn within RTÉ that everyone can have confidence around.

As has been raised by a number of contributors, those ideals are not limited to RTÉ and TG4. Our local, regional and national commercial newspapers and broadcasters also produce public interest journalism that holds power to account and makes innovative Irish programming available to the public. That is why this Bill will put in place a statutory framework that seeks to ensure the Irish public has access to high-quality, accessible public service content supplied by RTÉ and TG4. They will have a distinctive role and duties as public service media providers, and also to the wider Irish media sector.

The variety of the issues which have been raised on the floor highlight the breadth of the framework set out in the Bill. The Bill represents a key milestone in the evolution of the Broadcasting Act 2009 in terms of the regulation, governance and assessment of our public service media providers and the assessment and recognition of the role of the wider media sector in providing public service content to the public.

The Bill will provide Coimisiún na Meán, as independent regulator, with enhanced powers to ensure that public service media providers are transparent, independent and provide value for money, which is what we all want to see. The Bill enables Coimisiún na Meán to deal with the continuing changes in how we support and engage with public service media and public service content providers in Ireland.

The Bill has a critical EU law dimension as it will transpose provisions of the European Media Freedom Act. The Bill increases public service media's independence, strengthens the independent regulator, and provides for objective assessments of funding needs and appraisal, as required by the European Media Freedom Act.

Finally, I express my deep thanks for the contributions today and I look forward to working with Deputies into the future.

Question put.

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

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Rental Sector

Deputy Joe Cooney: Changes to the tenant in situ scheme are of significant concern for some constituents who face the very real prospect of homelessness because a scheme that was working has been effectively dismantled. When a landlord decided to sell, the local authority could step in, buy the property and keep the family in their home. It was straightforward and cost-effective and it worked, but last year the Department made a critical change. Local authorities cannot reclaim the cost of refurbishing properties they buy under the scheme. That might sound like a minor detail, but it is not. It is a decision that is making the scheme unworkable. The result is that councils are walking away from these purchases. They are not walking away because the family does not need the home but because the scheme is financially unsustainable for them.

In County Clare, this matter is particularly serious. Our private rental stock is older than the national average. Properties in our more rural and coastal locations often need more refurbishment before they can be let as social housing. We can see the impact in the numbers. In 2023, this scheme delivered 1,830 acquisitions. In 2024, it was 1,501. Last year, 2025, there were only 775 houses delivered.

At its peak, the tenant in situ scheme accounted for 46% of all homelessness prevention activity nationally. By December of last year, that figure had fallen to 11%. According to a recent media report, Clare County Council has only spent €1.45 million out of its €4 million allocation, which is very disappointing. I personally know of several cases where the council would not purchase the house because of the cost of refurbishing it to modern rental standards.

This scheme was one of the State's most effective tools for preventing homelessness. There should be no difference to the public purse whether this is achieved through the purchase and renovation of a property a tenant already lives in or moving them into a new build and renovating it afterwards. People in houses should be the measure of success, not the number of houses built. Preventing homelessness is the goal, regardless of what we do.

4 o'clock

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I thank Deputy Cooney for raising this matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Browne. I am happy to do so. I will pass on Deputy Cooney's thoughts and concerns about the tenant in situ scheme to the Minister.

Tenancy sustainment, also known as tenancy in situ, is not a stand-alone programme or scheme. It is a priority category under the Department of housing's social housing second-hand acquisitions programme, which helps to prevent social housing supported households in the private rental sector from becoming homeless. Such acquisitions are an option for local authorities to support households in the most precarious housing situations. They will continue to be available to local authorities for use as a last resort when all other options have been exhausted. However, they will never be the sole or even the primary option. The default first options should almost always be securing the sustainment of the tenancy with the landlord,

securing alternative accommodation through the tenancy sustainment and placefinder services, or allocating a local authority or approved housing body tenancy via a new build home or relet. Where acquisitions are deemed necessary, local authorities may pursue individual priority acquisitions without recourse to the Department, once they satisfy the broad parameters and criteria of the second-hand acquisitions programme.

Some €373 million is available to be drawn down by local authorities and approved housing bodies under this year's programme. With more than 17,000 persons in emergency homeless accommodation, including more than 5,000 children, the primary focus of this year's programme is to help households to exit emergency homeless accommodation into permanent housing. To this end, the largest share of funding available for draw-down, some €150 million, is ring-fenced for acquisitions supporting households and taking them out of homelessness. Thereafter, some €50 million is available to approved housing bodies for urgent acquisitions for older people, those with disabilities and caregivers. The remaining €173 million comprises €157 million for local authority priority acquisitions, including tenant in situ purchases, and a contingency of €16 million for local authorities that have drawn down most of their allocation but can complete further acquisitions and draw down the funding from the Department before the end of the year.

Clare County Council has been allocated an initial €1.7 million, with €800,000 and €900,000 earmarked for approved housing body and local authority priority acquisitions respectively. Consistent with the eligibility criteria introduced last year, refurbishment or adaptation costs are no longer an eligible cost for tenant in situ acquisitions. Generally, extensive refurbishments of those properties should not be required. They already benefit from significant Exchequer-funded rent supports through the housing assistance payment or rental accommodation scheme and, critically, must comply fully with the housing regulations. If refurbishment is required, local authorities need only undertake works necessary to comply with the regulations, effectively ensuring that homes are immediately safe, secure and warm. In such cases, local authorities can draw on the significant rental funding available to them through their respective annual budgetary processes. Notably, Clare County Council's adopted budget for 2025 suggests only 77% of its rental income would be invested in social housing management and maintenance. Local authorities may also draw on their respective internal capital receipts, and the Department of housing's planned maintenance and voids programme.

Deputy Joe Cooney: As far as I can see, the scheme is not working as well as previously. I ask the Minister of State to consider a number of things to make it work better in the future. Reinstate the scheme to its original state. Failing that, reinstate it for properties where refurbishment costs are proportionate to a purchase which is often worse value. Provide county-level data on acquisitions that have been declined or not pursued since March 2005 due to the refurbishment cost barrier. Provide data from each local authority about the number of tenants who have presented as homeless, following the refusal to purchase the property under this scheme. Let us all see the scale of this problem. The tenant in situ scheme was built on a simple principle of keeping families in their homes. The refurbishment exclusion has undermined that principle. I ask the Minister of State to restore the old scheme. I think it would work better for people going forward.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I will absolutely relay the Deputy's suggestions to the Minister. I will now read the remainder of the reply from the Department.

Local authorities may also draw on their respective internal capital receipts, and the Department of housing's planned maintenance and voids programme, energy efficiency retrofit programme, and disabled persons grants scheme, to support non-essential works that can be carried out in the long term. In this regard, Clare County Council projected that some €600,000 or so would be on hand via its internal capital receipts at the end of 2025, while a further €3.4 million is available to the council this year through the Department's stock improvement programmes. Ultimately, the delivery of new build social housing at scale is the only strategic solution preventing and alleviating long-term homelessness. Accordingly, and noting record delivery of new build social housing last year, demand for acquisitions should start to taper off as a greater level of new stock is delivered year on year. As I said, I will certainly relay Deputy Cooney's suggestions and observations to the Minister for housing and ask him to respond to the Deputy directly.

Waste Management

Deputy Gary Gannon: I thank the Minister of State for taking this matter. Dublin City Council's phase 3 bag-free streets programme will end plastic bag collection in Stoneybatter, Phibsborough, Broadstone, and other parts of the north-west inner city. It might feel like a good thing that we are removing plastic bags from rubbish collection. There have been incidents of seagulls opening bags which inevitably leads to rubbish being scattered and various related issues.

There is going to be a significant problem in that specific part of Dublin, however, on foot of this development because what is being proposed as an alternative involves a number of issues. The first of this is that there are going to be wheelie bins on streets that are in no way suitable for wheelie bins. The size of the bins that will be provided by the private operators involved means that take up half the footpath. If the Minister of State imagines streets like in Stoneybatter, there are rows upon rows of small terraced houses that either do not have back gardens or have gardens that are too small to house the wheelie bins on days when they are not being collected. That creates its own issues. On days when collections are taking place there will be wheelie bins taking up more than half the width of footpaths in communities where there are people with mobility issues. Wheelchair access is going to be prevented and anybody with a pram will simply have to move out onto the road.

I do not doubt the intention behind a plan like this, but the reality when it comes into place in a couple of weeks is going to be that will be rows of bins that will be an impediment to simply being able to get from their homes to their places of work and back. That is going to be an issue. Councillors from all parties on Dublin City Council unanimously passed a motion several weeks ago in which they called for this initiative to be stopped. They advocated for that, but in the past couple of days, the private operators contacted residents in Broadstone, Phibsborough and Stoneybatter to let them know that this change will be coming into place. This is a change that will have ramifications for accessibility. The aesthetic is another thing, because having these bins on the streets will be a blight on the entire neighbourhood. However, that is not as important as the fact that people will have to go get off the footpath in order to walk up the street.

There are also cost implications. It costs €40 for the bag collection. The cost of the wheelie bin collection is €240. In a cost-of-living crisis, that is a substantial increase. This has been foisted upon residents to the point where they are lobbying for their TDs to come into this Chamber and advocate against a change in the method of waste management. That is not what I want to be doing. I want to be scrutinising legislation and proposing Bills, but this is going to have an impact on the city of Dublin, our capital city, and the communities in it.

I understand that the regulation of waste management comes under the Department of climate. I am asking for some form of intervention with Dublin City Council. This initiative has not been accessibility proofed. The residents will certainly not be able to store wheelie bins or anything like that in their homes.

What they are asking for is some form of intervention by the State that will oversee the regulatory approval of initiatives like this and ask for a pause in order that full accessibility proofing can be done and alternative suggestions can be proposed. There have been alternatives proposed in the context of compactors and other things. Everyone accepts that there is an issue but nobody accepts that this is the solution. The solution to one problem will create a host of new issues which will fall outside the remit of Dublin City Council into all sorts of other areas, and we will be back here again. That will not be fair on people with accessibility issues who will be forced to walk on the street, nor will it be fair for anyone with a pram. Then there are also the cost implications. I am interested in hearing the Minister of State's response.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I am here on behalf of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. Waste management is a statutory executive function of local authorities. The phase-out of bags for the collection of waste is an initiative being taken by Dublin City Council, as the Deputy outlined. Under section 60(3) of the Waste Management Act, the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment is precluded from exercising any power or control, in specific circumstances, over the statutory functions of a local authority. That is not to say I will not relay the concerns the Deputy has outlined and see if there is any possibility of an intervention.

The collection of waste in bags was prohibited nationally over ten years ago, except in areas designated by local authorities as only being suitable for collection of waste in bags for reasons such as streets being too narrow or where there is no space within a property for three bins. In recent years, this was amended to collection by means of atypical collection solutions. If a household is in an area with no bin collection service, it may be able to avail of atypical collection solutions such as non-reusable receptacles or bags from the nearest collection point. Local authorities are responsible for designating areas as being only suitable for the collection of such waste by means of atypical collection solutions. Households can check with their local authorities if such a designation applies to their address and can organise a service with an authorised waste collection company accordingly.

Private waste collectors operate under a waste collection permit issued by the National Waste Collection Permit Office, NWCPO. These permits are subject to a set of standard conditions which include a requirement that waste collection charging systems should incentivise customers to source segregate their waste. This means that the fees charged for the collection of the brown bin or mixed dry recyclables bin should be lower than the fees for the

collection of the residual general waste bin. All permits can be viewed in full on the NWCPO website.

The waste management market is serviced by private companies, where the terms and conditions of contracts, including payment methods, are matters between those companies and their customers, subject to compliance with all applicable legislation, including contract and consumer legislation. The Minister has no role in relation to payment methods or setting prices in a competitive market.

The roll-out of this programme by Dublin City Council is an anti-litter and anti-dumping initiative. It will eliminate the presentation of domestic and commercial waste in bags, preventing the bags being ripped open by birds and vermin, thus making the streets cleaner. Affected households will need to switch to wheelie bins or use the new waste compactors. Any questions on the roll-out of the programme should be directed to Dublin City Council.

Deputy Gary Gannon: The State does set the regulatory framework that underpins the transition here. It is important that the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, understands the consequences for people in my area in Stoneybatter, Broadstone and Phibsborough, who are being forced to enter into a free-for-all between different private operators on streets that are wholly unsuitable for the services they provide. Imagine the situation where two or three days a week where small residential streets where there will be bins preventing people from getting through footpaths. That is a substantial lacuna in the law and the policy.

Accessibility and public sector duty might even come into play here because how we provide for waste management services does have consequences for those. The Minister can potentially apply public sector duty to ensure there is accessibility proofing done of this decision. We are paying the consequences of this bad privatisation of waste management. The ideal scenario for most of us would be for waste management services to come back under the remit of local authorities.

As it stands, people in Stoneybatter, Phibsborough and Broadstone will have to choose between competing operators and providers. They do not have anywhere to store the large bins they will be expected to purchase at a cost that is substantially higher than they paid previously. For all that, they will not only have seagulls picking their bags but they will also will face impediments in the context of getting up and down their streets.

These decisions that will have consequences. I am asking that the Minister intervene simply by asking Dublin City Council if this is the best policy for this particular part of Dublin. It is a much-discussed area because it is in the central part of the capital city. The policy in this regard is nonsensical. Dublin City Council is trying to remove from itself the cost involved in picking up scattered rubbish, but the consequences will be felt by people who cannot get up and down their streets.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: It is widely recognised there are difficulties with the collection of household waste in bags, including the littering caused as a result of bags being ripped, which we often see. There are health and safety issues for collectors whereby sharp objects are placed in bags, litter caused by fly-tipping on streets in areas where bag collections take place, little

or no segregation of recyclables or food waste and the inability to gather data on waste collected for statistical and environmental reporting purposes.

The Department, in consultation with local authorities, set criteria to be applied nationally with a view to phasing out bags except for areas where it is not practical to use wheelie bins and have been designated by local authorities as suitable for the use of atypical collection solutions. The criteria for these designated areas are: no space within the boundary of the property, which is the argument the Deputy is making; physical features would make it difficult to move a bag to the front or edge of the property or nearest boundary for presentation, or that it would be unreasonably difficult; that the area is too narrow for a refuse collection vehicle to access properties and the nearest designated collection point or suitable presentation point is more than 100 m from the property; and where the local authority is notified of exceptional circumstances and certifies it as same.

While waste legislation and policy are a matter for the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment, the bag-free streets programme is entirely an initiative for Dublin City Council. The council reports that illegal dumping has reduced by approximately 20 tonnes per month since the introduction of the programme and has contributed significantly to the very positive findings of the most recent Irish Business Against Litter survey, which noted a reduction in littering and an improved level of cleanliness. These improvements have delivered savings in terms of resources required - the Deputy acknowledged that argument – as well as collection and disposal costs for waste management services. I will relay Deputy Gannon's concerns to the Minister.

National Parks and Wildlife Service

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this matter for discussion. It relates to something that I find myself returning to repeatedly. While housing continues to be the number one issue in County Kildare and in other parts of the country, there is huge public anger around the manner in which the Curragh Plains are managed or not managed as the case might be. What is the Curragh? It is a 5,000-acre stretch of land resting between the areas of Kilcullen, Kildare and Newbridge. It is a proglacial fluvial plain formed during the Ice Age. I did not witness its formation, but I accept what we are told.

The Curragh sits on a bedrock of limestone. Under that limestone, is a huge aquifer which, we are told, is one of the largest in the country. Interestingly, the aquifer in question feeds water into Pollardstown Fen. That is interesting because, quite recently, within a couple of kilometres of the Curragh, Guinness spent €300 million opening a new production plant and committed to spending another €400 million on the second phase of that plant. It is also interesting because the first Guinness was allegedly made with water from Pollardstown Fen. The Curragh is used for legitimate purposes. Sheep are grazed there, the bloodstock industry uses it and the Defence Forces has its headquarters there. It was also used during the British occupation. It is an amenity that is used for numerous recreational purposes.

It is a great place I am told on a good moonlit night to observe the skies. I have not been doing that myself for a long time but nonetheless I understand that is the case.

What is required now is a new management structure and that management structure is committed to in the programme for Government. Why is it needed? It is needed because of

misuse of the plains, and unregulated use and overuse leading to the degradation of the national and local resource the Curragh Plains are. What is the problem? Bloodstock is using the plains. That is well managed by the racecourse and HRI, and it is well regulated. Sheep farming for the most part is controlled and well regulated. It is on a headage and lease basis, although some would argue there are far more sheep grazing now than perhaps there should be. There is certainly more than was obvious in the aftermath of the restrictions introduced during foot and mouth some decades ago. The leisure and amenity use is widespread and accepted but there is abuse of driving on the plains, indiscriminate parking, scrambling and other uses being made. Fly tipping is a huge problem.

However, one of the most acute difficulties in recent years has been the regular establishment over the past decade of illegal encampments on the plains. I pay tribute to the former Minister for Defence and the current Tánaiste, Deputy Simon Harris. He was the first person to seriously tackle that matter. Once he got his teeth into it, the Department of Defence moved rapidly each year to clear these illegal encampments. I pay tribute to the Secretary General, Jackie McCrum, and to Jason Kearney, the property manager there. There is huge expense being incurred by the State each year going to court to get court orders and carrying out the clean ups. It is not sustainable that would continue. We need a new management system in place, and we need it urgently.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Deputy for raising this incredibly important matter. I am here to respond on behalf of the Minister for Defence, who unfortunately cannot be here, but she sends her apologies to the House. I welcome the opportunity to respond on this matter. I acknowledge Deputy Ó Fearghaíl's long-standing interest in the protection, conservation and preservation of the Curragh Plains and his ongoing engagement with officials in that regard. The Curragh, as State land vested in the Minister for Defence, is recognised as a working environment for the State's Defence Forces as well as being a place of historical and cultural importance. The main occupiers are the Defence Forces in the Curragh Camp and the Curragh Racecourse, which leases a large tract of land. Additionally, the plains are used by sheep owners who avail of rights of pasture on the lands, and by both locals and visitors to Kildare as a major natural amenity. I concur about its scenic beauty any time you drive through County Kildare. The Curragh is approximately 4,870 acres and is one of the most open, accessible, and arguably beautiful areas in this country.

As the Deputy will be aware, for the past several years, the Department of Defence has been collaborating with Kildare County Council on the Curragh consultancy project, seeking to develop a suitable future management method and to highlight the importance and significance of the heritage associated with the Curragh Plains. The project came to completion in December 2024 when the Curragh Plains conservation management plan and the associated branding, interpretation and wayfinding strategy were published. The consultation process identified the need for a review of the Curragh by-laws and the Curragh of Kildare Act, with potential amendments to provide effective solutions to challenges faced. The report also identified the need to consider a dedicated agency responsible for the Curragh, or to assign responsibility for the site to an existing agency with the necessary expertise to maximise the potential of the plains. Throughout the project, both the Department of Defence and Kildare County Council remained cognisant of the need to have in place a means of ensuring conservation of this ancient landscape, while also enabling the area to receive the recognition

it deserves. The plan has laid out opportunities through which the area can be uniquely identified and also scoped out the development potential of the area as a high-value visitor attraction. It also aims to balance the needs of the respective users of the Curragh Plains, while caring for its natural qualities and providing clear policies for its sustainable future use.

As called for in the programme for Government, it is intended to implement the recommendations of the conservation plan for the Curragh, particularly in relation to transferring the plains to the agency that is best suited to managing this historic landscape. To this end, Department officials will continue to engage with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, which has undertaken an initial scoping of its likely requirements. I understand further discussions are intended in the coming weeks. From this process it is intended to advise Government as to the appropriate way to manage the plains.

I again thank the Deputy for his question and assure him that the Minister's intention is to ensure that the Curragh Plains, as an important element of our shared heritage, is protected into the future while also ensuring maximum benefit to the local population and to those who come to visit the plains. This Government is fully committed to pursuing a modern and sustainable regulatory model in managing this historically important landscape in the Curragh.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: I thank the Minister of State for a positive reply. We have known for some time that the Government favours the idea of the National Parks and Wildlife Service taking on the management of the plains. I am not so sure the National Parks and Wildlife Service itself is wildly enthusiastic about the prospect. It involves huge additional financial resources, and extra manpower will be needed. Kildare County Council conducted widespread consultation when it drafted its consultation and management plan for the Curragh. It attracted more than 3,600 public submissions. It was the largest number of submissions ever received in respect of any project in County Kildare. It is indicative of the level of interest there is in getting this right. I think the National Parks and Wildlife Service would be the right body but it will have to look at the Curragh differently to how it looks at the Phoenix Park or other areas of national importance. It will have to ensure it can guarantee that the legitimate regulated use of the plains by the bloodstock sector, the sheep sector and those involved in recreation and amenity can continue in an orderly and regulated manner that does not contribute to any degradation of the plains. However, this illegal encampment process going on year-in, year-out is a cause of incredible frustration. It is driving investment away from the area. Remember, huge crowds of people come to the Curragh for the major racing festivals. They are very often people with money to spend. They are not terribly attracted to a county where these unauthorised developments take place. It is not that everyone who comes treats the place with disdain. We had people from France last year who came with their caravans, mobile homes, toilets and bins. That is all grand but they would not be able to do it in the Phoenix Park, and they should not be able to do it in Kildare.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: The Deputy's passion about this is obvious. The statement from the Minister, Deputy McEntee, acknowledges the contribution he has made over the years working with the Department of Defence and the National Wildlife and Parks Service as an entity that may take on the management of this beautiful, scenic, historic and important piece of landscape that we have on the island of Ireland. As I have already stated, the Minister remains committed to pursuing a modern and sustainable regulatory model to manage this historically important

landscape in the Curragh. The Curragh Plains conservation management plan, finalised and published in 2024, is under consideration by officials in the Department of Defence. This will, however, provide the foundation for implementing the recommendations identified, including the progression of proposals for the future management of the plains. Any such proposals will be brought before Government to decide on a future management structure. I reiterate that it is the Government's intention to ensure the Curragh Plains are protected into future while ensuring and maximising the benefit to all stakeholders. I will relay the Deputy's point. The National Parks and Wildlife Service needs to act quickly to protect it, so we do not see caravans parking up, as they would not do in the Phoenix Park and should not do in the Curragh either.

Disability Services

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I want to talk to the Minister of State about the Before We Die campaign, a grassroots, family-led campaign across the country. It deals with an issue that we in this country have neglected for too long, that being, not finding appropriate residential places for people with intellectual disabilities. Unfortunately, it took a number of parents in Cork to raise this matter, albeit the main instigator, Tony Murray, was based in Dublin. He started this campaign a number of years ago. I pay tribute to Sinéad, Janet, Linda and Esther, who are central to the Cork campaign.

I do not understand how we have got into this position. Frequently, the House is told that we have massive budget increases for various aspects of disability services. That is true on paper, with over €3 billion now being spent on disability services annually and €2.2 billion of that for residential services, but if you talk to the 350 or so people who were in the Silver Springs hotel this day last week with myself and Deputy Séamus McGrath, you will hear of very little residential support and virtually no respite support. Cork has always been a bit of a black spot in terms of lacking disability services. That was no more evident than when residential support was discussed that night. Three hundred and fifty people packed that room. Some of the people had intellectual disabilities themselves, but many were parents, particularly mothers.

The Before We Die campaign has done its own research. There are 1,500 adults in this country with intellectual disabilities who are living with carers who are aged 70 or older. Of those, 500 or so are living with carers aged 80 or over. I am sure that the Minister of State and Deputy Ó Fearghaíl hear of people in their constituencies needing emergency care and intervention. A case came to me not so long ago where someone living in Cork was offered emergency residential care in Meath. That is what we are doing to these people, sending them hundreds of kilometres away from their families. Many of these parents do not want to make the decision to let their adult children leave them, but because of their ages, they just cannot cope any more. Unfortunately, the State offers the solution - the section 38 organisations in Cork offer it - of going hundreds of kilometres away from home. This is normally done to address an emergency or crisis situation.

We have done no forward planning in the last five or six years. The most recent figures made available to us show that 43 residential places were provided nationally in 2023. The waiting list speaks for itself. There are thousands of people in this situation and we are doing nothing to address it.

Since I became involved with the Before We Die campaign in Cork, we have been able to arrange a number of meetings with Cork City Council and Cork County Council and we are doing things locally that are going to help improve people's lives. The councils have each agreed to appoint a liaison officer to deal with families in these situations. Hopefully, the councils are now going to streamline the application process for social housing for these families.

We cannot forget that the section 38 and section 39 service providers have an obligation. Many have the capacity of housing bodies and can themselves deliver housing. We cannot let them shirk their responsibility.

What is the Department's view on the Before We Die campaign? What interaction is it having with the campaign? What does it intend to do to solve this residential crisis?

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Deputy very much. I acknowledge the incredible work he does on rare diseases campaigning. The issue the Before We Die group campaigns on is another incredibly important one. The Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, had hoped to be here but unfortunately she was not able to be. She acknowledges the great work the Deputy is doing and his raising of this important issue.

The Minister, Deputy Foley, recently met the Before We Die group and it is her understanding that An Taoiseach and the Minister of State with responsibility for disabilities, Deputy Higgins, also met it, alongside HSE representatives. The Minister wishes to acknowledge the ongoing commitment and dedication of all involved with the Before We Die group. The Minister also wants to recognise their advocacy for increased residential service provision for people with disabilities and their efforts to shine a light on the very real challenges many of these parents and families continue to face.

The next piece of my speech is going to speak to what the Deputy addressed about the investment that is there. It is just so sad to hear that, when you meet those groups, their lived reality is something very different. The information from the Department tells us that, in 2026, €65 million has been allocated to disability residential services for new developments, which includes €40 million that will provide in the region of 199 residential responses, including 152 residential placements. The remaining €25 million will support in the region of 40 residential packages for children in care with complex needs, the enhancement of existing residential placements, decongregation transitions and the under-65s programme. The Department is working closely with the HSE to move from crisis-led residential placements towards a more planned and balanced approach, with HSE regions and voluntary providers identifying and prioritising individuals earlier to help prevent crisis situations.

The HSE National Service Plan 2026 places greater emphasis on longer term planning for residential placements, with stronger operational processes to respond to the high demand. HSE disability programme leads are developing a procurement framework for residential placements with for-profit agencies, which will focus on purchasing placements on a group basis with the aim of securing more cost-effective placements. The procurement framework is expected to be in place by quarter 2 of 2026. In addition, new HSE housing co-ordinators and residential planning and review teams will be in place this year to co-ordinate and oversee the delivery of the new residential placements and plan for future placements, many of which will be delivered in local authority homes.

The Ministers, Deputies Foley and James Browne, with their officials, have made significant progress through the implementation structures established under the national housing strategy for disabled people in improving co-ordination with the local authorities and disability service providers at local, regional and national levels. This includes establishing the levels of unmet need for specialist disability residential services in each county or local authority area. This will inform the setting of targets in the local authority housing development action plans for two cohorts of disabled people, namely, those living more independently in the community and those with greater support needs, who will receive specialist disability residential services. Some €25 million in new development funding for respite services in budget 2026 has afforded the HSE the opportunity to plan for the expansion of services, with a range of respite initiatives under way. The HSE national service plan targets the delivery of 10,000 additional respite overnight sessions and 25,000 additional respite day sessions this year.

I will come back with a little more information later.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank the Minister and welcome the initiatives. I spoke to the Ministers, Deputies Foley and Browne, in recent weeks and I knew that a plan was coming together. However, as many Deputies will know, I am a cynic in here. I do not understand how we are having this discussion in 2026 and how no one in the various Departments, but particularly the Department of disabilities, had a light bulb go off at some stage and realise that the Departments were not meeting the level of need. As the Minister of State read out from the speech she was given, there is an unmet need. We all know it. I will give the Minister of State an idea of the numbers. In June 2025, 1,389 people were awaiting residential placement. That was up from 776 in 2019, a 79% increase in five or six years. Did no one in the various Departments not realise there was a problem, given the nearly 100% increase in the demand for residential places? I do not even have time to discuss respite support.

It is welcome that the Ministers are getting together and that a plan is going to be in place, but it takes time to build these houses and deliver these units. If the plan started this year, it would be a couple of years before we saw those units being turned over. The budget allocation will provide for nearly 200 places, but in 2023, only 43 new residential places were provided in the entire country. It was a pitiful amount. What these people are asking for is their right, as they all have a right to housing. Some of them are well capable of living independently. Some require round-the-clock care. It is that diverse a cohort.

There are two matters I will mention that I would like the Minister of State to take back to the Minister, the first of which is decongregation.

I understand why we did it, but if you talk to the parents who have children with intellectual disabilities, including adult children, they will say that they want a setting where they feel their daughters or sons can be safe. Some of them want to live in a gated community, and some want to be surrounded by the elderly. Locking these people away in apartment blocks is not the right way, just for the sake of decongregation. We need to have a proper debate about this.

Cork city and county councils have delivered their targets of 20% for people with disabilities. However, it is important that we distinguish between people with physical disabilities and intellectual disabilities in counting those numbers.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I again thank the Deputy for raising this important issue, which is a priority for the Ministers, Deputies Foley and Browne, and the wider Government. The Government recognises that there is more to do to improve the lived experience of those with disabilities. The increase in the disability budget for 2026 further demonstrates the multiple commitments made in the programme for Government to improve the lives of people with disabilities and make a difference. The Minister, Deputy Foley, would like to reiterate the importance of ensuring that we continue to support people with disabilities to live meaningful and fulfilling lives, with a person-centred approach across all the services provided. The ambition of the Government is to bring about a step change in services for people with disabilities in Ireland. It is committed to the expansion and reform of disability services to maximise people's independence and their health supports to help them to live ordinary lives in ordinary places.

The Minister wishes to reassure the Deputy that the Government is aware of the challenges presented across all regions. The Department is actively engaging with the Department of housing and the HSE to increase service provision, to support service providers to carry out their vital work and to explore various ways of responding to demand.

I have taken note of the specific issues the Deputy has raised and I will relay them to the Minister, Deputy Foley.

Public Health (Alcohol) (Amendment) Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am delighted to bring this Bill to Second Stage. It is pretty straightforward legislation, which would amend the Public Health (Alcohol) Act to ensure that the restrictions on alcohol advertising were fully enforced to the letter and spirit of the law, as intended. Members will remember that, back in 2018, the Oireachtas passed the Public Health (Alcohol) Act. It was landmark legislation that began to change the relationship that we in this State had with alcohol, and started many conversations around how we regulated and interacted with alcohol. A key part of that legislation was a restriction on alcohol advertising. It was fairly straightforward. It placed restrictions on advertising of alcohol near schools, near parks, on public transport, at sports events, on television before 9 p.m. and in supermarkets. These were modest provisions to regulate advertising. Unfortunately, the alcohol industry and the alcohol companies found a loophole in the law, and they are exploiting it. Our Bill closes that loophole. What we are asking for is enforcement of the original 2018 Act as intended, which would put a restriction on alcohol advertising. At its core, this is about protecting children. The areas that were picked were areas where there were children - near schools, on the bus, in public transport, at the cinema or watching television before 9 p.m. The Act was designed to ensure that children are not exposed to alcohol advertising.

It is clear to the dogs in the street that the alcohol industry is exploiting the law and that there is a clear loophole in the law. The industry is using the same branding, design and colours, and it is almost identical to the advertising for full-strength products. Anybody can see that. I would ask anybody looking in to take a look at the Social Democrats' Instagram. We have put

forward a “spot the difference” test so that people can see how identical these ads are. There is no denying what the alcohol industry is doing here. It is circumventing the law.

Deputy Murnane O'Connor, as the responsible Minister of State, needs to take a stand. She needs to stand up to the industry in the interests of public health and, in particular, in the interests of the children of Ireland. I urge her to reflect on the position the Government has put out on this. The right thing to do is to stand up in the interests of public health. That is her job as the Minister of State with responsibility for public health: to defend public health and to ensure that the laws passed by this House are enforced. We cannot allow those with vested interests to trample over the law and exploit loopholes in it.

This is a modest measure that we are putting forward. It is deeply disappointing that we have heard in advance that the Government is going to oppose it. I ask the Minister of State to reflect on that before she makes her opening address.

The evidence is clear. We have seen an increase in youth drinking. The Healthy Ireland study shows a 12% increase in youth drinking since 2018. That should concern the Minister of State, as the person responsible for public health. It should concern the officials in the Department as well. We know that, according to Alcohol Action, 50,000 children take up drinking each year, and this is a known risk factor for alcohol dependency in later life. What we are trying to do here is protect children and adults in later life by ensuring that they are not exposed to a large amount of alcohol advertising.

We have a growing awareness and understanding of the impact that alcohol is having on our society and on people. We know there are 1,000 alcohol-related cancers each year. We know that four people die every day in Ireland from alcohol-related harm. It is costing the health service a huge amount of money; according to the Government's own estimates, it is costing the health service €1.5 billion. We talk here all the time about cost savings, efficiencies and doing things better. We can do that by reducing alcohol-related harm and the cost it is having on our health service, our society and individuals. There is not a family in the country that has not been impacted by alcohol. What we are doing is trying to protect children to ensure there is not a greater impact on them in later life.

It is as clear as day what the alcohol industry is doing. The evidence shows us exactly that. The 0.0% alcohol products make up 1% of the total alcohol market, yet those in the industry are spending 25% of their outdoor alcohol budget on 0.0% products. Why is that? It is because they know this will sell more of the main alcohol product. They are pumping money into 0.0% alcohol advertising to circumvent the law, get around it and advertise in areas where there are children. They are openly saying this. It is not just me saying it. Heineken has said this. In a submission to win a marketing award, a Heineken marketer said that 0.0% product ads increase sales of the full-strength product. If the Minister of State does not believe me, she should listen to what Heineken is saying. It is telling her that this is what it is doing.

It is indisputable what the industry is at here. What is deeply frustrating is the two-faced nature of those in the alcohol industry on this. They will talk in private about the increase in sales, but in public, they will say it is about moderation. They also talk about this as a tool for growth, not moderation. We need to believe them when they say that. We need to look at the evidence and, for me, the evidence is crystal clear.

One of the key issues that we need to look at is the link between alcohol and sport. It came up during the debates back in 2018. On Second Stage in 2018, the then Minister for Health, now Tánaiste, Deputy Simon Harris, said:

Let us be honest. We all still remember sporting events by dint of the sport itself but we also recall the names of the companies that sponsored these events. Sponsorship has a powerful impact on people. This is all about normalising alcohol and healthy sports people in an arena. That is why the companies involved target sports and the big national sporting occasions we have in this country whereby they make the subtle link between physical prowess and alcohol. It is an approach that has to be challenged and addressed.

The Tánaiste, when he was Minister for Health, said: “It is a nefarious form of advertising that companies would target sporting events primarily for that purpose.” Deputy Simon Harris, in this House in 2018, called it “nefarious” that these companies would do that, yet we still have it. Every time we turn on a match, we have the Heineken Cup or the Guinness Six Nations. All of the big alcohol brands are linking it to sport, and they continue to do it.

The Tánaiste also said that the industry had lobbied and hoped to stall and delay projects. That is what it has done. We have to put a stop to it. In the interests of this institution, of democracy and of the rule of law, we need to enforce the laws that are passed. I have read back through the record and I know what the intention of the law was. The intention was to break that link, but it has not been done. The Department has utterly failed to stand up to vested interests and people who put profit before public health. The Minister of State needs to take a stand within the Department and call that out.

The alcohol industry should not have a seat at the table. The industry has lobbied time and again and has succeeded. We were meant to have health warnings on products by now but that has been delayed until 2028 because of lobbying by vested interests that want to make money. This is having an impact on public health. Yesterday, I was debating this on radio with the president of the Vintners' Federation of Ireland, VFI, and the former president of same association who happens to be a Fine Gael TD, so even within government we have people lobbying on this, people with vested interests who are out to make money. That needs to be called out.

I am deeply disappointed by the statement from the Government on this earlier in the week. Frankly, it is disingenuous and misleading and the officials need to reflect on that. We were told that the Government was going to oppose this legislation because of the definition that was given for low-alcohol products, set at 0.5%, but that is the definition within the Government's own Finance Act 2003. We took that from there. The Government cannot use that as an excuse to defeat our legislation when that is its own definition. If the Government thinks we should go further now and set it at 1.5%, we can amend the legislation on Committee Stage. That is why we have a ten-step legislative process in this House. That is why we have Committee and Report Stages in here and why a Bill can go to the Seanad and be amended. The Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Butler, was here a couple of weeks ago telling us about how she accepted hundreds of amendments to the Mental Health Bill. If that is the case for Government Bills, why not take one or two amendments for an Opposition Bill? Why is there one rule for Government Bills and a different one for Opposition Bills? Why set the bar so high for an Opposition Bill that one cannot even put a jot out of place but when it comes to a Government Bill, we can accept hundreds of amendments? Bills can be

amended to be something completely different by the time they get to the end of the process. It is hypocrisy, two-faced and unacceptable. The Government needs to stop doing it and be real with the people and honest about the process. I was on radio yesterday debating this with a backbencher who said that the reason the Government was going to oppose the Bill was because it wanted the level set at 1.2% instead of 0.5%. Honestly, it is laughable.

The other excuse given to us related to research. I agree that the more research we have, the better but we already have a stack of international evidence and I can quote some of it, if it is helpful. In 2026, a research paper was published in the *International Journal of Drug Policy*, entitled: "I just saw the alcohol brand, I never really thought of the zeros': young people's views of NoLo and alibi alcohol sponsorship". Children as young as 14 were able to identify Guinness as the sponsor of the Six Nations rugby tournament, noting that Guinness was highly visible during matches and that they had seen advertising around the stadium and at matches. One child simply said, "I just saw the alcohol brand, I never really thought of the zeros". This evidence was published in the *International Journal of Drug Policy* but the Government thinks we need more. In 2025, an Australian study on alcohol advertising in disguise showed that the exposure of teenagers to zero-alcohol products had a similar effect as exposure to alcohol products. That study concluded that regulatory approaches that sought to limit adolescents' exposure to alcohol should also extend to zero-alcohol products. This is the international evidence that the Government is looking for. It is published in study after study. A 2019 study from Asia on brand advertising and brand sharing of alcoholic and non-alcoholic products found that brand sharing increased brand familiarity and affected brand recognition and awareness. This research also revealed that young people who saw the logo of companies that sold both alcoholic and zero-alcoholic beverages were found to associate the logo primarily with the alcoholic version of the product, indicating that zero-alcohol beverages are working as advertising vehicles for the parent companies. This research concluded that early exposure to alcohol brands increased brand familiarity, which is one of the factors that affects drinking attitudes and purchasing intentions of young people. Another study from Stanford on zero-alcohol products and the guise of responsibility revealed a stark divergence between how zero-alcohol products were described publicly and privately by the industry. In public, the industry talks about it as a tool of moderation but in private it talks about it as a tool to drive market growth and increase main sales. There is a stack of international evidence.

We know what other countries are doing in this area, including Norway and France. Norway has banned brand sharing. Advertising that associates zero-alcohol products with their full-strength brands have been banned, which is similar to what we are looking for here. Non-alcoholic beverages must use completely distinctive branding to avoid any association with the parent alcoholic brand. Why can we not do what they have done in Norway? It is a simple solution. Zero-alcohol products use different branding so that there is not that association. It is very straightforward. We could pass our Bill and the companies could rebrand their products and not have that direct link between the two.

In 1991, France became one of the first countries to tackle alcohol advertising. The French public health code defines alcohol-free beverages as those that contain no more than 1.2% alcohol, technically allowing advertising of alcohol-free alternatives. In 2020, however, a court in France found that advertising zero-alcohol products with the same branding as the full-strength product was illegal because it constituted indirect advertising of the full-strength alcoholic version, which was prohibited in law. That is why when one watches the games in

France, they are called the H Cup but in Ireland they are called the Heineken Cup. They have tackled this issue in other countries but the Government here has its head in the sand and will not even enforce its own law that it passed in 2018.

We would not give children a zero-alcohol beer, so why would we allow it to be advertised to them? It is as simple as that. If we can collectively say we are not giving zero-alcohol beers to children, then we should also collectively agree that they should not be seeing ad after ad for them. Any child who goes to the Aviva stadium with a parent at the weekend will be bombarded with advertisements for alcohol. They will see it on the centre pitch and on the sidelines. They will face ad after ad. When they go to the supermarket, where alcohol is meant to be separated, they will see the zero-alcohol ads outside the separation point, next to the meat counter aisle. They will be bombarded with ads. As I was walking around today, I was counting the ads. I saw alcohol ad after alcohol ad. This morning on my way into the Oireachtas, I saw a 0.0 ad for Heineken at a bus stop in Harold's Cross right beside a school. Is that acceptable? Will the Minister of State allow it or will she stand up to the industry like we on this side of the House would? These are vested interests and they are trampling all over public health measures in the pursuit of profit. Is it too much to ask of the alcohol industry to abide by the law?

Finally, I want to thank the members of Alcohol Action who have joined us today and who have been working extensively on this issue and have worked with me on this legislation. I also want to say a big thanks to Jake Ryan in my office for his work on this. I really hope the Government will change its approach from the one expressed earlier in the week.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I want to acknowledge that the Deputy, in bringing this Bill before the House today, is motivated by public health concerns and reducing the impact of alcohol harms on our society. The Government shares that motivation. However, the Government is opposing this Private Members' Bill, which seeks to amend our Public Health (Alcohol) Act, because there is not enough evidence at this time to determine the impact of low- and no-alcohol products and their promotion through advertising. It is also being opposed on the grounds that the way the Bill has been drafted could lead to unintended consequences that may not be in the best interests of public health.

I will now outline the objectives of our Public Health (Alcohol) Act. It aims to: reduce alcohol consumption to 9.1 litres of pure alcohol per person per annum; delay the initiation of alcohol consumption by children and young people; reduce the harms caused by the misuse of alcohol; and regulate the supply and price of alcohol in order to minimise alcohol-related harm. These aims were developed because we recognise the harms to health that alcohol causes, as well as the significant costs to the public purse. Adults should be able to make informed choices about their drinking. Our children and young people must be protected, as they are particularly vulnerable to the harmful effects of alcohol. Since the enactment of our Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018, the trends in alcohol consumption show that we are having success with these aims. Alcohol consumption in Ireland in 2025 was an estimated 9.24 litres *per capita*. This reduced from 10.8 litres in 2019, which is significant and part of a larger decline in recent years. That said, we cannot be complacent because we have not yet reached the goal of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act, which is to reduce consumption to 9.1 litres per person, based on the OECD average.

5 o'clock

We must also note that the Healthy Ireland Survey 2025 found that 29% of adults did not consume any alcohol in the previous 12 months. This means that our *per capita* estimate is likely to be underestimating the actual amount consumed by the 71% of the population that do drink alcohol. The 2025 Healthy Ireland survey also found that 26% of the population binge drink and 36% of our population drink alcohol at a harmful level. Harmful drinking rates are decreasing but remain high and are a concern.

When it comes to our children, our 2024 European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs found positive trends compared to their previous 2019 survey. According to the 2024 survey, 66% of 15- and 16-year-olds surveyed had consumed alcohol in their lifetime, which was a decrease from 73%. The numbers reported as having ever been drunk and those reporting consuming alcohol in the last 30 days had also reduced. Although these are positive trends, we must continue to work to decrease these numbers and the risks to our young people.

Research studies also show consistently that exposure to alcohol advertising is associated with an increased likelihood that children will start to drink or will drink greater quantities if they already do. This is why the Public Health (Alcohol) Act contains measures designed to reduce this effect. Advertisements for alcohol products are banned in certain places, including in local authority parks and playgrounds, on our buses and trains, and in or near schools and crèches. Advertisements for alcohol are also banned in a venue while a sports event is taking place and at events aimed particularly at children. Children's clothing that is branded with an alcohol product, or which promotes alcohol consumption, cannot be manufactured for sale, sold, or imported for sale in the State. A broadcast watershed for alcohol advertising was also introduced so they are not allowed on television between the hours of 3 a.m to 9 p.m. Similarly, on radio they are banned between 3 p.m. and the following 10 a.m. on weekdays. These timings were agreed in conjunction with the Department, and with the then Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, and they aim to capture the times when children watch television and listen to radio. The Act also provides for the separation and reduced visibility of alcohol products and advertising in shops.

Section 13 of the Act has not yet been commenced. It provides that advertising for alcohol products must include three health warnings informing the public of the risks associated with alcohol, along with details of the alcohol public health website established by the HSE. I am taking this debate under the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill's brief, and I am working with the Minister under health and well-being. Under section 13 of the Act the Minister for Health can make regulations prescribing the form of the warnings and the duration of the warnings in a broadcast advertisement. Those regulations are currently being developed. Section 18 of the Act provides for restrictions on alcohol advertising in publications. This section cannot be commenced until section 13 comes into operation. This section will restrict the advertising space permitted for advertising alcohol products in a publication and ban advertisements in publications aimed particularly at children.

This comprehensive range of measures was developed on the basis of the evidence of health harms from alcohol and on the basis of evidence that these measures would be effective in reducing that harm. This evidence was important and necessary to ensure that the Bill, and regulations under it, successfully exited the EU assessment process that applies to this law. The Bill before us today would amend the definition of advertising in the Public Health (Alcohol)

Act to include advertisements for what it calls "alcohol-free" and "low-alcohol" products. This section also introduces a definition of these products, which includes that they have an alcohol by volume strength of 0.5% or lower.

The Government is opposing this Bill on a number of grounds. The first and most important is that the evidence is insufficient to determine the public health benefits or harms of advertisements for zero-alcohol and low-alcohol products. The Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 was introduced to reduce the health harms caused by the consumption of alcohol in Ireland. The settled scientific consensus is that alcohol consumption causes harms, including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and seven types of cancer, and that alcohol advertising serves to increase consumption and therefore harm. Zero-alcohol products do not have the health risks associated with alcohol products, and low-alcohol products have lower risk relative to standard alcohol products. If there is a widespread substitution of zero-alcohol or low-alcohol products for alcohol products this will be of benefit at a population health level and will reduce harm. The advertising of these products in promoting their consumption potentially supports or increases this potential benefit. However, the single risk in relation to the promotion of zero-alcohol or low-alcohol products is that this promotion may also serve to indirectly promote alcohol products. To facilitate evidence-based decision-making on the relative benefits and harms of no-alcohol and low-alcohol products and on their promotion, the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has requested reviews of the evidence on two aspects of zero-alcohol products. This is to be carried out by a team in the University of Galway. The reviews will look at the marketing and branding exposure for zero-alcohol-labelled products in Ireland, and a rapid scoping review of advertising presence, regulatory context, and consumer perception. They will also look at the health effects of zero-alcohol-labelled beverage consumption with a rapid umbrella review of review-level evidence. These reviews will be completed in quarter 3 of this year. It is important. I do understand the Deputy's concern. This is why it is important that we get these. The reports will identify the available evidence in Ireland on zero-alcohol products. Once these reviews are completed, the Minister will then consider whether additional evidence is needed, for example, evidence from other jurisdictions and evidence in relation to low-alcohol products. The purpose will be to determine the next best steps, based on evidence, in relation to these products and their promotion from a public health point of view.

In addition, this Bill raises other concerns. As I previously mentioned, section 13 of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act, which is not yet commenced, requires that advertisements for alcohol products must contain health warnings. Under this Private Members' Bill, advertisements for zero-alcohol products, which have none of the health risks associated with alcohol, would be required to have such health warnings. This could potentially mislead consumers about the risks of zero-alcohol products, as well as introduce the possibility of a legal challenge to section 13 on the grounds that advertisements for products with zero-alcohol content are required to carry such warnings.

Finally, the Bill as drafted targets products with 0.5% alcohol by volume content or lower only. The definitions of various alcohol products in the Public Health (Alcohol) Act are based on those in the 2003 Finance Act. Under that law, some alcohol products are defined at a different level of alcohol by volume. In that context, it may be that the restriction in the Bill to 0.5% may exclude some products. For these reasons, this Bill is being opposed but I acknowledge the Deputy's concerns and look forward to the outcomes of the reviews. We are

waiting on these and the Minister has requested the reviews. We are looking into it and I assure the Deputy that I will go back to the Minister with his concerns about the issues raised here today. I thank Deputy Rice for bringing the Bill to the House.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. It is our understanding of the Bill proposed by Deputy Rice that the intention is to restrict the advertising of low-alcohol and zero-alcohol products where the effect of such advertisements, regardless of intent, is to also promote alcohol drinks. The Bill seeks to do that by amending the definition of advertising to include low-alcohol and zero-alcohol drinks and by creating a distinct provision for trade descriptions, trademarks, emblems, logos and marketing images, which are associated with alcohol products. It will, essentially, force zero-alcohol and low-alcohol product branding to be distinct from the alcohol branding in a more comprehensive way than the current tacking of "0.0" onto existing alcohol branding.

The promotion and advertising of alcoholic beverages has been significantly curtailed since the commencement of the relevant provisions of the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018. Alcohol advertising and promotion is strictly limited, with an evening and late-night ban on TV advertising, a ban on advertising on public transport, near schools, childcare facilities, playgrounds and sports venues, or any event or place meant primarily for children. Alcohol advertising in shops is strictly limited to the part of the shop designated for alcohol products, and cannot be placed or seen from other parts of the shop.

Those restrictions do not apply to zero-alcohol products and would not apply to zero-alcohol products under this proposed new definition for advertising if they have satisfactory and distinct branding, logos, emblems and marketing imagery. As we see it, the intention is not to ban the advertising of low- and zero-alcohol products or to treat them the exact same as alcohol products, but to prevent the indirect advertising of alcohol products by raising the bar for zero-alcohol advertising that currently exists. Sadly, we have seen cynical and dishonest abuse of the existing laws by some of the worst aspects of the industry. We are all familiar with one particular brand that uses 0.0 labelling to sponsor a prominent sporting event, despite not actually producing or selling such a product. There are also genuine concerns of inappropriate advertising of 0.0 products in places where alcohol branding should not be present because the current threshold is too low.

The growth in zero-alcohol product consumption is welcome. Market trends indicate rapidly growing demand but the market share of zero-alcohol products is still much lower than in other EU states. As somebody who primarily drinks 0.0 Guinness, I can attest that in pretty much every bar you go into now, you can get zero-alcohol products on tap, which is a huge plus for those of us who do not want to drink alcohol but do want to drink a beer, Guinness, stout or whatever it may be. It is very important that is happening because there are huge health benefits to that product.

We need to be sure that public policy encourages the growth in zero-alcohol sales at the expense of alcoholic drinks, and that there are no unintended consequences for the growth of the zero-alcohol market share in any change made to the advertising laws. At the same time, the law clearly needs to be updated to ensure limits on alcohol advertising are not being cynically undermined by bad faith actors. For those reasons, we could not support a total ban on zero-alcohol advertising, but we are willing to work with the practical proposal in this Bill

to further separate alcohol and zero-alcohol marketing, imagery and branding to ensure it is fit for purpose and achieves the outcome we all want.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I thank my colleague, Deputy Rice, for bringing forward this legislation. The angle the Government has taken in opposing this legislation is that there is a lack of evidence that 0.0 beer has any health implications. This is a misunderstanding of why advertising 0.0 beer is not appropriate near schools, crèches and in sporting facilities. It is the same as when it was banned for full alcohol or whatever the levels of alcohol were.

The difficulty for me, as someone who has worked with children and young people for close to 30 years, is we are trying to discourage young people from drinking beer and taking substances that harm their brain development. We do not want them drinking alcohol, for the reason that the brain is not fully formed. In fact, some people would say it is not fully formed until they are about 25, so even drinking at 18 has detrimental effects on brain development and other parts of the body. Of course, as we all know as adults in this building and everywhere else in this country, alcohol also makes you do mad things, if you drink to excess.

We know the harmful effects of alcohol on everybody and young people do too. As someone who has worked with young people for a very long time, I do not want to see any alcohol advertised to them, especially when they are in sporting facilities or outside a school, as Deputy Rice said. That is why those bans are in place. Even if it says 0.0 beside it, young people see through that; they know exactly what is going on. I have been told by many young people, "Sure I can drink a 0.0 beer. There is no alcohol in it. What is the big deal?" Years ago, we used to talk about gateway drugs. This is a gateway - this is saying 0.0 is fine, so you can drink it. We need to have a debate here because what we are doing is showing young people they can drink 0.0 because it is fine, but we do not want them drinking beer at all. How do we know they are not drinking 0.0 one minute and then drinking the full thing the next minute? At what age do we say that is too young? Is it at ten that they can drink 0.0 beer? Would you give your six-year-old a 0.0 beer?

The conversation here has slid a little. The reason we should not be advertising 0.0 is not because it is zero alcohol and it does not have the effects full alcohol has, it is because young people see it and go, "Sure I can have one of them. Can I have one?" For parents, it is a difficulty. I know people my age with children where this is a difficulty. You are at social events and your child wants to drink a 0.0 beer. It is about looking at that part of it and not sliding around the other part saying, "Well, there is no evidence to say there are health implications with 0.0 beer."

I am little disappointed in the Government for taking that angle. Often when we come here to talk about health things, and it seems to always be on a Thursday, whether it is vapes or alcohol or whatever, there is massive lobbying going on about this. It is unacceptable. We should look at our conscience. This is also an ethical issue. Is it right to advertise beer, whether it is 0.0 or not? I agree with Deputy Rice that if you look at the adverts that are put up on our social media today, you would not know the difference. You would want to be looking very clearly because it is very smart marketing. That is what we are looking to address here. It is about not being outsmarted by that marketing for 0.0 because it is obviously not about that; it is about the full alcohol.

I commend Deputy Rice and his team on their work on this. I would like Government to reflect on what we have had to say here. I am not sure how that goes with removing amendments, but perhaps that might be something that would be considered.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I also thank Deputy Rice for bringing this forward. It is an opportunity to deal with the issue of advertising.

Over the years, if we go back long enough, within my lifetime, I can remember sports events being sponsored by alcohol, cigarettes and many things which have now become very much unacceptable. In Ireland, we have the particular issue of starting from a point where we have a very bad relationship with alcohol. We know the impact it has on families and individuals. We all talk now of the issues we have with cocaine but, unfortunately, we already had the foundations laid over a long period with the very bad relationship we have with alcohol.

Like Deputy Donnelly, I would like to see a scenario where we ensure we do not have bad faith actors who will advertise 0.0 from a point of view of ensuring they can up their sales of alcoholic drinks. It is making sure we have an absolute delineation of 0.0 offerings versus alcoholic offerings. I have seen a considerable amount of people drink 0.0. If we were all to state things clearly, there is an acceptance that frequently the reason 0.0 was created was so companies could get around advertising legislation. There is an absolute need for us to have whatever protections necessary in making sure it is very obvious that what is being advertised is something very different with the 0.0 offering.

I have a considerable number of friends, like Deputy Donnelly who spoke about this, who like the idea of being able to drink a 0.0 product. They do not have to go through the conversation I sometimes have of "Are you not having a drink?" or "Why are you not having a drink?" and then you go through this long piece. That is useful but, as I said, as regards the delineation, it has to be absolutely clearly stated. We have seen instances where companies have sponsored events and got around the advertising limits on alcohol by advertising a 0.0 offering that they did not even make. That is just absolutely wrong and absolutely ridiculous, and we need to make sure we have the facility to absolutely hammer them in those cases.

There is a need for a wider conversation about alcohol. From time to time, I think an awful lot of people get worried about the impact drugs have - whether we are talking about benzos, tablets of all forms, cocaine, crack cocaine or heroin - and the detrimental impact they have on whole communities. In most cases, when we talk about polydrug users, the big issue can be that one of those drugs is alcohol. We need to make sure we have the full wherewithal, as regards those who are young and impressionable and open to what is some of the best advertising money can buy, to ensure that there are limits and that it is absolutely clear when something is advertised that it is non-alcoholic. Then we have to have an ever greater level of protections in relation to advertising that would be open to younger minds. We have all seen the ads. Generally, it will be very healthy-looking people, in some cases very famous people, having a great time, but we all know what the idea is.

We would like to work alongside Deputy Rice on putting together legislation that can actually have an impact, and that is from a point of view that we do not allow these companies to curtail the existing laws on the advertising of alcohol. Then, as I said, we have to have a wider conversation about actually tackling the endemic levels of alcoholism and the misuse and abuse of alcohol. Many of us in younger years and at different times probably did abuse

alcohol. On some level it can almost be, "Ah, sure, he is only young", or "It is only this, that and the other". There is an element of forgiveness sometimes, a forgiveness that does not exist when we see somebody abusing drugs. I agree with Deputy Cummins when she speaks about the fact that in an awful lot of cases, the gateway drug for many is alcohol. We know the damage it does. We need to work on legislation that we can get across the line such that we make sure that we have a delineation and that those who see this advertising can notice the difference and the acceptance that we have a huge issue with alcohol. Not only do I have worries about the national drugs strategy and where it is going and the fact that we have seen a hollowing out of the community element of that, but we also need to see a fully fledged strategy on dealing with alcohol.

I commend Deputy Rice on bringing this forward. Hopefully, as I said, we can work alongside him on getting a Bill that will be able to deal with some of the issues in relation to other products and the misadvertising we have seen.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I thank colleagues for their contributions. I am responding on behalf of the Minister for Health. I welcome the Deputies' intention with this Bill and thank those who have contributed to the debate this afternoon. What has been said here makes a lot of sense; however, the Government is opposing the Bill. This is primarily on the grounds that there is insufficient evidence at this time to determine the health impacts of low- and no-alcohol products and their promotion through advertising. Our Public Health (Alcohol) Act is recognised across the world as groundbreaking and progressive. It was painstakingly built on public health evidence on the harms of alcohol and the best interventions to reduce those harms. Consumption levels among our adults and children are decreasing; however, we continue to work to reduce those levels. The remaining measures in the Act will come into operation, and those measures already in operation are being evaluated to determine their effectiveness in reducing alcohol consumption and harm. The potential harms and benefits of the advertising of zero-alcohol and low-alcohol products remain unclear. The Minister for Health has taken steps to find the evidence in order to decide on the next steps. She has asked for initial reviews of the evidence on the marketing and branding and on the health effects in relation to zero-alcohol products. These initial reviews will be completed by quarter 3 of this year. When we have those reviews, we will know what more needs to be done and will be able to make evidence-based decisions on this important public health issue.

The Government intends to wait for the evidence, and for that reason the Bill is being opposed.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Deputy Cummins in her speech said she was disappointed; I am frankly furious. No disrespect to the Minister of State with responsibility for AI, but we have a senior Minister and three junior Ministers in the Department of Health and not one of them could stay for the debate. It shows the lack of interest the Government has in this issue. It shows a complete disrespect for the House and for the issues before us that not a single Minister in the Department of Health could stay here for what has been a debate of about an hour. They could not show that respect for the House. Not one Minister from the Department of Health could stay for a Bill on public health. The Government does not care about public health, and if anyone was in any doubt about that, tonight's evidence stands before us in that the Minister

did not even stay to listen to the debate. I am furious. It is unacceptable and it is not good enough.

I honestly think we need to have real engagement on the issues. Frankly, it often feels in this House that you are shouting into a void. There was no engagement with the opening remarks we made about the evidence we set out or our argument because there was a different Minister here. The Government has just completely ignored what the Social Democrats put forward in our opening address and did not engage in any debate or any discussion. It is deeply frustrating. I say this as a new Member of the House: we need to run this Parliament better. It is not good enough. It is doing a disservice to the citizens of this State, to the people who elect us, that that is the quality of the debate we have in the House. It is utterly unacceptable, and I expect to engage with the Minister for Health and the junior Ministers on it. I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, to pass that message back to the Minister for Health.

I am also furious because the Minister of State's party leader, Micheál Martin, my constituency colleague, time and again in this House stands up here and tells us the Social Democrats have no ideas, no solutions, no policies. Then we push forward constructive Bills seeking to address what are real public health issues and the Government dismisses them out of hand for no solid reason at all. It is infuriating, frustrating and deeply disappointing. Is it any wonder there are so many people in this country who have no faith in Irish politics? There are so many citizens who disengage from the democratic process when that is the quality of the debate and the engagement in this House. When the Opposition comes in with solid proposals, backed up by evidence, supported by external groups, there is no engagement, the proposal is dismissed out of hand, "The Government is opposing this".

There is no talk of maybe taking it to Committee Stage or taking amendments. If the Government wants to make improvements, I am absolutely open to working with the Government, making amendments and making changes. As I said at the start, there is a reason we have a ten-step legislative process. We have Committee Stage, Report Stage and Final Stage, a Bill goes to the Seanad and it can be amended and improved there. If the Government wants to make changes, if it wants to increase the level to 1.5% instead of 0.5%, if it wants to make those small textual changes to the Bill, we have a process for it. We need to be honest with the people of Ireland about this because, as I said at the start, every single Government Bill gets amended. Some of them get amended into completely different Bills altogether. The Minister for Health tells us all the time how she took 600 amendments to the Mental Health Bill, but for an Opposition Bill we cannot take even one, and that is so frustrating.

I ask the Government to take a different approach. In the interests of democracy, of the citizens and of how we run this Republic, we need to do better. We need to actively engage in policy debates and discussions. We need to engage with the issues and for that to happen, a responsible Minister needs to stay in the House and listen to the contributions from Members. Members have prepared contributions, done research and worked on these issues for months and the Minister of State responsible walks out after making her contribution. She does not engage with the issues I raised or respond to any of the points put forward by the Social Democrats. Is that the quality we have from this Government? Is that what we are to expect from this Government? I expect more from Ministers and the Government and I want that message to go back tonight.

We heard from the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, that we have got no evidence. I cited the international evidence in my opening address. I cited evidence from the *International Journal of Drug Policy* and the evidence published by Stanford University. I cited the Australian study and the Asian study. There is a stack of international evidence. There is research published by Alcohol Action Ireland which has a long reference list, with reports from the World Health Organization and universities around the world on this issue. This argument that there is not enough evidence is disingenuous. It is unacceptable and not good enough that the quality of decision-making by Cabinet is to say we do not have enough evidence.

I do not believe the Government really believes we do not have enough evidence, but if it does and it wants to get HIQA to look at this, all well and good. It would take a couple of months. The Government should put forward a timed amendment, as it does all the time, to say we will return to the issue in 12 months' time. If it is a question of evidence, why not introduce a timed amendment and have this debate in 12 months when the Government has the evidence from HIQA? It is not doing that. It is opposing the Bill for no good reason. It should have the honesty and decency to say that to the Irish people. There is not one good reason for the Government to oppose the Bill, other than the fact that it has been captured by the lobbyists and vested interests of the alcohol industry, who sit on the benches opposite as well. I debated with some of them on the radio yesterday - publicans and heads of the vintners' association inside and outside government who want to make money from selling alcohol. That is why they are opposing these public health alcohol Bills. The Government should have the honesty to say to people, "Actually, no, we're on the side of the alcohol industry, the lobbyists and those who want to make profit, not public health."

These are modest measures. All I am asking is that the Government enforce the 2018 Act in full, as passed by this House. If we cannot even enforce the legislation we pass, we have a rule-of-law issue. We have a significant issue if this democracy, Parliament and Government cannot enforce its own legislation because of big business and the lobbyists and vested interests who want to make money. The Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, needs to stand up to them. She needs to take her job seriously as a Minister in the Irish Government and stand up to the vested interests and say that in this democracy, in this country, the Government puts public health first and does not care if the alcohol industry loses some money, that it is going to protect the children of Ireland by not exposing them to alcohol ads on their way to school, on the bus, in the playground, in the supermarket and on television before 9 p.m., and that it is going to enforce the law as passed.

For anybody who sees those ads for Heineken 0.0, it is almost identical to the main product. Heineken has admitted this. It said when it applied for an award that it used the 0.0 ads as a way to increase sales of its main product. The industry admits this, so why can the Government not admit it? Everybody knows these are alcohol ads in a very cheap disguise. On television, sometimes viewers cannot even see the 0.0 when it is on the field of play. I do not think a 12-, 13- or 14-year-old who goes to a match in the Aviva should be bombarded with alcohol advertising. There is enough pressure on our young people without us forcing stacks of advertising on them. We know the earlier people start to drink, the more impact it has on them in later life. It is a risk factor for dependency in later life. Despite what the Minister of State, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, said, there is an issue with youth drinking, which has increased. A Healthy Ireland study showed a 12% increase in youth drinking since 2018. That should

concern the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth. We know from the Irish drug and alcohol survey that 37% of 15- to 24-year-olds had an alcohol use disorder. That should be a public health concern.

The officials in the Department of Health have let the Minister down. The speeches tonight should be reviewed. The debate we have had this evening is deeply disappointing. I ask the Minister of State and her colleagues to reflect on it. I ask her to bring that message back. Let us have honest, reasonable debates in this House. Let us engage in the issues. Let us try to work together in the interests of the people who elect us to improve public health and health outcomes. Is that too much to ask, instead of coming in here and opposing Bills for nonsensical reasons? They are a smokescreen.

Health warnings were the other excuse given. It is in the power of the Minister for Health to issue those regulations. She can draft them in any way she wants. If she wants to exclude 0.0 products, she can do that. That is her power as a Minister and I ask her to use it and draft those regulations in a way she sees fit. If the Minister of State wants her amendment, we can do it on Committee Stage. If she wants to wait for evidence, we can take a timed amendment. I am willing to compromise on that. In relation to health warnings, they should be done by regulation, as the Act set out. It was meant to be done by now but will not be done for another two years. I have doubts the Government will ever do it because it is captured by the vested interests of the alcohol industry and is not standing up for the interests of the young people of Ireland. It is deeply disappointing.

Question put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Jen Cummins): The division is postponed until the next weekly division time.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 5.46 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 9 Meitheamh 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.46 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 9 June 2026.