



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 11 Meitheamh 2026

Thursday, 11 June 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea) i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Data Centres

1. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment if he is aware of a new UN report on the environmental impact of AI (details supplied), which cites Ireland as a "cautionary example"; if he has plans to implement a grid prioritisation framework, as outlined in the EU Commission's guidance on efficient and timely grid connections in December 2025; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44295/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: The United Nations is citing Ireland as a cautionary example of what happens when Government policy fails to keep pace with the explosive energy demand from data centres and AI. We are not leaders or an example for the rest of the world but a warning. This did not happen overnight. It is a result of political choices, the lack of a framework and the lack of a plan. What is the Minister's grip on this? Does he have any plans to deal with the mounting criticisms of our approach to data centres?

Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Data centres are a very important part of Ireland's economic and digital present and future, and a key part of our value proposition for foreign direct investment. Data centres bring wider economic benefits, as most understand. They bring tax revenues, employment, broader digital infrastructure value and significant support and linkages provided to other high-value sectors of the economy.

The recent KPMG study on data centres, undertaken on behalf of the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, reports there are 19,500 directly employed in the industry. As detailed in our large energy user action plan, LEAP, Ireland's technology sector, underpinned by the very digital infrastructure in data centres, accounted for employing almost 183,000 people in quarter 4 of 2024. This is equivalent to 7% of Ireland's total workforce.

Unlike other European countries that have heavy industry bases, Ireland's industrial electricity demand is primarily concentrated in our digital economy. This is our core energy intensive industry.

I note the contents of the cited UN University report on AI energy, particularly on the need for responsible and informed capacity planning of the power system. The Government has for a long time recognised that data centres and their energy consumption need to be managed and planned appropriately. This is why we brought forward the Government's large energy user action plan in January 2026. It sets out a plan-led approach for very large and energy intensive investments. This will enable Ireland to capture next generation investment in energy intensive industries and unlock significant associated economic and employment opportunities.

The Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, is responsible for grid connection policy and is accountable to a committee of the Oireachtas, not to me as Minister. Changes to connections policy, including those proposed in the cited document of the EU Commission, are a matter for CRU.

Deputy Pa Daly: I agree that data centres are necessary in this country but it is a question of planning appropriately for what is there. The European Commission has already set out a clear pathway for a grid prioritisation framework, putting the public need, system readiness and climate obligations at the centre of decision-making. Here in Ireland we have an open season policy of first come, first served regardless of who benefits. Who is inevitably benefiting? It is the larger corporate and AI users of data centres. This is why the UN calls it a cautionary example. What does it mean for ordinary people, families and small businesses? They are forced to compete for electricity capacity in their own country and county, when a small number of large-scale operators are effectively being waved through without the prioritisation strategy that is necessary. We have been warning about this for years. Housing developments are being delayed, energy bills are being driven up and blackouts are on the cards. Does the Minister have any plan to insist on a prioritisation framework?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I welcome the fact that Deputy Daly recognises the importance of ICT, digital infrastructure and data centres. This is something on which most will agree. The most critical parts of this are the large energy user action plan and the CRU decision on large energy users, both of which are from last year. Both clearly set out what is required for a new data centre or a large energy user connection. This means for a new data centre to get an energy connection it is required to get 80% of its energy through new renewable sources.

There is a plan-led approach. There is also the grid investment through PR6, which is critical for all of our industries and housing. This is the €18.9 billion investment to 2030 and beyond. It is absolutely critical. We need to ensure that we remain at the cutting edge of new technologies. As I mentioned, digital infrastructure is our large industrial base. Unlike many other European countries we are not a large manufacturing country. This is something we need to protect. We have not had a situation where any housing has not been connected due to the growth in our economy.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Minister for the reply but one of the consequences is in relation to our energy security. This is not a theoretical difficulty any more. When the system is pushed

to its limits the risk is not that abstract. What we have, and we have seen this already, are blackouts, supply disruption and emergency measures. This is what happens when a grid is under strain. EirGrid has been warning about it for years. The Secretary General warned of the dangers of the approach and said that we need to choose between housing and AI. Officials in the Department of public expenditure warned that data centres are pushing up household bills. Despite these warnings, not enough is being done to ensure security of supply so that no matter what the circumstances homes will be heated, hospitals will operate, businesses can function and energy bills are not driven sky-high, as they have been over the last number of years. We have seen that instead of securing supply first and managing demand, the Government is allowing demand, particularly from these centres, to dictate the system, and this is the imbalance that is happening.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I assure Deputy Daly they do not dictate the system. Connection policy is a matter for CRU, which is independent of me, which the Deputy knows. Grid investment is critical and we are doing that. Grid resilience is absolutely critical and this is why it is imperative that projects such as the North-South interconnector start and are completed as quickly as possible. I have already outlined what we are doing with regard to large energy users and we have published our plans in this regard. We also need to increase grid capacity and generation. What we have done in a ten-year period, when we look at generation of energy, is we have doubled wind capacity and there has been more than a 1,000% increase in solar, with a very good pipeline coming forward for more than 8 GW in renewables. This is where we need to get to. We need to ensure we are accelerating the deployment of renewables into our system and investing in our grid to make sure that grid resilience is there. There are backups to ensure the grid remains safe, such as fault ride through, which is there for large energy users also. This policy is one that is agreed by CRU in consultation with stakeholders.

Legislative Measures

2. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment when he intends to introduce the strategic gas emergency reserve Bill 2025 to the Dáil; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44871/26]

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: When does the Minister intend to introduce the strategic gas emergency reserve Bill to the Dáil? Will he give us an update on the progress of the Bill?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: In March 2025, I received Government approval to develop a State-led strategic gas reserve. The delivery of a strategic gas reserve is critical to Ireland's energy security as we transition to indigenous, clean, renewable energy. Crucially, the strategic gas emergency reserve will also ensure compliance with EU standards and regulations and is consistent with our climate action plan.

The State-led, transitional nature of the reserve ensures that the risk of stranded fossil fuel assets is mitigated, that the reserve will be used for emergency use only, and that it does not support increased gas demand with a view to minimising impacts on greenhouse gas emissions. The Government remains committed to taking decisive action to radically reduce our reliance

on fossil fuels and has greatly boosted the share of renewables in our increasingly electrified energy system. This, however, means greater reliance on gas to provide sufficient flexibility and backup for secure electricity supplies at times of low renewable output.

In line with the programme for Government priority, the approval to proceed with the strategic gas emergency reserve commits to exploring all opportunities to expedite delivery of the project. The gas reserve Bill that Deputy Whitmore asked about provides for an expedited consenting pathway to allow the next stage of delivery of the project. The Bill is being finalised, having completed pre-legislative scrutiny in February 2026, with a view to being completed, I hope, in this session. I will introduce it in this session and it is my intention to seek Government approval this month to publish the text of the Bill and to present the Bill to the Houses of the Oireachtas at the earliest opportunity thereafter. The general scheme of the legislation underpinning the operation of the strategic gas emergency reserve will be brought forward later this year. There will be two pieces of legislation, as Deputy Whitmore knows.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I thank the Minister for the update. As he knows, we had pre-legislative scrutiny at the committee and concerns were raised at that point. I want to refer to an article written by the previous Minister for the environment, Eamon Ryan, shortly after the start of this Dáil term when he was no longer a Member of the Oireachtas or a Minister. He was very clear that we do not require a floating LNG facility. As a former Minister, he was aware of the many details, discussions and reports that went through the Department, on which the Minister is also relying. He outlined a number of ways we could still secure our energy supply without relying on this LNG facility. I wish he had realised this when he first brought the plan forward. The strategic LNG facility was his proposal at the very start. I wish this work had been done at that point. However, it is important to be cognisant of what he has said. Has the Minister looked at his recommendations? This area moves quickly and technology moves quickly. It is an opportune time to review the policy.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have been very clear that we need this reserve on a temporary basis. We have an oil reserve but we have no gas reserve. It is a significant risk to our energy security in this country. I have a lot of time for the former Minister, Eamon Ryan. I worked very well with him. On this item I do not agree with him and I say that in a very respectful way.

It is a risk that needs to be mitigated and that cannot be ignored. That is why, very early in this Dáil term, I set aside that policy decision with agreement from the Government. Very clear legal advice was received, twice, in relation to the energy security report, with a particular focus on this idea of banning certain types of gas. The legal advice stated that was not possible, not feasible and not legal, end of story. This needs to be done for our energy security and it is consistent with our climate action plan. I fully respect Eamon Ryan. He did a very good job across the portfolio. In this area, my job is to mitigate risk and protect our State, and this is why I am bringing this forward.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I think everybody agrees that we are an energy insecure country and that we do rely on external actors. That is very clear from the different energy shocks we have experienced in recent years. It is important that we shore up our energy security. The

question is whether we require a strategic LNG facility to do it or if there is an alternative way to provide that energy security.

The former Minister, Eamon Ryan, based on the advice he received from the Department previously, is of the opinion that there is an alternative way to do that and this would be by using alternative fuels, battery storage and interconnector systems to provide energy security in the event that there were some catastrophic interruption to the gas pipelines coming into Ireland. That is a very unlikely event but it is a high-risk one. What came of the committee meeting was that the Government has not really looked at those alternatives. I ask the Minister to consider those alternatives.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The reality is that we are building more interconnections. We are building the Celtic interconnector now. I signed a further memorandum of understanding, MOU, with Spain in relation to exploring opportunities to have another electricity interconnector to continental Europe.

In the meantime, we are accelerating the deployment of renewables. I agree with the former Minister, Eamon Ryan, and that is what we are doing. In relation to storage, in our grid alone, we have over 1 GW of long-duration battery storage. This is the third highest capacity in the European Union. We do, however, need to do more. This will deal with demand flexibility and reducing dispatch down rates and allow us to be able to deploy our energy, and particularly renewable energy sources, at times when the wind is not blowing and the sun is not shining. It will be possible to store that energy and then deploy it. This facility will be used temporarily. It is to mitigate risk should something happen to our gas pipelines to Scotland. We only produce 20% of the gas that we use now and import 80%.

Energy Prices

3. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the number of recent reports which confirm that Ireland has the highest electricity prices in the EU (details supplied); the measures he is taking to reduce prices; if he will reintroduce electricity credits; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44296/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: The Minister knows we have the highest electricity bills in Europe. Families are struggling with increased costs year-on-year. The Government is continuing to preside over a system where costs are driven up by poor planning, over-reliance on imported gas and an energy model that prioritises the large corporate demand, particularly from data centres, over ordinary customers. Can the Minister explain why we are paying so much, what the Government has done that allows infrastructure and policy failures to push up the prices and what reliefs it is going to provide now? I ask the Minister not to say, "the task force".

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The Deputy is going to tell me what I am going to say now. The household energy price index, HEPI, report, which is referenced in the Deputy's written question, although he did not mention it in his remarks, tracks energy prices across European capital cities. When adjusted for purchasing power standard, PPS, this report shows that Dublin was the ninth highest for electricity prices in May 2026 and the 14th highest for gas prices. The report notes that purchasing power standards are an approach that eliminates general price

level differences between countries. Meanwhile, the latest data from Eurostat, which compares electricity prices across the EU, shows Ireland ranked fifth highest for electricity prices and eighth highest for gas prices among European countries in purchasing power parity terms.

That is still too high. I do not deny that at all. It is important to note, however, that price setting is a commercial and operational matter for each energy supplier. Retail prices are influenced by several factors, including wholesale energy prices, system operational costs and supplier hedging. We are deeply aware, however, of the pressures placed on households and businesses by high energy costs. We have taken a number of steps to support households and businesses facing those increased costs. This includes the €750 million package of fuel supports announced in March, which is the largest *per capita* of any EU state. Budget 2026 had a range of other measures. These included the extension until 2030 of the 9% VAT rate currently applied to gas and electricity bills. There were also enhanced social protection payments, including an increase to the fuel allowance rate and an expansion of the eligibility rules, which applies to about a quarter of Irish households, and a record allocation of €640 million in Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, retrofitting schemes. Those schemes are critically important. Since 2019, we have invested over €1.8 billion in retrofitting and we have been able to provide energy upgrades for 268,000 homes. These upgrades protect those homes and families from energy shocks and reduce their costs and energy consumption.

Deputy Pa Daly: The Minister said, and we all agree, that energy bills are too high, whether we have the highest, the second highest or the fourth highest costs. We all know that energy companies are, of course, going to raise their bills year-on-year. They have an obligation to shareholders, and they want to make a profit not only this year but an increased profit next year and the year afterwards. The question is: when the Minister is going to step in and tell them that enough is enough? I ask this because there is a lack of progress here. Energy suppliers had a recent spate of price hikes. One company raised its prices twice last summer. Once again, however, the Minister points to the insufficient measures, I think, contained in budget 2026. He did not, however, refer to the possibility of allocating energy credits, which we said would have been a temporary measure. The energy regulator warned that the withdrawal of these credits would lead to a spike in arrears, and that is exactly what happened. Is the Minister going to consider reintroducing energy credits as a temporary measure as part of budget 2027, given our prices are so high?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I am going to mention the work being done by the national energy affordability task force. I will report on that in July. That will give options for further changes and will feed into budgetary deliberations. I am not writing anything off regarding the budget. I will wait to receive that report. In the meantime, however, we have to ensure we accelerate the retrofitting programme I spoke about. If we look at solar, for argument's sake, over 112,000 homes in this country now have solar systems. This reduces their bills permanently. It is also good for our climate as well as being good for people's pockets and household bills. We want to keep accelerating this development.

Our continued overdependence on imported fossil fuel means we are going to continue to be over-reliant on them until we reach the tipping point on renewables. This means we will be at risk of volatility in the international fossil fuel markets. We are making good progress in

this regard. About 50% of our electricity, month on month, is generated by renewables. We need to get that figure up to 80%. This is why we need to continue to accelerate the progress.

I am not writing anything off for the budget. We will decide that as a Government. The national energy affordability task force will conclude its work in July in advance of the budget.

Deputy Pa Daly: Some progress is being made in offshore renewables but there is no State investment in it and we are way behind with it. Even one of the Government's own Ministers said it had been sitting on its hands and navel-gazing about offshore wind for many years.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Who was that?

Deputy Pa Daly: The energy credits were supposed to be just a temporary measure while the structural failures were being sorted out. It is not just Sinn Féin or other Opposition parties saying this. The International Energy Agency, IEA, has queried and called into question the huge gap between the retail price and the wholesale energy costs here. Even the Taoiseach himself has admitted that price gouging is going on. We have the biggest gap in the world and it costs three times more to buy energy here than it does to produce it. The ESRI agrees with us. It highlights that wholesale prices have fallen much more slowly here than in other European countries. I see what the Minister said about the VAT rate, the network charges and the other levies but it seems that nothing is being done to address this situation.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I have specifically asked the CRU to look at that pass-on of wholesale price reductions to retail, and that gap. I have written to the commission specifically on that matter to say it is something I want looked at. I am writing nothing off. I am not suggesting for a moment that the measures in the last budget were going to soften the blow of all price increases. They did not but they helped.

We are going to seek to help again where we can. We need to consider structural reform. I assure the Deputy, with regard to offshore renewables, that the only delay has been on the planning side. I am hopeful that we will get two planning decisions through this year and that we can move towards construction in this decade. That is what I have always said. The original plan was electrification by 2030. That was not possible because of delays in the planning process. That is why I brought forward, in the term of the last Government, the Planning and Development Act, which, I remind the Deputy, his party opposed at the time. We will be working on measures in advance of the budget, and that will be informed by the final national energy affordability task force report.

Data Centres

4. **Deputy Ciarán Ahern** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment his response to findings in a recent report by Friends of the Earth that data centre energy demand added a cumulative €715 million to household electricity bills between 2015 and 2023 and could add a further €1.6 billion over the next decade; his response to a recent report (details supplied) on data centres commissioned by the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, and whether he accepts its claims regarding employment numbers and economic value; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44852/26]

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I ask the Minister for his response to findings in a recent report by Friends of the Earth that data centre energy demand added a cumulative €715 million to household electricity bills between 2015 and 2023 and could add a further €1.6 billion over the next decade; his response to a recent report from KPMG on data centres commissioned by the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment; and whether he accepts the claims in that report regarding employment numbers and economic value.

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Alan Dillon): Data centres represent critical digital infrastructure that is central to Ireland's modern economy. They strengthen Ireland's position as a strategic, knowledge-intensive regional hub for the ICT sector and also support broader retention and expansion of existing investment that supports billions of euro in economic value for Ireland via high-wage employment, tax receipts and the supplier ecosystem.

The Government's policy is supportive of continued sustainable data centre developments that are consistent with our twin digital and green transitions. The Value of Data Centres to Ireland is an independent report commissioned by the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment that clearly demonstrates the significant role data centres play in our economy and draws on extensive consultation with relevant experts. It reports that there are over 19,500 directly employed in the industry.

As detailed in the large energy user action plan, Ireland's technology sector, underpinned by digital infrastructure and data centres, accounted for employment of over 180,000 people in quarter 4 of 2024, equivalent to 7% of Ireland's total workforce. This highlights that beyond their direct contribution to construction and operations, data centres play a critical role in enabling access to a wide range of digital-intensive sectors, enhancing the competitiveness of the Irish economy.

While data centres are large energy users, Ireland's industrial electricity demand – unlike that in other European countries, which are heavily industrially based – is primarily concentrated on the digital economy. This is a core energy-intensive sector and, as such, it reinforces the effectiveness of a plan-led approach for future development of the most energy-intensive industries, including data centres, as set out in the Government's large energy user action plan.

The environmental NGO report referred to by the Deputy is consistent with the Government position by underlining the importance of accelerating the deployment of renewable energy to remove gas-related cost effects driving energy prices. The Government has introduced a number of initiatives, including unprecedented investment in PR6 and ongoing co-operation in the acceleration of the infrastructure task force to support increased roll-out of renewables.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I thank the Minister of State. Of course, data centres have a role in modern society. No one would dispute that, but there is an important conversation starting about the costs and benefits. The benefits must be in proportion to the costs. Many of us in this House fear that the balance is being lost here. The Friends of the Earth report spoke to the costs that data centres are adding to our energy bills. We know of the strain that they are putting on our electricity grid, and that they are undermining our decarbonisation goals. What we are

trying to do here is scrutinise the Government's industrial policy as much as its climate and decarbonisation strategy.

The Minister of State mentioned that data centres are important in retaining jobs and industry here, but the job figures quoted in that report were frankly embarrassing. There were 876,000 jobs linked to data centres. Was the Minister of State not at all embarrassed about that kind of figure coming out? The real figure – the Minister of State mentioned 180,000 jobs – is more like 19,500, half of which are in construction. I would like the Minister of State's response to that.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Again, we have done extensive evidence-based analysis. If the Deputy examines the Department's KPMG report, he will note it reflects the reality of Ireland being recognised as a global digital hub. I accept that the future pathway needs to be different, and that is exactly what we are implementing. We will no longer be in a position where the sector will be unmanaged. We will introduce a plan-led framework based on the large energy user action plan. That will align energy demand with renewable supply and ensure we have grid stability that is protected. We are also very much focused on accelerating renewable delivery. We will see onshore wind, offshore wind and solar generation capacity rapidly increase, with a target of over 80% by 2030. Along with that, we are introducing affordability measures, and the Deputy will see that in the energy affordability action plan that will be published in quarter 3 of this year.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: We welcome regulation and planning in this area. Currently, 22% of our energy is going to data centres. That is going to be 30% by 2030. Even under the Government's current plans, it looks like 55% of our energy will be going towards data centres, if all the data centres that are in planning are built. What does the Minister of State believe is an acceptable proportion of our energy going to data centres? Is it 22%? Is it 30%? Is it 55%? Even 22% means we have five times more energy going to data centres than in the USA. It is 20 times more than in China.

The Minister answered a question earlier on energy security, but data centre strategy is undermining our energy security by increasing the gas demand in this country. Even if only 20% of the energy going into data centres is associated with gas and not renewables, it will double the peak demand for gas in this country. Again, it is undermining the Government's other strategies.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I take the points the Deputy has raised. As I said, that is precisely why we have moved to a more plan-led approach under the large energy user action plan. That is in place. We predict that by the end of the decade, 30% of our energy will be focused towards digital hubs and data centres. What does that mean in practice? It means new connections will be subject to strict conditions. It will also mean that on-site or contracted renewable generation will be required. That is very much focused on a demand-led approach with flexibility. Also, system supports must be provided by operators. Most importantly, data centres are now part of the solution in regard to renewable energy projects, grid connections and energy storage. We have a huge pipeline of onshore and offshore projects coming through. If we manage renewables, we will have less reliance on gas and a stronger grid. That is exactly where Government policy now is focused.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

5. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment whether he believes the measures that the Government has taken will not be sufficient to reduce emissions to meet both our national and EU climate targets (details supplied); the measures he is taking to address this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44297/26]

6. **Deputy Grace Boland** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the additional measures under consideration to bring Ireland back on track to meet its carbon budgets and legally binding 2030 emissions reduction targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44390/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: Recent reports have stated Government measures will not be sufficient to reduce emissions in order to meet our national and EU climate targets and obligations. What measures is the Minister taking to address this?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I propose to take Questions Nos. 5 and 6 together.

We are committed to delivering on Ireland's responsibility to address the climate crisis, and work remains ongoing right across government, not just in my Department, to implement climate mitigation measures every single day of the week. My priority is driving implementation, particularly on high-impact measures with multiple societal and economic benefits.

Last month, the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, launched its latest greenhouse gas emissions projections to 2030, which show that we are moving in the right direction and improving our performance compared with the previous year. For the first time, the EPA now projects that we are close to meeting our first carbon budget, following a consistent trend of improving projections for that budget over recent years. It is important to remember that in 2018, under existing measures, emissions were projected by the EPA to increase by 4% by 2030 because of population growth and economic growth, and that additional measures would reduce emissions by just 1%. Now, it is projecting a decrease in emissions of between 10% and 25% by 2030, which I welcome.

What we have been able to do is to decouple economic growth from emissions growth. We are seeing emissions reduce across many sectors while our population is growing and our economy is growing. We now have the lowest level of greenhouse gas emissions in 35 years, which is notable, given, as I mentioned earlier, we have 1.5 million more people in our country than we had then. More than 1 million new homes have been added since then. We also have over 1 million extra vehicles on our roads. As I mentioned, the important thing is decoupling growth from emissions. We are now world leaders in renewable energy. We have a higher rate of renewables integrated into our grid than any European state. We are more than halving the emissions in our electricity system, which is significant, and are now projected to reduce that by between 53% and 60% by the end of the decade. Emissions in agriculture are set to decrease by between 4% and 19% and emissions in transport are set to decrease by between 16% and 28%.

The EPA report shows that a significant increase in electric vehicles, EVs, last year has led to a significant change in the projections for emissions in the transport sector and we are seeing in the first five months of this year a further ramping up of EVs, in particular. Of course, we need to do more. I want to focus on the most impactful measures. That is why when I bring forward the climate action plan over the coming period, it will be more focused on the most impactful measures and will report on the ones that make the biggest difference. We need to try to bridge the gap to the target that has been set for greenhouse gas emission reductions by 2030. I have said in this House, and have said publicly elsewhere, that we will not reach that target by 2030 but we are moving towards it very well. We can get to that target in the early 2030s. For us in government, and indeed all of us in the House, it is about looking at the measures that we can take now, such as those we have discussed this morning, particularly the acceleration of renewables, the electrification of our country across sectors and the retrofitting of our homes and businesses. We must continue with the pipeline of projects we have, particularly offshore, and get them to construction.

We have seen from one year's projections to the next improvements. That is good. They are not enough to reach our overall target by 2030 but across sectors, we are moving towards the target significantly.

Deputy Pa Daly: We accept, and the Minister accepts, that the small amount of money allocated for the new EV scheme, which is commencing on 1 July, is not going to address the issue. The way things are going, those funds will probably have been used up by the end of that month. Even though some money has been ring-fenced for rural areas, the scheme is not going to address the glaring need there.

The EPA has made it clear that even if the current measures were to be delivered, they will only cut emissions by approximately 25%. On the EU side, we are heading to approximately 23% when the obligation, as the Minister knows, is 42%. It is a policy failure. The consequence is that we could have up to €28 billion in fines, although the Minister has questioned that. We will have to pay some money towards carbon credit purchases. That money could be invested in communities and workers. Retrofit schemes are still too expensive. Rural communities are still facing rising costs and we have heard about energy prices. Workers and families have to carry this burden without clear, credible income supports and transition pathways. We need a just transition.

Deputy Grace Boland: While I welcome the progress that is being made, the EPA, as it stands, is telling us that, at best, we are only going to meet half of the targets that we need to meet for 2030. What urgent additional measures is the Minister and his Department considering to try to bring us further forward in reaching our 2030 goals?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I would not dismiss what the EPA says and I have not done so. I welcome the work it does. We are taking measures that have been agreed at Cabinet and among Government members and TDs, such as Deputy Boland, who support the Government. We have changed the retrofitting grants, which has made a massive difference not only from a climate perspective in reducing energy use but also in terms of cost and affordability. Since the changes I brought forward in the first quarter of this year, there has been a doubling. There have been over 50,000 applications to the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, for

home retrofitting and bringing about that retrofitting passport, to which Deputy Daly also referred, which means that you can break up the grants and make them more accessible. We are seeing people respond to that now, which is good. I want to see more of that. Nearly €670 million has been allocated to that. I want that money invested and spent. Over 264,000 homes have now had energy upgrades. That is very good for climate, good for reducing emissions and very good for household budgets. There were approximately 5,000 business grants last year. I am working on measures to make those business grants more accessible, too.

I brought in another €40 million this year for EVs. There has been a substantial increase in the number of registrations of EVs. I have ring-fenced €10 million for the scrappage scheme. I have been clear that it is a pilot scheme. We want to see how it works. If it is over-subscribed, it is a success. We want to get cars that are 13 years old or older off the roads. I have ring-fenced 65% of that funding for rural areas, which I said I would. Friends of the Earth and others have welcomed the focus on rural areas in particular. I will monitor that. If the scheme is open for one, two or three months and is fully expended, we will go back and look at it again. That is just an example of the type of measures we are looking to bring forward.

Underpinning all of it is the acceleration of renewables. I will come back in with a supplementary contribution.

Deputy Pa Daly: I know the Minister has been asked to do that in respect of EV cars and it is good that he is moving towards addressing an issue for which we have been calling for a long time, which is the prioritisation of rural areas. What about second-hand cars? It is still the case that for people who will be selling or scrapping cars, it is a small amount of money. How about a scheme for second-hand purchasers if, for example, it is their first time buying an EV? We need a just transition. We need free or subsidised retrofits for those who need them the most. If you are in a rural area or are an older person, you are unlikely to make that big outward investment to retrofit your home. We also need affordable public transport and more rural connectivity. We need income supports and protections for workers and families through the transition. I ask the Minister to address those points and to have more of an emphasis on older people and rural areas. As the Minister knows, one third of the money for EVs has up to now been given for cars that are worth over €55,000.

Deputy Grace Boland: At a recent meeting of the Committee of Public Accounts, the Minister's Secretary General and I discussed retrofitting and delivering energy efficient homes. She acknowledged that is a real issue and there is a workforce gap. Has the Minister's Department made an assessment of that gap? What measures is he taking to address it?

The Minister mentioned an extra 1 million EVs on the road. What we really need is better public transport. In Fingal, as the Minister knows, we need better public transport. We need local buses to connect our sprawling towns with train lines. We need the electrification.

I ask the Minister and his very capable Secretary General to work with urgency to deliver all of these climate measures to ensure that we meet as much of our target as possible by 2030.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank both Deputies. I will try to deal with both of their interventions. Deputy Boland can be assured that everything we do is to try to accelerate the actions we are taking in relation to climate. It is the number one crisis worldwide. Ireland, as

a country, has shown that it is able to pivot and change quite quickly. I used the example earlier that we have doubled wind capacity in under ten years. In 2015, there was 2 MW of solar energy in our system. By the end of this year, there will be 3 GW. What does that mean? Just 1 GW is enough to power 500,000 homes. That is where solar has moved quickly. We are seeing a rooftop revolution and well over 120,000 homes with solar panels.

I completely agree about public transport. That is where the national development plan that we all agreed is important. One euro of every four invested between now and the end of this decade is being invested in transport. There is a public transport deficit that we need to catch up with and address with major projects that the Deputy and I are aware of.

In the year before last, which is the last full year for which we have figures, there were 365 million public transport passenger journeys. People are responding. We need to accelerate projects. We regularly discuss the need to get new services in place. The Deputy can be assured that we will do that.

The rural focus on electric vehicles is something Deputy Daly has been calling for. I have also, as part of the additional funding I have brought forward, reduced the value of cars for which grants are applicable from €60,000 to €50,00 because I do not want to grant-aid luxury cars. We want to focus on middle income families and families who actually need that assistance. Under the scrappage scheme, the grant is €8,500. New EV cars can now be bought for close to €20,000. I will not mention which brands; people can have a look. There are good cars available there. I will keep an open mind on second-hand cars but we need to do this through dealerships for certification and application reasons. It is something we will continue to look at.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Energy Policy

7. **Deputy Seán Kyne** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment to provide an update on the work of the national energy affordability task force; when the action plan will be produced; the way in which timelines on implementation will be managed so as to assist households and business in advance of winter 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44562/26]

Deputy Seán Kyne: I am seeking an update on the work of the national energy affordability task force; when the action plan will be produced; the implementation timelines; and what will be done to assist households and businesses in advance of the coming winter.

Deputy Alan Dillon: First, I congratulate Deputy Seán Kyne on his re-election to Dáil Éireann.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Hear, hear.

Deputy Alan Dillon: He is very welcome.

Addressing energy affordability is a key priority for this Government. That is why, in June of last year, the Department established the national energy affordability task force, NEAT, to identify, assess and implement measures that will enhance energy affordability for households and businesses while delivering key renewables commitments and protecting security of supply and economic stability. The first report of the task force informed key aspects of budget 2026. That included a 15%, or €5 per week, increase to the fuel allowance, providing an additional €140 to recipients during the annual fuel allowance season. Eligibility for the fuel allowance was also expanded to include those in receipt of the working family payment and there was an extension to 2030 of the reduced VAT rate of 9%, which is applied to gas and electricity. A €400 income tax disregard for households involved in microgeneration was also extended for a further three years.

A record €640 million is also being provided to support the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland's residential and community energy upgrade scheme this year. This includes €340 million for the warmer homes scheme, which provides fully funded upgrades for households in energy poverty. The allocation means that more funding than ever will be available to make homes warmer, healthier, more comfortable and less expensive to heat. According to the SEAI, since 2019 over 17,000 homes have been upgraded in Galway alone under SEAI schemes, including over 1,400 fully funded upgrades for households at risk of energy poverty under the warmer homes scheme, and over 7,300 solar PV installations.

The NEAT continues to work intensively on an energy affordability action plan to be submitted to the Government in quarter 3 of this year. This action plan will focus on short-, medium- and long-term measures, such as addressing the price of energy, sustainable demand and enhancing flexibility, and addressing energy poverty, customer protections and energy affordability for businesses.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I acknowledge the work of the Government in assisting those in fuel poverty and under pressure, the extension of the fuel allowance season and the continuation of the reduction in VAT on electricity on gas. We saw during March and April significant increases in the price of home heating oil. Thankfully, that has now come back to a degree but it was certainly a shock to the budgets of many homeowners. While I acknowledge the medium and longer term role of retrofitting as well as the moneys being spent from the carbon tax on the fuel allowance and retrofitting and the investment by the Government and the work of the Department, how can we prepare for such a shock, if it were to happen again in the coming winter, in terms of home heating kerosine prices?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his question. When we saw the huge volatility and the energy crisis that resulted from events in the Middle East, we introduced unprecedented supports. We expanded the fuel allowance for an additional four weeks, which provided some comfort for those who use home heating oil. Notwithstanding the pressures that energy costs are putting on many families and recognising the scale of the intervention that has already been delivered, we also recognise what is still required. That is why, through the national energy affordability task force, we are moving to the next phase, which is to move away from emergency supports to more long-term affordable solutions. The core driver is reducing our reliance on volatile fossil fuels, scaling up renewables and improving energy efficiency. We want to continue to protect those who are most vulnerable. As I said, a comprehensive plan,

which will come to the Government in quarter 3 of this year, will include a number of measures for those who are in energy poverty and those who need them most.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I agree that the action plan needs to be flexible in relation to such shocks. I know this is not just an issue for his Department, and requires a whole-of-government response. During the winter period, demand for and usage of home heating oil will increase in Galway and Mayo. We will have colder nights and people will stay in for longer. I certainly hope that there is, in the action plan and in the Department, work taking place to engage with the Minister for Finance and other Ministers to ensure there will be a response should there be another home heating oil price shock. I acknowledge the medium and longer term view in relation to retrofitting, insulation and alternative sources, but we also have to look at the here and now for those under pressure.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I take the points the Deputy has raised. We will feed in the challenges that many households that rely on kerosene face. The task force will engage with other Departments such as the Department of Social Protection on how the fuel allowance can better support those who require it. That is exactly how this should be structured. There should not be just one published document, but a phased approach in which we see immediate measures being delivered in the budget 2027 as well as further targeted actions, which can be finalised in the winter ahead, and a clear delivery timeline for the action plan itself. I take the points the Deputy has raised with regard to his constituents, especially those in rural areas who rely on oil and kerosene. I am sure we will engage with the Minister, Deputy Calleary, and other Departments on that.

Legislative Process

8. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the timeline to enact the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Bill 2025; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44544/26]

Deputy Brendan Smith: It is now a year and five months since Storm Éowyn wreaked havoc on this country and caused so much damage. We were promised at that time that the Government would take effective measures to implement the learnings from this storm. I welcome the Minister's major commitment to upgrade energy infrastructure and to very substantial funding. There is also a need to implement new legislative measures, with particular regard to the relationship between forestry and power lines. I would like to know what the status of that legislation is because we do not want to be in a position where another storm happens and many areas of country are without electricity again.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I thank Deputy Smith for raising this important matter. The Bill to which he refers, the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill 2025, is being progressed by my Department as part of a wider programme of work to strengthen the resilience of Ireland's electricity network in the context of climate change and increasingly severe storms. Lessons have and must continue to be learned from Storm Éowyn. We have seen significant work done in relation to the clearing of forestry corridors and debris. That work is under way.

The overarching objective is to ensure that overhead electricity networks and forestry can coexist in a manner that delivers a secure, reliable and climate-resilient electricity supply for homes, businesses and communities. The Bill will make provisions for a number of amendments, which include enhanced proactive vegetation management measures to protect the electricity network, including powers to clear vegetation likely to interfere with the network; the establishment and maintenance of forestry corridors to improve resilience and operational safety for the network; and statutory regulation of future forestry planting in proximity to the electricity network.

The Bill is informed by lessons learned from Storm Éowyn and other severe weather events where we have seen specific vulnerabilities in parts of the country.

The proposed legislation seeks to provide a clear statutory framework to facilitate the proactive management of vegetation and forestry risks, while balancing environmental considerations, forestry interests and the rights of landowners. That is under way while, as the Deputy has recognised, we are investing in critical grid infrastructure across the country.

The updated draft heads of Bill are currently being revised and the team in my Department continues to engage, as a matter of priority, with stakeholders, in particular the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, but also ESB Networks, forestry representatives, landowner organisations and the Office of the Attorney General.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister for his reply. It should not be rocket science to bring forward these new legislative measures. The initial legislation in this area in this State is the Electricity (Supply) Act 1927, which was amended in 1999 to address the relationship between forestry and transmission lines. For years, I have raised in this House the difficulties facing communities, especially those in my county of Cavan, and also across Leitrim and into Sligo. Year after year, during lesser storms than Storm Éowyn, trees were falling and bringing down power lines. I could be certain every January and February that I would have numerous calls from constituents who were without power due to forestry falling on power lines. This issue should have been addressed before Storm Éowyn. I know the Minister is prioritising it but legislation at official level moves far too slowly. This has to be given priority, as he said. There is no reason this type of legislation should not be enacted quickly and effectively. The last thing we want is to have forestry continuing to damage our critical infrastructure, including telecoms and ESB lines.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I agree with the Deputy. This is a priority. It needs to move quicker but there are a lot of stakeholders. To be frank about it, this is being made more complex than it should be because we are respecting the views of other stakeholders. We need to ensure the regulatory changes needed for new forestry are in place because the State is not going to be able to, nor should it, manage every private forest or private piece of land in the country. The State should not pay for it all either. The agreement with the Irish Farmers Association that was in place, which was a relatively loose agreement on forestry management, needs to be updated and put in legislation. We are operating under the 1927 Act and grey areas have been identified with respect to right of access. We are bottoming those out now. I met my team earlier this week. We are dependent on other stakeholders and Departments to work with us, which they are doing, but this needs to be done really quickly. I share the Deputy's

sense of frustration with the pace heretofore but I assure him the legislation is being afforded priority. We need to get it done.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister for his reply. I cannot emphasise enough the priority that needs to be attached to this. We know the horrendous hardship and suffering that were inflicted on so many individuals, families and communities. Unfortunately, that also happened prior to Storm Éowyn. We are going to have more severe weather events, according to all predictions. Whatever needs to be done, the relevant measures have to be put in place rapidly. Under no circumstances can we have this idea that people can plant land up to other people's houses and all of that. There has to be strict regulation. Also, where the Department of agriculture is paying out premiums for forestry, it should have an inspection regime to ensure forests are properly maintained.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Absolutely.

Deputy Brendan Smith: It is the lack of maintenance that has allowed trees and forestry to cause so much damage. What has happened previously cannot be allowed continue. I implore the Minister again to emphasise to the stakeholders, namely, other Departments and the statutory agencies, that this legislation has to be prioritised.

I take this opportunity to pay tribute, as I did in 2025, to members of the emergency services who worked in very difficult circumstances to try to help families and communities, especially in ESB Networks.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The work of our emergency services is exceptional. We saw the difficulties they had to operate under following recent storms, including Storm Chandra and Storm Éowyn.

This work needs to be concluded. There is complexity in it. I hate even using the word because it seems like it is an excuse, but there is genuine complexity here. It involves updating legislation but also updating the operation and management of forestry. I agree with the Deputy completely that forestry owners have an absolute responsibility. That is why we need to get agreement now that we want re-forestation across the country, with forests planted and maintained in such a way that we do not create a problem further down the road. We have nearly concluded that work and I will be convening stakeholders again in the next week or so. I expect to bring heads of Bill back to the Government well in advance of the summer recess. I completely understand the urgency of this legislation and I will keep the Deputy directly informed. I am aware of the impact this issue has had on areas of the country where there are large amounts of forestry, including the Deputy's area. Some of that forestry has not been managed or managed appropriately. I will keep him directly informed.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): With the permission of the House the next question, which is in the name of Deputy Barry Ward, will be taken by Deputy Kyne.

Recycling Policy

9. **Deputy Barry Ward** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the position regarding any Departmental review of the deposit return scheme; the mechanisms in place to measure the success of the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43426/26]

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for the question. The framework for governance and oversight of the deposit return scheme, DRS, is set out in the Separate Collection (Deposit Return Scheme) Regulations 2024, the ministerial approval issued under those regulations and the code of corporate governance for compliance schemes. While Re-turn is responsible for all operational and funding matters relating to the DRS, officials from my Department monitor performance of the scheme closely and meet Re-turn monthly to review progress. In addition, quarterly meetings are held to discuss strategic priorities and governance matters. I have also met representatives of the company on a number of occasions.

Regulation 7 of the DRS regulations provides for a review of Re-turn's approval three years after the grant of approval and every third year thereafter. Re-turn's approval was granted in July 2022, which means the first review was initiated in 2025, and this remains under consideration. As this is the first review since the scheme went live, a number of matters require review to ensure the continued effectiveness of the scheme.

The scheme is performing very well to date. Communities around the country are making the most of this new fundraising opportunity and enjoying huge reductions in litter. The 2026 Irish Business Against Litter annual survey, which was published last week, reported cans and plastic bottles litter is down 50% since the scheme was introduced in early 2024. The approval also obliges the company to achieve two separate collection and recycling targets, namely, by 2025 to have an amount equal to 77% of products placed on the market by weight, and by 2029 to have an amount equal to 90% of products placed on the market by weight. The company will publish its annual report for 2025 in the coming weeks and will set out its performance against those targets and other metrics in detail.

Deputy Seán Kyne: I thank the Minister of State for the response. It is good to see the statistics from Irish Business Against Litter showing a reduction of can and bottle litter. It is certainly welcome. There have been some concerns raised about the accessibility of the machines to wheelchair users, where the unclaimed deposit money will go and how long it is in the system, as well as how the machines' screens are not photosensitive, meaning they are bright at night when they do not need to be and are therefore using excess energy. Perhaps these issues could be looked at.

Deputy Alan Dillon: On accessibility, support and engagement are ongoing for those who require more adaptable Re-turn machines. The matter has certainly been brought to the attention of Re-turn and we have raised it. It is an operational issue for it. As the scheme continues to mature, more new initiatives will be included, not just through retailers but as part of the current review process.

In terms of the unredeemed deposits, the huge amounts that are sitting with a return are a significant issue, but it is also an opportunity. That money does not go to profit for return. It is reinvested in the scheme around educational awareness, but also circular initiatives. Again,

it is my clear expectation that these funds will continue to strengthen and improve the system, notwithstanding the fact that we need to get to a more sustainable model. As the scheme continues to deliver as intended, those unredeemed deposits will continue to reduce.

Deputy Seán Kyne: It is important that unclaimed deposits be kept under review. Are there any regional differences in the uptake of the scheme? Is that something that could be examined, in particular whether particular parts of the country are lower? It is likely to be the case. There would be an average level and there would be some with higher rates of use and others with lower rates of use and return. We could engage with such communities to see what the issues, problems, stumbling blocks and impediments are to the uptake or what more could be done to improve the rates in those areas.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Through the ongoing governance and reviews, we get monthly operational and monitoring data. That is reviewed by our Department. We also get quarterly governance and strategic reviews. This is part of the statutory approval process, notwithstanding the strict corporate code of practice around this scheme.

In response to the Deputy's point, we will continue to bring forward new initiatives if they are raised within this House and can be practically implemented. Overall, nationally we have seen a high uptake. More than 77% of PET bottles and aluminium cans are being collected and separated. We have seen a huge uptake in regard to it. More than 2 billion bottles and cans are being processed on the island of Ireland, which is significant. We will continue to engage with Re-Turn on how it can continue to adapt and deliver for all our communities and make it more accessible to people who require it.

Questions Nos. 10 to 11, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Electricity Grid

12. **Deputy Joe Cooney** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment to outline if his Department has undertaken an impact assessment of the current high cost of electricity on the Government's own electrification and decarbonisation targets; the measures that are in place to ensure that the cost of necessary grid infrastructure investment does not fall disproportionately on domestic consumers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44140/26]

38. **Deputy Joe Cooney** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the steps being taken to ensure that retail electricity prices are brought to a level that makes electrification a genuinely affordable proposition for ordinary households, given the Government's ambition to accelerate the electrification of Irish homes through heat pumps, electric vehicles, and other demand-side measures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44139/26]

Deputy Joe Cooney: I welcome the opportunity to raise this important matter. Has the Department looked into the impact of high electricity prices in Ireland on the uptake of technology like heat pumps, electric vehicles, EVs, and home batteries that are needed to meet our decarbonisation target, and how that might impact on our 2030 targets?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I propose to take Questions Nos. 12 and 38 together.

I thank the Deputy for his question. The Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, is currently undertaking a multi-annual review of electricity network tariffs. Electricity network tariffs recover the costs of developing, operating, and maintaining the networks from the users connected to the electricity networks. The review will seek to put in place a framework for how network tariffs should be structured to ensure they are in the best interest of consumers, are fit for purpose for the modern evolving electricity networks and to help facilitate a low-carbon future.

The tariff review will take account of upcoming legal proposals from the European Commission on network charges which are expected to be published in July. It is anticipated that the legal proposals will aim to expedite the transition towards a more electrified, more efficient and more resilient energy system that can lower prices for consumers.

For the decarbonisation pathway to be efficient, our energy system must be smart. A smart and flexible energy system will reduce consumer energy bills by reducing the amount of generation and network assets that need to be built to meet peak demand.

Since 2019, capital expenditure of over €1.8 billion has delivered more than 268,000 home energy upgrades, including over 36,300 fully-funded upgrades for households at risk of energy poverty under the warmer homes scheme to the end of May 2026.

A rooftop revolution is under way across Ireland. More than 112,000 homes have received solar PV grants since the scheme began. The SEAI had received over 15,000 applications for solar PV in 2026, to the end of April. This is a 72% increase on the total applications in 2025. Some 99% of new housing is A-rated.

I recognise the importance of helping households and businesses under pressure as a result of increasing energy prices. The cross-government national energy affordability task force, NEAT, will play a key role in this regard. NEAT is working intensively on an energy affordability action plan, which will be focused on short, medium and longer term measures to support households and businesses to meet their energy costs. The action plan will be built around four key pillars: addressing the price of energy; sustainable demand and enhancing flexibility; addressing energy poverty and customer protections; and energy affordability for businesses. To facilitate this, a number of NEAT subgroups has been established, bringing together officials from a wide range of Departments and agencies. A period of intensive engagement to refine options for consideration by the task force is under way, with subgroups meeting on an ongoing basis. This work is also being supported by structured engagement with relevant external stakeholders. The action plan will be submitted to the Government in the third quarter of this year.

Deputy Joe Cooney: Ireland has set an ambitious decarbonisation target of a 51% reduction in emissions by 2030, which is nearly full electrification of heat and transport. I heard from constituents who have recently undertaken works to electrify their homes and from others who are considering it. The price of electricity means the payback calculations, unfortunately, no longer stack up. We face a situation where, unfortunately, the technologies required to meet our reduction targets are being undermined by the cost of energy that powers them. We cannot

afford to set targets and then allow market conditions to quietly hollow them out. What plans does the Minister of State have in place to ensure the public have confidence in making investments into these technologies for the future?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I again thank the Deputy for the points he raises. I fully understand the concerns. Householders need confidence when switching to electricity that it will save them money. We have seen with the number of applications for SEAI grants but also for solar PV grants that those investments are reaping rewards. Electrification, when combined with efficiency and renewables, will lower energy costs over time for households. That is very much what we are focused on. Heat pumps in well-insulated homes reduce household heating bills. Solar PV allows households to generate their own electricity. We have seen a huge uptake in EVs and that has significantly reduced fuel and maintenance costs. These are the real drivers of ensuring that we can reduce our exposure to volatile, fossil fuel prices, particularly gas. That is why the Minister, through the SEAI and others, is scaling up the supports. We are also scaling up our renewable electricity at pace, reducing dependency on fossil fuels, but also building a more stable, low-cost system.

Through NEAT, we are also bringing forward additional measures that will continue to support households. The risk to households who do not move to electrification is that they could stay locked into expensive fossil fuels. We will look at how we can utilise best practice, be it through smart meters, looking at lower tariffs, better use, better efficiency and better supports. That is the way forward for many consumers and households.

Deputy Joe Cooney: The electrification of our economy is the right policy direction but it will only succeed if ordinary households are not priced out of it. Ireland already has some of the highest electricity prices in Europe. The scale of grid investment required over the coming decade is enormous and there is a real concern that the cost of that infrastructure will be loaded onto domestic electricity bills through network charges.

10 o'clock

If this continues, the people we are asking to switch to EVs and heat pumps are also the people being hit hardest by the cost of investing in the infrastructure needed to support our transition to full electrification. Will the Minister of State outline clearly how the Government will ensure that the burden of grid investment is distributed fairly and does not fall unequally on the domestic consumer who it is pushing to do the right thing?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I understand the points the Deputy raised. The challenge of high electricity prices is well-understood. That is actively shaping Government policy in terms of regulatory discussions and decisions, but also how we continue to prioritise investment through price review, PR, 6, through ESB Networks and also EirGrid. That is precisely also why we have commissioned the regulator of utilities to undertake an in-depth, fundamental and multi-annual review of the electricity network tariffs.

That review is very important in ensuring the costs are shared fairly right across users on the system, that households are protected, that they are not paying the most but also that they are protected from disproportionate impact, and that the tariff system supports electrification

rather than acting as a barrier. That work will certainly be aligned with future forthcoming EU proposals that will be brought forward.

We want to continue to invest in our grid and bring more renewables on-stream, continue to support households and businesses through SEAI supports and ensure that businesses and households are protected into the future. We have already delivered in some of these areas. We reduced the VAT rate on electricity, in line with gas, to 9%. We have also increased the fuel allowance and its eligibility, bringing many recipients of the working family payment into direct energy supports. We will continue to shape budget 2027 around the energy affordability piece, working with other Departments, such as the Department of Social Protection, for those who are at risk of energy poverty.

Renewable Energy Generation

13. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment for an update offshore wind projects; the amount of offshore wind that is expected to be connected by 2030, 2032 and 2035, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43821/26]

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Five phase 1 offshore projects are currently in planning, as the Deputy will be aware, off our east coast, with planned capacity of 3.8 GW. All five have submitted planning applications and first determinations from An Coimisiún Pleanála are anticipated on at least two of these by the end of this year, with the others to follow in 2027. The reason for that is they received detailed requests for further information, particularly around bird surveys. Subject to planning approval, I anticipate that some of these projects will be in construction by 2030. I do not see any of them being electrified, although there is the possibility of one, with a fair wind, if the Deputy will excuse the pun. I have said that publicly. Our focus is in getting them into construction and operational by the early 2030s.

We also have the 900 MW Tonn Nua project off the coast of Waterford. It was the only successful auction in the EU. If Britain is included as part of the European Continent, it was one of only two, along with allocation round 7, AR7. I expect that to be energised in 2033. Tonn Nua was the first of four sites to be brought to auction from the south coast designated maritime area plan, DMAP. We are making preparations to bring the remaining three south coast DMAP sites to auction over the coming period.

Separately, we are in the middle of the national DMAP process, that is, mapping our full maritime area to build that pipeline of sites into the future to be able to continue with regular auctions. That is to facilitate a further 20 GW.

I am not being evasive but I cannot say this we will have in 2030, 2032 or beyond. Suffice it to say, it is getting these ones out of planning and getting the phase 1 ones into construction. Tonn Nua is now done. I want to move on Lí Ban, for an auction there, and then conclude the national DMAP work by 2027, which is what we said we would do.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Minister pointed on some of the issues that I want to raise. The first is what has been identified as a substantial delay in the planning system. This was reported on and accounted in the Oireachtas committee at the back end of last year. There were

examples there, which he touched on, in terms of entering into the planning system in 2024, an expectation that people would have a decision in 2025 and instead they get a massive request for further information. I would make two related points on that. The first is that it felt like a planning system getting used to new types of applications. Is that something that we can expect in the future will be resolved? The second is the capacity in the planning system and the staffing of it. It does not fall directly under the Minister's remit, but where is that?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: To be fair, on the Deputy's first point, that is acknowledge by what was then An Bord Pleanála and is now An Coimisiún Pleanála. Certainly, those were the first type of projects that they ever had to deal with. I agree there are learnings and they have learnt from them. Second, the planning environment is different now. New applications will come under the Planning and Development Act 2024, which sets strict timelines on planning decisions and sets timelines around requests for further information and how often further information can be requested. In short, that will improve the situation.

In relation to resources, I can tell the Deputy, given my previous portfolio, that we have increased resources in An Coimisiún Pleanála by over 50% and we have restructured an coimisiún. An coimisiún is meeting approximately 90% of its targets. I commend the officials on the work they are doing. The decisions are coming out quicker and more efficiently.

The Deputy made a very fair point. These were large projects that had not been seen in the planning system previously. The learnings from them have been acknowledged. With the new planning Act, I expect that planning for new offshore wind projects will go through much quicker and much more efficiently.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: That is something that we need to keep a continued emphasis on to ensure that these applications are processed in a timely manner and that all of the necessary scrutiny is conducted from all aspects.

One of the key enabling infrastructures around offshore wind is our ports infrastructure. In terms of the development of our ports infrastructure, will we be ready to take advantage of the opportunity that presents itself in terms of offshore wind, whether in terms of ports for the maintenance of these facilities or for their construction?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Ports will be critical. In the coming couple of weeks, certainly before the recess, we will be bringing the new national ports policy to Cabinet. A lot of work has gone into it, and fed in by stakeholders as well. The east coast will be very important on that. That will come to Cabinet and then we will publish it. That will go out for consultation and every party and all stakeholders will get to see it.

Right now, Belfast is the only port that one could say will be able to carry out both. Belfast will be important to the island of Ireland and I see it being utilised. Cork is well advanced as well. I have visited the Port of Cork on a number of occasions. There has been really good work on the extension of piers, and good assistance from the European Union in that regard.

I agree we need to increase port capacity for construction but also, really importantly, as the Deputy mentioned, for the maintenance that will be required.

I see we will be ready. The Port of Cork has moved forward. I see Belfast as part of our offering as well and part of that solution, and, indeed, other ports that may come forward as well.

Questions Nos. 14 to 17, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): The next available question is Question No. 18 in the name of Deputy Michael Murphy.

Departmental Schemes

18. **Deputy Michael Murphy** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the current average waiting times for applicants to the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland warmer homes scheme at each stage of the process, including assessment, survey and completion of works; the number of households currently waiting more than 12 months and more than 24 months, respectively; the measures being taken to reduce these delays; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [41546/26]

Deputy Michael Murphy: I want to champion the warmer homes scheme and the Minister's commitment to it. I am seeking an update on waiting times for initial assessment and for completion of works, and details of any action plan to reduce those times.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his question. The warmer homes scheme aims to improve home energy efficiency and warmth for people at risk of energy poverty. It is a nationwide scheme delivering 100% funded energy efficiency improvements to the homes of people in receipt of certain welfare payments, thereby making their homes more comfortable and energy efficient and reducing their energy costs.

The scheme is operated by the SEAI on behalf of the Department and is funded through carbon tax receipts and the European Regional Development Fund, ERDF. From 2019 to the end of May 2026, SEAI schemes have provided more than €1.8 billion in support to homeowners for over 268,000 home energy improvements, including more than 36,300 fully funded upgrades for households at risk of energy poverty under the warmer homes schemes. Some 8,139 homes were upgraded under the scheme in 2025. In quarter 1 of 2026, the average cost of upgrades under the scheme, which were fully funded, was just over €31,000.

The breakdown of average wait times under the scheme in 2025 is as follows: 6.5 months for applications prior to publication of the building energy rating, BER; 13.5 months for applications for survey completed; 14.8 months for applications for contractor allocation; and 22 months for applications for work completed. The overall waiting time for applications for works completed represents a decrease from an average of 26 months for homes completed in 2022. In parallel with that decrease in the average waiting time, the number of homes upgraded in a year has almost doubled in the same period, increasing from more than 4,200 in 2022 to over 8,100 in 2025.

The reduction in waiting times and increase in the number of home upgrades follows a range of measures introduced by my Department and the SEAI. They include the allocation of additional staff to the warmer homes scheme, a significantly increased budget allocation, active

contract engagement management by the SEAI to increase contractor output, and actions to address ongoing supply chain pressures.

Deputy Michael Murphy: I reaffirm my support for the warmer homes scheme, which is having a real impact at local level, particularly for vulnerable householders, including older people and low-income families. The extension of the eligibility criteria for the scheme means that more than 470,000 families are now entitled to avail of it. My concern is the waiting times, with an average of 14 months for assessment and 24 to 26 months for completion of works. We really need to look at that. Having met with SEAI representatives this morning, my understanding is that there is an action plan for the scheme before the Department. A process is being gone through whereby there may be changes to the whole contractor system in terms of the individuals or companies that manage the contracts. With the numbers eligible for the scheme increasing, waiting times will surge unless we do something differently. While I support the scheme, I appeal for changes that will accelerate its operation.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for raising those important points. He has been consistent in his advocacy for improvements in waiting times for the scheme. The Minister will meet again with SEAI representatives to try to progress and build more efficiencies into the programme. We are not where we want to be. We want to make the scheme more agile. Demand for it has increased significantly, as I said, because it is fully funded. We understand the real benefits it provides to households. At the same time, the level of work involved, often amounting to full home retrofits, means these are complex projects, not quick fixes.

The grants available are in the region of €31,000, which is significant. We have allocated record levels of funding to support the scheme and we have also increased contractor capacity. We will continue to work with the SEAI to make the process more efficient. We are very much committed to delivering twice as many upgrades annually compared with the numbers a few years ago. We will continue to do that in the months ahead.

Deputy Michael Murphy: Since the early days of the scheme, which I continue to champion, more than 176,000 houses have been retrofitted. The Minister of State is right that the average retrofit cost per house is €31,000 but I am conscious that 30% of all applications are for what are called shallow refits involving both attic and wall insulation. When I met with the SEAI representatives this morning, there was a consciousness on both sides of the better energy homes scheme, which provides 100% funding for wall and attic insulation. We need to do more to encourage people on the waiting list for the warmer homes scheme who require only a shallow refit to avail of the better energy homes scheme instead, under which they can have wall and attic insulation done in the short term.

The key is to get the initial assessment done sooner and to avail of the capacity within the system. There are 1,000 BER assessors around the country. I understand there is a request within the action plan that is currently before the Department to better utilise those 1,000 assessors.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I again thank the Deputy for his work to try to streamline the process. I know he has engaged directly with the SEAI on a case-by-case basis regarding the operational details. There is no lack of oversight by the Department. We are very closely monitoring the

overall performance with a view to improving it. We want to drive improvements and deliver more capacity within the schemes. That in itself will provide many more of the upgrades that people desperately need and that will reduce their reliance on fossil fuels and make their homes more comfortable and cheaper to heat and run. The objective of streamlining the process, maintaining the quality and increasing the speed of delivery is why we have allocated €340 million this year. The ambition is that it will deliver more than 11,500 upgrades. That is exactly what we are focused on doing.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John Paul O'Shea): There are no more Members in the Chamber to put their questions. I might put my Question No. 46 if Deputy Murphy will take the Chair. The Deputy is agreeable.

Questions Nos. 19 to 37, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Question No. 38 taken with Question No. 12.

Questions Nos. 39 to 45, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Energy Prices

46. **Deputy John Paul O'Shea** asked the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment the measures being taken to address the high cost of energy for households and small businesses, particularly in rural areas; if he will consider further targeted supports in the upcoming budget; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [42815/26]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Michael Murphy): Deputy O'Shea had better not go over time.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: What measures are being taken to address the crisis of high energy costs for householders and small businesses, particularly in rural areas? Will further targeted supports be considered in the upcoming budget?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We have discussed a number of measures this morning, including directly funded retrofitting for families and the grants we can provide to reduce energy usage. Those measures are good for our climate because they reduce emissions and they reduce costs for households. We have been able to retrofit approximately 264,000 homes so far. Earlier this year, the Minister of State and I, along with our team, looked at the grants that were available and broke them down to make them more accessible, particularly for middle-income families. In the first quarter of this year, there were more than 50,000 applications for home retrofitting. We need to support that because it takes pressure off our energy system.

It is good as well because we are pointing families and householders in the direction of renewable energy. Over 120,000 homes now have rooftop solar systems. Those grants have been increased, as have heat pump grants. The focus on rural areas, which the Deputy mentioned, is critical.

We have brought forward things to be able to break down the grants, like attic insulation or cavity walls, which can be done separately. The windows and doors grants were also not

available before unless you retrofitted your whole home. To be frank, many people could not afford to do that, even though the grants were substantial because these still needed to be matched with substantial funding. That is why we have broken them down. We have had over 8,000 applications for that grant alone, based on the last numbers I had, in just a two-month period. These are practical measures we are taking for people.

On the business side of things, we had 5,000 business retrofitting grants approved. We need to focus a lot more of our resources in that space because it protects people against future price shocks. When people get retrofitting done, their energy bills come down and they are protected against future shocks. They are also pivoting towards renewables and we are making good progress there.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: I concur with the Minister on the uptake of the grants, particularly the windows and doors grant. There has been a significant uptake in that grant. Certainly, through our own constituency offices, we can see there is great interest in it. I commend the Minister, his Department and all the team on making that available. Having the smaller grants available is hugely important for people who can afford them and can do retrofits in pieces and patches. That opportunity allows people to invest in their own homes as best as possible.

I also concur with the previous speaker, Deputy Murphy, as regards the warmer homes scheme and community energy scheme on how we can work with the SEAI to ensure more people can access those grants as quickly as possible. There is great appetite out there for more work in this space. I hope, along with budget 2027 and further budgets, we can continue the good work that has been done to date.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: On the warmer homes scheme, and I listened to the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach's intervention on that, approximately 34,000 homes have been fully retrofitted with 100% grants. It is a great scheme, but waiting times are too long. To be fair to the SEAI, as Deputy Murphy said, it has submitted an action plan. I have a meeting later this afternoon in that regard to see how we can speed that up. We have made two specific changes for people on the warmer homes waiting list who can now access certain grants, which will not affect them while they are waiting for the overall grant. We are also retrofitting social homes at a level that has never been seen before, which is also a good thing. This protects those at risk of energy poverty, it is good for the climate and good for their pocket, as well as being good for our energy system. I will keep Members informed on this. I have a further meeting this afternoon with the team specifically relating to the SEAI action plan.

Deputy John Paul O'Shea: The Minister mentioned in previous contributions this morning the national energy affordability task force. Having that come out in quarter 3 of this year will be very important, particularly the four points addressed as part of that. These are the price of energy, sustainability in demand, enhancement of flexibility and addressing energy poverty for the consumer and customer protections. That is hugely important because we have a lot of people who are currently in arrears. How we can target that energy poverty measures to those customers will be hugely important. Likewise, with energy affordability for businesses the Minister just mentioned, if we can keep going along that process for the next 12 months, we can also certainly do a significant amount of work and see significant benefits from that.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: The meat of that report will feed into our budget considerations and deliberations. I expect to have that by the end of July this year. We have done a lot of work on it. It looks at some potential structural changes and short-, medium- and longer-term measures, as well as further improving measures that are in place.

We know we are not in the position we want to be in with regard to energy costs. That is why it is so important that we accelerate delivery of renewables across the board and reduce our dependence on wholesale fossil fuel markets. Fundamentally, that is the major problem we face.

The figures out today do not deal with long-term systemic arrears. They are arrears from day one to post-90 days, so the figures themselves need to be interrogated more. However, anyone who does find themselves in arrears should make contact with their energy provider. Plans are there and will be put in place to help households. The last thing anyone wants, and I have said this to energy providers, is for people to be cut off from the energy they need. People should engage with their providers. I thank the Deputy for his support.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Sports Events

62. **Deputy Joanna Byrne** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport in view of Ministers' comments that they will not attend the Ireland v Israel Nations League fixtures, if he will call for a boycott of these fixtures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43392/26]

66. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport to report on his engagements with an organisation (details supplied) in relation to the upcoming Nations' League fixtures with Israel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44836/26]

67. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the level of engagement he has had with an organisation (details supplied) and other relevant agencies in relation to safety and security arrangements for the upcoming Ireland v Israel match in Dublin; whether he is satisfied that all necessary measures are in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44321/26]

Deputy Joanna Byrne: The Minister of State will appreciate these questions were submitted before the recess and before the Government's shameful response to the two Private Members' motions on the Ireland and Israel fixtures this week. In spite of that, a response is warranted from the Minister of State to the Irish football community and Irish footballers as to why it is okay for him and the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, to publicly state they will not attend these fixtures, yet they will shoulder that burden onto our footballers and ask them to choose between what is right and wrong, and lining out for their country and playing the game they love.

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 62, 66 and 67 together.

At the outset, I believe the Minister has been in touch to indicate he is unavoidably unable to be here this morning. I am taking all the questions this morning for that reason.

I thank the Deputy for her question. As she indicated, this is an issue that has received very strong consideration and debate in the House, particularly over the course of this past week. As I outlined in those debates, from the point of view of the Government, it has been providing leadership on what is happening in Palestine and the unacceptable actions of the Israeli Government on many occasions, which has led to many innocent lives lost and so much destruction, as well as genocidal behaviour in the persecution in the war in Palestine. The Irish Government has led out internationally on addressing this and has been at the forefront of forming international opinion, whether that is the recognition of the State of Palestine, ensuring that UNRWA is fully supported and has its funding increased, or in the legal sphere in joining the South African legal case in the European Court of Justice regarding the genocidal behaviour by Israel in Palestine.

However, when it comes to the sporting situation, while the Government runs the country and sets our political policy, it is a well-established principle internationally that sporting organisations and federations are responsible for the conduct of sport. In this regard, it is UEFA at a European level and FIFA at a world level that decide and make policy decisions on whether teams and countries participate in competition. Obviously, we recognise the difficult position the FAI is in here with regard to the draw and having two games to participate in, but it has to work within the UEFA structures. After its AGM last November, the FAI brought a motion to UEFA seeking to have Israel excluded from international competition. It received very little support from other footballing nations on this and it now has to work within the UEFA rules. It has now indicated and made the decision to fulfil those two fixtures. This is a matter for the FAI to decide and the Government fully respects that. It is not appropriate for the Government to interfere here.

We debated motions on this over the past two days, the content of which would ultimately mean Irish athletes would not participate in international sports competitions in which Israel is also participating. For example, this would ultimately mean we would not be in a position to have any athletes participating in the next LA Olympics. Again, that is a matter for sporting bodies to decide upon. We as a Government will continue to give very strong leadership internationally in the political sense, but it is up to each sporting federation to make their own call, and the FAI has done so with the two fixtures it is programmed to play at the end of September and start of October.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I am delighted the Minister of State has learned a new word since Tuesday night-Wednesday morning. In the response which the Minister of State, Deputy McConalogue, gave to me on Tuesday night and which was carbon-copied by the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, on Wednesday morning, the word "genocide" never featured at all. It is great that he has learned that word in the past two days. Even though he has now acknowledged there is a genocide and obviously understands what a genocide is, he still cannot grasp the magnitude of what this means to the Irish footballing community. They do not want this match to proceed. They do not want to normalise sports-washing.

Ireland playing Israel normalises a genocidal regime and gives cover for statute violations, for apartheid and for war crimes. In standing up and saying he will not attend these fixtures all he is doing is putting that pressure and that burden on our footballers. Inevitably, if this goes ahead, our footballers will have to make a conscious choice individually or collectively as a team as whether they should fulfil this fixture and it is not fair. The Minister of State had an opportunity this week to empower the FAI and to support the FAI. So, I do not buy all this back tapping for the FAI. The Minister of State had an opportunity to stand with the FAI, to stand with Irish football and to stand with our Irish football team but he chose not to. Shame on him.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I totally refute that. Internationally we, as a country, have led out. We have called out the genocidal activity that Israel has persecuted in Palestine. We have led internationally in pushing for stronger sanctions to reflect the unacceptable behaviour of Israel and we will continue to do so.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: You did not do so this week.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Just last week the occupied territories Bill was approved by Cabinet will be brought through the Houses between now and the summer. Let us be clear. The Deputy is suggesting that the Government should get involved in deciding not just for the FAI but for all sporting organisations what competitions they should and should not participate in. The point that she is focusing on most of all is the Israel game coming up. However, she supports and did so again here last night that for all sports where Israel is participating, including for example the next Los Angeles Olympics, Irish athletes should not compete. That is what she is proposing. That would mean the Government getting involved in an unprecedented way in relation to the conduct of all sports and indeed preventing us from being able to participate in the Olympics for example. If other governments across the world took a similar approach to sport, sport simply would not be able to be conducted because of it always being mired in politics. Whatever the merits or otherwise might be, sport simply would not be able to be conducted across the world.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: History, including his own party's history, is lost on the Minister of State. There is a precedent in this State of us taking a stand when it comes to sport. It is wrong for him to stand there and tell me that it is unprecedented. That is factually incorrect. He is a Fianna Fáil Member and he should know this. He should talk to his previous Taoiseach. There is absolutely no justification for it. What he is saying this morning, what he said on Tuesday night and the script he handed to his colleague to say to Deputy Gibney on Wednesday morning is absolutely shameful and there is no justification for it. I think deep down he knows that because otherwise he would not have sat at the Oireachtas Joint Committee on sport to say he would not attend these fixtures but yet he expects our national team to line out and attend them. It is shocking and absolutely shameful. He is going down the wrong side of history on this.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: It would be unprecedented to follow through on what the Deputy and Members of the Opposition are proposing, which is not participating in international sporting competitions, including not participating in the next Olympic Games as a country.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: The Minister of State is deflecting-----

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I am not.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: ----- from the stop-the-game question that I specifically put to him on Tuesday night.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Byrne, allow the Minister of State to answer, please.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I am addressing the issue and addressing proposals that are coming from the Opposition, including all the logical outworkings of what the Deputy is proposing. It would be unprecedented and would have the Government getting involved in an unprecedented way in dictating what should happen in relation to sport.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: It is taking a stand through sport.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We will continue to lead out politically at European level as we have done here.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: What about harmony?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: As I have said on a number of occasions, there is a real difference between what happened with Russia where there was unity at an EU political level to apply sanctions and also where both UEFA and FIFA banned Russia from participating in their competitions. That has not happened either at political level - there is not a consensus there - in relation to Israel or on the sporting side from UEFA or FIFA.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan. He is aware that the questions were grouped and his Question No. 67 is part of that group.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I wish to ask specifically about the operational side of things in preparation for potentially playing this match in Dublin. What level of engagement has the FAI had with relevant agencies, including Dublin City Council and An Garda Síochána over the past number of weeks in anticipation of this match? Are there any security concerns if the match were to be hosted here? What risks have been highlighted? What steps are being taken to mitigate those risks if the match were to be held? I will not get into a debate with the Minister of State about the merits of playing the match; we had a vote on that last night. However, I am interested in the preparations that have been made if the game were to be played here. We need to understand any risks highlighted by An Garda Síochána and Dublin City Council. I wish to find out about the level of engagement, the number of meetings and the content of those meetings.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The FAI has been engaging domestically with the Garda in relation to the policing of the event. It has also been engaging internationally with other

football associations. For example, it has engaged with the Norwegian Football Association, which hosted a match against Israel in Oslo in November, to learn from its experience and to see how the FAI can apply any learnings in relation to the operation of that match. We have had number of conversations with the FAI where it updated us on the steps it is taking as well but it is always on the basis that this is a matter for the FAI to deal with and a decision for it. I know from reports in recent days that it is considering whether the match be played in Dublin or elsewhere. Again, that is a matter for the FAI to decide on. We respect the responsibility and role it has as a football association and as the national governing body to make that call.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I refer to an article in *The Irish Times* from two days ago which stated that the association's board continues to meet to discuss the operational aspects of hosting the home fixture but that there are ongoing discussions. That is fine. It is still discussing potentially hosting the game here albeit as the Minister of State has referenced, it is very likely that the game will be held elsewhere if it is held at all. If the FAI is having meetings to discuss operational aspects of hosting it still, has the Minister of State had any briefing from the FAI, An Garda Síochána or Dublin City Council about the risks, what it would cost, the additional security and any of that type of detail in relation to upcoming fixture?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The Department of sport has not been involved in the operational details or discussions, which are matters for the FAI to deal with along with the appropriate authorities. It has had ongoing engagement with the Garda. I know the Garda has indicated to the FAI that it is willing to police the game but they continue to engage. I have no doubt the FAI has been engaging with Dublin City Council. We have not been party to those discussions. Obviously, this is a matter for the FAI to decide upon in relation to participating in the game and also as to where it would take place having had consultations particularly with the Garda authorities and Dublin City Council. It is entirely a matter for the FAI and not one of the Department of sport has been involved in.

Planning Issues

63. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport whether his Department has engaged with other relevant Departments to close the governance gap which exists regarding codes of practice for live events; whether his Department is in favour of codes of practice for live events falling under a single Department or body; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44878/26]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I am following up today on the codes of practice for live events which I raised as a topic with the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, in March. I received correspondence which clearly shows confusion between Departments as to who is responsible for the codes of practice for live events. Will the Department support an effort alongside other Departments to close the governance gap and give organisers clarity?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The Department has responsibility for policy and various funding streams that support the development of the live music sector. The Department, both through its own schemes as well as its funding of the Arts Council, provides a range of support to organisations that play essential roles in the development of live music events across the

country. However, the Minister has no general responsibility for live events which extends beyond concerts and sport events. The codes of practice in relation to live events fall within the remit of a number of different bodies and Departments.

There are a number of key pieces of legislation, none of which fall under the remit of this Department, that are applicable to events. Part 16 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, which deals primarily with the licensing of large-scale outdoor events, is a matter for the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The licensing of events is a matter for local authorities under the licensing of outdoor events regulations, which were most recently amended under the Planning and Development Act 2000. In addition, the events industry is a matter for the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment, Deputy Burke, and the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005. Associated regulations are a matter for the Health and Safety Authority.

Of course, the Department will continue to support the live music sector through policy and various funding streams. Ultimately, as I have stated, the codes of practice for live events or music events do not fall under the remit of the Department.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: It is incredibly helpful that the Minister of State read that response because anyone listening is going to hear how complex this is. It is complex for me when I am trying to find information from parliamentary questions. We keep getting batted around. We cannot identify the right agency with responsibility for this. Once again, will the Minister of State do some work to clarify this?

Events are experiencing difficulty because different, inconsistent approaches are being taken depending on the local authority and the style of the event in question, be it a music, sporting or community event. There is simply no definition as to what a live event is. It seems clear to me that the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport is the Department that should have primary responsibility for this. Will the Minister of State work with those other Departments to help people who are trying to navigate this? In many cases, they are dealing with this level of complexity on top of already being underfunded and under-resourced. Often, the teams trying to navigate this work on a voluntary basis. They then end up dealing with additional expense and health and safety issues. Will the Minister of State take responsibility and work with his Cabinet colleagues on this? I ask him and the Department to take a lead on resolving this.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: This is something that the night-time economy task force considered. It made recommendations that clear processes and procedures should be consistently applied across local authorities to assist festival and event organisers and ensure safe attendance at community group events of fewer than 5,000 people. The Department has been engaging with the Local Government Management Agency, LGMA, and the County and City Management Association, CCMA, which are leading on this action within the night-time economy task force, to examine ways to standardise the approach to event planning and streamline a system for festival organisers and event planners. Some local authorities, such as Fingal County Council, have developed guidance and templates to assist event organisers. I understand these have also been introduced across other local authority areas.

The night-time economy implementation group is continuing to work in partnership with the Department of Justice, An Garda Síochána, the HSE and the Department of Health to ensure that we support the ongoing safety and innovative measures across all night-time economy activities, including outdoor festivals. It is something that has been addressed and discussed within the night-time economy task force. Work is continuing on its implementation.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The night-time economy task force is under the remit of the Minister of State's Department. Is that correct?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Yes.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: The Minister of State rattled off even more agencies, which only adds to the complexity people are navigating. Will he, or the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, commit to meet us so that we can thrash this out a little? We have been working with stakeholders in this space, such as the live events association. The Irish Music Rights Organisation, IMRO, has a big interest in this as well.

It is not just about the impact on organisations, however. Our young people have had community supports withdrawn. Movements like Give Us The Night are fighting for the entertainment sector to be preserved as a result of the growing cost of living. Many communities find themselves without places to meet, congregate or have joint experiences. That has a real isolating effect and means that vital sources of culture, entertainment and community are simply vanishing. With the decline of pubs and clubs, including the closure of The Complex in Dublin, we have seen that the hands-off approach does not work. I am keen to work on this, get clarity for these stakeholders and help them navigate what is a complex system that means they are falling between multiple stools. I would appreciate a commitment from the Minister of State that he will engage to deal with this effectively.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: As a Government and Department, we should always be open to assessing and discussing the challenges that are there, as well as listening to any ideas people have. As I said, the night-time economy task force considered and made recommendations in this regard. I am happy to ask officials to engage further with the Deputy around any proposals she might have and to consider the matter further. It is important that we always keep these matters under review. Where there are challenges and further discussion needed, that should happen. Certainly, I will ask for that engagement with the Deputy.

An Ghaeltacht

64. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport cén plean atá ag a Roinn agus ag na hInstitiúidí Náisiúnta Cultúir chun comóradh agus ceiliúradh a dhéanamh ar 100 bliain ó tugadh aitheantas oifigiúil don Ghaeltacht den chéad uair. [43393/26]

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Cad atá beartaithe ag an Stát, an Roinn agus na hInstitiúidí náisiúnta cultúir chun comóradh agus ceiliúradh a dhéanamh ar 100 bliain ó tugadh aitheantas oifigiúil don Ghaeltacht?

Deputy Charlie McConologue: Ar iarratas ó mo Roinn, d’eagraigh An Chartlann Náisiúnta - foras a thagann faoi scáth na Roinne - taispeántas den chéad scoth anuraidh, An Ghaeilge agus Daonáireamh na Gaeltachta 1925. Bhí an taispeántas le feiceáil i gceanncheathrú nua mo Roinne agus ag an gcomórtas treabhdóireachta, the ploughing championship, i mí Mheán Fómhair seo caite. Cuireadh béim sa taispeántas ar an nasc idir cúrsaí teanga, polasaí agus féiniúlachta ó bhlianta tosaigh an Stáit go dtí an lá atá inniu ann. Léiríodh, trí cháipéisí cartlainne, na hiarrachtaí chun an Ghaeilge a chosaint agus a athneartú, ag tosú le daonáireamh na Gaeltachta i 1925 agus obair Choimisiún na Gaeltachta.

Cé nach eol dom aon taispeántas eile in institiúidí náisiúnta cultúrtha i mbliana, tá mo Roinn ag tacú le tionscnamh Chomhairle Contae na Gaillimhe, Croí na Gaeltachta: Guthanna an Phobail, 1926. Déanfar iniúchadh mar chuid den tionscnamh seo ar thaithí shóisialta, cultúrtha agus stairiúil phobail Ghaeltachta Chonamara le linn bhlianta tosaigh an Stáit. Beidh clár cónaithe d’ealaíontóirí ann agus glacfaidh pobail áitiúla páirt i ngníomhaíochtaí ag tarraingt ar scéalta, nósanna áitiúla agus an teanga. Tá sé mar aidhm go gcruthófar saothar nua ealaíne a léireoidh teacht aniar, cruthaitheacht agus féiniúlacht na bpobal Gaeltachta.

I mí Dheireadh Fómhair, réachtálfar clár mar chuid d’fhéile ealaíon-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Bunaíodh Coimisiún na Gaeltachta in 1925 chun daonáireamh a dhéanamh orthu siúd a raibh Gaeilge acu timpeall na tíre. Rinne An Garda Síochána an census sin. Tháinig a lán eolais as. Bunaithe air sin, leagadh amach na ceantair ar ghá cosaint a dhéanamh orthu agus tacaíocht bhreise a thabhairt dóibh le déanamh cinnte go gcosnófaí an tseoid náisiúnta a bhíodh timpeall na gceantar sin, is í sin, an Ghaeilge agus an cultúr Gaelach agus Gaeltachta. Bhí 82 moladh ag an gcoimisiún. In 1928, bhí díospóireacht sa Dáil faoi. I dtuairisc uachtarán an choimisiúin, dúirt sé, “Our language has been waylaid, beaten and robbed, and left for dead by the wayside”. Dúirt an Teachta Dála, Proinsias Ó Fathaigh, le linn na díospóireachta sin, “A patient in such dire straits needs special care and attention, needs nursing and special remedies.” Níl na remedies sin ag tarlú go fóill. Tá géarchás fós ó thaobh na teanga de sa Ghaeltacht.

Deputy Charlie McConologue: Obviously, it is an historic moment to be 100 years on since the Gaeltacht was first officially recognised. The Deputy is asking what the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport in particular is doing to commemorate this. Across government, all Departments are going to have to consider and appropriately recognise this. Regarding my Department, last year, at the National Archives of Ireland we had an exhibition, The Irish Language and the 1925 Census of the Gaeltacht. I also outlined how the Department is supporting Galway County Council’s initiative, croí na Gaeltachta, community voices 1926. This October, Donegal County Council’s Wainfest, which is an arts and book festival, will include a programme aimed at primary school children with a particular emphasis on the Irish language and the Gaeltacht. Those are some of the steps that my Department is taking. Obviously, across government, it is important we commemorate this important moment of being 100 years on from the official recognition of the Gaeltacht.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Ag an am a rinneadh an daonáireamh, is An Garda Síochána, mar a dúirt mé, a rinne an daonáireamh. Bhí na Gaeilgeoirí á gcomhaireamh timpeall na gcontaetha acu. Ag an am céanna, bhí siad ag comhaireamh cé mhéad bó agus caora a bhí ag daoine. Those who spoke Irish in what are now Gaeltacht areas were equated with sheep and cattle, which were also being recorded by the commission and the census by An Garda Síochána at the time. Ag an stad seo, ceapann daoine fós go bhfuil an Ghaeilge agus an Ghaeltacht i mbaol agus is léir sin ó na fadhbanna atá ann. Cad atáimid chun a dhéanamh? Cad iad na céimeanna? Ní comóradh agus céimeanna amháin atá ann, cad iad na céimeanna breise ar gá a dhéanamh chun a chinntiú, i gceann 100 bliain eile go mbeidh an Ghaeltacht fós beo beathach? Sin an cheist mhór seachas díreach comóradh agus ceiliúradh.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I have outlined the steps we are taking from a departmental point of view. It has been wonderful in recent years to see the renaissance of the Irish language and the particular focus on the spoken language. It is lamentable how so many of us have come through our education system and have such a poor grasp of speaking Irish. Unfortunately, I include myself in that, even though I come from a county - although I live a good distance from a Gaeltacht area - that has such a proud tradition and has kept the Irish language alive.

It is important we recognise how the Gaeltacht has progressed in the 100 years since its establishment and, in particular, take learnings from it. As we go forward, we have to try to ensure the Irish language is built upon. The momentum behind the language in recent times has been energising and from a Government point of view, it is important that we support that. The Deputy asked how our Department in particular is recognising that 100 years on from the establishment of the Gaeltacht. It is important we play a role in that, as we do across government. Most important is supporting growth again so that more and more people across the country can speak our native language fluently.

National Governing Bodies

65. **Deputy Robert O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if consideration has been given to the establishment of an independent governance authority for local sports and athletics clubs to oversee committee conduct, ensure compliance with governance standards, provide independent dispute resolution mechanisms and support transparency and accountability in club administration; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43961/26]

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Has consideration been given to the establishment of an independent governance authority for sporting and volunteer organisations to oversee committee conduct, ensure compliance with governance standards, provide independent dispute resolution mechanisms and support transparency and accountability in organisational administration? I have been asking this question for a while and I seem to be pushed from one agency to another without being able to get a clear answer.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: National governing bodies of sport, NGBs, which represent over 13,000 sports clubs throughout the country, are independent, autonomous organisations which are responsible for governance of their sports at national, local and other levels,

including disciplinary and complaints processes. Sport Ireland, as Ireland's sports development agency, works with NGBs to ensure that appropriate governance and safeguarding policies are put in place, as well as mechanisms to handle complaints or issues when they arise. This work is underpinned by Sport Ireland's governance code for sport, compliance with which is a condition of funding for NGBs.

While I am always open to exploring policy initiatives that could improve the operation of the Irish sports ecosystem, I consider that establishing a separate statutory governance authority for NGBs is not required and could have unintended negative consequences. For example, it could undermine NGB operational autonomy, alienate volunteer-led club networks, create bureaucratic duplication or trigger jurisdictional conflicts within existing international sports federations. Moving the disciplinary and dispute resolution processes of NGBs to a stand-alone governance authority could also lead to significant additional costs for the sector.

The safeguarding of everyone at all levels of sport, regardless of age, is a shared responsibility. In August 2023, a new national code of conduct template for sporting organisations was launched by Sport Ireland. The code sets out guidelines and principles promoting the behaviours and conduct expected from athletes, coaches, parents and guardians, supporters, referees, officials and all club members. All NGBs are expected to use this template code of conduct as an opportunity to review their existing policies and procedures for handling code breaches to ensure a safe and respectful environment for all involved in Irish sport. Leadership is being provided through Sport Ireland and the national governing bodies. To take that away from the NGBs entirely and have a separate body would have repercussions and undermine those NGBs. I am open to having further discussion on what is an important point. It is something we should consider fully.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I have come across a case in a volunteer-led organisation where a member raised serious issues through the appropriate channels. The organisation's committee stated that the matter had been investigated. However, it subsequently emerged that no thorough investigation had taken place. Most concerning of all, the party who made the complaint was not engaged in the process. When the complainant sought to escalate the matter to the NGB, they were informed that NGBs do not have the governance oversight of individual committees. There appears to be a significant accountability gap. In some cases, committee members can become embedded in positions of authority and act as though they are beyond scrutiny. No committee should be permitted to operate as though it owns the club or disregard the concerns of members without oversight. These organisations are in receipt of public money and membership fees but little governance or accountability seems to be attached to that.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: This is an issue that requires careful consideration. To a significant extent, we have to empower NGBs and their membership to have good codes of governance and conduct within their organisations to deal with issues that arise. We would have to carefully consider any step that would bring that into a State body. It would have significant unintended consequences.

We are reviewing our national sport policy and there will be a public consultation over the coming months. It is important that all issues are considered in discussions on developing that policy and that it is thoroughly thought out. The Federation of Irish Sport, which is an

independent organisation and works with our national governing bodies, offers a dispute resolution service for NGBs that have not been able to resolve a dispute within their organisation. That is an important service. To put it on a statutory basis would be a different kettle of fish altogether.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: It is good to hear about empowering NGBs and I accept that care and consideration are needed on this matter. Volunteer organisations play a vital role in our communities, but with that role comes responsibility to uphold good governance, transparency and accountability. I urge the Minister of State to bring forward those measures that he just mentioned and further measures, where they are needed, to ensure that members have access to an independent avenue of appeal when local governance processes fail.

I have since received a number of further disclosures from clubs and volunteer organisations concerning the conduct of committee members and the treatment of fee-paying members. Regrettably, a recurring response seems to be that those who disagree with the organisation's policies are encouraged to leave, when these policies could be causing significant distress to members of these organisations. It is deeply concerning that this situation arises. It poses serious questions about accountability and governance within these organisations. Who ensures that complaints are treated fairly, transparently and in accordance with the basic principles of natural justice?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Sport Ireland is always available to work with national governing bodies in respect of their governance and how they run themselves. In 2023, it set in place the governance code for sport. It also launched the national code of conduct template, which NGBs are encouraged to adopt to make sure the structures and policies they have in place, and within which their membership, oversight bodies and committees have to operate, work. As I said, the Federation of Irish Sport also has a disputes resolution facility in place.

We have seen massive evolution and development in sporting governance and organisation over the last generation. The development and establishment of Sport Ireland over 20 years ago and bringing our national governing bodies underneath it was a massive step forward, one which has been very productive and enhanced sport nationally. The funding we have provided has added to that.

Where one puts the line and how one empowers NGBs is an important issue, one that we have to keep under review and consistently learn from. It is important that, in as far as possible, it is the members who deal with issues, with good conduct, governance and codes to guide them.

Questions Nos. 66 and 67 taken with Question No. 62.

11 o'clock

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Question No. 66 was grouped with Questions Nos. 62 and 67. With the permission of Members, we will go back and take a question from Deputy Coppinger on Question No. 66.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Apologies, I did not realise my question was grouped.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It was, but go ahead with your question, Deputy.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I have heard the Minister of State say that sport and politics are separate. I thought that was quite amusing since he is a political representative in charge of sport, so obviously they are not separate. The Government, including the Tánaiste recently, has said it has no role whatsoever in the Irish team playing against Israel in the two upcoming fixtures and it is solely up to the FAI. I do not know if the Minister of State received a letter from a legal firm but he will receive one because he does have a role, as does the Government, under many laws and because the FAI is publicly funded and we have signed the Genocide Convention. Deputy McConalogue is the Minister of State with overarching responsibility for sport. The FAI receives €6 million per annum and is a public body under genocide laws, the European Convention of Human Rights and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Coppinger. I have not personally received a legal letter. There was correspondence to our Department. That legal letter was actually addressed to the previous Cabinet Minister, Catherine Martin, but it has been assessed and considered by the Department. As I have said in this House on numerous occasions this week, this is an issue that, from a footballing perspective, is one for the FAI to work on within the structures it has within UEFA and FIFA. It has been proactive within UEFA in bringing a motion seeking to have Israel excluded from competitions. Unlike what happened with Russia, where UEFA and FIFA banned Russia from participating in competitions, the FAI got very little support within UEFA whenever it brought that motion forward. The FAI then had a decision to make as to whether it will fulfil those games and it has decided and has been very clear that it intends to do so.

From a political point of view, the Government will continue to lead out in the international arena, particularly in the European scene, on addressing Israel's behaviour and the absolutely unacceptable conduct we saw in the war, the unacceptable loss of innocent lives and genocidal behaviour. We will continue to do that. Between now and the summer, we will bring forward an occupied territories Bill in the Dáil to be passed by the Oireachtas as the latest step in providing that leadership and example internationally.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I keep hearing the Minister of State say "we will continue to do". What has the Government actually done? I know it has talked but here is the chance to actually do something. For example, under the ruling of the International Court of Justice, which this Government has signed up to, all states are obliged not to recognise Israel's illegal acts. Only this week, two Palestinian women footballers were kidnapped. We know ten clubs play in occupied Palestinian territories. We know Israel has killed 1,000 athletes. What more does the Government want? We know it is very afraid of the American multinationals but surely the Government could do something on this. It has failed to act. The staff and players have a legal right to freedom of expression. I will keep the pressure on the Government to underwrite any potential losses the FAI might endure. It is very clear, however, that the FAI has huge legal grounds because UEFA is breaching its own statutes and legislation. There is no way the FAI would face fines.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: What the Deputy has been supporting and proposing in the House this week is not just related to the match, which obviously has dominated the discussion and debates. What she has been supporting and advocating is that all Irish athletes across all sports should not participate in any competitions internationally in which Israel is also participating. That basically means that while the illegal occupation of the occupied territories continues, Ireland would not participate in any sports anywhere. It would not just apply to the match at the end of September but to all sports. It means we would not be sending a team to the Los Angeles Olympic Games in 2028 unless the occupied territories are unoccupied by that point in time. That is what the Opposition is advocating for. It does not just relate to the match. It is the logical extension of saying the match should not go ahead. We have been clear, from a Government point of view, that it is not through closing down all sport that we take a stance and show leadership politically. It is by doing what we have been doing internationally, which we have been very much to the forefront of.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: My position is not that Irish athletes should have to take a decision not to participate. Israel should be kicked out of all sporting competitions, in the same way Russia was. Does the Minister of State agree with Russia being banned? I would like an answer to that question. Failing the authorities taking action, because they are hugely corrupt, players and athletes may have to take a decision, and they should take a decision. I would prefer if they took it as a collective, and I think they will. We already had Séamus Coleman say the other night that it should not be down to the players, it should be down to the governing bodies and the Government, but the players do know what is right and wrong. They should not be put in that position, however. They should have the full support of their governing body and the State.

The women's football team showed this in 2017 when they went on strike. If the Minister of State recalls, they refused to play against Czechia, which was a World Cup qualifier. They wore jerseys with "respect" written on them because they were facing discrimination in the way they were being treated. The Spanish women's football team refused to play until Rubiales was kicked out, so it can be done. Pressure can be put on to force change.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I absolutely agree with the sanctions against Russia, which have been implemented with unity across the EU and have been replicated at a sporting level by FIFA and UEFA, excluding Russia from competitions.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: That was four years ago.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We as a country have worked to try to get strong sanctions against Israel for its behaviours over the last period of time. At European level, we are seeking the suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement. To be clear about what Deputy Coppinger is saying, rather than Ireland continuing to lead out politically at international level, as we have done, and which we will do again in passing the occupied territories Bill in this House, the Deputy is saying that all of our athletes across all sports should stop participating in all competitions. That is what is being asked by the Opposition in this House this week and it is what the Government voted down. That is not the way for this country to do its work politically. It is a matter for each sporting organisation, within its federation, to decide its own

participation and it is a matter for the governing bodies to have that exclusive option and decision.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We are asking the Government to act.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Arts Funding

69. **Deputy Joe Cooney** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport to provide an update on the basic income for the arts scheme, the number of applicants by county in tabular form; the timeline for approvals and to outline if each county will be given an equitable allocation of recipients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44127/26]

78. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport when the successor scheme to the basic income for the arts will commence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44454/26]

103. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport when applicants for the new basic income for the arts scheme will be informed that they are selected; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44508/26]

105. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if, in view of applications for the successor scheme to the basic income for the arts pilot greatly exceeding the number of places available on the scheme, if consideration is being given to expanding the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44453/26]

114. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the number of applications that were received for the basic income for the arts; and when recipients will be informed and begin to receive payment if they are successful. [43460/26]

123. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport for an update on the roll-out of the basic income for the arts scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44287/26]

Deputy Joe Cooney: I welcome the basic income for the arts, BIA, scheme and commend the Minister on securing funding to make it permanent. This is a genuinely progressive policy and is especially important to County Clare, with our rich arts tradition, from traditional music to visual arts and literature. I ask for an update on the application process, a breakdown by county and an outline of how rural counties such as Clare will be treated equally when faced with other more populated counties and urban centres.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I propose to take Questions Nos. 69, 78, 103, 105, 114 and 123 together.

I thank the Deputy for his question and for his support for the basic income for the arts scheme. The main objective of the scheme is to support professional artists whose creative practice is based in Ireland. The scheme will provide 2,000 artists with a weekly payment of €325 for a period of three years. There has been significant international interest in the scheme, which clearly illustrates the value Ireland places on art and our artists here at home. Indeed, when it comes to the arts, Ireland as a small country punches well above our weight across film, music, and literature and this is in part due to the sustained investment in professional artistic practice.

Funding for the arts through the Arts Council, Screen Ireland and Culture Ireland is at the highest level ever in the history of the State. In February, the Government agreed to making the basic income for the arts scheme permanent, which was a major milestone for the arts in Ireland. Research conducted by the Department provided the Government with a clear evidence base on which to make that decision. The research clearly demonstrated both how precarious and difficult it is to be an artist and the positive benefits for society as a whole, which we are all very aware of, if we invest in our artists.

The pilot scheme was underpinned by a robust research project consisting of a randomised controlled trial with a treatment group of 2,000 and a control group of 1,000. The research element will continue in the successor scheme.

An independent cost-benefit analysis of the pilot published late last year shows that the scheme produced over €100 million in social and economic benefits; for every €1 of public money invested in the pilot, society received €1.39 in return. The net cost of the basic income for the arts pilot went from €105 million to under €72 million due to tax generated and savings on social welfare payments.

Late last year the Department conducted a public consultation into the basic income for the arts scheme. This consultation received over 17,000 submissions with 97% of respondents in favour of making the scheme permanent, showing very much the value of the scheme and how it is appreciated not only by those in the arts sector but also by society at large. With an allocation of €18.27 million for this year, the Department will be in a position to fund 2,000 artists. At the launch in February the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, stated that over time he would like to expand the scheme beyond 2,000 artists, should more funding become available in future budget cycles.

We have seen strong demand for the scheme, with approximately 10,000 applications submitted. For the pilot scheme more than 9,000 applications were received. Participants are selected using an anonymous random selection process. This is considered the fairest selection process where there is not enough funding to provide the scheme to all eligible applicants. All applicants had to complete a comprehensive survey at time of their application and those who will receive the payment will provide data on an ongoing basis. The applications submitted show that there is great variety in the Irish arts sector today. A diversity of arts practices, ages and geographical distribution is visible. The data collected as part of the application is very much a snapshot of the sector in 2026 and will be a strong resource for the Department in terms of developing future policy for the arts. A report setting out this data will be published in due course.

The Department has begun eligibility assessments, which will continue throughout the summer. Given the volume of applications it is difficult to be precise about the date applicants will be informed but it will certainly be September at the earliest. The first payment to selected recipients will be made before the end of 2026 and will be backdated to September 2026 if necessary. Compliance with eligibility will be continuously recorded and assessed throughout the time a recipient receives the payment. All successful participants will need to register with Revenue as self-employed and pay schedule D income tax where appropriate on the basic income for the arts scheme.

This is a ground-breaking support for the arts in Ireland, as Deputy Cooney recognises, and is significant for the artists in our country. It makes Ireland a world leader in how we support our artists and culture. It will help to sustain the careers of those artists who will receive it and retain their talent in the arts sector. Applications were received from every county in the country and the county breakdown for applications will be sent separately to Deputy Cooney.

Deputy Joe Cooney: I thank the Minister. My question today is important. Will rural counties such as Clare receive an equal share of the BIA scheme? The randomised selection model is fair in principle as it ensures no bias in individual selection. However, fairness in process is not the same as equity of outcome. Clare has a proud professional arts community but artists in rural counties often lack access to the institutional networks, residencies and funding bodies that provide the proof of professional practice needed for the scheme. The structural disadvantage is real and will result in the pool of eligible applicants being skewed toward urban centres with large populations. Therefore, a random draw will still produce an urban-heavy result. How will this structural issue be resolved?

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Over 10,000 people made applications for this particular round of the successor to the basic income for the arts scheme. The Department is in a position to support only about 20% of them. This means just over 2,000 artists will be supported and the other 80% will be left disappointed. This is about a similar level of disappointed applicants as we saw in the original pilot scheme launched by the then Minister, Catherine Martin. It is disappointing to see that the scheme is not growing. We welcomed at that time that there would be another round of funding coming for three years but the fact it is not growing and that more artists are not being supported and will not be able to enjoy the very real benefits of the scheme, which were charted by the research undertaken, is a letdown and I know many artists in the sector feel let down.

The Minister of State referenced that continuing research will be undertaken on the impact of the financial support on the second group of artists who receive it. Will he give us more detail about what is being measured and what is being examined? Will it be the same as the first time or are other benefits of the scheme being considered? Has consideration been given to putting the basic income for the arts scheme on a statutory footing so there would be real certainty that the scheme is an established part of the State's support for the artistic community?

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It is good to hear that progress is being made and that the Minister of State expects at some stage, probably in October by the sounds of it, that the scheme will start but will be backdated to September. This will mean that 2,000 more artists will benefit from a basic income and, hopefully, it will help them in their output and artistic endeavours. It

is about trying to ensure that others in future can benefit and that this is rolled over. The Minister of State mentioned that €18 million has been set aside for this year. This seems to suggest that if it does not start until the end of September, or is not backdated to the end of September, there may be a surplus. Is this expected to be spent this year or will it be rolled into the budget for next year's basic income?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I will take Deputy Ó Snodaigh's question first. The budget is allocated for this year to be able to pay 2,000 applicants from September onwards. While every effort is being made to give people early decisions, the payment will be backdated to September so nobody will lose out financially by virtue of any delay in being approved. The budget will be utilised by the end of this year.

To respond to Deputy O'Gorman on the scheme and its permanence, I recognise the previous Minister, Catherine Martin, and her initiative in establishing the pilot. The Government has progressed and built on it. We have made it permanent. We have been clear that this will be a permanent scheme. I do not believe it needs to be on a statutory basis for it to be a permanent scheme. We have been clear from a policy point of view and a budgetary point of view that it is something that will be continued.

In terms of the specific research that will continue to be carried out, I will get Deputy O'Gorman a further response specifically on what is being measured and how it compares to previous research which was significant. Having a treatment group of the 2,000 who were in the scheme and a control group of 1,000 who were outside of it was significant research and important in relation to seeing the scheme become permanent and built upon. In relation to more participants, it is something we have indicated we would like to be able to do but it is budgetary dependent. Making it permanent is a significant step forward, as is making sure new artists and more artists are able to participate and have an opportunity to avail of it.

Deputy Cooney has advocated very strongly for his county. There have been 10,000 applicants and 2,000 will be able to participate and will be successful for participating in the scheme. The approach that is planned to be taken is an anonymous random selection process. The assessment is that this is the way to be fair to all artists who have applied and to have the best possible spread representative of the number of artists who have applied. Our objective is to be fair and equal and give as many people as possible the opportunity to participate. Obviously there will be different participants this time in the scheme compared to the pilot scheme, and the objective is to ensure that as many people as possible can avail of the support.

The approach will be that randomised, anonymised selection process to make sure that people have faith in how the selection is being done and everybody has an equal opportunity to benefit from it.

Heritage Schemes

68. **Deputy Edward Timmins** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if he can provide an update on the American Presidents trail as we approach America 250; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44534/26]

Deputy Edward Timmins: A total of 23 US Presidents have had Irish heritage, with many coming from Northern Ireland. As the Minister of State knows, I floated the idea of an American Presidents trail in the House early last year. I thank the Minister for his great support. I ask the Minister of State for an update on the progress of this project.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for his question and his advocacy for this worthy project and his work on it. Significant progress has been made in advancing Ireland's America250 programme, which is the State's national commemorative initiative marking the 250th anniversary of the US Declaration of Independence. It is being delivered across this year and 2027, and the programme is being supported by €200,000 in funding from my Department to ensure a fitting and meaningful series of commemorative events.

The American Presidents trail is a key initiative within the programme. The Department is working closely with local authority partners to identify communities across the island with ancestral connections to former US Presidents, recognising the important contribution of Irish heritage to the American story. It is proposed that a native tree and interpretive information panel will mark the connection, creating a lasting legacy for local communities and visitors. A co-ordinated tree planting initiative is being developed as part of the trail.

Significant progress has also been made on the literary legacies of the American presidents' trail. Two publications, one for a general audience and another for younger readers, will provide a more widely accessible form of the presidents trail. The general publication is scheduled for completion in advance of the 4 July anniversary, with the children's edition expected in the autumn. Work is also continuing in partnership with the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland on the wider delivery of the America250 programme.

All activity will be guided by the established principles of commemorations: respectful remembrance, historical authenticity, inclusivity and accessibility. The American Presidents trail will leave a lasting legacy, celebrating the contribution of Irish communities to the American story while delivering cultural, educational and tourism benefits.

Deputy Edward Timmins: I thank the Minister of State. I am glad that progress is being made. The actions announced are the start of what will, hopefully, be a fully-fledged tourist route. I strongly believe that this proposal could be a positive North-South project. It could also be a major attraction for US visitors, especially those with Irish links, and could be comparable to the Wild Atlantic Way. I have pinpointed several key counties to consider with a suggested route. Ultimately, however, this map would benefit all parts of Ireland. This project should be a part of a national strategy for Tourism Ireland and Fáilte Ireland.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Strong support for this project has also come from the shared island unit in the Department of the Taoiseach in respect of developing the two-year programme. That is important. It is also important that we are undertaking this project on an all-island basis, because all of the island has contributed to the American story and to the development of the American nation over the past 250 years. This has been the case throughout all levels of American society but the most high-profile way has been through the number of American presidents with Irish heritage who have served their country. I will certainly continue to ensure that the Department engages with the Deputy on his ideas to make sure the project

and the presidents' trail are as impactful as possible and that any ideas in this regard are used and brought to reality. I recognise once again the Deputy's advocacy for and work on this trail.

Deputy Edward Timmins: Never has it been so important to highlight the close relationship we have with the United States. This trail would promote our close ties. It is a perfect example of the use of soft power. Soft power is something we have in the context of the US and we need to constantly remind ourselves of this fact, develop it and not take it for granted. It has contributed to the massive investment in this country by the US. The trail would also fit perfectly, as the Minister of State said, with the goals of the shared island unit. It would boost the economy of Northern Ireland and deliver benefits that we cannot predict. It would also improve co-operation between both parts of this island and develop relationships that currently do not exist. This is the best way to unite our island. We hear a lot of divisive talk about North and South, but this is the perfect opportunity where we can bring North and South together, build relationships and unite people.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I agree fully. The shared experience and history of both parts of our island have been crucial to bringing our island together. When Irish people have gone abroad, from North or South, and built relationships abroad, that has been extremely positive. Those international relationships bring our own island together as well, whether this concerns our shared heritage of people travelling over the decades and centuries to America, or within the European Union context, where sharing the European project also brought our island together in terms of removing borders. We saw the challenge posed when that process started to be reversed through Brexit. In terms of looking towards the contribution that North and South have made to America, there is a real opportunity there to ensure this is part of our shared future and brings us together in the context of our clear similarities and shared history and contribution.

Question No. 71 taken with Written Answers.

Sport and Recreational Development

72. **Deputy Joanna Byrne** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if he will consider amending the Sport Ireland Act 2015 and expand the definition of competitive sport and recreational sport to include “all forms of sporting activity which through organised participation, aim at expressing or improving performance and at obtaining improved results in competition at all levels through organised participation” and “all forms of sporting activity which through casual or regular participation aim at expressing or improving mental well-being, self-esteem and at forming social relationships; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43446/26]

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for raising this important topic for consideration. Sport Ireland, as the Deputy knows, is the statutory body that we have assigned with responsibility for the recognition of sports in Ireland. As part of the recognition criteria, Sport Ireland must be satisfied that an activity meets the criteria for sport as outlined in section 2 of the Sport Ireland Act 2015, which was adopted from the Council of Europe's definition of "sport". The Act defines competitive and recreational sport, a common theme being physical

activity with the aim of improving physical fitness. It defines "competitive sport" as meaning: "all forms of physical activity which, through organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness, and obtaining improved results in competition at all levels". It also defines "recreational sport" as meaning: "all forms of physical activity which, through casual or regular participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, and forming social relationships".

The physical activity and fitness underpinning the statutory understanding of sport is important due to the significant physical health benefits associated with sport, for both the individual and for society. These benefits are central to the rationale that we all have and agree on for public investment in sport. The existing definitions give regard to persons with disabilities and older people participating in sport as they begin by noting that sport "includes all forms of physical activity", which can include a wide range of adapted and disability-inclusive forms of sport. There is a risk that a widening of the definition of "sport" by relaxing physical activity conditions could result in an overly expansive understanding of sport that would encompass almost any organised recreational pastime involving competition. Accordingly, I do not propose at this juncture to amend the Sport Ireland Act 2015 as proposed by the Deputy. It is, though, something that can be considered in the context of the development of the next national sports strategy, which will set out a framework for the next ten years. Everything should be up for consideration to make sure we have the right approach, and I am happy to have a good discussion on this matter in that context.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I am asking this question because activities such as chess are not recognised as sports in Ireland. Chess is recognised as a sport in 24 of the 27 EU member states and in over 100 countries worldwide. It is recognised as a sport by the Olympic movement, which holds its own chess Olympiad. After football, chess is the most widely played sport in the world. It has been played for over 1,500 years. Chess has great health benefits for the ageing by stimulating the brain and has multiple benefits for children taking up sport.

I am asking the Minister of State to agree to a change in wording of the definition of "sport" to allow chess to become a sport.

This could have multiple benefits for bridge and similar games. It is a small change that could make a massive difference and have a huge impact on chess players right around the nation.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy. I agree chess is a great game, one I played from an early age.

Any change that is made to the definition of "sport" within the legislation will have repercussions, not just for chess, and will have to be considered very carefully. We do not have any plans to change it but we are just coming to the end of the period covered by our first ever ten-year national policy for sport, which has been very impactful in bringing sport forward and improving participation across all sports in the country. From this autumn onwards, we will be doing the public consultation to have a new policy agreed by the end of next year to see us through the following ten years. We really want this to continue to be transformative for sport.

The issues and their full implications should rightfully be considered in that context. I am happy to have the discussion and I thank the Deputy for raising the matter this morning.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: The Minister of State's response is positive. I cannot ask for more than that. I ask that he keep the matter on the radar as we begin the consultation for, and the implementation of, a new sports strategy. If he bears it in mind, I will be happy to work with him in that regard.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: All topics should be up for consideration. Whenever we come to framing a ten-year national sports policy on the direction of travel for our NGBs and everyone working within sport, it is important to have thorough discussions. As I said about a couple of other matters earlier, let us make sure the consideration and consultation are thorough. All points, including the upsides and downsides, should be fully considered and we should have as much consensus as possible in making sure the next national sports policy is really strong, is as comprehensive as it can be, serves our communities as well as it possibly can and ultimately assists sporting competitions while, importantly, having physical activity and well-being at its core.

Sports Funding

73. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport for an update on the total funding allocated to the large-scale sport infrastructure fund, LSSIF, to date; to provide a breakdown of funding awarded to each individual project, the amounts that have been drawn down or are in the process of being drawn down; the details of projects that have yet to commence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44338/26]

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I ask the Minister for an update on the LSSIF, including detail about each project. Maybe the Minister of State can give me that afterwards. I do not expect him to list them all. I also ask for the amount that has been drawn down and the amount that has yet to be drawn down.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The LSSIF, as the Deputy knows, was established under the national sports policy to provide Exchequer support for larger sports facility projects to be able to progress. Previously, there was a gap in that there was no such fund to enable larger projects to proceed. While it is aimed primarily at national governing bodies and local authorities, it is also open to other bodies. In this regard, I refer to applications that would necessarily have to be made and prioritised by a local authority in the process.

The cumulative investment under the LSSIF since 2020 has been €297 million across 68 projects. To date, €60 million has been drawn down by grantees, and the following projects have been completed: the linear walkway and playing fields project in Meath; phase 1 of Walsh Park in Waterford; the regional athletics hub in Limerick; the Dundalk Leisure Centre facilities refurbishment project; phases 1 and 2 of the Munster Technological University athletics track in Cork, in the Deputy's own part of the world; St. Conleth's Park in Kildare; Charlesland athletics track; Munster Centre of Excellence in Cork; Askeaton Pool and Leisure; Cavan

Regional Sports Campus; St. Thomas's multisport complex, phase 1; and the Dexcom Connacht rugby stadium in Galway.

A number of other LSSIF projects are due to be completed this year or significantly progressed, for example, the RDS main arena and Páirc Tailteann in County Meath. My officials continue to work closely with fund grantees to help them progress their projects. Nine construction projects approved under the 2018 LSSIF programme have yet to commence. In addition, two have indicated their intention to withdraw their grant allocation. All applicants allocated funding under the 2024 round of LSSIF are working through the procedures required under the infrastructure guidelines, which set out the value for money guidelines for the evaluation, planning and management of public investment projects.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: It will not come as a surprise to the Minister of State that I have asked this question before at committee meetings. To be fair, he knows my form on this. I do not begrudge anybody getting money they have applied for, or any of the sports bodies that have applied on behalf of clubs, mainly national clubs but what irks me is that, as he said, nine projects from 2018 have still not commenced. We just need to take the bull by the horns at some stage and have a realistic conversation with some of those organisations to say that, if they are not drawing down the money, it is going to be reallocated for another worthy project. I say this not out of a desire to take the money from any applicant. The reality is that some organisations have been sitting on the money for the best part of eight years, as the Minister of State said. I understand the difficulties and the amount they have to raise. It is onerous to draw down from the fund but, at the same time, we need the moneys drawn down. I am a massive supporter of the good the funding does. I would like to see allocations become more frequent but it is hard to argue for that when a fairly high proportion of clubs have still not commenced projects or drawn down the money.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I acknowledge the Deputy's point on the need for realistic conversations with all applicants to make sure they are moving forward on drawing down the money. I assure him that those conversations are happening. We want to, and we have delivered the message that, these projects need to progress. The Government allocated the projects funding with the objective of seeing them come to fruition.

Between the two rounds so far, 68 applicants across the country have received funding. The projects probably would never have been able to get off the ground or be in a position to be viable without this State investment. We do need to see them move forward, however. This is not something that is going to be on the never-never. We are making it very clear to all of the projects that they need to be moving forward. My team is actively engaging with those behind them with the objective of making sure they can proceed to construction.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: The Minister of State says this will not be on the never-never but the reality, as he said, is that nine projects have not commenced since 2018. There are more that have been allocated funding in a subsequent round. Deadlines need to be imposed. It gives me no satisfaction to say here that this is State money and that if State money were allocated for projects in any other field, we would be asking about it. We want accountability and transparency. We want projects delivered, let us be truthful. If the initial projects envisaged, or scaled-back versions, if required, could be completed, it should be explored. If

those concerned are having difficulties with fundraising or whatever, it is a matter of helping them to bridge the gaps. Ultimately, however, we need projects completed.

There are sports clubs the length and breadth of the country crying out for substantial money like what has been allocated under the fund. The money for a certain project in Cork, which I will not mention here but with which the Minister is familiar, has been sitting there for six years, undrawn. Other potential suitors were interested in availing of it. A particular organisation has sat on it and withheld it from going towards a very positive project. The gun needs to be put to some of these organisations' heads and they need to get on with the works.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I assure the Deputy that no project that has been given approval for funding is sitting on funding. We are spending all the money we have, managing the LSSIF funding stream to the nth degree and making sure it is getting invested. Likewise, we want to make sure every project is moving forward.

We will have one more round of the LSSIF over the term of the Government. I want that to be as early in the term as it can be but it will certainly be in the second half of it. It will be contingent on where we are at with projects. Projects that are not moving forward will have to be taken off the books so new ones can be considered. In the meantime, we are working with those involved to drive their projects forward and make sure that we see them completed so people can avail of and enjoy the benefits of these great facilities. We are working to try to deliver that.

Question No. 74 taken with Written Answers.

Sports Funding

70. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport the measures he is taking to support grassroots sports clubs in north Dublin that are experiencing increased demand due to population growth; whether he is satisfied that existing funding programmes are sufficient to meet infrastructure needs, including in respect of pitches, clubhouses, changing facilities, lighting and accessibility improvements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44489/26]

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Ba mhaith liom ceist a chur ar an Aire Stáit faoi chúrsaí spóirt i dtuaisceart Bhaile Átha Cliath. Is iontach an infheistíocht atá déanta sa chlub Shells, but what steps are being taken to support grassroots sports clubs across north Dublin, including with clubhouses and changing facilities, in light of the recent bad weather? The weather this year, certainly the rain, was the worst in a long time. Multiple sports clubs had young girls and boys who could not play because of the lack of all-weather pitches.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy for his question and for his ongoing advocacy for the role that sport plays in our communities. I was glad to join him recently for a visit to Shelbourne Football Club. It was great to see the work happening there. I know the club recently completed a new astro pitch, which is making a real difference.

One of my key goals as Minister of State for sport is to see an increase in participation levels. As the Deputy pointed out, the availability of access to sports facilities, whether in a

club setting, on public lands or in other amenity areas, is a key factor in drawing more people to participation in sport. Planning for future facilities' needs, locations and types is a particular focus of our current sports action plan. Through the sports action plan, we have two particular funds aimed at delivering funding to clubs. Those funds are the community sport facilities fund and the large-scale sport infrastructure fund. Over the past decade, over €96 million has been allocated to 1,435 sporting projects in Dublin under the community sport facilities fund, benefitting 57 different sport types.

Given the challenges of increased demand and a growing population, I consider that there is real merit in the development of municipally-backed shared facilities. As my Department does not purchase the land, local authorities have a key role to play here, including through the development plan process and through the processes by which they secure and acquire land. I also encourage sports' national governing bodies to work with local authorities to ensure that the land can be used to deliver sporting facilities. My Department is engaging with local authorities, particularly in Dublin, to see how we can work together to ensure we get maximum impact from the funding that will be put in there and particularly to see how we can address that challenge around land and space. We must ensure there are facilities available in communities for people to participate in.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit agus le gach duine atá ag obair sa Department faoi láthair. I thank the men and women of Dublin City Council, go háirithe na laethanta seo. They have put in more toilets than we have seen previously and are doing work in north Dublin. North Dublin has been neglected for too long. It is one of the main reasons I got involved. It is great to see that there is work being done. I thank the council for all the work at the Kilmore West Recreation Centre and the all-weather pitch at the Stardust Memorial Park, which I recently visited. I spoke to one of the executives in Dublin City Council and it is good to see that things are moving.

The Minister mentioned the multi-sport complex systems that we see in parts of southern European cities where all clubs use the facilities. It is not just one single clubhouse. Any club can use those facilities. That is an approach we should consider. We in Ireland need to move away from the idea of clubhouses for single clubs. We can put in more money, get better facilities for all clubs and get grassroots participation up.

I also want to ask about Killester Basketball Club, one of the largest basketball clubs with the largest number of female players. I would love for the Department to bring it any attention.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy. I outlined previously that nearly 1,500 projects have been supported across Dublin through the community sport facilities fund. That has a big impact on communities, as I know the Deputy knows. We want to continue and do more in that regard. The benefit of building those facilities is that we are seeing increased participation. We are particularly seeing more and more young girls playing sport at the same level as young boys, and staying with it. That brings pressure and a need for more facilities. We are going to continue to invest but we want to do so in as strategic a way as possible. We are working with local authorities to ensure we are making the most of the land available. That involves working with local authorities and encouraging national governing bodies to work together to see where they can collaborate. We must structure the community sport facilities fund in a way that encourages that collaboration.

In the next round, we will be focusing strongly on encouraging schools to work with clubs. Often, there are school facilities that investment could significantly improve or through which new facilities could be developed. They can be available to students during the day and to the community outside of school time. We can maximise the impact and return on investment.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I appreciate that update. We will kill two birds with one stone with that approach. We will give children the opportunity at break time in school to get away from the books and get onto the pitch to play football, rugby or whatever they want to play. The club would then benefit later.

There are two projects I would love to highlight. I welcome Dublin City Council's plan for an 11-a-side, 3G all-weather pitch. As the Minister of State knows, Dublin produces the best footballers. I will also mention the upgrade to all-weather pitches at Stardust Memorial Park and in Kilmore West Recreation Centre. Dublin Bay North is a broad constituency, which runs from Fairview to Howth and Darndale. Across the constituency, there is a lack of these all-weather pitches. I welcome the fact that the Department is looking at that issue. The Minister mentioned continuing to increase the participation levels for young women and boys and ensuring they continue to play sports. We need to give them all-weather pitches and nearby toilets. It makes it easier for parents and the hard-working coaches coming down on a Saturday night. I appreciate that.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: The Deputy and I could have a debate about which county produces the best footballers. There would, however, be no debate about which county produces the best goalkeepers for the number 1 jersey.

We want to ensure that the investment we are making this time around delivers the biggest impact. We want to ensure clubs collaborate. There is some low-hanging fruit in our education system. Schools could do with better facilities and if we can put the facilities on the school grounds where a club is working with the school, there will be a great dividend for the community on all fronts. We will focus on working in education and with local authorities. That is the message we have been getting out there. We will push hard once we launch the round over the summer to ensure we get the best possible bang for the investment we are putting in. We want legs on the ground, lungs being busted and people getting great enjoyment from their involvement in sport.

Television Licence Fee

75. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport to provide an update on TV licence sales for each of the years 2024, 2025 and to date in 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [43818/26]

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I ask the Minister of State to provide an update on TV licence sales for each of the years 2024, 2025 and to date 2026. I ask him to make a statement on the matter.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: There are two key revenue streams associated with the TV licence, which are the revenue arising from television licences sold by An Post as statutory

issuing agent and the allocation provided by the Department of Social Protection in respect of the provision of free television licences to recipients of the household benefits package. As I know the Deputy is aware, the number of television licences sold by An Post has been in decline over the past number of years. This has been driven by three factors. First, an ageing population means that the number of households qualifying for a free TV licence increases every year by between 13,000 and 20,000. Second, the number of households without a liable television set has increased, driven by changes in the way that people access audiovisual services. Third, there has been a marked increase in evasion since the revelations regarding presenter payments and governance failings in RTÉ in July 2023.

In this context, TV licence sales have continued to decline over the past number of years. In 2024, 792,000 TV licences were sold by An Post. In 2025, this figure was just over 768,000. To the end of May 2026, just under 300,000 TV licences were sold, a 4.5% year-on-year decline in the year to date. A total of 299,373 were sold to the end of May this year.

In July 2024, the Government decided that the TV licence system would be retained, underpinned by improvements in collection and compliance to maximise revenue generation. The technical working group on the reform and enhancement of the TV licence was reconvened to bring forward proposals to that effect. The Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, recently received the report of the group and will decide on the next steps with Government colleagues.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: It is clear, based on the figures the Minister of State has outlined, that the TV licence funding model is completely broken. People are voting with their feet. The Minister of State has outlined a number of contributing factors. The single biggest contributing factor is scandal after scandal in RTÉ. In 2019, over 1 million TV licences were sold. The Minister of State is saying that in the first half of this year, fewer than 300,000 have been sold and in all of last year, only 768,000 were sold. This is a very significant decrease and it calls into serious question the fundamental funding model for public sector broadcasting in this State. When will decisions be made on the review that has been conducted and will the scrapping of the TV licence be considered?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank the Deputy. As I said in my initial response, the technical working group on the reform and enhancement of the TV licence has brought forward proposals to that effect.

The report from that group has only recently been received by the Department. That will be considered and I have no doubt over the next short period we will step it out in responding to it and plotting the way forward. There are real challenges there as we all accept. It is really important we see the continuing reform happening at RTÉ to build confidence in the public in terms of people purchasing their TV licence. I think we all agree it is more important than ever at the moment that we have a good public service broadcaster in this country and have that service. When we see what is happening in the level of disinformation and misinformation now in the online world, having a credible authoritative public service broadcaster is more important than ever. We have recognised that at Government level in putting the funding streams in place to support RTÉ. It is important we ensure there is a sustainable way forward and a strong broadcaster underpinned by that funding into the future.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. I absolutely agree and that is why it is important to raise these issues. At the heart of this is the question of the funding model for good-quality public service broadcasting. I will give another example on this. I welcome the Ashbourne Women's Shed who are visiting today. There were a number of posts for local democracy journalism funded across the State but in Meath and Mayo those posts have been withdrawn. They are not being funded. It was an initiative on behalf of this Government and the previous government. It was a welcome and important initiative. It could be seen reflected in local online and print media covering local council meetings and court services. There needs to be increased investment in this initiative. In particular, the post in County Meath needs to be reinstated. The public in County Meath need to have the same access to that service as we have in other parts of the State.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: There was a new round recently of those public service grants for coverage and journalism across different mediums, whether that is broadcast or print. Like the Deputy, I have seen the benefit and the impact of that in the increased coverage of what is happening in the public sphere by journalists. It is a very worthy scheme. I will certainly pass it back and ask the Department officials to consider the point the Deputy makes and to respond to him regarding Meath and Mayo. I expect it must be that from one round to the next not all applications would be able to be approved each time.

A sustainable funding model for our public service broadcaster and for public service broadcasting in general across different streams is really important in the country. It has been challenged. It is important we consider that and have debates and discussion around it. As a Government, we have committed to the TV licence. However, we have commissioned a report to look at how it can be reformed. We can all agree it is important that it is removed from the Government. That is a really important principle on which public service broadcasting is established in terms of a broadcaster. It is something we are taking seriously and will be coming forward, on the back of receiving the report, with that further direction of travel.

Questions Nos. 76 and 77 taken with Written Answers.

Question No. 78 taken with Question No. 69.

Broadcasting Sector

79. **Deputy Keira Keogh** asked the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport if he will consider measures to strengthen the sustainability of local and regional media outlets serving rural communities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44114/26]

Deputy Keira Keogh: I join with Deputy O'Rourke in congratulating Charlotte Davis who has her last day with that scheme tomorrow and is taking up a new role with the *Western People*. It has been a fantastic scheme.

Local and regional media plays a vital role in rural communities. However, they are facing rising costs as they continue to operate this crucial service. Especially concerning is the €3.7 million broadcast levy that has to be paid to Coimisiún na Meán by local radio stations. Will the Minister of State consider measures to strengthen the sustainability of local and regional media outlets?

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I thank Deputy Keogh for her question. As we have just discussed, we are all agreed that local and regional media outlets play a vital role in providing high-quality public service content and in contributing to the diversity and plurality of trusted voices in our media sector, which greatly enhances democratic participation and also provides safeguards for our information space. The Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill will provide for the establishment of a statutory media fund, which will provide a robust framework for supporting the wider media sector in the long term. A suite of funding schemes catering to all parts of the media sector currently operates on an administrative basis, pending the establishment of the statutory media fund.

In January of this year, Coimisiún na Meán announced a total package of approximately €15 million in supports for the wider media sector in order to enhance the provision of public-interest journalism, to assist the modernisation of technology and to support the upskilling of staff within the sector. Almost €5.7 million of that was awarded under the local democracy and courts reporting schemes to enhance the vital role of media service providers in reporting on public interest matters. We saw €3.8 million awarded through the news reporting scheme this year to support the provision of additional high-quality news and current affairs coverage. There was €2.7 million was awarded through the digital transformation scheme providing vital support, as the Deputy knows, for media outlets to enhance their technological and digital infrastructure, as well as to provide training and upskilling opportunities for staff in the context of the increasingly digitalised media landscape we are now seeing.

These supports are of particular important in rural areas where local, regional and community radio contributes significantly to the strength of communities and their access to trusted news. It is something to which we have been, and will stay, committed. I welcome the Deputy raising its importance here and her own strong commitment to seeing that public service in our regions, through our papers and our local radio, is very much supported.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I definitely welcome those funding schemes, especially the new ones that are going to come on board. Money does have to come in if it is going to go out, but that €3.7 million broadcast levy that has to be paid to Coimisiún na Meán is €1 million more this year than it was last year, which is an average 39% increase. For some local radio stations that is translating to €14,000. That was communicated at really short notice and it did not give them a lot of time to put finances in place. When we look back, that has increased 69% over two years and, as the Minister of State said, local media outlets are a trusted source of news when there is so much misinformation and disinformation out there. Our constituents rely on them for updates on local issues, such as weather, community events, road conditions and other local notices, especially in Mayo. The Midwest Radio death notices are very popular and are turned on in the kitchen every single morning. Midwest Radio is like a friend in the kitchen. I just want to make sure these local media outlets have enough support.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: I hear what Deputy Keogh is saying in relation to the impact of costs but as she knows, neither the Government nor the relevant Department plays a role in formulating or approving the proposed income or expenditure of Coimisiún na Meán or in setting the levy. The preparation of those annual estimates of income and expenditure under Section 26(1) of the Broadcasting Act requires Coimisiún na Meán to submit such estimates to

the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport. It is important to note that the Minister does not approve or agree the actual estimates or the annual budget. The Minister's sole role is in conjunction with the Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation to give an coimisiún consent for the publication of the budget on its website in accordance with Section 26(7) of the Act. That is the statutory position. I accept what the Deputy is saying and there have been many representations and points made in relation to the budget, which no doubt will be considered by Coimisiún na Meán, but there is a statutory separation between the Government and the commission under the Act.

Deputy Keira Keogh: I thank the Minister of State. I absolutely appreciate and value that separation between the Minister and Coimisiún na Meán. Given the shock that occurred across the county when that levy was announced, local radio stations in particular are struggling, and ahead of the approaching budget we should make sure they get as much support as possible. Older people in particular really rely on turning on that local radio station, getting the local update and hearing local voices. It is also vital, with some of the stations facing viability issues, that we consider local jobs. Many people start out in a local newspaper and then make it to sitting in the Gallery here in Dáil Éireann. We have to make sure that these radio stations can continue.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: This ties back to the previous conversation we had about public service broadcasting and the importance of the separation of the Government from the distribution of funding in relation to achieving good public service in broadcasting and media across the country. That is why Coimisiún na Meán was established on a statutory basis. It then has a legal duty to set its levies in relation to that. The Government, as we just discussed, is giving significant funding with over €15 million distributed last year through Coimisiún na Meán. We all agree in the House today that we can see the benefits of that in terms of media and communication at local and regional level.

12 o'clock

We will continue with the commitment in relation to that. It is important we keep that separation so the allocation of Government funding is not tied to how the coverage looks, other than that it serves the public in a neutral way and in a way that enhances the quality of communications, broadcasting and journalism at all levels from local right up to national but especially at local and regional level.

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Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Léiríonn na figiúirí is déanaí ón CRU pictiúr thar a bheith gruama den bhrú atá ar theaghlaigh ar fud an Stáit. Don chéad uair riamh anois, tá níos mó ná 500,000 cuntas fuinnimh teaghlaigh i riaráistí. Níl na teaghlaigh a dhéanann iad féin a dhícheangal mar nach bhfuil siad ábalta íoc as méadar íoc-mar-a-úsáidtear san áireamh sna figiúirí sin. I gcás go leor seandaoine, iad siúd atá ina gcónaí leo féin agus teaghlaigh le páistí óga, bíonn

iarmhairtí tubaisteacha acu maidir le sláinte, ar fholláine agus ar chaighdeán na beatha. Agus líon mór teaghlaigh ag streachailt chun íoc as bunriaráistí fuinnimh, tá méaduithe eile fógartha anois ag na comhlachtaí fuinnimh. Cad é go díreach atá an Rialtas chun a dhéanamh faoi seo? Cad é an freagra atá ag an Rialtas do na céadta míle teaghlaigh atá ag tabhairt aghaidh ar chostais fhuinnimh atá ag ardú agus an brú atá ar chúrsaí airgeadais?

The latest figures from the energy regulator paint a deeply concerning picture of the pressures that are facing families across this State. For the first time ever there are over 500,000 families with energy accounts in arrears. These figures show there are more 319,000 families who cannot pay their electricity bills and 183,000 families who cannot pay their gas bills. These figures only tell part of the story. They do not include households who silently disconnect because they cannot afford to top up a pay-as-you-go meter. For those living alone and families with young children these choices have real consequences for health, well-being and quality of life.

While record numbers of households are not able to pay for their basic energy needs we see energy companies have once again announced they are going to hike up energy costs. At a time when many families are already trying to keep pace with rising costs energy bills are set to rise again. Last week the biggest energy supplier in this State, Electric Ireland, announced sharp increases but there was not a peep out of those in Cabinet or Government. The Minister, Deputy Burke, points to economic growth and his Government points to record tax revenues and budget surpluses running into billions of euro. None of these things can reduce the bills that are landing on the kitchen tables each month and none of these things change the reality facing hundreds of thousands of families who are struggling with the cost of essential services. People are exhausted after years of rising costs. They have cut back where they can. They have adjusted their budgets and absorbed increase after increase but many feel there is no end in sight.

The most frustrating thing is this is all happening at a time when there are unprecedented financial resources at the Government's disposal. The Minister's Government claims to understand the pressures people are under but the regulator's figures tell a very different story. They show financial pressures remain severe for many households despite repeated assurances that conditions are improving. For the first time ever there are more than 500,000 households across this State in energy arrears and families are facing prices going up yet again. The Government still has an opportunity to act before the latest price increases take effect. Timely action now, including energy credits, would ease the pressure on workers, families and pensioners who are already struggling to keep up. Will the Government act now? Will it listen? Will it provide energy credits as an immediate solution for people who are really struggling? What is the Government's answer to the hundreds of thousands of families who are facing mounting energy costs and financial strain?

Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Peter Burke): I thank Deputy Doherty for his question on an area which is very close to the concern of the Government, which is energy affordability in our country and the ability of households to pay. Something the Government keeps a very close track of is those who are in arrears for 90 days. It is a critical component that shows stress over a period of time.

I want to outline what the Government is doing to really reduce costs at the kitchen table, as the Deputy put it. First of all, we came forward with a record level in an EU context *per capita* of intervention to support families across the country. We are supporting families with the cost of fuel, which is very significant for those who are commuting to work, families who are working and families who are trying to heat their homes, by reducing excise duties across all components with a €16 reduction in petrol per fill and a €19 reduction in diesel. Also, looking at the logistics and how food is produced to reduce the cost of groceries on the shelves for consumers, we have done a huge package for agriculture in terms of production and in haulage, with a 60% increase in the diesel rebate scheme, again underwriting the cost to the housewife, the homemaker and the person in the home to ensure they get that key support.

There are a few areas I also want to comment on in relation to how we get energy independence and reduce the cost to the family. At this point we have 258,000 homes that have been through energy improvements. We have fully-funded 32,700 under the warmer homes scheme. That is 32,700 families across the country who have had that support. We have brought forward 18,000 heat pumps, again to support people - and using money raised by the State. We have about €558 million of the €640 million through those schemes through the SEA to target the most vulnerable in society. I note when Deputy Doherty brought forward his party's proposals earlier this year in a motion he left out the fuel allowance, meaning no recompense to support the most vulnerable people in a targeted way, which is key and absolutely needed.

The Government's position is very clear. We stood up the national affordability task force to look at affordability right across the economy to the household and particularly to the most vulnerable. That report will be published in advance of consideration for the budget. We will be looking, through that report, at energy prices in the first instance and second at addressing energy poverty and consumer protections - which are very important - as well as energy affordability. I ask people who are struggling to first of all engage with their supplier. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has been very clear in meeting all the energy companies and working with them to ensure people are not cut off, people who engage with them, and to support people.

We will obviously be coming forward as a Government, collectively, with other measures in the context of the next budget. As Deputies have seen in previous budgets, we were agile. We reacted before the calendar turned and supported families right across the economy and supported the most vulnerable, which is key, through our targeted measures in the current budget, which are still being utilised and are supporting families as we speak. It is key we ensure we continue to support families. We will be doing that through evidence-based initiatives, through our national affordability task force and through supporting customers who are in arrears. I would also say to people who are in trouble that they should reach out to our Department of Social Protection, which has a range of supports, including the additional needs payment, and works with families to ensure no one gets cut off. The fuel allowance has increased significantly to €152 per month to support families in a targeted measure. There are now about 460,000 homes right across the economy, which are being supported by it. We extended it this year to people on the working families payment, thereby bringing 50,000 more families into that support and linking it to work as well, to support people who are working right across the economy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister and his Government withdrew energy credits in last year's budget. That is why we are seeing what is happening now. We have record numbers of families across this State who cannot pay their electricity or gas bills. That is on the Government. We are paying the highest electricity costs in Europe and the electricity companies have just told us they are going to jack up prices again. In less than three weeks 1.2 million families across the State are going to face near double-digit increases in electricity and gas prices? What is the Minister's response? It is that we should wait to see what the Government does in next year's budget. That is not good enough. The Government needs to call in the energy companies and it needs to tell them that increase after increase is simply not on. The Government also needs to make direct intervention. It needs to bring forward energy credits right now. It has to understand the scale of the problem.

There are people coming to me who never had a problem paying their electricity bill or gas bill, but because of the relentless price increases they now cannot pay their bills.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Doherty.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The penny needs to drop. Half a million households is massive. I am asking this very clearly. Will the Government act now, before these increases take effect in three weeks' time, and bring forward energy credits?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Doherty. I call on the Minister to respond.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Will the Government rein in the companies here and tell them we cannot face these energy increases time after time, while they make multimillion profits?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Peter Burke: We are acting right now at a record level in the economy, supporting people at the fuel pumps and through reductions in electricity VAT rates. We are supporting people right across the economy to ensure they are not cut off. The Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, has met with all the energy companies and given the Government an assurance that anyone who works with energy companies in relation to their bill will be supported.

The Deputy has brought forward a number of measures he said he costed at €100 million a month, to be brought forward at the start of this energy crisis. The Government is doing much more than that. Sinn Féin says the Government is doing nothing this side of the Border, but on the other side of the Border Sinn Féin is doing nothing. We are acting at a record level to support families. We will continue to do that through the national affordability task force, which is looking at energy affordability, protecting consumers and energy policy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The task force will not pay their bills.

Deputy Peter Burke: We have always acted in the past and we will continue to do so to protect the most vulnerable in society.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Does the Minister actually care?

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Yesterday, the Taoiseach laid out Ireland's priorities for the EU Presidency. He said: "Active support for Ukraine will be a defining priority for the Irish presidency." On Tuesday night, missiles rained down on the Kharkiv region bringing destruction, injury and death to the civilian population. One of those who lost their life was a 22-year-old pregnant woman. A one-year-old child was among those seriously injured. This is the brutality caused by drones and missiles that land on Ukrainian homes on a daily basis.

An investigation carried out by *The Irish Times* and the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project found that vast amounts of alumina are being shipped from Ireland to Russia. On arrival, it is being sold to a company that supplies dozens of Russian arms manufacturers. This flies in the face of Irish people's support for Ukraine. Alumina exports to Russia have increased from €196 million in 2021 to €318 million last year. According to a report by Swedish tax investigators, the Russian oligarch, Oleg Deripaska, retains a controlling share of the company that has a majority ownership of Aughinish Alumina. Deripaska is a close ally and supporter of Putin. He has contributed substantially to Putin's brutal invasion of Ukraine.

The Government's head-in-the-sand approach is in sharp contrast to the decisive action taken by Australia. It banned the export of alumina to Russia as soon as it invaded Ukraine. At the time, Australia supplied 20% of Russia's alumina, but it still acted with urgency. It did this because alumina played a critical role in Russia's war machine, as its then Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, said. The Australians did not want to play any part whatsoever in feeding Putin's murderous war. Instead, they said they would work with companies and exporters impacted by the ban to find new markets and expand existing ones. After Australia cut off its supply, the Russians had to look elsewhere to find replacements, including Aughinish Alumina, where exports to Russia have soared.

The Minister claims he has no idea about the end use of the alumina exported from Ireland, but it is clear from independent investigations that it is being used by Russian arms manufacturers. These arms are then being used to kill Ukrainian men, women and children. Will the Government stop the export of alumina to Russia? When will the Department's investigation be completed? Will it be published? Have we asked the Ukrainian Government for samples from drones and missiles to forensically analyse against samples from Aughinish?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Cian O'Callaghan for his very important question. I fully share the concern he has raised. That is why we have set about conducting an investigation in the Department of enterprise to impartially ascertain the evidence, working with the European Commission and the Swedish authorities, which came forward with additional evidence in the past ten days. We are also working with Aughinish Alumina to try to ascertain the truth. We will get to the bottom of the supply chain. We will need assurances that it is a concealed supply chain.

Ireland has supported every sanctions package in a European context against Russia, which is the aggressor in this case. That is a total of 21 packages we have fully supported. We have been very much to the fore as a country in supporting Ukraine, be it with the very significant €90 billion support loan we were part of underwriting in a European context, supporting Ukraine with non-lethal aid, giving it spare parts for its grid, welcoming so many Ukrainians

here to Ireland and also providing more than 14,000 school places to support them at that very difficult time in their history. That is why I am very clear in the first instance that we must have a robust investigation here. We are working very closely with the European Commission.

Aughinish Alumina was established in Ireland around 1986. It is the largest supplier of alumina in Europe. There are a few important facts to set out in the first instance to understand the trajectory. First, alumina is a critical raw material. It is relied upon for so many parts by every economy, including Europe, for medical devices, the automotive industry, electric vehicles and the food sector.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Will the Minister answer my questions?

Deputy Peter Burke: I will. I said that we are carrying out an investigation to get the evidence. As a Minister, I cannot make a decision without impartial evidence before me. We are working with the European Commission, which is the competent authority in this regard, to essentially recommend sanctions to the Department of enterprise and the Government. We are the enforcement authority. We carry out the execution of the sanction but the policy piece is the remit of the Commission, which we feed into. We will be working to ascertain the truth here. We are taking a pan-European approach with other European authorities, which is critical.

I will be very clear that the Irish Government would not tolerate any exports that were feeding the Russian military complex. We have supported Ukraine. We have a very strong track record of doing that. I have put an independent process in place to ensure that we get to the bottom of the facts of exactly where this alumina is ending up. We have to achieve that through the investigation.

In a European context, alumina is not a dual-use product and has not been designated as such. There are many products like that across the economy. We have to be clear. We must get the evidence and then take action if it is proven that the supply chain is not concealed and that it is going to aid and assist the Russian military complex.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The facts on this have been established. Since the war began our exports to Russia have soared. That is one fact. The second fact is these exports come from a company where the majority ownership behind it is a Russian oligarch who is a close ally and supporter of Putin. The third fact that has been established by an independent investigation is that when these exports go to Russia they are being used to produce aluminium that is then being sold to Russian arms manufacturers. The fourth fact is those Russian arms manufacturers are supplying Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the missiles, drones and weapons are being used to kill Ukrainian people. The facts are staring the Minister in the face. The Australians knew the facts more than four years ago. They acted decisively. Why is the Government hiding behind its claim that it needs to ascertain the truth and establish what is going on here when it has been established already? When is the Government going to act decisively on this? When is it going to stop these exports? Will the Minister answer my questions? Has the Government asked the Ukrainian Government for samples of drones and missiles so it can forensically examine them to establish the links with the exports from Ireland?

Deputy Peter Burke: Yes, we have spoken to the Ukrainian Government and we have asked it for the evidence it possesses regarding the allegation that is before us. It is currently engaging with the Department in relation to that. That is why I said our investigation is very wide-ranging. It is a genuine investigation to get the evidence. I am working with the Swedish authorities on evidence that has come forward as well. We need to go through the process to prove the allegation the Deputy puts forward. I put on the record to be helpful that incorrect data was given to the Central Statistics Office about the exports of alumina to the EU and to Russia. About 45% of it goes to Russia and about 55% goes to the EU. I have to stress test the notes that are given to me. The independent investigation will do that. A large proportion of the alumina is imported back into the European Union from smelters in Russia. We have to assess all that and ensure that the information we have is correct.

I have put on the record very clearly, as a proud European, that we stand by Ukraine. We will not tolerate, in any shape or form, if exports from Ireland are advancing the cause of the Russian aggression in Ukraine and damaging their citizens.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The greed of Rotunda Hospital consultants on public-only contracts trying to get a way with still treating private patients in public hospitals has been front-page news all week. The Minister for Health has said she believes "in equality for every baby being born".

The idea that some mothers and babies should get better care because of having more money is absolutely abhorrent but the question is: should that equality for babies stop the moment that they leave the maternity hospital? There is an unpublished report by EY into Children's Health Ireland, CHI, which shows that is exactly what is happening. It shows that children whose parents cannot afford health insurance, that is, approximately half of all children in this country, are being forced to wait much, much longer for essential surgery. Hospital consultants are prioritising private patients over those on public lists. It shows that children who need urology surgery are waiting up to a year longer if they do not have private health insurance. Kids who need time-sensitive spinal surgery are waiting more than six months longer because their little bodies are less profitable to operate on.

I will give the Minister some examples from the report. Urology consultant 2 in this sample has 20 public child patients. The average waiting time for surgery in public is 12.4 months. For ten private patients the average waiting time is 1.84 months. For consultant 5, in orthopaedics, the average waiting time in public is 8.7 months while the average waiting time in private is two months. That is pretty much across the board in terms of a massive discrepancy of waiting time in public versus waiting time for private.

Everyone pretends that discrimination between private and public patients has no impact on safety or patient care but the review shows that to be untrue. Let me quote from it: "For Spinal patients, only 41% (9 out of 22) were treated within the Clinical Recommended Timeframes ... meaning 59% faced delays, sometimes for several months. Delays happened for both urgent and less urgent cases ... with a median delay of 143 days". We all remember poor Harvey Morrison Sherratt suffering in agony on a waiting list. In urology, "Of the 73 patients reviewed ... (41%) were treated outside the Clinical Recommended Timeframes ... The median delay was 152 days". There was one case where a child waited seven years for routine surgery.

The report points out that children may wait longer than clinically recommended for assessment, investigation or treatment, with potential consequences for clinical outcomes, disease progression and quality of life. So much for cherishing all the children of the nation equally.

Does the Minister agree that this is utterly horrendous and that all children should get equal access to healthcare? Does he agree that this report needs to be published immediately? Does he agree that just as private healthcare has no place in the Rotunda, it should have no place in Children's Health Ireland either?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Murphy for his question. I am a firm believer in Sláintecare. It is one time when the Oireachtas came together and charted how health policy evolves irrespective of the change of Governments that we have within the country.

First of all, the Deputy is quoting from a leaked report, which I have not seen and have no knowledge of. The Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, commissioned a report - ordered the HSE to do so - into Children's Health Ireland because of significant concerns that she had. I would acknowledge the exceptional work the Minister has carried out over the past two weeks to protect the integrity of the State and to ensure patients get equality of care right across our economy. The great work that has been carried out with the public-only consultant contract should be pointed out. As of the end of May 2026, 3,416 consultants have signed up to the public-only consultant contract. Out of 2,196 consultants, that represents almost 70% of all consultants working in Ireland. As a result of that, we have to ensure that work is public only. The Minister is committed to doing that, in line with the terms as set out by Sláintecare which is very important. One of the critical things we can do with the public-only consultant contract is that, clinically, we can manage consultant availability with public demand. That will be very important as we see the challenges our health service faces in the years ahead.

It should be pointed out also that huge advances have taken place in a lot of hospitals across the country because of these changes. For example, in the Mater hospital, an additional 180 CT scans monthly and 84 MRI scans have taken place because of the public-only consultant contract. We see in other hospitals that many of the theatres are now operating at weekends. We get additional days out of consultants and, critically, the key decision-makers are in the room when patients have to be triaged and clinical decisions have to be made. Those senior consultants who are employed by the State on a public-only contract are available to make those decisions in support of patients, which is critical.

Sláintecare has had its challenges but the Government is very committed to deliver it. It has never been so committed as under the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. The Minister has demonstrated that with the increase in budget the Health Service Executive has received over the past number of years, which now is at record levels, with the support we have in preventative medicine, which is key, and with the support for our children.

No one wants to stand over any child in this State having to wait for urgent healthcare. That is not acceptable in any society and I say that as a father, understanding the needs and the genuine concerns families have right across our society.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Minister's commitment to public healthcare is somewhat undermined by the fact that private suites are being built in the new national children's hospital right now - more inequality literally being built into the system even though private care in public hospitals is meant to be expiring.

I will ask again whether the Minister agrees that this report needs to be published. People have the right to see these figures which show the reality of the horrific effect of having private for-profit healthcare happening within our health system. What it means is worse health outcomes, longer times on waiting lists - sometimes in agony - and having poor outcomes at the end of it for kids whose parents do not have the money to have private healthcare. Is that okay? Is it okay that if you have private healthcare, you get to wait a lot less than if you have public healthcare? These are children. These are children who do not even make the choice about whether they have private healthcare or not.

Does the Minister agree that all children need to be treated equally, regardless of their health insurance status? Does he agree the report needs to be published? Does he agree that it is time to wipe private healthcare out of CHI and the whole public hospital system?

Deputy Peter Burke: First of all, I reiterate I have not seen the report. I do not know when it will be completed. I do not know what version the Deputy has that has been leaked. I do not know whether the Minister has received it yet. The Minister for Health commissioned this report and asked for an investigation into the practices at CHI to ensure there was equity of treatment of patients. The Minister asked for this and the Deputy is quoting the results of it. I do not know whether the Minister has seen that report and what actions she will take on foot of it but I am confident she will take action. The Minister demonstrated that quite clearly over the past number of days when she assured the protection of the public-only consultant contract. The Minister has got results.

That is why I am clear in my view. The Government is very committed to Sláintecare and, critically, that all children are treated equally in our society. That is espoused in the Proclamation. It is something that we have strongly in our hearts as Irish people. We are doing everything we can to ensure there is equality of treatment for all our children.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: The matter that has caused great distress in communities and volunteer organisations across this country is a sudden collapse of *tickets.ie*. Last week, organisers who logged in to draw down moneys owed to them, moneys that had already been paid by ordinary people buying tickets in good faith, were met instead with a webpage telling them that the company, Tickets.ie, and Oshi Software Limited had ceased trading and were heading into liquidation. There was no warning and no telephone call, only a webpage telling them that the company had gone.

Some organisers in communication with the company the previous day were told their moneys were secure, there was no problem and it was business as usual when discussing ticket sales.

For more than 20 years, Tickets.ie was one of the State's largest independent ticketing platforms.

It was not the choice of the multinational or stadium promoters. It was the choice of the parish festivals, the local arts groups, the community sports clubs and the volunteer community organisations running music festivals to put their town on the map. They are precisely the events that rural and small towns in Ireland need but it is those groups that are now left out of pocket. The sums are not small. Between three festivals, namely, the Rory Gallagher International Festival, Rockathon and the Cowboys and Heroes festival in Ballinamore, organisers have reported collectively being owed in the region of €580,000. One festival alone faces losses of up to €135,000. For a volunteer committee, that is not just a setback; it is ruinous. It is the difference between that festival being run again next summer and having to wrap it up and finish for good.

When a licensed travel agent collapses, customers' moneys are protected because it was decided long ago in this House that businesses holding public moneys would be subject to safeguards in respect of those moneys. It should trouble every Member of this House that ticketing agencies in this State that may hold hundreds of thousands of euro belonging to promoters and ticket buyers can collapse overnight with no equivalent protections, that is, no ring fencing, no bond and no money supplied. The moneys will simply vanish into liquidation. That is a gap in the law of the State and it must be closed.

Will the Minister for enterprise intervene on behalf of the organisations caught in this collapse and will he and the Minister for culture provide and mobilise emergency funding? Second, will the Government commit to regulating the primary ticket sales agents to protect and ring-fence money paid by and being held on behalf of those organisations? We cannot go back but we can ensure that no more people involved in parish councils and community organisations find themselves looking at a webpage and wondering where their money has gone.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue. I am aware of the many community groups up and down the country that give so much to organising festivals that benefit the wider community and attract significant numbers of visitors to rural areas. A number of Members put queries to me on this issue during the week. The Minister of State, Deputy Feighan, has been doing a lot of work with a number of festivals in his area. Deputy O'Flynn has outlined how much out of pocket some of the festivals are and the exposure faced by community groups.

I understand there is an intervention in the High Court in relation to this issue. Therefore, I must be careful in what I say. The first point I will make is that protections are very clearly set out for a lot of areas where client money is held. This particular area does concern me. As the Deputy rightly pointed out, there may be a gap in the regulatory environment. We will look at that because we want to ensure maximum protections are afforded to client moneys being held by any organisation. In the context of a liquidation process, the rules are very clear in terms of the action a liquidator will take in regard to preferential creditors and how that process is worked through. As I said, a court action is going on in the background.

I have asked my Department to investigate what we can do and what supports we can provide in this regard. However, I do not want to make false promises. We have committed a very significant budget over the next three years for festival events through Fáilte Ireland, which is supporting many festivals up and down the country. That will bring a huge amount

of economic activity to many rural parts of our country. I absolutely am not in any way unsympathetic to the issues the Deputy has raised. I work with community groups. I am at the coalface in a rural town where exactly that activity is happening. I know how much of their time volunteers give to run festivals, particularly ones like the Rory Gallagher International Festival in Ballyshannon, Cowboys and Heroes in County Leitrim and Rockathon at Fairyhouse, that have a very significant reputation. They are all important events that contribute very substantially to their localities.

I will revert to the Deputy in the first instance in terms of regulatory gaps that may exist in relation to clients' funds. I need to go through that properly in the Department to see exactly what we can do in terms of supports. The Corporate Enforcement Authority is there. If there are any allegations, we can investigate them. However, I must be careful in terms of the High Court case that is currently under way.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: The reality is that the Minister will have to come up with something in respect of these groups. Many of the festivals will not survive. Some have gone ahead or will go ahead but they are carrying huge deficits. They will go into liquidation. Some are limited companies, some are parish councils and some are community organisations. We will have a serious deficit if the Government does not invest in our festivals and does not come up with emergency funding or an emergency package. I have written to the Minister and a number of his ministerial colleagues. I ask him to intervene on the issue. It is about keeping our festivals not just this year but for next year and the years after it. There is no coming back from the blow experienced by many of these festivals. They are run by volunteer groups that have no other source of income.

The Minister mentioned a gap in legislation and regulation on this issue. In fact, it is a gaping hole. No other industry is operating in this type of cowboy country situation. If we look at a solicitor's fund or any client fund, we see it is well organised and well protected. Regulation must be brought to the House as quickly as possible to ensure the same is in place in this area.

Deputy Peter Burke: I will revert to the House on this matter. This year, we are under significant pressure in terms of our budgetary perspective. However, we may be able, over the coming years, to look at what is needed to keep running these established festivals and how we can support them. I can commit to having a look at that in the next couple of years to see what my Department can do, together with the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, who has a lot of responsibility in this area. I appreciate that many genuinely voluntary organisations are working so hard and driving so much economic activity at the heart of their communities. Those involved are exactly the types of people the Government wants to support.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I again raise the issue of rare diseases, which I have raised consistently in the House for the past five years. I have spent the past hour and a half with Senator Costello, who was meeting with parents whose children suffer from Duchenne muscular dystrophy. They received the good news this week that the treatment drug is on its

way to the HSE management team for consideration, having been positively recommended for reimbursement. It is a great relief for the families but the victory is bittersweet because they know that every week they lost waiting for the drug over recent years has led to a deterioration in their children's condition. Those parents are not alone in their story. There is a campaign currently under way by parents whose children primarily suffer from Friedreich's ataxia and who urgently require the drug Skylarys. I understand that matter is at a sensitive stage of negotiations with the HSE and I do not expect the Minister to comment on it.

On the overall picture, the Minister made an important point in his interaction with Deputy Paul Murphy. The Minister is a father and, like me, he understands how difficult it is for parents of children who are ill. No child should have to wait for healthcare but we consistently have a system in this country under which children are waiting. On average, children in Ireland wait 800 days for rare disease drugs. That is in contrast with the situation in other EU and EEA countries. I am not talking about the big countries with the big economies and the big patient cohorts. I am talking about smaller countries, some of them with smaller economies than our own, like Iceland, Luxembourg and Denmark. They are reimbursing drugs at twice and three times the rates we are reimbursing them. We are consistently laggards in the league table when it comes to reimbursement of these drugs.

I commend Senator Costello and the families on their campaign over the past few months. It came to fruition this week and they have achieved the result they want. However, there must be dozens of families at home looking on enviously while they wait for the drug they need to be assessed for reimbursement. It is a cruel and horrible situation for any family to be in. It is inhumane. I am asking for follow-through on the two commitments on this issue in the programme for Government. One relates to the early access scheme and the other is for a review of the reimbursement process as a whole. To my knowledge, action has not commenced on either recommendation. I am hearing about bits and pieces going on but when I talk to clinicians and consultants, they tell me nothing is happening. The Government is a year and a half into its term. The Minister knows as well as I do that anything involving a review or report will take God knows how long. It could take a year, two years or three years, if we are lucky.

I ask the Minister to urgently speak with the Minister for Health to ensure those two commitments in the programme for Government are honoured and prioritised with immediate effect.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy O'Sullivan for his important question. We have about 300,000 people in Ireland who are living with rare diseases - about one in seven of the population - which is very significant. We have made commitments in the programme for Government and we are working with the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, whom I know is very committed in this area. One of the critical areas we are working on is access to new medicines. That is why, later this year, we will bring forward a life science strategy which, in partnership with the Department of Health and my Department, will work to ensure access to rare medicines and incentivise innovation.

We have many life science companies in operation in Ireland, employing over 100,000 people, which are advancing the most clinically innovative drugs. It is critical we get access to those drugs for our population, particularly the cohort the Deputy mentioned. There is a mechanism for approval of rare drugs and resources have increased significantly to the Health

Products Regulatory Authority, HPRA, to ensure we get better at approving these key medicines that are so important for society, children and families. As the Deputy rightly pointed out, there is family who are very much suffering because of that. I know Senator Maria Byrne and my Fine Gael colleagues do a huge amount of work with the rare diseases group here in the Oireachtas, and they are very interested in progressing it.

I look forward to working with the Deputy in this regard. I will relay the issues he raised to the Minister for Health.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I commend the Minister as she was central to this drug being approved. She met with families, treated them with dignity and gave them hope, and I commend her on that. However, it feels like groundhog day because I know that in three, six or nine months' time, another cohort of patients will be looking for another miracle drug. I have seen children regain their mobility from taking some of these drugs. That is what they do.

The innovation the Minister referred to is phenomenal. Every year, corporation tax collected from pharmaceutical companies amounts to between €7 billion and €10 billion. Even more phenomenal is that we cannot get a good price from these pharmaceutical companies. We cannot get these drugs at a quick pace, which we should. If we are facilitating these large corporations being here, the least we can do is get early access to a reasonably priced drug. If we do not listen to the health argument on this issue, which we have not done for over a decade now, I would make the argument that the jobs the Minister referred to are contingent on us keeping up with innovation. Unfortunately, we have an archaic system that has not changed and kept pace with that innovation. I ask the Minister to press home the issue with the Minister for Health to make sure we get an early access scheme as quickly as possible.

Deputy Peter Burke: I will raise this issue with the Minister of Health. As the Deputy pointed out, she is committed and has been meeting families on this. In budgets between 2021 and 2025, an additional €158 million was made available for new drugs and of the 263 new drugs, 72 were new drugs that were licensed in that regard. We also have the rare diseases strategy from 2025 to 2030, which the Government is working on to ensure we breathe life into its recommendations to support the families the Deputy referenced. That is what the Government is achieving. I will work with the Minister for Health and raise the concerns the Deputy has brought to the House this afternoon.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I return to the issue of the liquidation of *tickets.ie*. As I mentioned yesterday when I raised this issue, as somebody who is a director of a not-for-profit music festival, I understand the challenges festivals face across the State. In the past, I have raised the fact we have lost about a dozen major festivals across the State in recent years. The liquidation of *tickets.ie* has had a devastating impact on a number of festivals, including some that are not for profit, such as the Rory Gallagher International Festival in Ballyshannon in my county. The potential hit there is €283,000, which is literally wipe-out territory. That cannot happen. This is an excellent festival that attracts people internationally and keeps the name of

Rory Gallagher alive. It is also very important for the local economy. Others have also been mentioned, including Liberty, Rockathon and other events. There is a serious flaw in the legislation that has to be fixed. This should never be allowed to happen and it has to be dealt with. However, the immediate priority here is ensuring we do not lose these festivals. What interaction has the Minister had with the parent company, which has a multimillion euro turnover in Germany? What is the Government looking at to make sure these festivals are rescued in terms of grant support?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Doherty for this important question. It is an area on which I can empathise. Many community groups have given so much of their time to bring in festivals that contribute to the local economy. I spoke with Barry O'Neill about the Rory Gallagher festival earlier this week and the concerns he has, some of which the Deputy outlined. I have to be careful about what I can do as regards contacting the parent company. When an entity goes into liquidation, the rules are very clear and prescriptive in legislation. Obviously, there has also been a High Court challenge taken. As I said to Deputy O'Flynn, when that takes place and crystalises, I will look at what I can do in the years proceeding. Some of these festivals will be key to local areas going ahead in the next few years. I do not want to make any promises because it is very early days yet. This has only happened in the past ten days. We want to see the events crystalise. I will do all I can, working with the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan. I want to see festivals take place in the communities that derive so much from them.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: How many children experiencing poverty is too many for this Government? The Taoiseach and Tánaiste have both said child poverty is a priority for the Government. Everything seems to be a priority for this Government, but outcomes are not improving and we see that justified in the Children's Rights Alliance report this week, which told us that one in 12 children is experiencing poverty in this country. The Minister will tell me about school meals or he might talk about school books as if they are silver bullets. We know they are not. What families need is income equality. We have been told, through the rumour mill, that a second tier of child benefit is in the mix. Can the Minister confirm if this is still in the mix for budget 2027? Families also need access to quality public services, such as childcare that is affordable, diagnoses, assessments and therapeutic services. Is one in 12 children experiencing poverty too many or is it one in ten or one in eight? What is the acceptable level of child poverty in this country?

Deputy Peter Burke: No one in this House, in any political party or none, wants to see any child in poverty or deems it acceptable, might I add, that any child would be in poverty. That is why we are doing everything we can as a Government to ensure we are assisting. Let me demonstrate some of the facts. First, regarding the target, in figures produced by the CSO, we have reduced child poverty from 8.5% in 2024 to 7.8%. That is too slow, but it is progress. Our child poverty unit is doing a huge amount of work. In budget 2026, we increased the under 12s child support payment by 16% and the over 12s payment by 25%. We increased the income disregard for one-parent families and increased the fuel allowance. We provided hot school meals and free school books to support families who are under pressure. We had a €320 million package in budget 2026, specifically to address child poverty. That is the policy the Government has embarked upon. We have a child poverty unit to try to ensure children get

access to care and the therapies they need, as well as being supported in their family unit to ensure, in every way possible, that we are reducing child poverty. I have no doubt this is something that drives everyone in this House every single day.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I want to bring forward a practical and potentially long overdue reform. Early years educators are currently not permitted to work July provision, providing supports to children transitioning from ECCE into primary school. I have been contacted by several early years educators from my constituency in Dublin Fingal West who have built trusted relationships and deep knowledge of children's individual needs, but are excluded from participating in July provision. This creates two clear problems. First, children are left without the consistent support they are entitled to during a critical stage of transition. Second, early years educators are left unemployed over the summer months, despite being willing and able to deliver this care. Allowing early years educators to participate in July provision would improve continuity for children, strengthen capacity where recruitment has failed and make better use of experienced educators who already understand these children best. It is a simple and practical step that would keep children at the centre of care. I would appreciate if the Minister would consider this.

Deputy Peter Burke: I appreciate the Deputy's contribution. I will raise the matter with the Ministers for education and children.

As a Government, we really need to ensure that children get access to early intervention. I know the July provision has been a huge success but we have to do better. I will take the Deputy's contribution and bring it to the attention of both Ministers.

Deputy Brian Stanley: A 23-year-old woman from Portlaoise was not diagnosed with scoliosis until she was 17 due to inadequate services. She had surgery last December and four weeks later developed tremors in her leg, which have affected her ability to walk meaning she has to use a rollator or a stick. Her condition has worsened. She has serious mobility problems. She is facing a four-year wait for the Mater neurological clinic to get services. She has been refused access to other neurological clinics as they are full. She is meeting a brick wall. After having to wait until she was 17 to have a diagnosis and 23 to have a surgical intervention, she is left in limbo. Caoimhe is anxious to get back to work but she cannot. She has no access to adult occupational therapy, OT, services - nor does anybody else by the way - as there is none in County Laois. I have raised this many times in the Dáil and with the Minister. Research has found that 58% of neurological patients in the midlands have no access to community rehab. In the midlands, and in Laois in particular, there is a four-year wait to get to a clinic and see somebody, 58% have no access to community rehab and we have absolutely no adult recovery or OT services in primary care. I ask the Minister to ask the Minister for Health to address this.

Deputy Peter Burke: The Deputy has a significant concern in relation to his constituent who is absolutely waiting too long. I will raise the issue with the Minister for Health. However, we have done a huge amount in relation to primary care improvements and reducing waiting lists. We have had an intervention specifically to reduce waiting lists. I will raise this specific issue which the Minister for Health and bring it to her attention.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Everybody has been shocked by the brutal attack that happened in Belfast this week and by the subsequent riots. Hadi Alodid has been charged for the alleged attack. The Chief Constable in the North of Ireland has said that this individual is a Sudanese national who came to Belfast via Dublin from Paris but no information has been given by the Government as to his movements in this jurisdiction. How long was he in this jurisdiction? I have heard it was 24 hours. Is this true? Did he apply for asylum here? Was the application refused? Did he have a visa? Did he have a passport? Was he checked for criminal records in his background? The world is asking these questions and all we have is dead air from the Government at the moment. Was any of this specific information shared with the authorities in the North of Ireland or is it the case that the Government simply does not know any of this information whatsoever? The Government's silence is damaging the people's confidence in its ability to manage immigration on an all-Ireland basis. It is creating an information vacuum. Will the Minister tell the people the background of this individual?

Deputy Peter Burke: We have had a very strong response to immigration with the asylum and migration pact, which this House has adjudicated on and voted on, and which the Council of State has also adjudicated on. We are now very clear in terms of processing applications quickly in a 12-week period-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: This question.

Deputy Peter Burke: -----ensuring that we have a very strong robust network throughout Europe to deal collectively what immigration. One thing I will not do is lean into people's fears like the Deputy is. I will not validate prejudice like he tried to do.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: That is a disgraceful load of rubbish.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Tóibín-----

Deputy Peter Burke: What I will do is work to ensure-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I am simply asking factual questions that everybody understands.

Deputy Peter Burke: I will work with the Minister for justice, Deputy O'Callaghan, and the Minister of State, Deputy Brophy, to ensure that we have a firm immigration system-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Will the Minister answer these questions?

Deputy Peter Burke: -----that we have a fair immigration system and one that is hard on traffickers and smugglers, and where we decide the policy ourselves.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Why will the Minister not answer any of those questions? That is a disgrace.

Deputy Brendan Smith: The Rathcorick day centre is the location for County Cavan's day activation unit. This unit provides adult day services for persons with complex needs. Unfortunately, this centre is totally outdated and needs to be replaced as quickly as possible. The adults attending a day activation unit deserve to have modern state-of-the-art facilities. It is not acceptable that these services are provided in totally inadequate accommodation at present. Day services provide a vital support for adults with disabilities to enable them to participate in day-to-day activities and to realise their own potential. A considerable time ago, approval was given for the provision of a new activation unit in the in the general Cavan town area and it is essential that this new accommodation be provided at an early date. The existing centre urgently needs to be replaced and relocated.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue for his area. I will raise it with the Minister in question. I do not have the knowledge of the specific issue in question but will raise it with the Minister and get her to revert to him directly.

Deputy Keira Keogh: We are in the thick of the summer tourism season, despite the rain pummelling down outside. County Mayo has really exciting plans from the wild Mayo strategy, which has just been launched for north Mayo and which will hopefully include a new jaw-dropping suspension bridge at Ballycastle that will have a breathtaking view of Downpatrick Head right down to the continuing restoration, reimagining and rewilding at Westport House and gardens. Projects like these are absolutely vital to attract tourists and more importantly extend the tourist season. We want our visitors to experience world-class facilities when they explore our heritage and nature, such as the accessible Claggan mountain coastal trail that was recently reopened after a fire. Tourism is vital for providing jobs in Mayo. Will Westport and Mayo more generally be prioritised by Fáilte Ireland in its capital investment schemes?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for her very important question on tourism. Since December, we have had a new plan, A New Era for Irish Tourism, which seeks to increase employment to 250,000 from 228,000, bring our domestic revenue up to €5.8 billion annually and bring our overseas revenue up to €9 billion, which will be significant growth for the tourism sector. Mayo will be front and centre to that development. I look forward to working with the Deputy on a number of capital projects we have in gestation to ensure that we are supporting the key infrastructure there. Westport has a huge ability to attract visitors. I was with the Deputy visiting a number of the organisations and people who work to support Westport as a town. I know the great work she does in supporting them through Government policy. Westport House is another key area that we can support through Government intervention. I look forward to working with the Deputy to ensure that Westport and, indeed, Mayo benefit from our tourism strategy.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: I again want to raise Dunguaire Castle in Kinvara. The Minister is well aware of the situation there. I am getting hundreds of emails from locals and from tourists who cannot understand why this situation is being allowed to continue. They are rightly frustrated because this is an iconic landmark on the edge of Kinvara village and on the Wild Atlantic Way that has been closed indefinitely it seems. It is a huge loss to the local community and to the wider region. This issue comes down to funding for Galway County Council. What

is the hesitation from Government in providing the funding that is necessary for the council to acquire the castle, bring it up to a safe standard and reopen it to the public? At this stage, people in Kinvara are sick and tired of the excuses coming from Government, passing the buck between Ministers and between Departments. We need to get this castle reopened. I call on the Minister to put a real proposal on the table and come down to Kinvara, meet community representatives, visit the castle and see for himself the situation there. It cannot be allowed to persist any longer.

Deputy Peter Burke: I acknowledge the Deputy and the work we are trying to do on this significant asset. As he knows, we had a meeting with the key players who have the decision on this - the Department of Transport, Galway County Council and my Department through Fáilte Ireland. At that juncture, I advised them that our capital expenditure schemes would open from September of this year but I need a proposal that I can work with. I cannot fund through Fáilte Ireland the full capital and acquisition costs to bring this up to a level that would be amenable for visitors. I need to work with other parties to do that. If I get a proposal through Fáilte Ireland, I will be happy to work to bring it to fruition. The issue has been raised by a lot of people. Senator P. J. Murphy has been very much the forefront on it as well. We will do anything we can with the local authority and the Department of Transport but we have to work together. That is the key message I have.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: Recent legislative developments have not addressed practical barriers that continue to delay and prevent many people from setting up an enduring power of attorney, EPA. Before the Easter recess, the Government expedited the passage of the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Bill 2026 through the Dáil and Seanad. The Act's primary purpose is to enable High Court to extend on a case-by-case basis the timeframe for discharge of wardship. The legislation represented a missed opportunity to address well-documented challenges within the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015, particularly those seeking to establish an EPA. In principle, any individual should be able to put an EPA in place.

1 o'clock

That is not currently the case. The process is fully digital and must be completed via a decision support service online portal. This system has proven complex and difficult to navigate. It leads to delays and, in some cases, abandonment of the process by a member of the public. The programme for Government commits to review the Act. Can the Minister confirm a timeline for delivery of this solicitor portal as per the programme for Government?

Deputy Peter Burke: The Deputy has raised an important area. I will have to revert to the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, to get a timeline because it is not under my jurisdiction. It has progressed through the Houses significantly. We will find out where it is at for the Deputy.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: The Minister drives from Mullingar most weeks when he comes to Dublin 2, which is in my constituency. He might have noticed the state of the roads in Dublin city. They are in a huge state of disrepair. It is problematic for many residents. The Minister must imagine my surprise when I received an email this week stating that the area engineer for this area does not have any budget remaining for the remainder of 2026 for road surfacing and

footpath reconstruction. Did the Government knowingly underfund Dublin City Council to not start any new road resurfacing projects in the last six months of this year? Does the Minister and his Government care so little for this capital city that they use every week?

Deputy Peter Burke: I will forward the query to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, but I am not aware that we underfunded any local authority. We give local authorities funding, particularly for roads, but they have to, essentially, prioritise their budget on where the acute need is. It is important that Dublin City Council has a budget to repair roads. To have it committed this early is pretty alarming. I will talk to the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and forward the Deputy's concerns in that regard.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I raise the issue of givinostat. I know it has been raised repeatedly but there was a packed audiovisual room briefing. There was welcome news on it yesterday. This is givinostat for Duchenne muscular dystrophy. It was recommended for reimbursement by the HSE drugs group and it is with the senior leadership team now. There are two specific asks I wish to raise with the Minister. First, this process must happen speedily. These children still do not have access to this drug, and they need access to it. Every day counts. The second ask is an important one. When it is recommended and reimbursed, it must be consistent with the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, NICE, guidelines in Britain so that everyone who can stand or walk, with or without support, is included in the scheme. That is an important point. I would appreciate it if the Minister would bring that back.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for raising an important point around the support for people with muscular dystrophy. It is a very debilitating condition. Obviously, from the interest and number of people who turned up to the audiovisual room, the will to support can be seen. I will raise it with the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. A significant amount of resources went into the Health Products Regulatory Authority, HPRA, and the drugs approval process in the context of budget 2026. New people were hired to get through the process quicker. I will raise the Deputy's concerns with the Minister and ask her to revert to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I raise the Local Link 199 bus route. It was approved last year. I was told by the NTA in May last year that it was funded. It went out to tender last summer. The company that won the tender bought a bus and hired four drivers. It was meant to start in September but it has not yet started. I held a public meeting last week on this. This bus is to go from Laragh to Glendalough, Roundwood and Bray. Some 150 people turned up to the meeting. It is a big issue.

My major concern is the lack of transparency and information about why this route has not started. The Tánaiste, whom I was hoping would be here today to answer, has been telling constituents that the firm date for that service should be available this week and that the service is financed. In the past number of days, however, I have received an email from the NTA that states:

We require funding to operate this service. No funding is available. Unfortunately, a precise date for commencement cannot be provided at this time.

They are two very different statements. People – myself included - are frustrated at mixed messaging coming from the Government and the NTA. The communities in Wicklow who rely on the route deserve answers. They deserve clarity and a single message from the Government as to when the service is going to start because they are making life decisions based on that service, such as whether to go to college or where to get a job. They deserve transparency and the truth.

Deputy Peter Burke: I absolutely know the value of our Local Link services. I see it clearly in my constituency in bringing people of all ages to their destination, be it for education, appointments or just to bring people into their local town to do their grocery shopping. I will raise the issue of the 199 service with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and ask him to get a response from the NTA. In good faith, I hope the service goes ahead because Local Link is an absolute gem to rural communities. It is important we prioritise its increased proliferation right across the country.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I wish to raise a cross-Border issue with regard to the poultry industry. North of the Border, the poultry industry is an important and large industry. Of course, a byproduct of that is poultry litter. Poultry litter contains a high level of phosphates. As a result of the North already having an abundance of them, and the South having a deficit, poultry litter has traditionally always been exported South of the Border under licence from the Department of agriculture. However, the Shared Environmental Services, SES, in the North – it is kind of a State-fund organisation similar to An Taisce down here – has raised questions about the export and spreading of this litter, particularly its impact on designated sites.

That has brought us to a situation where, in fact, there has been a suspension of licences being issued. The poultry litter cannot come across the Border and it is having a serious impact on farmers down here. As we know, the price of fertiliser has gone through the roof. They will have to buy fertiliser to replace this. It is a serious problem for both sides of the Border. Farmers in the North cannot get rid of it and farmers down here who want it are not being given a licence to get it. We need to get this resolved. I raised it with the Minister for agriculture, Deputy Heydon, in the past. He said he is trying to work something out. The Government needs to engage with the environmental services and the Department of agriculture, as well as with our counterparts north of the Border, to get this issue resolved as quickly as possible.

Deputy Peter Burke: I am happy to raise it with the Department of agriculture and the Minister for agriculture, Deputy Heydon, to get a response for the Deputy. I am not fully appraised of the situation and, therefore, I do not want to put anything on the record that I may not be fully aware of. If it was suckler cows, I might have been able to come back to the Deputy directly. When it comes to poultry, I cannot do so, unfortunately.

Deputy Colm Burke: On Monday, the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, opened a new, 50-bed rehabilitation unit in Tower and Blarney in my constituency. A total of 30 beds are geriatric rehabilitation beds, while there are 20 neurosurgery rehabilitation beds. The whole idea behind the geriatric rehabilitation beds is that the person will be in unit for between 30 and 35 days going through rehabilitation, rather than being inside in a hospital where they would not have access to the same level of treatment. Will the Government identify sites around the

country to develop and build these rehabilitation and step-down facilities so that we can free up hospital beds? Will a programme be put in place? This is an innovative way of trying to get people out of hospitals faster. At the same time, it will ensure that, when people go home, they have gone through a full rehabilitation programme and are ready and fit to go back to their homes and get suitable support thereafter.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Burke for raising this important issue. I know he is a strong supporter of healthcare, particularly through his work on the health committee, to ensure that people of all ages get the adequate care they deserve. I will raise the concerns he has with the Minister for Health. Hopefully, we will have a capital programme. The Deputy quite rightly pointed out the saving that we have embarked upon in the acute hospital setting through capital infrastructure to support people like that. I will absolutely raise it with the Minister for Health. I know he is very much engaged with her on those key issues that affect people in their daily lives.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I again raise the issue of scramblers, e-bikes and e-scooters. We have to get a grip on the import and supply of these vehicles. We also need to have a far greater accountability from the suppliers of these vehicles, which are wreaking havoc in communities across the country. I have spoken previously of gangs of youths wearing balaclavas when driving on scramblers, etc., but they are not even wearing balaclavas anymore. They do not care and they are not afraid. They are not being pursued and are being given free reign.

From speaking with representatives of the GRA, gardaí are afraid of pursuing them for fear of disciplinary action or, worse, prosecution. Will the Government introduce a statutory indemnity protecting gardaí who pursue, within reason, scramblers? Will the Government introduce a separate professional driving licence for gardaí so they can go about their duty?

Will the Government bring in stricter measures so that we can get rid of this scourge once and for all? Grace's Law on its own is insufficient. We need a comprehensive suite of measures that includes a ban of online sales in this jurisdiction to rid us of this scourge once and for all.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for his important question. I know the Minister for justice is linked in with the Garda Commissioner in this area because adequate cover for An Garda Síochána to do the enforcement work that is necessary in this area to fulfil the requirement to ensure communities are safe has been raised. I will bring it to his attention that the Deputy raised it. I know the Minister is working on a solution with the Garda Commissioner for An Garda Síochána.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Last week, the Minister for children, Norma Foley, said that she was not familiar with the sexually explicit book *What's the T?* when asked whether it was appropriate for a recommendation by the State-funded body and promoted by Raidió Teilifís Éireann to children as young as 15. Since then, the former Minister, Charlie Flanagan, has publicly stated that he raised concerns with the Minister, Deputy Foley, in December 2023. He asked her to read that book. The question is: which is it? Is it the word of the Minister for children currently serving with the Minister for enterprise in Cabinet, or that of the former Minister, Charlie Flanagan, a member of his own party? Was the Minister, Deputy Foley, misleading the public with her knowledge of the book, or is the former Minister, Charlie

Flanagan, mistaken when he said he raised the matter directly with her in December 2023? Is the Government satisfied with the standard of transparency and candour expected of a Minister in this particular case?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy. I do not propose to engage in "He said, she said" on the floor of the Dáil because I am not-----

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: It is important.

Deputy Peter Burke: I am not aware of the debate myself in connection with-----

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: It is about transparency.

Deputy Peter Burke: I am not aware of the debate. I am not a witness to have heard what was said where and when between the two individuals the Deputy referred to. I cannot be because I was not there. He is asking me an absolutely impossible question.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Will he question the Minister?

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Sixteen-year-old Paudie Coady from Cork is living with Friedrich's ataxia, a rare and degenerative neurological condition. Last year, his younger brother, Rory, died from the same disease. Paudie's mother is also living with advanced Huntington's disease. Paudie's father, Craig, has said that he is in a race against time to secure access to Skyclarys, the first treatment shown to slow progression of this devastating illness. He has rightly stated that if there is a price tag on every child in this country, it is a sorry country to be in. The National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics said in December that it would not recommend that the HSE provided it because it was poor value for money and it was unsure, based on the available clinical evidence, of the meaningful improvements it could have. Families facing rare diseases cannot afford bureaucratic delays while conditions continue to progress. Will the Government commit to expediting the decision-making process on Skyclarys? Can the Minister give a clear timeline on when patients like Paudie will finally have access to this life-changing treatment?

Deputy Peter Burke: I cannot imagine the trauma that Paudie and his family are going through. It is a very distressing case that the Deputy has outlined, particularly on a number of fronts. I will raise it with the Minister for Health. I do not have the knowledge of the individual case to give a substantive response, but I will raise it as a priority with the Minister. I hope things get better and that approval does come.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I want to raise school places in my constituency, specifically in Portmarnock. It is two months to the day since I stood in this Chamber and requested an urgent meeting with the Minister for Education and Youth on the severe deficit of school places in Portmarnock. I have had no official response to that meeting request and I have followed up with the Department a number of times. It is not good enough. It is not what the parents and the children deserve. The parliamentary questions I have tabled are getting the same copy and

paste answer with duplication of applications being given as a reason and that this problem will work out itself, when we know that they will not. We have done the figures on the ground

I can understand why the Minister may not want to meet, but it is impossible to defend the Government's inability to deliver proper infrastructure where new homes are getting built. It just is not good enough. The Minister's colleague, a former Minister for housing, Deputy O'Brien, knows the area very well and was involved in assisting with the houses there. He is also aware of the school places issue. Will the Minister please contact the Minister for education on our behalf in order that we can provide assistance and assurance to the parents of Portmarnock that this Government is not giving up on them?

Deputy Peter Burke: I will revert to the Minister in relation to the Deputy's query. Crucially, we have seen through negotiations over the past number of weeks the very significant budget that the Department of education has right now to support families across our country and to ensure that children get the education they need and deserve. I will raise the Deputy's concerns with the Minister and ask her to revert to him directly.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.15 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 1.55 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.15 p.m. and resumed at 1.55 p.m.

Housing and Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

On 19 May this year, the Government approved the publication of the Housing and Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026. This Bill is structured in three Parts, the two substantive elements being Part 2 and Part 3, which deal with amendments to the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 around eligibility for social housing, and the second, Part 3, which introduces a number of technical amendments to the Residential Tenancies Act 2004. The publication of the Bill follows pre-legislative scrutiny by the Oireachtas committee on housing of the general scheme of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill in early 2024. I thank the committee for its work.

Part 2 inserts two new sections into the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009. The first inserts a new section 20A that puts on a statutory footing residency requirements for social housing eligibility. The second inserts a new section 20B that provides for a new statutory appeals process for decisions relating to eligibility for social housing, including those relating to residency. Both of these legislative changes are founded on the Government's objective to ensure a robust legislative framework and a consistent and standardised approach across the local authority sector to eligibility for social housing.

There is currently no provision in the housing Acts requiring residency as an eligibility criteria for social housing support. The policy and guidance on this matter are provided in Department Circular 41/2012. This Bill will put these eligibility requirements for accessing social housing supports on a statutory footing by amending the relevant provisions of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 consistent with the existing policy included in

the relevant circular. The Bill introduces clear legal requirements that all applicants must be lawfully and habitually resident in the State.

These legislative reforms are building on existing policy and procedures which, in the first instance, define social housing as a long-term housing support. Therefore, successful applicants must be in a position to demonstrate that they have a long-term entitlement to reside in the State, that is, their permission to reside here is not temporary or short term. Putting these requirements on a statutory footing ensures there is a robust statutory and regulatory framework in an area of increasing demand. Ultimately, these changes will provide legal certainty for applicants, decision makers and the courts.

The Bill inserts a new section 20A into the 2009 Act. Section 20A prescribes clearly the specific residency requirements for Irish, UK, EU-EEA and non-EU-EEA nationals. These are grounded in existing policy and current decision-making in line with existing policy. These residency requirements are also consistent with our international obligations under various directives, EU treaties and related case law.

As with existing policy, those who have applied for international protection but have yet to receive a decision; a person who has a deportation or a return order against them where the notification is in force; those with immigration permissions that do not permit them to access certain social and public services; and those on certain temporary permissions, for example, temporary protection, will not be eligible for housing support.

2 o'clock

The introduction of the new habitual residency requirement for all social housing applicants as a new eligibility criterion is consistent with the approach taken in social protection legislation and consistent with the policy objective that social housing is a long-term support. The measure will ensure social housing support recipients are resident in the State, have close links to the State, and have made Ireland their home. While demonstrating habitual residency is a new part of the application and assessment process, much, if not all, of the existing documentation required, such as proof of address, income and history of residency permission, will in most cases suffice. The introduction of the Bill is about ensuring we have a robust legislative framework, eliminating ambiguity and ensuring a statutory framework for the complex interaction of the immigration system and local authority social housing eligibility decision-making.

The Bill also provides for the appeal of social housing assessment decisions by housing authority decision makers. This builds on, but makes more robust, existing local authority arrangements in this area. The new appeal provisions will provide an independent, accessible and fair appeals service for social housing applicants in a prompt manner without the necessity to establish a new entity or body and the associated governance and related complexities this would bring. These provisions have been drafted with input and advice from the Office of the Attorney General and with the experience of the applicant and the expertise of local authorities in mind.

Part 3 of the Bill technically amends the Residential Tenancies Acts 2004 to 2026 to enhance their implementation and the outcomes thereunder, with greater efficiencies for stakeholders, including the Residential Tenancies Board and the courts. The key provisions of Part 3 include streamlining court enforcement of RTB determination orders and allowing members of An

Garda Síochána and officers of a housing authority, if required, to provide evidence in certain RTB dispute resolution cases, such as anti-social behaviour cases. They also include empowering the RTB to issue 28-day fixed payment notices for certain offences to provide the opportunity for an offender to avoid prosecution and speed up compliance with the RTA, and clearly providing for public RTB hearings in the context of adjudication, tribunal and sanctioning cases.

It is the intention of the Minister, Deputy Browne, to bring forward a number of Committee Stage amendments in relation to Part 2 of the Bill. These are technical amendments to take account of the enactment of the International Protection Act 2026 in a new section 20A, provisions on data and information sharing with the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to support implementation of residency provisions in an amendment to section 55 of the Housing Act 2014, and amendments to certain sections of the Housing Act 1988 and the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 relating to the provision of homeless services to be brought forward on Committee and Report Stages.

As a result of the considerable changes in the nature of homelessness which have occurred since the Housing Act 1988 was enacted, in July 2025 the Government approved the preparation of legislative amendments relating to the provision of homeless services by local authorities. On Committee Stage, we will bring forward a requirement for Tusla to be included as a member of each of the nine regional joint homelessness consultative fora. We will also bring Report Stage amendments on the introduction of eligibility criteria for access to homeless services, the expansion of the circumstances in which the provision of emergency accommodation can be withdrawn, and the recognition of the best interests of the child.

In line with amendments to eligibility for social housing support, lawful residency and habitual residency will be introduced as eligibility criteria for homelessness supports. The introduction of this amendment will ensure that the State is operating a harmonised and consistent approach to the provision of social entitlements in general. For a person deemed not eligible for homeless supports and services, a safety net service will allow local authorities to provide emergency accommodation to that person in strictly limited circumstances on a night-to-night basis. An amendment will also be brought forward to expand the circumstances in which local authorities can withdraw the provision of emergency accommodation.

The proposed amendments to be brought forward on Report Stage will also introduce a mechanism of appeal against decisions made by local authorities in relation to the withdrawal of the provision of emergency accommodation. They will also introduce an obligation on local authorities to have regard to the best interests of the child when emergency accommodation is being provided to a person and a child who normally resides with them and a definition of what a child is.

It is also the intention of the Minister, Deputy Browne, to bring forward a number of technical amendments to Part 3 of the Bill as it progresses through the Houses on Committee and Report Stages, including technical and consequential amendments to section 9. These will include extending the period from the date of an offence for the RTB to institute a prosecution and updating the references to the increases in the building energy rating required to qualify for an exemption from the rent increase restriction to reflect the new BER scale that came into force in May.

They will also include providing that landlords must serve a notice of rent review or notice of termination on the RTB within seven days of the date on which the notice is served on the tenant rather than on the same day on which the notice is served on the tenant. The purpose of this is to facilitate compliance as the postal service may not deliver such notices to both the RTB and the tenant on the same day. There will also be clarity that a party appealing a decision of an RTB adjudication to an RTB tribunal must state the ground or grounds for the appeal. Provision will also be made for two warning notices to issue prior to any fixed payment notice, as referred to earlier, and potentially, for related payment procedures. There will also be provision that a detached auxiliary dwelling developed in accordance with exempted development, as per forthcoming amendments to the planning and development regulations, shall not be a tenancy for the purposes of the Residential Tenancies Acts.

I will now outline the broad thrust of the Bill and I will focus specifically on the provisions. The Bill contains 50 sections. Sections 1 to 3, inclusive, contain standard provisions dealing with the short title, definitions, commencement, construction and collective citation of the Bill. Section 3 provides for the consequential repeal of sections 39A(3) and (4) of the Residential Tenancies Acts 2004 to 2026. The requirement on Residential Tenancies Board adjudicators and tribunals to have regard to any advice of the Money Advice and Budgeting Service in making determinations in relevant dispute cases will be more appropriately placed by this Bill as new sections 97(4A) and 104(8) of the Residential Tenancies Acts. Sections 4 to 6, inclusive, are technical amendments and consequential to other provisions.

Section 7 provides amendment of section 20 of the 2009 Act and allows regulations to be made for the amendment to the eligibility criteria for social housing support. Section 8, on residency requirements and social housing appeals, amends the Act of 2009 by the insertion of section 20A after section 20. Section 20A(1) provides that a household shall not be eligible for social housing support unless at the time of carrying out the social housing assessment each member of the household is lawfully resident. Section 20A(2) provides that being lawfully resident in the State does not apply to a member of a household who is a child, within the meaning of the Children Act 2001. Section 20A(3) sets out the members of a household that shall be considered lawfully resident in the State for the purposes of social housing support.

Section 20A(4) gives the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, with the consent of the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, the power to prescribe in regulations a class or classes of persons. It may include persons to whom permission as may be specified by the Minister, which is specified permission, has been given in accordance with the law of the State, to be or to remain in the State and, where considered appropriate, who have been lawfully resident for such period immediately preceding the specified permission.

Section 20A(5) outlines the matters that the Minister shall consider when prescribing a class or class of persons under subsection (4). Section 20A(6) outlines class or classes of persons that the Minister shall not prescribe under subsection (4).

Section 20A(7) provides for the five factors that the housing authority shall take into consideration when determining whether a member of a household is habitually resident in the State. Section 20A(8) provides for the conditions that apply to a person whose residency is based on the person availing of his or her right under SI 548 of 2015 European Communities (Free Movement of Persons) Regulations 2015.

They are not entitled to social housing support for a period of at least three months immediately prior to the day of application.

Section 20A(9) provides for conditions attached to persons under subsection (3)(i). Section 20A(10) provides for conditions attached to a connected family of persons under subsection (3)(1). Section 20A(11) outlines the persons that shall not be regarded as being habitually resident in the State for the purposes of social housing support and section 20A(12) contains standard provisions dealing with definitions.

Section 20B is concerned with appeal procedures. This outlines that households may appeal a determination by a housing authority that the household is not qualified for social housing support on eligibility and need criteria or a particular form of social housing support is the appropriate form of such support for that household. Section 20B(1) provides that a household may appeal a determination by the housing authority when it is determined that a household is (a) not qualified for social housing support or (b) where a household, having previously been determined as qualified for support, is no longer qualified for such support or (c) that a particular form of social housing support is the appropriate form of such support for that household. Section 20B(2) provides that an appeal does not apply to a household in receipt of social housing support. Section 20B(3) provides that a social housing appeal in relation to (a) or (b) in subsection (1) shall be on one or more of the grounds in relation to eligibility specified in subsection (4) only and that (c) in subsection (1) shall be on one or more of the grounds in relation to the classification of housing need specified in subsection (5) only. Section 20B(4) provides for the grounds on which households may appeal a decision in relation to the eligibility criteria. Section 20B(5) provides the grounds on which a household may appeal a decision in relation to the classification of household need. Section 20B(6) provides that a social housing appeal shall be made to the chief executive of the housing authority concerned within 14 days of the notification to the household concerned. Section 20B(7) provides that an appeal shall be in writing and what grounds the appeal is under. Section 20B(8) states that the household may submit such information and documents as the household considers appropriate to support the appeal. Section 20B(9) states that on receipt by a housing authority of a social housing appeal, the chief executive of that authority shall appoint an officer or employee of the authority to decide the appeal. Section 20B(10) provides that an appeals officer shall be a person who did not make the determination concerned and is in a more senior position in the authority than the person who participated in the original decision-making. Section 20B(11) states that an appeals officer shall be independent in the performance of his or her functions under this section. Section 20B(12) provides that an appeal shall be decided upon within 28 days and shall confirm the determination of the social housing appeal concerned, vary the determination, or set aside the determination and, where the appeals officer considers it appropriate, replace it with an alternative determination. Section 20B(13) provides that an appeals officer shall consider all information provided by a household, the social housing appeal and any accompanying information provided in accordance with subsection (8). Other provisions in this section relate to the decision-making period.

I am conscious of the time. I will move on to the transitional provisions in section 9 of the Bill, which aim to set out how local authorities deal with an application with the authority concerned but which has not yet determined the application; a review of an existing application from somebody already on the housing list where, immediately before the commencement of the relevant section, the authority has not yet concluded the review; and a summary under

section 21 of the Act of 2009 where, immediately before the commencement of the section, the housing authority has not yet completed the summary. Subsections (2) to (5) of section 9 provide that the housing authority may give notice in writing that an applicant is required to complete and submit a prescribed form for the purposes of demonstrating that each member of the household satisfies the new provisions in relation to legal and habitual residency. Where a form is required, the householder shall submit the form within 21 days, and the housing authority may extend the period if it considers it appropriate. Provisions in section 9(6) provide that if a person is found guilty of an offence, a fine not exceeding €2,000 may be imposed. Section 9(7) provides that an offence under subsection (6) may be prosecuted by the housing authority that gave the notice concerned.

Part 3 of the Bill, which contains sections 10 to 50, provides for technical amendments, as I outlined previously, in relation to providing greater efficiencies for all stakeholders who interact with the RTB provisions. I outlined some of those in my original contribution in relation to bringing about efficiencies, ensuring we have a fines mechanism in place, statutory timelines and ensuring that High Court orders in appeal cases can be implemented in a more efficient manner.

I certainly hope all the measures contained in the Bill will be welcomed. I worked with some Members of the House during my time on the Oireachtas joint committee. I acknowledge the significant work the committee does in relation to this. I also thank my officials, who have done extensive work in relation to this legislation over a considerable time. I commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank the Minister of State. I thank the officials from the Department of housing for the two very detailed briefings they gave us on Monday and Tuesday and for the follow-on assistance they have given us to try to get our heads around this complex legislation in a very short time.

The central proposition of this Bill is twofold. One is to take the existing eligibility rules for people to access social housing support and put them on a statutory basis, while the other is to provide an appeals mechanism for people refused social housing support, those who have that support removed or in other circumstances. We are not opposed to that proposition as it has been presented. The Minister of State will, though, expect a “but” here. There are some concerns. I think it is important that the Minister and the Minister of State listen very carefully to the concerns they are going to hear here and from others outside the Chamber. As we move through the Committee, Report and Remaining Stages, it is important that these concerns are addressed either by way of further explanation or, where required, amendment.

We were not given enough time to consider this Bill before we came here. It was published on Friday. We did get the briefings, but amendments had to be submitted yesterday and not today, which is not ideal. Therefore, I do hope that enough time will be given in what will probably be two committee sessions next week to address the concerns the Minister of State is going to hear today. These are not just our concerns. The Minister, the officials and my party have received extensive correspondence from the statutory authorities like the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC, and from legal experts, often working on the front line for those most vulnerable in our society, including the Free Legal Advice Centres, FLAC, Community Law and Mediation and the Mercy Law Resource Centre. This is in addition to

the Irish Homeless Policy Group. Its member agencies are made up of people who provide homeless services, as well as Threshold.

I urge the Minister, Deputy Browne, not just to respond to the concerns but to meet those organisations, as I understand he has been requested to do following the National Homeless Action Committee meeting this week. I refer in particular to those organisations that have the legal expertise to tease out some of the complexities of the interaction of immigration and housing law to ensure that nobody who should have an entitlement to social housing is wrongly denied it following the commencement of this legislation.

I also urge the Minister to work with us. The amendments we have all tabled have been made in good faith. Therefore, even when the technical drafting of our amendments might not meet the high standards of the Department, if the intention is right, I ask it to work with us over the next six weeks to get those corrected.

The key test for Sinn Féin throughout this process will be a simple proposition. Nobody who today has an entitlement to access social housing support, all other things being equal, should be denied access to social housing support following the passage and commencement of this Bill. Nobody who is currently in social housing support or on a county council waiting list should have that removed, all things being equal, arising from the passage of this legislation. That is the bottom line for us.

My understanding is that is the intention of this Bill and therefore we will work constructively with the Minister on it. We also need to ensure that the appeals mechanism, which I will talk to in some detail, is got right, and that the changes to the Residential Tenancies Act strengthen tenants' rights and do not undermine them.

I have a concern. We have eight pages of ministerial amendments. They were published late last night and, again, there is very little time to scrutinise them. Some of the most potentially problematic ministerial amendments have yet to be published, in particular the proposed amendments to section 10 of the Housing Act 1988 dealing with the provision of emergency accommodation. That was not included in the pre-legislative scrutiny. It has not received adequate attention from external bodies and, again, that is something we are going to need adequate time to address.

What are the principal concerns we have? The first relates to section 20A and the application of habitual residency conditions in the State to accessing social housing support. I have no issue with that at all. That is the current practice, effectively. While it is not framed in that way, people have to be legally and habitually resident in the State and, indeed, in the functional area of their local authority to access social housing support. That is not in dispute. There is, however, a lack of clarity on the text of proposed section 20A(1), whereby all members of the household have to be legally and habitually resident in the State, and on how the section interacts with sections 20A(2), 20A(3), 20A(8) and 20A(10). These are exceptionally technical. In fairness to the officials, when they gave us their detailed briefing they themselves expressed the challenge in drafting those sections. The greater the level of clarity on this fundamental question as we progress with this legislation, the better. The reason I am saying that is the core principle that you cannot have a situation where the lead applicant fulfils the conditions set out in section 20A(1), and is legally and habitually resident, while children, dependant adults or connected individuals fall foul of them. From my discussions with the

officials, that is not the intention for how those sections should interact, but greater clarity from the Minister on the record would be helpful in this regard.

We also need to ensure that the impact of the changes on very vulnerable groups is adequately dealt with. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission has made this a significant element of its correspondence with the Minister and ourselves. People fleeing domestic violence or those subject to human trafficking, for example, must be adequately dealt with, if not here or in our emergency accommodation system, then clearly somewhere else. This must not be palmed off to another Department in the hope that it will do something about it in the future.

The second area I will talk about relates to section 20B. I believe the Minister has got it wrong. An appeals mechanism is eminently sensible but the idea of having a designated individual making appeals in all 31-odd local authorities is the wrong way to do things. That is not the way it has worked for our social welfare system and, therefore, there is a very strong argument to rethink this and locate the appeals office in the Housing Agency, for a number of very simple reasons. One is to assure full independence. I am not at all suggesting that more senior officials in the council cannot, under certain circumstances, overturn the decisions of officials at grade 4 or 5, but we have an independent social welfare appeals office for a reason and that principle should translate through here too.

The second point is that the cases are going to be incredibly complex. There is not going to be a huge number but they will be at a level of complexity, as the Minister of State's officials have expressed to us, in understanding the interaction of immigration, EU freedom of movement law and housing policy. Therefore, to build up a body of expertise to ensure good-quality decisions that are made consistently, it makes more sense to have a single place where an individual or individuals can build up expertise over time. Many of us are in and out of our local authorities regularly. They have huge constraints on time, recruitment and retention in their housing sections. I suspect that if it were asked to give an honest answer, the County and City Management Association would be more than happy for the office to be located somewhere else so local authorities could get on with the job of meeting people's housing needs.

What appears to be a restriction on the provision of new information in the appeals process makes no sense. In fact, if you look at the Residential Tenancies Board and appeals to its tribunals, for example, one of the conditions of lodging an appeal is you are meant to bring new information that might have a bearing on the case, similar to social welfare appeals. It appears from my reading of the text of the legislation that new information would not be admissible. That would be a mistake. If I am wrong, it should be clarified. Therefore, I urge that this be looked at between now and Report Stage. It would not require significant textual change but we would be better for it.

The changes to the Residential Tenancies Act are broadly positive and I welcome all of those that extend tenants' rights. However, there are a couple of problems. On section 17, the slip rule should not be applicable to statutory declarations. Statutory declarations are documents of legal standing. There is an absolute obligation on the signatory and the solicitor in question to make sure they are right. There is no definition of what the criterion for a slip rule is. Is it the date? Is it the signature? Is it the name of the landlord or his or her agent? Those things

are fundamentally important to the legal integrity of a statutory declaration. This is a section we will be strongly opposing.

I urge the Minister of State to change the notice period for RTB hearings back to 28 days from the ten or 11 days in section 30. The shorter period makes no sense and does not really speed up the process. That is not the primary delay. Giving a working person, particularly a single parent with a job and child, ten or 11 days to organise childcare, get time off work, etc., presents an exceptional difficulty. We have all dealt with cases where people, in advance of a tribunal hearing date, appealed to the RTB to delay that because they had very legitimate grounds for not being able to attend. That is being denied. Therefore, people need the maximum amount of time to make the arrangements to attend hearings because, as we know, when they cannot attend it is materially detrimental to them arguing their case.

I do not understand the need for the transitional provisions. We probably did not get as much time to discuss those with the officials at the briefing because we were focusing on sections 20A and 20B. I do not understand why we cannot continue with the regime that exists and then, when the section in question is fully enacted, have the new rules apply. The reason I am saying that is because, if I take the Minister of State at his word, there is actually no change to the rules. From the current regime to the new regime, the rules stay the same. The statutory underpinning of those rules is fundamentally different but local authorities should be making the same kinds of decisions based on the same policy criteria. Why, therefore, do we need complicated transitional mechanisms? This is going to be tricky enough, and adding in a third layer of complexity makes no sense. When we go through the sections of the Bill on Committee Stage, I will invite the Minister to explain the rationale for them. If they are needed, I will be more than happy to revise my opinion, but right now I do not see any set of circumstances where they would be required.

I will to talk about a couple of areas that are not in the Bill but should be, and then I will talk about the as yet unseen Committee Stage and Report Stage amendments before making my concluding remarks. The first is the long-standing issue of a social housing passport. We all know in our constituencies that there are people whose life circumstances change when on a local authority housing waiting list or in receipt of a social housing support such as the housing assistance payment, HAP. They might get a job in another local authority area or their children might need to attend specialist education or healthcare in another local authority area. They might have entered into a new relationship. Our current system punishes those people. If somebody in Dublin who is waiting for nine years on the local authority housing waiting list, or who is in receipt of HAP or rent supplement, gets a job offer in Cork that allows them to advance their career, they have to make a decision. Do they throw away their nine years on the list in Dublin, or do they move to Cork and take their the time on the list with them, which is not allowed?

This is absolutely the correct place for this issue to be addressed. It was in Deputy Alan Kelly's housing plan, rightly, but never implemented. It was in Simon Coveney's housing plan, rightly, but never implemented. It was in the plan of former Minister for housing, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. It is not in the current programme for Government. My understanding is that it is not necessarily a case of opposition at political level but that the County and City Management Association is concerned about the level of administration involved in allowing people to move around the country. Of course, a social housing passport should set very strict

criteria if people need to move for work, education, relationship reasons or healthcare reasons. I am aware that the local authorities are working with the Department on the protocol to address this issue with respect to domestic violence, and that is positive. This would be the ideal place to deal with that fundamental inequity in our housing system. This is relevant to habitual residency because ultimately people are moving their core centre of interest. I have an amendment tabled on this. I am sure the hard-working officials in the Department could do a much better job than me between now and Report Stage. The Minister of State knows my proposal will make sense. He should please talk to his colleagues and see whether it can be accepted.

The other issue, which I am sure gets cross-party support from the Opposition and the Government, relates to returning Irish migrants, particularly those who have been abroad for very long periods of time and would find it exceptionally difficult to meet the habitual residency test on return. Think of people who have lived in London for 30 or 40 years. Perhaps they got married and had children and a home. Perhaps their life circumstances then change and they want to spend the autumn years of their lives back where they are from but their families no longer live there. They no longer work there. Their pension entitlements come from the jurisdiction in which they lived for 30 or 40 years. There are many cases where those people find it challenging to meet the habitual residency condition or the local condition as it stands. I am sure the Minister of State and the Minister would be sympathetic to making sure that is not the case. There could be a legislative amendment or guidance alongside this Bill. However, we need to ensure that the habitual residency condition, which must apply to everybody equally and cannot have exemptions or opt-outs, does not act as a barrier to Irish people returning home to spend the final decades or years of their lives where they grew up and want to spend that time.

I want to talk about section 10. I am concerned that we are not getting to see these amendments on Committee Stage next week and the week after. I appreciate there are technical drafting issues. I would, therefore, urge that we get a briefing on those amendments as soon as they are ready to be published and get adequate time on Report and Final Stages to deal with them.

The Minister of State has explained the safety net. That was one of my questions and I am happy with that. However, here is one of the challenges. I could be somebody who has an entitlement to access emergency accommodation but a local authority makes the wrong decision. I could be completely entitled under this Bill and the decision could still be wrong. Not only would I be denied access to emergency accommodation and left sleeping on the streets, but I would not have the right to appeal. I understand that the local authorities are concerned that if there is a right to appeal a refusal of accommodation, it would create a challenge about ending that emergency accommodation. However, if we have already provided a safety net for those people who do not have reckonable residency, surely we have to provide something similar. We deal with cases all the time. I had an email from a gentleman in Wexford who was denied access to emergency accommodation on the absolutely illegal grounds that he did not have an entitlement to social housing support. As officials will say if asked, there is no relationship between an entitlement to social housing support under the 2010 Act and access to emergency accommodation under the 1988 Act. There is no issue whatsoever. That is a case where an individual has been denied access to emergency accommodation where he and his two children have an entitlement to it. Under this regime, there is no right to appeal and no

safety net. That is fundamentally unfair and unjust. I appeal to the Government to reconsider that.

Correspondence from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC, and others has raised issues about vulnerable groups, particularly those who have been human trafficked, that must be addressed to our satisfaction either here or elsewhere.

The Bill is going to need significant written guidance and support for local authorities to ensure consistency of decision-making. It is also going to require close monitoring by the Department and an annual review with reporting to the Oireachtas housing committee to ensure that what the Minister is saying he wants to do - and I am taking his word in good faith - is what will happen.

We can have all the discussion we want about the rules underpinning social housing support. However, if the Government is not supplying a sufficient volume of social homes, far too many people will wait far too long. The summary of social housing needs assessment was published last week. It is an important document. It shows a marginal increase in the number of households on local authority waiting lists but also shows that gross social housing need is declining as the number of people in the housing assistance payment, HAP, scheme and the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, continues to decline. If you do an analysis of the flows in and out of the list for HAP, it would take, on the basis of the delivery of social housing, new builds, acquisitions and leasing in the past three or four years, at least 55 years to meet current and emerging social housing need, all things being equal. Whatever about the political weight we have in this Chamber, that tells us that the current delivery and the targets for the coming years, even if they are met, will not come anywhere close to reducing the length of time people are waiting. People should not be waiting nine, ten, 12, 14 years or more for social housing. That is the reality in many counties across the State. There needs to be an honest assessment by the Government based on the data provided by the Housing Agency in the summary of social housing needs assessment of how long it will take to bring down the waiting lists and to ensure that people have access to adequate homes.

The Minister for housing is on the front page of today's *Irish Examiner* saying it is all about supply. That is not the right answer. It must be the right kind of supply in the right place and at the right price to meet people's needs.

This is one of those occasions, certainly from my party's point of view, when there is not a deep division between what the Government is saying it wants to do and what we can live with. The Government needs to listen carefully to what we are saying, and to what the organisations, homeless services, legal services, NGOs and statutory bodies are saying. It needs to work with us on Committee and Report Stages to ensure that nobody who today has access to social housing support will be denied it, all things being equal, on the other side of the Bill; that the appeals mechanism is fit for purpose and makes good decisions in a consistent manner based on correct interpretation of the law; that the Residential Tenancies Act changes do not in any way undermine tenants' rights; and, crucially, ensures that nobody who has an entitlement to emergency accommodation will be denied it in the future or, worse still, is denied any meaningful opportunity to appeal a decision that could be incorrect in law and detrimental to their well-being or that of their children.

I take the Minister of State at his word that he will work with us. The proof will be in the pudding and we will see him in committee next week to put that pudding to the test.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Minister of State is probably well aware of the significant concerns of a number of rights-based organisations working directly on housing on the front line, including the statutory body, IHREC, and others. I will outline what they have highlighted as some of the significant concerns about this Bill.

I was not a Deputy during the previous Dáil term when this legislation went to the housing committee. I am looking at it from the perspective of someone who is coming new to these particular proposals. Stepping back and looking at it, I have serious questions. I asked the officials at the briefing what was the rationale for the introduction of these measures now. I would also ask what the rush is. We should give it the time it needs because there are serious concerns about it.

Is there a reason the Minister for housing is not here? Is he otherwise engaged? I would have thought, given the significance of this legislation, which makes the biggest change to homeless legislation since the enactment of the 1988 legislation, that the Minister for housing would be here to explain why he is introducing these changes, completely separate from what had gone through pre-legislative scrutiny. My deep concern is that the changes around emergency accommodation are a knee-jerk reaction to try to somehow massage the figures for emergency accommodation. If that is not the case, why introduce it? If it is going to make no material change to the numbers, why is it being introduced? It is, of course, going to have an impact. Otherwise, the Government would not be introducing it. Therefore, it is clear that the Government is introducing a significant change to access to emergency accommodation in the middle of the worst homelessness crisis in this State. It is moving to remove access to homeless accommodation. Why is it doing that? It is doing it because it wants to reduce homelessness numbers to try to take the political heat out of the issue. Even worse is the alternative, which is that the Government is pandering to a rising anti-immigrant sentiment. I have serious political concerns that that is what this Bill is about. I am concerned that it is not actually about addressing housing or homelessness but is about being seen, just like the Minister for justice, to be engaged in performative acts of hardening a stance on immigration in order to pander to what we are seeing, which is rising anti-immigrant sentiment and rising racism.

We saw the outcome of that in Belfast and we saw it in 2024 here. I have serious concern that the Government is not taking seriously the political impacts of introducing this, why it is introducing it and what messages it is sending out. This is not the start of this. The Taoiseach and the Tánaiste have been saying for months that homelessness is more complex and is linked to immigration. The Tánaiste, Deputy Simon Harris, said it himself that there are people in emergency accommodation who are not entitled to housing in this country. He said they do not have a right to housing here. Very clearly, this is being done in the context of that, to act on that to reduce the entitlements of access to emergency accommodation. What it is doing, and I will set out why, is making the most vulnerable people in this country, those who are homeless, pay for an absolute political failure to deal with a social and economic disaster of the housing crisis and homelessness. I am sure the Minister of State has seen that the organisations are calling for this to be paused. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission has written to the Minister, to the Minister of State and to the House this week asking for this to be paused. IHREC is the statutory human rights organisation in this country

that the State is supposed to be abiding by. Is the Government going to ignore it? We also have the Irish Homeless Policy Group, which sets out very clearly its concerns. Whatever the Government thinks about listening or not listening to us, this is Focus Ireland, the Simon Communities of Ireland, Threshold, and the organisations that are working on the front line of homelessness. I will set out what the Irish Homeless Policy Group has written this week. It said that along with its key concerns with the proposed Bill, we also ask that members of the committee ensure that the proposed legislation does not in any way prevent access to emergency accommodation while matters relating to residency status are being adjudicated by local authorities. This includes Irish citizen households returning from abroad in crisis. The issue of how this legislation going to impact on returning Irish emigrants has also been raised. Focus Ireland, Threshold and the Simon Community are concerned that implementing this legislation could lead to an increase in rough sleeping and households being pushed into increasingly vulnerable situations. They say it is critical that families and individuals are provided with accommodation and supports while residency status is determined.

The organisations working on the front line of homelessness are saying that this legislation could worsen homelessness. There needs to be a proper response to that to outline how this is not going to worsen homelessness. By that, we do not mean increasing numbers going into emergency accommodation. Of course, what happens if people are denied access to emergency accommodation is they are not counted as homeless. What we will see is a rise in hidden homelessness and in street homelessness - people sleeping in tents and on the streets as a result of these changes. Why would the Government do that?

The organisations also outline something that has been mentioned already and that we would support, namely, the social housing appeals board. My understanding is that the previous housing committee recommended that the appeals board would not be within local authorities but would actually be an independent board. I ask the Minister of State to take on board that it is not best practice to develop an appeals mechanism. The appeals mechanism should be done through an organisation independent from local authorities.

The Irish Homeless Policy Group and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, the Mercy Law Resource Centre all raise this issue of how these changes are going to impact on particularly vulnerable cohorts. They mention specifically victims of domestic violence and human trafficking and they highlight that the IHREC made a specific recommendation when this went through pre-legislative scrutiny. I am sure the Minister of State has that recommendation and is familiar with it but IHREC recommended that the "legislation should include exemptions from the habitual residence requirement for victims of trafficking and victims of domestic, sexual or gender-based violence." Again, I ask the Minister of State to include that as an amendment and to agree to that as a change because we cannot have a situation whereby we are introducing legislation that will mean that victims of trafficking, which we are obliged to support under international law we have signed up to, and victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence are going to be further marginalised, exposed and unsupported as a result of restricting access to social housing and emergency accommodation. It is absolutely essential that the Department and the Minister respond to that specific issue and outline how these changes are not going to result in this. IHREC also recommended that the legislation be amended to ensure that the five years' reckonable residency requirement does not apply specifically to the victims of trafficking in a manner that is contrary to the EU anti-trafficking directive.

The other recommendation was that discretion be given to local authorities to provide social housing supports to these vulnerable cohorts. I have been working for a long time in the area of housing specifically and the right to housing, and one of the issues that has come up is the 1988 Act and issues around it. Indeed, I wrote a research report specifically on it when I was in Maynooth. One of the criticisms by the likes of the Mercy Law Resource Centre, the community law centre and those working directly with people trying to access emergency accommodation was that there was no actual requirement on local authorities to provide emergency accommodation and that local authorities were constantly trying to find reasons not to provide it. People who come to my constituency office, and I am sure the Minister of State has it as well, would often say the local authority asked them if there was some couch they could sleep on or if there were parents they could go to as there was no emergency accommodation available. Local authorities would also ask about this issue of local connection and would refuse people access to emergency accommodation, or try to find ways to refuse people access to emergency accommodation, in part because they simply do not have the emergency accommodation.

The organisations also highlighted that discrimination was taking place against particular vulnerable groups, be they Travellers, Roma or migrants, by local authorities and that these organisations were constantly having to advocate. That is part of the work of the likes of the Mercy Law Resource Centre and in my own constituency, the northside community law centre, and Community Law and Mediation. They do a lot of that work trying to advocate on behalf of people to be able to access emergency accommodation. These organisations are deeply concerned that these changes are going to make it even harder for people and therefore we are going to see more people put into hidden homelessness.

The Mercy Law Resource Centre highlighted in its letter this week - as did Deputy Ó Broin - our concern, along with the concern of those organisations at the speed in which the Government is pushing this through. I asked at the outset why the rush? What is the rush about this? Why are we not taking time to go through this, given the considerations?

The Mercy Law Resource Centre and others have significant concerns that the urgency in pushing the Bill through fails to allow time to give it full consideration and to investigate any potential unintended consequences. The centre states it is striking that the Bill fails to give consideration again to the victims of trafficking who may have difficulty satisfying the new habitual residence test. Similarly, it argues that a person returning to Ireland in crisis may have difficulty proving habitual residence and that we need only look at the recent actions of immigration officials in other jurisdiction to see the impact this could have. It said those were merely two examples that jumped out to it from an initial reading of the Bill.

The centre also outlined something that needs to be answered. IHREC has asked about this as well and it was also brought up in relation to the pre-legislative scrutiny. It is that the Bill may fail to comply with EU law, especially as it relates to the requirement that all members of a household must satisfy the habitual residence requirement. There is also the issue of EU nationals who are working here and the three-month period. The Irish Homeless Policy Group highlights a concern about the rights of EU workers, who are here with their families and children, to access services within the first three months. The group outlines – and I request an answer specifically on this – that this may be a contravention of EU Regulation No. 492/2011, contrary to the European Court of Justice, and that the fundamental rights of Irish

and EU citizen children under Article 20 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union will be contravened by this Bill. This is set out in Directive 2004/38/EC, which sets out that EU worker households and their family members are specifically protected from the application of the rule that can otherwise bar access to state supports in the first three months of residence. They are also guaranteed equal treatment and non-discrimination under Articles 7 and 9. I ask that this be addressed.

Before I move to the issue of the slip rule and the Residential Tenancies Act, I again express my deep concern about the way in which this Bill has been brought forward, the discussion of it, the framing of it and the adding in of the emergency accommodation restriction. The introduction of the best interests of the child should be positive and welcome. I have consistently made the point that children are quite invisible within homeless services and in the crisis of homelessness. We do not fully count how many children go through emergency accommodation and present as homeless, and we have not fundamentally accepted the deeply damaging impact on children of spending time in emergency accommodation. The Minister of State's party, Fine Gael, as well as Fianna Fáil, have stood over this homelessness crisis. We have now been at it for over 12 years, since 2014. It is galling to hear the Tánaiste in an interview talk about the housing crisis being an "emergency" and how he is so frustrated things just are not moving. Fine Gael has been in power for 15 years and homelessness has risen year after year and then the Minister of State gets up and talks about how the Government's big move on homelessness is to restrict access to emergency accommodation. It is not right. The Government's big action should be to introduce a ban on evictions to stop people being made homeless. Its priorities are all wrong. It is playing into a dangerous politics and it is deeply disappointing to see it being brought forward in this way, and cynical as well.

I have significant concerns about the Residential Tenancies Act and the slip rule being applied to statutory declarations. This will also lead to a further increase in evictions and a reduction in the right of tenants to be to challenge illegal notices to quit. This should not be applied to statutory declarations. Similarly, the length of time required for notification of hearings is too short. Tenants need a longer period to prepare their information, book time off work and arrange childcare. It also raises the issue that it is always down to tenants to try to challenge illegal evictions and the idea that our rental systems and its tenant protections are based on tenants having to spend a huge amount of time contacting the RTB and presenting to it. What should be in place is much stronger legal protection for tenants from evictions and rent hikes, but of course the Government is unwilling to do that.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: This Bill deals with access to social housing support. I am aware the rules outlined in it are already in place in my two local authorities, Galway City Council and Galway County Council. I want to talk about the impact of the housing crisis on the people of Galway. For the majority of people trying to access social housing support in Galway, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible. If you are homeless and present for emergency accommodation, you have to be put on a waiting list because emergency accommodation in Galway is full. It has been this way for years but the Government does nothing to offer additional supports to the local authorities to deal with this crisis.

Notices to quit rose dramatically across the State in the first quarter of this year, with over 7,000 notices issued in that time. I have been told by Galway City Council it is dealing with 160 active, valid notices to quit. Many of these notices are due to the properties in question

being sold. Local authorities should be able to take advantage of this by acquiring the properties through the tenant in situ scheme, which was a crucial piece of homeless prevention before funding for it was cut. Local authorities should have more flexibility when it comes to acquisitions, not less. This would be especially appropriate in an area like Galway where the communities served by two separate local authorities are very intertwined. Councils should be able to work together to meet the housing need of people facing homelessness.

The two Galway councils are also extremely constrained when it comes to housing stock. We have seen commencements in 2025 and 2026 are on track to fall short of commencements in 2024. We need to be increasing these numbers year on year, not decreasing them. There are constraints not only on social housing stock but also on affordable private rented options, so families facing homelessness have no alternative places to rent. This is borne out in consecutive Locked Out reports, published by the Simon Community, which find again and again that there are no affordable private rented units in Galway and surrounding suburbs. It is also borne out in a recent report by a financial website. Its analysis showed Galway is the most unaffordable city in Ireland for renters when comparing average wages with average rents.

We often talk about facts, figures and statistics but there are real people behind each and every one of those figures. I want to share some of these stories with the Minister of State. A woman I have met, whose story was published today by RTÉ, has been homeless with her two sons for two years. She initially struggled to access emergency accommodation due to the pressure on homeless services in Galway. She is now living in one room with her sons, and her oldest child is having a really difficult time, like any child in emergency accommodation would. He is now also struggling with night terrors, a condition his mother has advised runs in her family. The boy has been referred to consultants who have signed off on the council's medical form, advising that he needs his own bedroom for his own health and the well-being of his brother. His mother is now struggling to get this medical advice accepted. I have met other individuals who are homeless and have serious health concerns, which mean emergency accommodation is not a suitable option for them. The only other option the council can offer them at this point is either to stay in overcrowded accommodation with friends and families or to self-fund a hotel or bed and breakfast accommodation. If you cannot afford the rents in Galway, you certainly cannot afford a room in a bed and breakfast until suitable housing can be offered. Local authorities have to have more options available to them beyond the one-size-fits-all emergency accommodation, so they can also support those medically vulnerable people.

3 o'clock

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Government narrative on this Bill is that it is largely a technical Bill that is going to put on a statutory footing what is already the practice in terms of eligibility criteria on residency and habitual residency for social housing. It is just technical and it is a tidying-up exercise, providing a little bit more efficiency for decisions of the RTB in the second instance. There is nothing to see here and nothing to be concerned about.

That begs the question: why we are doing it? What is the rationale for this? As has been asked, why is the Minister doing it if we are not really doing much anyway, and why is there such a big rush to do it? That begs pretty serious questions. I have to ask that question in the context of what has happened up in the North this week because, sadly, I am afraid these things have become connected. We have a horrific attack taking place in Belfast, which should be

utterly condemned. The perpetrator of that attack should be brought to justice. People are rightly horrified by what happened. Of course, our sympathy goes out to the victim of this terrible attack, but we have also seen how it has then resulted in horrific attacks on people who happen to be immigrants and people of colour in the North. Houses are being burnt out and vile, vicious racist attacks are taking place against people purely on the basis that they are deemed to be immigrants or people of colour who had nothing whatsoever to do with the attack. Horrific things happen all the time. As a lot of people have been highlighting, in the North we have horrific instances of violence against women where they are killed as a result of domestic violence. We have horrific instances of organised crime in this country where people are chopped up by criminals and so on. There is revulsion and horror but it does not generally lead to attacks on people who have nothing to do with that, and generalisations, but in the context of the North, it has fuelled racist pogroms against people of colour and migrants because the alleged perpetrator of that horrific assault was an immigrant. Certain political forces on the far right, who also coincidentally tend to be supporters of the Israeli regime, which I will just throw that in for good measure, who seem to get a lot of support online from the United States and Britain and so on for their targeting of immigrants and for whipping up hatred, fear and hostility and horrific, violent pogroms against immigrants. There is support from really vile political forces on the far right from those countries.

How is that all connected to what we are discussing here? We have got to stand up against that. The Government, and political forces that have any sense of decency, should not in any way lean into narratives that suggest that because someone is an immigrant or a person of colour, somehow he or she is a threat or something to be feared or that he or she is a problem for our society. We must not in any way lean into a narrative that can lead to that sort of stuff. That is what the Government is doing. It is leaning into that stuff because the truth is we have a shortage of housing and a catastrophic housing crisis not because of immigrants coming into this country, but because of a Government that has failed for more than a decade to address the housing crisis and to deliver the social and affordable housing necessary to address it and to deal with the homelessness crisis that continues to escalate. The Government has leant into the narrative that somehow it is because there are too many people rather than it has not provided enough social and affordable housing or it has failed to take measures that would prevent people ending up homeless. That leads into the racist narrative being pushed by the far right, which ends in the sort of stuff we have seen in the past few weeks.

There seems to be no apparent rationale for this because this is about rationing access to something there should not be a shortage of. That is essentially what this Bill is about. There should not be a shortage of housing. There should not be a shortage of social and affordable housing. There should not be homelessness, yet what this Bill is about is about rationing access to something that there should not be a shortage of because it should be a basic right. Of course, it is a handy way to deflect from the Government's own responsibility. The oldest trick in the book and in politics generally is, "Watch what my right hand is doing so you don't see what my left hand is doing." This week I tried to highlight the fact that Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown is selling off land zoned for 1,000 homes on publicly owned land to private developers. Nobody is talking about that. It is an absolute scandal. On a site that is publicly owned, where we should have 100% social and affordable housing, we are only going to get 20% social and affordable housing because the Government has decided to sell it off and somebody is going to profiteer from it. That is why we have a housing crisis. The Government is looking after

people who are profiteering from the inadequate supply of the most basic thing in the world - an affordable, secure roof over one's head. Even in this Bill, it is doing things to benefit landlords and to make it ever so slightly easier, for example, to evict people. Technical problems with termination notices will not longer be a reason to stop an eviction. It will be just a little easier for landlords to evict people when they should not be allowed to evict people at all in the midst of a homelessness crisis.

The Government claims that nobody is going to be excluded from social housing eligibility who was previously eligible for it but, in actuality, as multiple organisations, including Mercy Law, IHREC and so on, are saying, the Bill may well result in that. In any event, there is a performative element to it because what it is saying is there is a problem we need to tighten up on here, suggesting that people who are not eligible and do not have a right to social housing might be getting it, so we have to tighten it up. That certainly is not happening. Asylum seekers are not being housed in social housing. It is not happening but there is an implication that maybe it is and therefore we have to tighten it up. The consequence may be that vulnerable people will be excluded from emergency accommodation or even potentially from eligibility for social housing because one person in the household does not quite meet the criteria, even though everybody else has met the criteria such as children, including vulnerable children, people who are victims of human trafficking and so on may be deemed ineligible. As I understand it, the Government is going to table amendments on the next Stage, which could mean the eligibility thresholds required for social housing could then be applied to access to emergency accommodation. Where are the people who are deemed ineligible or cannot gain access to emergency accommodation going to go? They are going to end up on the streets homeless. The Government has achieved a performative act of pointing the finger at them, setting them up as somehow a problem that has to be managed, fuelling and giving ground and concessions to the sort of people who are engaging in pogroms in the North at the moment.

To be honest, that is what I think the Government is up to here. I do not really see, other than that, the reasons for this legislation. I am deeply concerned about what the Government is doing.

We will have more detailed questions on Committee Stage about all of this. The Minister of State did not even accept many of the recommendations put forward by the joint committee on how this legislation should be processed, which begs serious questions about what the real agenda behind it is.

Deputy Brian Stanley: The question with this Bill, as with previous ones, is: will it help families, particularly low-and-middle income families, to access affordable and secure accommodation? I have particularly in mind those in private rented accommodation. The concern is that the Minister of State is bringing in further measures and amendments to what was brought in in March. That was one of the most far-reaching Bills relating to tenants and renters in this country because the Minister threw them completely at the mercy of free market speculation. That was a recipe for disaster. Let us look across at America and other countries, where unbridled free-marketeering is the order of the day.

What I am hearing from some parts of the country and from my own constituency, Laois, is that those changes have been piled on. I am seeing it with the number of people coming into my constituency office. Since November-December of last year and right up to yesterday, the

effects of those changes have been seen by us at local level. It is piling huge pressure on households and individuals renting.

There is a case on the street where I have my office where more than half the income of a household is going on rent. That is not sustainable. We cannot do that. That is the result of what is happening here, in this legislation and previous legislation that the Minister brought in. The notices to quit continue to spiral. Rents in new tenancies have not just hit the roof but gone out through it.

In particular, a cap needs to be reimposed in section 8. I will table an amendment to that effect. Most of us were critical of the rent pressure zones. We would have liked them to be stronger and there are ways out of it, but they provided some cooling effect in the municipal districts where they applied. The evidence of that is that when the Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael Government removed them, we could see what happened. The evidence is there in the rent reports of Daft.ie. Looking at the Residential Tenancies Board figures, everything shows. It is not only us telling the Minister; the hard data tells him this.

I told the Minister about the increases in Laois. The average increase for a two-bedroom house or apartment has risen by 34% in the space of one year. Now there is nothing else that I know of that has gone up 34%. That is like something that would happen in a banana republic but that happened in County Laois. Nobody is disputing it because it can be seen in the hard data. Three-bedroom new lets cost over €2,000 a month. It is the law of the jungle. Nothing less than that is what has happened. It is Trumpian-style politics and that is regrettable. I recognise that some small landlords are being fair enough about it. In a lot of cases, they have tried to not be too penal about it.

On top of all that then, in recent times the Minister has lowered the standards and for apartments and the size, including the sizes of windows. The last time window sizes were reduced was under British rule because one of the issues on which the rent was based was the amount of light going into the little cabins that people lived in. Here we are now with 36 sq. m apartments and the Minister has limited the light going into them. Not alone has he limited space, he has limited the light. Then the developers building apartments, including those who had started, got a tax break. To cap it all, the Minister is bringing in this measure on rent so you have tenants competing against each other for somewhere to live. That is what is being played. It is like an auction and some landlords are using that.

In all of this, the context is always important. I am raising this with the Minister of State because I am hearing this from constituents day in, day out. All of this is happening at a time the cost of living is going up. There is no disputing it, with increases in the cost of electricity, fuel, groceries and transport. The coming winter will be very difficult. We are in June now, but renters and a lot of people who have mortgages are struggling badly at present.

The message I want to convey to the Minister of State is the human cost to all this. There is a human cost in terms of stress. There is a human cost in terms of mental health. There is a human cost in terms of conflict within families over it. Health is affected, relationships are breaking down and, of course, there is poverty. He will have seen the figures for child poverty earlier in the week. That is not good enough in one of the richest states in the world.

As always, I am not arguing for willy-nilly measures to be brought in. What I am trying to get across to the Minister of State is that the cumulative effect of the measures the Minister has

taken over recent times has reduced standards, that landlords, and particularly big landlords and developers, have benefited, and that the Minister has piled further pressure to people who are already struggling. That is not good enough. We do not need to be doing this. There was another road to take with this.

The impact of the measures being imposed by the Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael Government should be assessed. We should let it run maybe to the six-month point, and the effect of this on people and on housing should be assessed at that stage in September or October. It should be examined in the cold light of day. I urge the Government to do that.

The Minister may have disputed what we were saying to him in January, February and March but we were seeing what was happening on the ground. Let us see the effects of this in six months and see what is happening.

I am asking the Minister of State to use this Bill. He has introduced a pile of amendments. I ask him to go back and look at this and to try to put some cooling effect on the spiralling cost of private rented accommodation.

None of this will do anything for low-and-middle income households who are really under pressure. We should not be doing this to people. This is not fair. What has happened is not fair and everybody here in this House, if they look at the evidence, will recognise that. That is not the type of society that we should be trying to live in.

Of course, we need more housing. The measures the Minister of State brought in will not provide more housing. They are providing more hardship. That is what they are doing and that is not good enough.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: I welcome the Bill. As Chair of the housing committee, I am disappointed that some of the cross-party recommendations that were put forward by the committee have not been included in the Bill.

The Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2026, which came in on 1 March of this year and which I supported, is about giving certainty to tenancies but it is also about creating an environment where we will see further investment in the market to try to unlock all those tens of thousands of planning permissions for apartments that have not been built and ultimately provide new housing units.

Deputy Stanley made a point with regard to that Bill. This is something I have said publicly as Chair of the committee as well. As a committee we will be looking at the Act after 12 months. I have always believed this will take a number of months to settle but in the long term, it is the right thing to do. As a committee, we will be looking at the effects of it and the figures after 12 months.

The Bill is about creating statutory arrangements for residential requirements, eligibility for social housing and including a new habitual residency requirement. There is also a number of other technical amendments. These legislative reforms build on the existing policy and procedures that define social housing as a long-term housing support.

The legislation sets out residents' requirements for Irish, UK, EU, EEA and non-EU-EEA applicants. It also adds a new requirement that applicants be habitually resident in the State.

The addition of that requirement is consistent with the approach taken by social protection legislation. It is considered appropriate to ensure social housing support recipients are, in fact, resident in the State. We discussed with Department officials the need for a provision, which was included in previous programmes for Government, to ensure this requirement does not mean returning Irish emigrants are at a disadvantage. People who hold Irish passports, if they have gone abroad for work purposes or whatever it might be, are still Irish citizens when they return to this country and should be entitled to the same rights as those who remain here.

The Bill puts in place a new statutory appeals mechanism in respect of local authority decisions relating to housing eligibility and assessment in general. Detailed provisions are set out in regard to this mechanism, stipulating that each local authority will appoint an appeals officer to decide on cases and ensure they are fully independent. It is important that these appeals officers are based within every local authority rather than at a national level.

There is a streamlining of enforcement of RTB determination orders through the courts, allowing Garda members and housing authority officials, if required, to give evidence in RTB cases. The RTB is empowered to issue 28-day fixed payment notices for certain offences, to hold hearings in the context of an adjudication tribunal and to sanction cases to be held in public. This is about giving more certainty for both tenants and landlords.

An issue that is not dealt with in the legislation is where a person from my county of Longford, for example, who moved to Dublin and was on a housing list there for X number of years without being allocated a house now wants to move back to Longford. The period in which people are on a housing list in another county should be taken into account when they move back to their home county. Will the Minister of State ask his officials to look at that issue? It is only right that people who return to their home county having not been made a housing offer in the county where they had been living should not go back to day one. The length of time they were on the housing list in the other county should be taken into account.

The legislation introduces requirements on landlords in respect of the RTB. The State, through our local authorities, is a landlord with a large number of tenancies. If we are putting in place strict requirements for private landlords, the State must likewise ensure it provides housing that is to a proper standard, including safety standard, for local authority tenants. Committee colleagues and I visited the Oliver Bond flats this morning to meet with residents. I ask that their situation be looked at again. The proposals put forward by Dublin City Council, which is the local housing authority, should be reviewed in terms of what is right for the residents. It is about building communities and homes for families, not units. Going out and seeing what is being proposed locally is the right thing to do. It is incumbent on the Government and the Department to put strong measures in place to support families in the same way we ask landlords to support their tenants.

I fully support the Bill. It is the right measure to create certainty for tenants into the future. It will bring in investment. I ask that consideration be given to ensuring returning Irish emigrants have certainty that they will have entitlement straight away and not have to prove it. If people are Irish citizens, they should not have to do anything else at all to secure that entitlement. I also ask that where people spend time on a housing list in another county and then return to their home county, the time spent on the list is carried forward with them. I refer only to the particular circumstance where someone is returning to his or her home county.

Deputy Duncan Smith: It is long overdue for the Government to enact some changes to ensure that the implementation and enforcement of relevant Department circulars is put on a statutory footing. In doing so, the Bill takes some steps that are tentatively welcome but significant concerns remain that the legislation may make it increasingly difficult for those who should be entitled to access social housing to do so by increasing and complicating the criteria they have to meet. The Bill suggests an unreality in which the existing situation is in any way easy. It already is a complication and an absolute ordeal for many families just to get onto the list, never mind the journey towards getting an allocation. Individuals in our society who urgently require the support of public housing and emergency accommodation must have clearer pathways to accessing those rights. They must not be presented with further hurdles and complications. The Minister has assured us the Bill will not have such an impact on those requiring public housing but significant concern remains about what its ultimate outcome will be.

A critical element of concern is the requirement that the habitual residency condition apply to every member of a household applying for social housing. Any of us who deal with social housing applicants know very many applicants will fall foul of this new rule and that it has been designed for just that reason. The habitual residency condition should only apply to one member of a household, not the entire household. The new rule is designed to ensure many households will not have access to public housing.

An area that demands significant attention and modification is the ability of individuals to move between different local authorities without losing the social housing status they have obtained. A proposal to that effect, introduced in the Social Housing Passport Bill 2026, would have allowed individuals experiencing a variety of different problems and needs to transfer their status to their new local authority. Under current law, if individuals need to relocate to another area, they must reapply and, in effect, start from scratch. Many of us have asked colleagues in other constituencies to make representations to housing officials on behalf of families who are forced to move from our constituency - in my case, Dublin Fingal - to the colleague's constituency, whether that be in south Kildare, Meath, Louth or elsewhere, because of unemployment or inability to access private rental accommodation. Those people need to build lives, get their children into schools, etc., but could face losing the six, seven, eight, nine or ten years they have spent on the previous local authority housing list. That should not be allowed to happen.

Another concerning element of the Bill is the application of a slip rule to all documentation that accompanies a notice of termination, including other relevant or similar statutory declarations. It is of the utmost importance that the handling of infractions of the magnitude of ending an individual's tenancy is done with clarity. Changing or altering contracts or documents without the proper procedure and at a moment's notice leaves room for significant harm. By allowing corrections to statutory documents and declarations in this manner, we are putting at risk the due process that protects tenants and other individuals involved. It is deeply important that should errors arise, whether clerical in nature or otherwise, they are handled and resolved in a manner that allows for the traditional due process for corrections.

There is concern about the rigour of the new independent appeals process set out in the Bill. As recommended in the 2024 pre-legislative scrutiny report, this should be entirely independent of local authorities. Although the Bill establishes a formal independent statutory appeals

process, it does not provide for its operation through a central body rather than through the proposed dedicated appeals officers. Anything but a central body would result in significant deficiencies and be incapable of meeting the gravity of these problems. The use of a central body for decision-making would allow expertise and institutional knowledge to accumulate over time, with the ultimate goal of a holistic and consistent system. These processes must go further in order to ensure the development of an appeals system that works for the benefit of the individuals who are in great need of help.

Additionally, the introduction of this Bill has sparked deep, wide-reaching concerns among numerous human rights groups and other related charities and organisations, as it could restrict critical access to many programmes, such as emergency homelessness services and highly sought-after social housing for society's most vulnerable and at-risk groups. We must not ignore these calls for help. The core of these issues arises from the proposed right to reside and habitual residence conditions as prerequisites to receive public housing. Various front-line groups have cautioned that these measures risk the exclusion of at-risk individuals from the basic emergency shelter they so desperately need. This would effectively create a direct and purposeful pipeline to more homelessness and individuals on the street without proper accommodation.

On homelessness, this Bill would greatly restrict access to social housing that so many individuals require. In the Bill as drafted, there exists no critical provisions for emergency accommodation as recommended by the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage. It is of critical importance that we enable those in urgent need to acquire the social housing they so desperately seek. The focus of the Department of housing should be on taking effective action to meet these problems head on. It is of the utmost importance that this Government supports those in critical need, rather than imposing more restrictive access on individuals with such great needs, which this Bill would ultimately do. The issue of quality, affordable and easy to access housing remains a critical concern for many individuals in society. The damage this Government is doing with its housing policy is crippling communities. These are communities that have struggled, survived and thrived at various times over the years, but are now facing great harm from this Government.

I will return to the issue of the Oliver Bond flats, an area that is very close to my heart. I spent an awful lot of time growing up there. I would not be here without Oliver Bond. It gave my nana and grandad a home when they needed one, and my dad and his siblings grew up there. There are five generations of people living in Oliver Bond who have, through all those generations, worked to ensure it has thrived and have created a wonderful, warm community. It has received regeneration in the past which has benefited the flats. I met Gayle Cullen Doyle a couple of weeks ago in Oliver Bond, and she spoke about the regeneration of the late 1980s and early 1990s. I remember the physical regeneration at the time. I remember the double-glazed windows, central heating and showers going in. Oliver Bond survived for 50 years without basic showering, central heating and all these things we take for granted in the modern day. Along with that, which I did not notice at the time as I was too young, investment and resources went in, with diversion programmes, drug addiction resources and health resources. That all went in at the time. Gayle will tell you - she has told anyone who has visited - that this was a big improvement. It helped turn around the difficulties of the 1980s in terms of the drug epidemic, which I have vivid memories of from that period in my mind's eye.

However, that investment stopped and has stopped for the past 20 years. Now, Oliver Bond receives attention through the media for poor living quality and poor health outcomes. What does this Government and the Department do? It turns its back on the plan of investment for Oliver Bond to ensure that the next five generations of families can live there because, ultimately, the bottom line is they will lose 28 units in an overall regeneration. Instead of talking about units, the Government should be talking about homes. Oliver Bond and other flat complexes that remain in Dublin city are the beating heart and the last vestige of a living city, such has been the hollowing out of the city for people to be able to live there. If we continue to hollow out Oliver Bond, Pearse House, Markievicz House and others, we will push families further out of Dublin city and hollow it out. Oliver Bond should not be one-bedroom apartments and studios. It should be one-bedroom, studio, two-bedroom and three-bedroom homes. The whole panoply of community should be allowed to live there for the next 90 years and beyond. It should not be about the bottom line all the time.

We need more housing; we need copious amounts of it. We need thousands more one-, two-, three- and four-bedroom homes all over the country. A reduction of 28 units would have to be accounted for, but when it will deliver overall more family homes for a community that has been in Dublin for 90 years, and needs to be there for another 90 years and beyond, Dublin City Council will need to swallow that. Those in opposition who are housing spokespeople and interested in this issue will understand that when it comes to regeneration projects because we know the complexities of it. Unfortunately, it seems those complexities are lost on the Department of housing. I am hoping that in the decision made in four to five weeks' time we will see common sense prevail, and that we will see a future not only for Oliver Bond but for other local authority complexes throughout Dublin city.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill this afternoon. An Teachta Ó Broin has outlined in detail the Sinn Féin position on this legislation. I will say one thing, and this is more of a general point than a specific one, that at this early stage in the legislative process, the tabling of pages and pages of ministerial amendments is a little bit concerning. That is no disrespect to the people who put the work into drafting them, but it indicates a little bit of confusion, chaos and unpreparedness - I do not know what word you would use - on behalf of the Government.

The issue of housing is so important and it is very important we get it right. However, this is not the only legislation relating to housing where a Bill has been published and then almost immediately we have got a raft of ministerial amendments. It is very sloppy and speaks to a Government that is effectively disinterested in the legislative process. It is also disrespectful to those spokespersons who want to engage with the legislation and the amendments. At this stage, there should not be pages and pages of ministerial amendments to this legislation. Best practice would say that work should be done before publication but, again, there was a rush to publish for reasons that are not clear to me. However, the Minister of State will have an opportunity in his concluding remarks to answer that.

I ask myself a very simple question when I consider any legislation relating to housing. Will it help my constituents who are homeless, who are in emergency accommodation and who need stable, secure and affordable accommodation? For as long as I have been here, I have yet to see any legislation, aside from the Covid eviction ban, coming from Government that helps my constituents. In fact, in the ten years since I was elected, governments led by Fianna Fáil and

Fine Gael - taking turns - have made the housing and homelessness crisis much worse. One very effective measure we have to gauge how effective Government policy is are the lists it publishes every month with the number of homeless people. That in itself is very worrying. I have said before that it is not normal to publish a list of people who are homeless every single month. That certainly did not happen when I was growing up. I know the Government would love for us to normalise that level of homelessness, but we will not.

I will ask a question of the Minister of State, who will have a chance in his remarks to address this. I will give him an example. There is a family living in my constituency - a mam, a dad and a son. They live in Balbriggan and the parents are both working locally. They are in private rental accommodation, have a notice to quit and are due out in September. I am working with them, and they have replied to hundreds of accommodation adverts at this stage, but they have nowhere to live. September will come fast. The Minister of State knows it himself. You think it is going to take ages but it does not; it goes in a flash.

This family is faced with the prospect of having to go into emergency accommodation but the dad, in this instance, is gravely ill and undergoing medical treatment for cancer. He is getting chemotherapy at the moment. His doctor asks about his housing situation every time he goes in to see him because of the level of stress it causes him. He asks, "Where are you going to be?" because he has embarked on a treatment schedule that is going to take months. They have come to me - no other TD has an office in my area - and asked what emergency accommodation is like. The Minister of State knows it is not nice. He would not like to live in it and neither would I, but that is where they are heading. He cannot go there because of his medical condition, yet I cannot answer where they are supposed to go. The Minister of State might answer that for them in his remarks.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: It is good that we are discussing housing, albeit a miscellaneous provisions Bill. I have not seen the Minister's amendments, even at this stage. We dealt with another miscellaneous Bill last night on justice and, at the last minute, we were dealing with a large volume of amendments which were not relevant to the original purpose of the Bill.

They were related to justice all right and they were miscellaneous but that was not what the Bill was. Hopefully, the amendments that have been tabled will address some of the issues I have.

One of the issues that we are dealing with in this State is basically that the State is totally dependent on private landlords and, in many cases, vulture funds to deal with housing issues. Yet we are here. Maybe it is about standardising the eligibility criteria. I never noticed that there was a problem in Dublin City Council, which is the local authority I mainly deal with. I think local authorities understood who was eligible and who was not across the board. Maybe we need a standardisation across the whole country to ensure similar processes and approaches to what we had in Dublin City Council with the points system and a scheme of lettings. There is a new scheme of lettings, which is another change only voted on last night and even that did not address all of the issues.

There are little peculiarities in Dublin City Council. Even in Dublin someone is allowed to be on three lists at the same time - three of the council lists because there are four local authorities in Dublin. The problem now is that many of those who end up homeless and then

end up in hot properties who are from Dublin are ending up in Kildare, Wicklow or somewhere else, but they are not allowed to be on the Dublin City Council housing list any more because their focus of interest, according to the council, is elsewhere. You have to fight each case. Maybe there is a need for a single list for the whole country. It needs to be thought about even though there may be problems with it, such as taking away some of the powers of the local authority.

We need to ensure the model works. Others have highlighted the Vienna model which addresses the thresholds, which are absolutely meaningless in this city. There are couples who are working and once two adults in a house work they are basically nearly over the threshold at this stage. If they are not, they are getting penalised in Dublin City Council because they have just increased the rents to screw them, despite the fact that they are not getting a property that would stand up to the standards set by legislation for private landlords. There is a problem. If the price of housing keeps going up at the rate it is going, it means more and more people become dependent on social housing or housing supports, mainly HAP but also RAS. A third of the private tenancies in this country are now subsidised by the State which is absolutely crazy.

It is crazy that the State is now beholden to private landlordism. We should have gone away from that. We had moved away from it even when there was no funding there. When there was no money, there was availability of social housing. The lack of investment and the lack of building have forced us into a place where couples and families who are trying to buy are now competing against the private sector, the vulture funds or even just small-time capitalists who want the property because they know it will pay for itself through their mortgage. They are sometimes fighting against the local authority as well which causes its own problems. I could go into a whole list of problems in terms of the estate agents and how they are gaming the system at this stage and trying to drive up prices. That might be something that the Government could look at. If you want miscellaneous provisions, there is a whole area there that could regulate that market a lot better and stop them driving up the prices as well.

Debate adjourned.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

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

Deputy Ged Nash - To discuss the recent fish kill on the River Glyde, County Louth.

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss religious instruction opt-out compliance in school admissions policies.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the need for social and affordable housing in Arklow, County Wicklow.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the school summer programme.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the progress of proposed school extension works at Cóláiste an Phiarsaigh, Glanmire, Cork.

Deputy Daniel Ennis - To discuss a full independent public inquiry into the death of Terence Wheelock.

Deputies Tom Brabazon, Naoise Ó Muirí, Cian O'Callaghan, Barry Heneghan, Denise Mitchell - To discuss the loss of staff at St. Francis Junior School in Priorswood in the context of its new DEIS-plus status.

The matters raised by Deputies Ged Nash, Pádraig O'Sullivan, Louise O'Reilly, Tom Brabazon, Naoise Ó Muirí, Cian O'Callaghan, Barry Heneghan, Denise Mitchell and Malcolm Byrne have been selected for discussion

Housing and Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026: Second Stage (Resumed)

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

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I thank all the Members for their contributions during the Second Stage debate. Some concerns were raised and there was some support for the provisions within the Bill. I hope some of that can be addressed on Committee Stage.

I was here when Deputy O'Reilly raised the issue of the terrible situation her constituent finds himself in. As she knows, the Minister cannot get involved in individual cases but I wish that gentleman the best of luck in his treatment and recovery. It should be the case that our emergency accommodation provision is fit for purpose, is comfortable and is a safe place. If that is not the case, I urge the Deputy to bring it to our attention if there is a particular emergency accommodation she has concerns about because that should not be the case.

In relation to the social housing provisions and residency requirements, these legislative reforms are building on existing policy and procedures which, in the first instance, define social housing as a long-term housing support and therefore successful applicants must be in a position to demonstrate that they have a long-term right to reside in the State, that is, their permission to reside here is not temporary or short term. These statutory provisions are founded on the Government's objective to ensure a robust legislative framework and a consistent and standardised approach across the local authority sector to eligibility for social housing.

There is currently no provision in the housing Acts requiring residency as an eligibility criterion for social housing support. The policy and guidance on this matter are provided in a 2012 Department circular. There is strong advice that operating such a significant decision framework in the absence of a statutory structure brings risks to the State. The Government is moving to manage that risk and ensure transparency and clarity for applicants and decision makers.

I understand that the pre-legislative scrutiny process, the Oireachtas joint committee report and engagement and input from the IHREC were an important benefit to the drafting of the provisions, since the general scheme was published in January 2024. This is a complex area

of law, social housing and immigration policy, with a significant quantity of international and European law and case law needing to be considered. The advices and support of officials in the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration and the Attorney General's office have been important throughout, and the Government is satisfied that the Bill as drafted is fit for purpose.

A number of meaningful policy and legislative changes have been initiated in this area since the general scheme was drafted. These include the enactment of the International Protection Act 2026 and plans for the ending of temporary protection. The Department, in consultation with the Department of justice, has worked to ensure the Bill aligns with existing social housing policy and is robust but flexible, allowing the Minister to respond to the practical realities of the immigration and permissions system where the Minister for justice has powers to grant permissions and stamps, and set conditions which can change over time.

The introduction of the new habitual residency requirement for all social housing applicants as a new eligibility criterion is consistent with the approach taken in social protection legislation. The measure will ensure social housing support recipients are resident in the State, have close links to the State and have made Ireland their home. This habitual residence requirement is a question of fact, which seeks to ascertain whether the household member has established his or her centre of interest in the State by examining family connections, length of stay, employment history, etc.

However, this habitual residency requirement will not be onerous for those already assessed for social housing, on the waiting list and potentially being reassessed, as is normal practice over time under existing legislation, given that they are likely to already have been present in the State for a significant period of time. Very little additional information will be required as part of the application process for social housing. Much, if not all, of the existing documentation required, such as proof of address, income and history of residency permission, will in most cases suffice. The new requirement does not impact those already in receipt of social housing support, for example, or on HAP or in local authority or AHB dwellings, on the basis that they have moved past the eligibility process and their housing need is met.

In relation to the appeals mechanism, the Government is committed to the necessity for independence and fair process in the administration of these decisions. Again, the provisions have been the subject of detailed advices from the Attorney General to ensure that they are robust and meet a high bar of independent and transparent process.

The administration of the appeals mechanism remains within the local authority sector but it continues to be the case that applicants unhappy with the outcome of an appeal can make a case to the Ombudsman. The timelines for both applicants and appeal officers were developed following consultation with the local authority sector and drawing from existing experience of appeals and review processes already in place. On that basis, these timelines have been deemed to be sufficient and fair.

Notwithstanding that local authorities are already operating residency eligibility requirements for social housing on a non-statutory basis, important preparatory work is under way with the assistance of the Housing Agency to build a suite of information and training resources. New application forms and related public information are being developed to assist applicants with the process of both applying for social housing and making an appeal.

Similarly, in the case of the new appeals mechanism, the Department and the Housing Agency will work closely to ensure a standardised approach to the implementation of the new provisions. Ongoing monitoring of the volume of appeals, and outcomes of the appeals, will be important to ensure that greater understanding can be brought to how decision-making can be improved in the interest of applicants.

The programme for Government 2025, *Securing Ireland's Future*, commits to protect renters and landlords from abusive practices by enhancing the enforcement powers of the Residential Tenancies Board, RTB. The Government's action plan on housing supply and targeting homelessness, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities*, similarly commits to strengthening the RTB's organisational capacity, processes and performance to ensure that its business and resourcing needs are optimised. These processes are important in the light of the updated regulatory and legislative framework being introduced through this Bill to better serve the rental sector.

It is important for both landlords and tenants that disputes are resolved as early as possible, and that parties to the dispute consider the process transparent and reflective of our rental law. The Government has provided increased levels of funding to the RTB, which will support improved dispute resolution and enforcement activities to minimise dispute resolution timelines and ensure effective outcomes for both landlords and tenants.

Part 3 of the Bill provides for technical amendments to the residential tenancies Acts 2004 to 2026 to enhance its implementation and the outcomes thereunder, with greater efficiencies for stakeholders, including the Residential Tenancies Board and the courts. The vast majority of the amendments were included in the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) (No. 3) Bill 2024, as initiated in Dáil Éireann on 24 July 2024. However, they lapsed with the dissolution of the Dáil on 8 November 2024. Many amendments were also included in the general scheme of the residential tenancies (amendment) (No. 2) Bill, approved by the Government on 14 October 2025. The amendments to sections 9, 137, 137A and 138 are additional and are required in order to increase the penalties that apply for offences under the residential tenancies Acts, clarify the RTB powers to charge late registration fees to approved housing bodies and increase registration fees in line with inflation.

The key provisions of Part 3 of the Bill aim to streamline the court enforcement of RTB determination orders; allow members of An Garda Síochána and officers of a housing authority, if required, to provide evidence in certain RTB dispute resolution cases, such as where antisocial behaviour arises or there is danger posed to a dwelling; empower the RTB to issue 28-day fixed payment notices for certain offences to provide the opportunity for the offender to avoid prosecution and to speed up compliance with the residential tenancies Acts; and clearly provide for public RTB hearings in the context of adjudication, tribunal and sanctioning cases. These reforms to how we regulate the sector will be critical as our rental sector continues to grow into the future.

The Irish rental market grew in quarter 1 of 2026, with registered private and cost-rental tenancies increasing by 2.4% year on year to 246,477, the highest level since the data series began. The RTB also received 16,548 new tenancy registrations for quarter 1 of 2026. The number of private landlords rose by 1.3% annually to 105,847, indicating increased participation in the rental market. While the notice of termination figures increased in the first two months of 2026, the data show a downward trend following the February peak. There are

always landlords entering and leaving the rental market, with new notices of termination and new registrations. However, the longer term trends show that the market continues to grow. We must provide the RTB with the tools and resources to effectively regulate the sector.

Since the Government announcement on 10 June 2025 on the enhancement to rent controls and tenancy protections, my Department has engaged extensively with the RTB in relation to resource requirements for both staff and funding in order that it can implement rental law promptly and effectively. An Exchequer allocation of €22.8 million has been provided to the RTB for 2026, which is an increase of €8 million compared with 2025. This increase will assist the RTB to deliver its demand-led services and enable the enhancement of its ICT systems. My Department will continue to work with the RTB to ensure that it is sufficiently resourced to implement legislative changes and deliver on its mandate. The Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, has already specified to the House the further Government amendments to the residential tenancies Acts that will be made as the Bill progresses through the legislative process.

I thank Deputies for their contributions and commend the Housing and Residential-----

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Minister of State did not reply to any of the questions I asked.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: -----Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 to the House.

Deputy Rory Hearne: It is farcical.

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I look forward to progressing through the remaining Stages of the Bill over the coming weeks.

Question put and agreed to.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I raise the new school building for Coláiste an Phiarsaigh. To be clear, I taught there once upon a time. I was also a former student there for six years, so I have a vested interest in this relatively big school building programme. I am asking for a clear update. It seems to be stuck at the 2b lottery stage, which I know is frustrating for many TDs. A lot of these building projects are frequently stuck in this phase 2b. This is just another example.

This school has a remarkable story. It opened in 1973 with only 20 students and six teachers. It had no building. Classes were held in a rented Church of Ireland premises in the village of Glenmire. They had, in the words of those who were there, neither "cailc nó clár dubh", no chalk or blackboard. From that beginning, it has grown into one of the most successful Irish-medium schools in the country, with nearly 600 students and more than 60 staff. It consistently ranks as one of the best in terms of its academic achievement.

The new building promised for this school is not a modest one. As I said, it is a fairly large extension. It would make Coláiste an Phiarsaigh the largest Gaelscoil in Ireland, with a new sports hall, indoor running track and wellness suite. The students in the school, through the students' council, advocated for it to have a carbon-neutral design, which has been built into the design of the school.

In September 2023, the school community was told that construction would begin within 18 months. That timeline has now passed and families in Glenmire deserve to know why and what the revised position is. Glenmire is one of the fastest growing suburbs in Cork. The demand for Irish-medium education is only going in one direction. The students currently in first year will be sitting their leaving certificate before too long. They should not spend their entire secondary education waiting for a building they were told was imminent.

I am asking for the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, to set out plainly the current stage of this project, when it is anticipated it will go to construction and when the doors of the new school will open. I have been involved with this school building project over the past five years. We have had senior Ministers visit, as well as the Taoiseach, cutting ribbons and launching plans. The expectation is quite high that this will be delivered in a timely manner. I understand the significant difficulties in the Department of education and the overspend. They are glaringly obvious for all of us. That said, big projects like this need to be delivered.

When I attended Coláiste an Phiarsaigh as a student, half the school campus was in prefabs, and some of those very same prefabs are still there today. The Minister of States knows the way this can go. There has been some improvement with other updated modular units over the past few years but the reason they are getting this big project is that half the school footprint is, in essence, modular. This will replace it with bricks and mortar.

4 o'clock

This is something that has been long awaited. I genuinely hope that there is something the Minister of State will tell me which will illuminate things for me, although I will be dubious about it. It is high time we were straight with people in Glanmire and set out a timeline for when this project is likely to be delivered.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I thank Deputy O'Sullivan for his continued interest in this matter. It is an issue in which I know he has a personal interest and one on which he has advocated considerably in this House and elsewhere. I thank him for that continued work.

As the Deputy knows, the current position in relation to this major development project in Coláiste an Phiarsaigh, County Cork, is the responsibility of the Minister for Education and Youth. She has asked me to outline the current position. The project referred to has been devolved to the joint managerial body for delivery. The project brief for Coláiste an Phiarsaigh provides for a long-term projected enrolment of 750 pupils, including four classrooms for students with special educational needs. That is an important function and part of the overall project, because the Government has a considerable focus on providing appropriate locations for children with special educational needs.

The project is currently at stage 2b of the architectural design process, as the Deputy said. This allows for detailed design and planning, obtaining the necessary statutory permissions and

the preparation of tender documents. Planning permission was granted in November 2025. The Department awaits submission of a stage 2b report. Once received, it will undergo a detailed technical and cost review in line with the Government's infrastructure guidelines. It is clear that the joint managerial body needs to get that stage 2b report to the Department to allow for the next stages along the way.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Department recently published the €7.55 billion NDP sectoral investment plan for the education and youth sectors for the period 2026 to 2030. The NDP sectoral investment plan involves a strong emphasis on maximising existing capacity and prioritisation of school building projects to meet the most urgent needs. In this regard, there will be a strong special education dimension to project roll-out. That is one of the important facets of the project, so that when it gets through the stage it is at, it will have significant prioritisation in the mix of other schools. Of the total €7.55 billion investment, it is envisaged that circa €5 billion will be used for project roll-out to support the delivery and modernisation of school buildings. This will build on the progress made over recent years with the continued roll-out of projects on a prioritised basis to meet the most urgent needs in terms of provision of additional capacity and modernisation of existing facilities. In this regard, a list of the 105 school building projects in the first tranche to proceed to construction or tender over 2026 and 2027 was published and this included 12 schools in Cork.

The progression of other projects through the pipeline will form part of overall programme management and prioritisation. The timing of a pipeline project moving from one stage to the next requires careful planning and is determined by a number of factors, such as confirmation that any existing or emerging school capacity in the area is being, or will be, optimised; confirmation of compliance with all technical and cost requirements relevant to that project stage; outcome of prioritisation assessment; and timing of affordability within annual NDP funding parameters, taking account of overall programme requirements.

In moving projects forward, the Department maintains a strong focus on delivering value for money and affordability, and includes phasing arrangements, where necessary, to ensure that spending remains sustainable. Functionality, long-term suitability and the specific needs of schools, including special education requirements, are also considered at each stage. This approach ensures that projects not only progress in a timely manner but also deliver maximum value for money and target priorities of the school estate. This prioritisation process will be informed by engagement with school patrons and management bodies, which is currently under way. The project at Coláiste an Phiarsaigh will form part of this overall process.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Unfortunately, I do not have my date. I get that we have invested an awful lot in infrastructure and education over the last few years. That is undeniable. I was struck by a couple of phrases the Minister of State used, including "affordability" and "value for money". We have all been in this House long enough to know that the longer we wait to do these projects, the more inflated the price becomes given the way the current market is. If we leave this another year, it could easily add another 10%, if not more, to the price of this school. Unfortunately, I think we are going to be waiting much longer than a year, judging by what the statement the Minister of State read out. I get that there is a €700 million overspend in the budget for the Department of education. The Department of public expenditure needs to talk to the Department of education and problems need to be worked through. The Department has to stay within the budget but, at the same time, this is not a problem that just emerged.

While it is fair enough that the project only got planning last year, as I said, the prefabs have been there for 25 or 30 years. This build is largely to replace those prefabs.

We have another good story on the site in question. The people who established the school own the land around it. The Minister for the Gaeltacht, Deputy Calleary, is looking at turning an old building into a cultúrlann and have it as a real Irish-language hub in the centre of Glanmire. It would largely meet the needs of the Irish language community in Cork city. A lot of exciting things are happening with this project on this site, but they are all going to be held up because we are waiting for the school. Nothing else can happen until the school has initiated. I can only make the case for my constituency, as we all do here for our constituencies. This school will be the largest Gaelcholáiste in the country when it is built. That is at a time when officials in the Department would tell us that numbers in Gaelscoileanna normally do not exceed 600 or 700. This school could easily cater for 1,200 students, such is the demand.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Deputy has made a strong case for this project. I set out, in broad terms, the criteria that apply to all schools and building projects. I set out, in a clear way, the commitment of the Government, from an overall financial envelope available over the next number of years, to complete these projects and how they get assessed. Of course, there are more projects than there is money to address them over the next five years. That is why the prioritisation is part of it, but just because I have set out the prioritisation, it does not necessarily mean the school is not part of that. The first tranche has been announced. What is important now is for those preparing the stage 2b report to get it into the Department.

Knowing the Deputy as long as I do, I know his capacity to advocate. When the report is on the Department's desk, the Deputy will probably be back in the House looking for a further update. Of course, we will provide him with one. I know the Deputy will be advocating through his contacts in the Department as well. At every stage, I encourage the school to get the documentation and report in. I have identified the priorities for the Deputy. The key priority is that it is a Gaelscoil, but the fact that the focus is firmly on the special needs or educational element for children with special needs is a significant part of the overall jigsaw. I suggest that the Deputy emphasise that and continue to advocate. Sooner rather than later, the Department will be, I hope, in a position to move the project to the next stage. There are a number of stages, but every time the project moves on, the school gets closer to that mark. I apologise that I cannot give a timeframe, but it would be foolhardy for anyone to give a guesstimate given that the report is still awaited. I have every expectation that officials will be in touch with the school and that they will move on that.

Water Pollution

Deputy Ged Nash: I appreciate that the Minister of State is here to take this Topical Issue. I have a simple question to put to him. When are people, individuals or corporate bodies, whose actions destroy our rivers and habitats going to see a law change that would see those responsible for the destruction of those habitats possibly face jail? The Minister of State was on the banks of the River Glyde in County Louth last week where he saw some of the remains of the 20,000 dead fish. He spoke to members of the Ardee and Glyde Fishing Development Association and some local representatives, who were pictured with him. He admitted that the fines and sanctions available to the State to prosecute those responsible for polluting our rivers

and habitats are inadequate. He said they are "not fit for purpose". I suggest that this is a classic understatement.

This is not news either. From my research over the last few days, I have been looking at some of the issues that have arisen around the country.

In recent years a farmer who was found to be responsible for leaking animal shit, because that is what it is and I am sorry to use the colloquialism, into the River Tracton in Cork, received a conviction and fine of €2,000 in the local District Court in 2022. There were 5,000 fish killed. In the same year, in a case in Monaghan close to where the Minister of State was last week, there was a €400 fine and €5,000 in costs. His infraction was that silage effluent from his farm was found in a watercourse - more shit. I am sorry to use the colloquialism. I would not usually do that but I do not want to beat around the bush. When we describe this as "waste", "effluent" or "discharge", it minimises the impact and the issue.

There were 20,000 fish killed in the River Glyde last week, including Atlantic salmon, eels, brown trout, pikes, minnows and course fish, and 25 km of the finest river in mid-Louth was destroyed. Inland Fisheries Ireland, IFI, responded rapidly. I spoke to their representatives last week about this and I commend their actions. The Dee and Glyde fishing association does tremendous work. It is a custodian of the river. I have known those people for many years and have worked with them in the past. They have worked hard to protect and maintain the river's ecosystem.

I do not for a minute want to prejudice the outcome of any investigation or any possible prosecution that might arise but we know that in all likelihood in cases like this, it is the provisions of the 1959 Act that are used so those responsible can probably sleep soundly at night. The cases are heard in the District Court. This is, of course, where you will hear shoplifting cases, public order offences and traffic offences but nothing of this scale. History tells us that those who are responsible for major fish kills attract very small fines. They are a pittance.

This is ecocide. That is what it is. It is the mass destruction of habitats and is dangerous to public health. These are matters that ought to be dealt with through our legal code in the Circuit Court, at the very least, or, indeed, the High Court. When will we see changes in the law where the punishment will fit the crime? It has been said to me that in some cases, it is easier for operators to take the fine rather than spend the money they need to spend in order to up their game.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue and for allowing me to update the House on what has happened. I acknowledge the significance of a very severe fish kill that occurred on the River Glyde and the devastating impact it has had on the local communities, anglers and users of this important river catchment. I want to pay tribute to the angling community and those who use the river for leisure and other activities for the way in which they care for that river. As in many cases around the country, they act as citizen scientists, notifying IFI of various events that happen on the river. In fact, it was an angler who first identified the discharge and the death of fish. IFI reacted very quickly and was on site within about ten minutes. Within about four hours, using kayaks and drones it was able to identify the source of the effluent entering the river and end the discharge. Were it not for the fast action of all concerned the situation could have been far worse. That is not at all to

undermine the damage that was done to the ecosystem of the river but I want to identify and thank people for that. We estimate that around 20,000 fish have been lost, including Atlantic salmon, eels, brown trout, pike, minnow and coarse fish species. That, of course, will have a devastating impact on the people who use the river but also on the ecology of the area.

The Deputy rightly asked what the next step is. The investigation is ongoing and IFI is putting together the details of what has happened and will prepare a file that will go to the Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP, and then a decision will be taken on whether or not to prosecute based on the evidence that has been procured. The Deputy raised an important issue in reference to the comments I made. I do not believe, quite frankly, the punishment, fines or the way the process is structured is in any way commensurate with the damage that is done. Therefore, I do not think it acts as a sufficient deterrent.

Often in a case like this it could be a licensed operator. I am speaking in general terms because I do not want to get into the specifics as I am conscious there may be a prosecution at some point. There can be a licensed entity, usually a commercial entity that has a licence to discharge into a particular body of water. The licence is issued by the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA. I think that at times the reissuance of licences should not be done - the continued issuance of a licence where there have been breaches. I have said this to the EPA and asked it to give me its views on what the fines structure should be. I have my own views but I must follow the professional advice and I await that determination.

Last year, soon after taking on this role with responsibility for inland fisheries, an event happened on the River Blackwater which again had devastating consequences. At the time, I asked both the EPA and IFI to look at the body of law that is there, to look at the fines and to come forward with suggestions. I await that information and will certainly move as quickly as I can as soon as I get it because the Deputy is right, in that I do not think it acts as a deterrent.

The Deputy is right in saying that sometimes it is wilful neglect because the fine is not serious enough to prevent accidents. Sometimes it is wilful destruction where somebody chooses to do this where, as the Deputy said, rather than investing, it is easier to breach and be fined and not be impacted. We have to elevate the fines and the punishment to a level in order that people take heed of the necessity to protect our rivers and waterways.

Deputy Ged Nash: I thank the Minister of State for his response and I eagerly await the evolution of the process he has outlined. This is not a new issue. My colleague, Deputy Eoghan Kenny, did a lot of work to raise awareness of the mass fish kill in the Blackwater last year and of the lacuna in the law at the moment in terms of the requirement for the sorts of sanctions that would be commensurate with a violation of the nature of what happened in the Blackwater. Similarly, the same perspective can be applied to this particular matter on the River Glyde in County Louth.

I am not aware of any case where an EPA licence was in place and was removed from somebody who was successfully prosecuted in the District Court or anywhere else for actions that led to a mass fish kill and ecological destruction in an area. We need to reflect on that. That is simply not good enough in this day and age. It was never good enough and it is certainly not good enough now. I would have particular words for any vested interest that stands in the way of us improving and enhancing this legislation and the sanctions available to the State to address these issues.

It is interesting that there is an EU directive in place, 2024/1203 and that there is a criminal law element to but that we have decided not to transpose it. It deals with the question of ecocide and provides for, for example, eight years imprisonment for what is described as natural persons who may be involved in or found guilty of major habitat destruction. We have decided not to transpose that directive for a variety of reasons. We need to reflect on that if we are serious about ensuring the punishment fits the crime, if we can use the word "crime", in broad cases of this nature.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Deputy for his contribution. I know Deputy Eoghan Kenny and other Members of this House were centrally involved in the Blackwater issue. As referenced, I cannot recount if a licence was ever removed. I know licences have been suspended in cases and it may be that there is a difficulty from the EPA's perspective on how it might do that. Maybe that does require to be codified better in the law. The lessons learned from the Blackwater fish kill continue to inform Government policy and are certainly guiding me. We did a review among the agencies involved but then we got an independent review undertaken by the European Commission's joint research centre and it identified some practical recommendations to strengthen prevention, detection and inter-agency co-ordination in responding to fish kill incidents.

Those recommendations are now being implemented alongside the modernisation of inland fisheries legislation to strengthen enforcement powers and ensure penalties provide an effective deterrent against environmental pollution. We are on a pathway to update the legislation and I look forward to the engagement of Deputy Nash and others in the House when we bring it to Committee Stage or on pre-legislative scrutiny, when there will be an opportunity for all to get involved.

I acknowledge the work of IFI, the local authorities and the many volunteers and community members, including the Dee and Glyde Fishing Development Association, who have responded to the incident. The Government remains committed to supporting the recovery of the River Glyde and to promoting Ireland's rivers for future generations. The overarching point here is that this cannot be done in isolation. We have to make the penalty and fines structure suitable for and commensurate with the damage that is ultimately being done. We mitigate the risks. Accidents do happen, for sure, but we have to ensure a lot more mitigation is taken because there is a lack of understanding of how important our rivers and oceans are from a biodiversity and climate change perspective.

Special Educational Needs

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Minister of State for being here to take this Topical Issue. I will talk specifically about a school but a school that illustrates a broader problem. I will refer to one school but I am referring to a broader issue with the school summer programme. There was a delay, and the Minister of State is aware of this, in releasing the programme. Only in the past few weeks have schools been able to apply. I will speak about Gaelscoil Baile Brigín. It applied for two special classes and three mainstream classes, which is what it had applied for previously. Previously it had four mainstream groups with six students. This year it applied for three groups of 12 because that was what was in the guidelines.

The Department has said there must be at least 12 students in each group, with only one SNA and one teacher. This is a problem from the get-go because that will not be enough staff. This is a big increase in the number of students without any allowance for a reduction in group size or for students with complex needs. Additional staff are not being made available for students who have additional needs and who are accommodated for those needs. That does not make any sense because these are kids who have an SNA in their classroom every single day. Their needs do not change. Just because it is the summer, their needs do not change and they certainly do not decrease at any particular time in the calendar. If they are entitled to an SNA, they should have one. At the very least, they should have something that is similar.

The school has raised issues. It applied for three groups but was only sanctioned for two. This leaves the school community, the principal, the deputy principal and the staff in an awful position because they have to go back to parents and tell them that for reasons they do not know, they are not able to accommodate their kids. It is a horrible decision for the school community to have to make. Nobody wants to make lists when everyone on the list has a need and should have an entitlement to access the programme. The school now has to cut students from the programme, which is really awful.

What did the school do? It certainly did not sit around and do nothing. It made massive efforts to contact the Department by email and phone. It has not had any response. I get it because changes are being made, and I understand the Department is busy and under pressure. This is not meant to be disrespectful to the people who are answering the phones, who I know are doing their best. Unfortunately, the school cannot get an answer so now it has to speak to the parents of the children who possibly will not be able to be accommodated. When the parents ask why this is happening the school does not know because nobody will tell it. I sincerely hope these changes, which the Minister of State might try to dress up as some class of reform, are not being driven by the massive overspend in the Department, which I can tell him is not the fault of any of the parents or the teachers.

I am looking for a few very simple things. Will the Minister of State get me an explanation as to why Gaelscoil Baile Brigín and other schools were only sanctioned a reduced number of classes? Will he convey to the Minister the frustration of the teaching community at this last-minute decision-making? Months and months of planning go into getting ready for this. Will he explain why the changes are being brought in? If they are being driven by money, then he needs to tell us. Will he please ask the Department to reply to Gaelscoil Baile Brigín and those other schools waiting on answers? Will he confirm that home-based tuition will be available for the children who are going to be inevitably left out? Will he advise why there is no appeal? Will he clarify the number of SNAs that will be available per class?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank Deputy O'Reilly very much for her series of questions. I know her interest in this area and she has been a strong advocate, not just for specific schools in her area but also for the educational needs of children.

The Government is fully committed to supporting children with special educational needs to fulfil their full potential and the programme for Government makes several commitments to deliver on this objective. The summer programme is a vital and targeted intervention that is specifically designed for children with complex special educational needs or those at risk of educational disadvantage. While it is delivered during the summer months, it is an educational

programme and should not be viewed as a replacement for recreational summer camps. Since 2021, the Department of Education and Youth's inspectorate has evaluated the programme annually. Its findings consistently highlight the programme's positive impact on the many children and young people who have taken part, with parents, staff and the children themselves reporting improvements in confidence, attitude and readiness to return to school in September.

Deputy O'Reilly has asked a series of questions. I do not have all of the answers but I will ask the Department to communicate directly with her and the school on the specifics and I will speak on the general point.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: That is fair enough. I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The original intention and the continued emphasis of the summer programme is to mitigate the impact of learning loss on those children while schools are closed. An increase in special educational needs prevalence rates, particularly of autism, and the presentation of children with more complex needs has meant that the summer programme is more important than ever.

Details of the summer programme were communicated to schools and stakeholders in early May. While it is acknowledged that the details of the programme are typically announced earlier, the Department continually kept in touch with stakeholders querying when the summer programme might be announced to ensure they understood that it would be forthcoming and that schools should start their preparations. As a result, the online application portals for both the school-based and the home-based programmes were opened from 6 May to 15 May. The Minister, Deputy Naughton, and the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, listened to the concerns of schools that wanted to apply after the deadline, and the application portals were reopened from 2 to 5 June. Details on this reopening were communicated to all schools on Thursday, 29 May 2026.

The summer programme has been well established for several years, so even though there was a shorter window for applications, schools were prepared in advance. The Department subsequently received more applications for the school-based scheme this year than were run in 2025, with increases across primary, post-primary and special schools. In addition, the number of home-based applications has significantly increased on last year.

Officials in the Department have been engaging with schools on an individual basis in relation to the running of their summer programme. Schools have now received their sanction letters with their staffing allocation. This allocation is based on the number of children who are taking part in accordance with the published terms and conditions of the programme. Schools can engage with the Department if they have unique circumstances that require additional resources, and the Department will work with these schools on an individual basis to ensure that they can meet the needs of the children taking part. I believe this is what Deputy O'Reilly is asking, with regard to having a child-centric approach.

Equally, it is acknowledged that there are some children with complex special educational needs whose school is not running a school-based programme or a place on the school-based programme is not available. In this instance, these children can avail of the home-based provision which allows for tuition or care support to be provided on a one-to-one basis or in a

small group setting. I hope this response outlines the general position to some extent. We will certainly try to ensure the Department comes back to Deputy O'Reilly with greater detail.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: That would be very welcome. The Minister of State said, and we agree on this, that the programme has a positive impact on the many children and young people who have taken part, and that parents, staff and the children themselves report improvements in confidence, attitude and readiness to return to school in September. There is nothing wrong with that. It is fantastic and a sign of something that is working. It is very natural and normal that I would come in the House and say, on behalf of my constituents, that if we all agree something is a good idea, that it should be happening and that there is a benefit for the children and the school community, then I have to circle back to my original question on why it is being cut. Why are there going to be kids who are attending Gaelscoil Baile Brigín who will be told, although I hope not because I hope when the Department looks at it that it will change it, that they may not have a place?

They may not, though, have a place, when the Minister of State himself acknowledged that this is a programme that works. It is a decent programme that the kids and the school community benefit from. It should not be this hard for the teachers and the school community to be able to access something where there is no disagreement. The Department says it is a good idea. The teachers say it is a good idea. The parents say it is a good idea. The kids clearly benefit from it. When all of these things come together, then I am left asking: why I am standing here asking for this to work when it has worked previously?

I have given a list of detailed questions. It was not my intention to blindside the Minister of State with them, but I hope that he will bring these to the attention of the Minister and get some answers not just for the school but also for the parents and the students. It is very hard to have to tell the students that they may not be accepted for the programme when they previously benefited from it. I do not want the school community, teachers, principal and deputy principals to be put into that position, and I am sure the Minister of State does not either.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Deputy very much. As I indicated, there has been a significant increase in demand for both school-based and home-based tuition during those months. From a departmental perspective, it does take a little bit of time to iron out all of that. I will ask the Department to communicate directly on his specific questions and that, perhaps, there be a level of engagement between it and the school so that the school does not have to be at loggerheads or not have all the information available to it that it would need to take whatever actions it has to in the coming months. If that flow of information does not happen, I ask the Deputy to come back to me and I will be happy to follow through on it for her.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Go raibh maith agat.

Housing and Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026: Referral to Select Committee

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage pursuant to Standing Orders 103(2)(b) and 188(1).

Question put and agreed to.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate (Resumed)

School Staff

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I wish to raise the issue of St. Francis Junior National School as it is set to lose one of its mainstream teachers because it was short one pupil. One teacher is going to be lost because of the lack of one single pupil. This is ridiculous, bureaucratic, box-ticking nonsense. The school appealed this decision and, in turn, that appeal was refused. It is frustrating to engage with the Department. In fact, the issue with the Department is that it does not engage but rather stonewalls any request for movement.

It is important that we make it clear who will suffer here. Ultimately, it is going to be the children of the school who will be impacted by this ridiculous decision. St. Francis Junior National School is not only a DEIS school but recently got DEIS plus status. It caters for a community with social and economic challenges. Many of the children attending the school have complex needs and have not attended any sort of preschool. The school and its teachers catch any sign of relevant needs-----

Acting Chairman (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): I thank the Deputy. He is taking time from his colleagues. I call Deputy Ó Muirí.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: As Deputy Brabazon said, St. Francis Junior National School is a fabulous school in a challenging area. The school had the joy and elation of achieving DEIS plus status, which was very important for it, but now it faces the dismay of losing a teacher shortly after. This is happening when the pupil numbers are clearly coming back up for the school next year.

There are 66 children from Traveller families in this school, and we know the challenges that this brings for the education system and for those families. It is important that the school is part of the DEIS plus initiative and that we support it. We need to advocate for the school. That is why we are here and that is what we are doing. I ask the Minister of State to ask the Minister not for the decision to be reversed, but for a temporary arrangement to be put in place for one year, as has been done previously, to deal with this situation.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The key point here is that the school will have the numbers in the coming year. It will be above the threshold in coming year. All we need is a fix for this year. This was done before in 2020. The Minister for Education at that point intervened with a one-year fixed term contract. We are talking about the school being short one pupil last year. This is a school that has extra enrolments late every year, after 30 September, so this needs to be taken into account as well. I urge the Minister of State and the Minister for Education and

Youth to put this situation right and get a solution in place for this year for the benefit of this great school, its dedicated staff and the pupils that really need action on this matter.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: St. Francis Junior National School in Priorswood is short just one pupil. All five local TDs attended a meeting there. I am very proud when Dublin Bay North TDs come together on educational issues. While we differ politically, we have one passion, and that is representing north Dublin. The fact that all the constituency's TDs are here shows this.

A total of 40% of the pupils attending this school are from the Traveller community. Many of them are arriving in this school and need this support. The school is short one pupil and it is losing a teacher. There is a precedent for an additional teacher to be allocated. When a school misses out by just one pupil and loses one teacher, the system is wrong and it needs to be changed.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: As has been said, this is a fantastic school. It serves a disadvantaged community. As has been said as well, 40% of the students in the school are from the Traveller community. This school has children attending from Darndale and the wider community around Priorswood. The decision that has been taken, therefore, is absolutely ridiculous. The school was short just one pupil by a specific date, and this means it is going to lose a teacher. It was already said that all five TDs met the school community. This school community is very angry at this decision. Will the Minister intervene and either overrule the decision or find some other mechanism to make sure that this school does not lose its teacher?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Deputies very much. It is refreshing to see everybody on the same side of an important issue like this.

Addressing educational disadvantage and ensuring that every child and young person can reach their full potential is a key priority for this Government. The DEIS plus scheme represents a significant expansion of targeted educational supports. It is designed to provide enhanced, evidence-based supports to schools with the highest concentrations of children and young people experiencing persistent and intergenerational disadvantage. Approximately 30,000 children and young people nationally will benefit from inclusion in the scheme in 121 schools.

Schools in the DEIS plus scheme will receive strengthened, research-informed supports across well-being, attendance, engagement, guidance, leadership capacity, community partnerships and access to services, including the introduction of a new positive mental health and well-being initiative to support a whole-school approach to student well-being. As part of St. Francis National School's inclusion in the DEIS plus scheme, the school will gain a positive mental health and well-being co-ordinator, PMHW, which is a full-time post of one teacher, and two administrative release days per week for the school's deputy principal.

Teacher numbers at primary level have reached the highest ever level in the current school year. Currently there are over 43,000 teaching posts allocated across the primary school system. This represents an increase of just over 5,000 teachers when compared with the 2019-20 school year, and this has led to a steady improvement in the pupil:teacher ratio and average class size during this period. In recent budgets, prioritisation was given to reducing the pupil-

teacher ratios in primary schools, which has brought the teacher allocation ratio to an average of one classroom teacher for every 23 pupils in all primary schools, the most favourable ratio ever seen at primary level. More favourable ratios are implemented for DEIS urban band 1, including DEIS plus schools, at an average of 17:1, 21:1 and 19:1 for junior, senior and vertical schools respectively. A three-point reduction in the retention schedule, which was introduced in 2021, assists schools that would otherwise be at risk of losing teaching posts.

The latest figures relating to pupil-teacher ratio show an improved ratio of pupils to teachers, from 15:1 to 12.8:1, at primary level when comparing the 2019-20 school year to the 2024-25 school year. In the same period, the primary staffing schedule improved from 26:1 to 23:1 and average class sizes at primary level have improved from 24:1 to 22.2:1. The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30 September. The primary staffing schedule is a long-standing feature of the primary allocation system, which ensures fairness and transparency in the allocation of mainstream class teachers across our primary schools, regardless of location.

St. Francis Junior National School currently has ten mainstream teachers. As the school's enrolment fell below the required enrolment threshold for that level of staffing, which all the TDs have identified, the mainstream staffing is due to be reduced by one in September.

I realise that others have said the number fell-----

Deputy Denise Mitchell: By one.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: -----by just one. I get that but there has to be a cut-off. There has to be some line so the Department's hands are tied in that regard.

As the Deputies know, the school submitted an appeal to the primary staffing appeals board and, unfortunately, that appeal was unsuccessful. The board operates entirely independently of the Department and the rules set out that its decision is final. It is unfortunate for the school to find itself in this situation but, on a more positive note, the Deputies seems to indicate the numbers will be available next year and that the position will return to what it was previously. I am sorry I cannot provide more positive information. I am guided by the Minister in this regard and the information that is available to me.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Louise O'Reilly: For the supplementary questions to the Minister of State, each Member has 24 seconds. I remind them that I have no latitude to give additional time. Members all know that. I remind them that if they exceed their time, they will be taking time from one of their constituency colleagues. It is 24 seconds each.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: The Chair is emphasising that.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Le bhur dtoil.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Incentivise.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I am going to stick with the same order, so I call Deputy Brabazon.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: We have given the school DEIS plus status and the decision to remove one teacher from it is a policy contradiction in itself. It is utterly ridiculous. I have found since I have been elected to this House that the Department of Education and Youth has been relying on circular this, circular that and circular the other. We are constrained and what is missing is common sense and practicality. It has to be reversed.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I ask that this be taken to the Minister. We need a fix. It involves a one-year fix around one student. It will all straighten itself out in a year's time. This area, above all others, needs the level of support we are asking for. We have to give it to the school. The Minister of State should relay this to the Minister. I appreciate the Minister of State's feedback.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I ask the Minister of State to ask the Minister, directly after this debate, about this matter. It was fixed in 2020 and can be fixed again, with a bit of common sense. We are all asking the Minister to do it. This school really needs it. It is a brilliant school doing great work with children facing a lot of challenges, and we just need her to go the extra mile and fix things.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: At the end of the Minister of State's response, which I realise the Department officials wrote for him, he said the appeal was unsuccessful. Who made it unsuccessful? I would love, with all the Deputies present, to invite them to Priorswood and Darndale and show them the children and the teachers, who are working as hard as they can. The cost of an extra teacher compares favourably with the foreseen disadvantage that will affect the children's lives. The loss of one pupil should not determine the educational outcome for the entire school.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: I am frustrated by the Minister of State's response. St. Francis school was mentioned only in the last two paragraphs that he read. I cannot understand how the Minister can award a school DEIS plus status and then, on the other hand, remove a teacher. This was resolved in 2020, and the five TDs here are asking her to do so again.

The Minister of State is going against his own programme for Government. It states the Government wants to reduce class sizes but, given what is happening, classes are going to have to merge into bigger classes.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Deputies. I understand and get the difficulty but there have to be objective criteria for allocating or reducing the number of teachers. My understanding is that, with the awarding of DEIS plus status, the school got additional resources. I set that out for the Deputies. There was an additional element. I get that it is challenging when there is a reduction of just one. If it were five or seven, it might be more easily comprehended and accepted. I will, of course, bring this matter directly to the attention of the Minister, but my understanding is that her hands are tied on this because, as with anything, there is the law of unintended consequences. Where provision is made for one, the

impact on so many others must be thought about. I am not going to put the Minister in a position where she is a hostage to fortune but I will relay the Deputies' comments to her. If an engagement has to take place afterwards or something positive can come out of it, we will happily get back to the Deputies.

While I fully understand the sentiments that they expressed and the impact on the school, there has to be an objective criterion for managing fluctuations in pupil-teacher ratios and school numbers. The Deputies are all asking, given that it is obvious that the number enrolled next year will return to the previous level, whether there is an interim solution. On that basis, I will ask the Minister for guidance from the Department. Let us see where we go with that.

Housing Provision

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for taking this issue on behalf of the Minister for housing. Arklow is a fine coastal town with Viking heritage but for a long time, its infrastructural development had been held back because of the lack of wastewater capacity. In May of last year, the Taoiseach opened the Arklow wastewater treatment plant, a €139 million project. It was completed six months ahead of schedule and within budget, so it was a good news story. The Taoiseach made clear at that opening the importance of such strategic infrastructure not just in terms of cleaning up the Avoca River and for environmental reasons, but critically to provide housing within the community of Arklow and south Wicklow. He pointed out that the wastewater treatment plant could end up supporting a population of 24,000, with the potential of expanding that up to 36,000. In the 2022 census, Arklow had a population of 13,399, so there is going to be capacity there as a result of the new wastewater treatment plant.

The Minister of State knows as well as I do how strong the demand is for housing. In my office on the main street in Arklow, the most common issue that arises is raised by people who are looking for social or affordable housing. It is raised with me on the streets regularly in Arklow, as it is right around the country. We would imagine, after the hold-up for all these years, that suddenly we would start to see a surge of housing, particularly affordable housing.

I asked in November 2025, by way of parliamentary questions, what progress had been seen. It was pointed out in reply that since 2022 Wicklow had 970 households availing of affordable housing supports through the mix of various schemes. I inquired further as to how many of these were in the Arklow area. It was not the case that anything seemed to be happening. I contacted Wicklow County Council, which, in April this year, told me it had a number of schemes in the planning and detailed design stages at Tinahask and Sheepphouse in the town, but it stated it is currently awaiting the housing delivery plan from the Government, which will determine the output required throughout the county. Not happy with that, I went back to the Department to obtain clarity on what social and affordable housing supports were being made available in Arklow through Wicklow County Council. The Department, in response to a parliamentary question, told me that to date it had not received any applications or plans for new starter home delivery in the local area of Arklow.

I am really frustrated about this. Arklow is a town that has been in need of development and housing for a long time. There is a problem with enrolment falling in some of the schools because there are no new families moving into the area. The town is within the commuter

zone; it is a very fine town. Whether it is a matter for the Department or Wicklow County Council, we are just not seeing homes in general being built but I have a particular interest in social and affordable homes.

I contrast Arklow with the other main town in my constituency, Gorey, where we regularly see social and affordable schemes developed. In fact, there is another being opened in the town tomorrow by Wexford County Council. Considering that the Government has invested so much in the wastewater infrastructure in Arklow, whose lack was holding everything up, why are we not seeing the necessary social and affordable housing that we were expecting to see there?

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Deputy for raising this important matter regarding the delivery of social and affordable housing in Arklow. I am answering on behalf of our colleague the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Browne, and his Department.

Affordability and the chance to own a home remain at the heart of this Government's housing policy, as set out in our new national housing action plan, *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025–2030*. At the same time, we remain firmly committed to delivering the social housing needed to support individuals and families who require housing assistance and to building strong, sustainable communities across the country.

Under the housing action plan, the Government is targeting the delivery of 300,000 new homes by 2030, including 72,000 social homes. The plan will significantly increase the delivery of new-build social housing to an average of 12,000 homes per year and includes a range of measures to support local authorities in meeting this ambition. These include a streamlined approval process for social housing projects, greater use of standardised designs and modern methods of construction, enhanced land acquisition supports, dedicated housing delivery teams in every local authority and financial incentives to exceed annual social housing delivery targets.

Alongside these social housing measures, the plan reinforces and expands the range of affordable housing supports already being delivered, including the new starter homes programme, which aims to provide an average of 15,000 starter home supports annually to 2030. To underpin this ambition, the Government is investing at an unprecedented level through direct Exchequer funding, investment by the Land Development Agency and lending through the Housing Finance Agency.

Across the country, the starter purchase scheme, cost-rental scheme, first home scheme, help-to-buy scheme and the vacant property refurbishment grant are helping individuals and families access secure and affordable housing. Last year, more than 17,000 supports were delivered through these measures.

In Wicklow, significant progress has already been made. Since 2022, over 1,000 starter home supports have been delivered through a combination of starter purchase, cost rental, the first home scheme and the vacant property refurbishment grant. Wicklow County Council has delivered 91 starter purchase homes to date and has further schemes approved for delivery in the coming years. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has also funded seven dedicated starter homes administrative and technical posts within Wicklow County Council to support delivery.

Importantly, Wicklow County Council is also performing strongly in the delivery of social housing. The council has exceeded its social housing targets for the period 2022 to 2025, achieving 125% of its target. The latest social housing construction status report shows a strong pipeline of 512 social homes at various stages of design and procurement, including 166 homes under construction at the end of 2025. This demonstrates a local authority that is actively delivering homes and planning for future need.

While Wicklow County Council currently has a programme of housing delivery under way in other parts of the county, no applications have yet been received for starter homes schemes in Arklow. This is clearly a matter that requires continued engagement and focus.

The affordable housing fund remains available to Wicklow County Council to support the development of affordable homes where affordability pressures have been identified. The Department of housing, the Housing Agency and the housing delivery co-ordination office continue to work closely with local authorities to develop and advance housing projects that respond to local needs, including in key growth centres such as Arklow.

As local authorities prepare new housing delivery action plans under Delivering Homes, Building Communities, there will be a renewed focus on identifying and delivering both social and affordable housing solutions that reflect local needs and priorities. These plans will provide a clear pathway for future delivery and ensure that communities such as Arklow benefit from the full range of housing supports available.

This is about more than building houses, as the Deputy knows. It is about building sustainable communities, creating places where people can live, work and raise families, and ensuring that the homes we build today are fit for future generations.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank the Minister of State for the answer. As he knows, I am supportive. There is an extensive programme of building social and affordable homes right around the country. As he acknowledged, Wicklow County Council has been very good in north Wicklow. The key line in the answer the Minister of State gave was about the fact that there are no applications from Arklow. He went on to say that "this is clearly a matter that requires continued engagement and focus". Can the Minister of State name any other town in the country with a population of over 13,000 where a single social or affordable home has not been constructed and where there have been no applications to the Department?

For those waiting for homes in Arklow and living around south Wicklow, there is no point telling them that there are many more homes being made available in Bray, Gorey or Clare, much as I welcome all of those homes. This is the largest town in the country where we are not seeing any progress on social and affordable homes.

I have raised the issue with the Minister but I ask the Minister of State to bring the issue back to him. It needs to be communicated to Wicklow County Council that it needs to prioritise this. The evidence is clear. We are not seeing any social and affordable homes. It is no good talking about it being a priority if we are not seeing progress. I do not know what it is that Wicklow County Council has against Arklow but it does not seem to be prioritising it in the context of the building of social and affordable homes. That is why I am getting it in the neck in my office over the Government's failure to deliver in that area. I am not getting it to the

same extent in Gorey, where I am seeing real progress being made by Wexford County Council, as I am sure the Minister of State knows is happening in other parts of the country.

I ask the Minister of State to raise the issue directly with the Minister. I want the Department to call in Wicklow County Council and demand to know from it, if it is saying Arklow requires continued engagement and focus, what specific actions the council is undertaking.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: I thank the Deputy. Of course, I know of his significant interest in homes and housing. He has been and continues to be a strong advocate. There is a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation from the Department's perspective. It is looking at the overall delivery of social homes and it is on target and on budget. To get into micromanagement is a bit of a challenge for the Department but I will certainly raise the issue with the Minister.

The fact that the Deputy is raising the issue is giving vent to his concerns. Engagement with Wicklow County Council is needed. The Deputy was a member of a local authority and knows about that sort of engagement. Perhaps some collective work could be done to include the Minister and the Deputy, working with the councillors and the county manager, the chief executive. Perhaps a meeting could be arranged in Leinster House, and I am happy to facilitate that. The Deputy is well able to manage it but if he needs any assistance from me, I am happy to do that. Sometimes it takes a nudge to spark action. The county-wide approach is doing well, with 125% of its target achieved, but that is cold comfort to someone who is in the Deputy's constituency office and whose son or daughter wants to remain in Arklow, live their life there alongside their parents, siblings or whoever it might be, and is told there is a home in Gorey or wherever else. Up the road does not wash. I am happy to work with the Deputy. I will talk to the Minister, Deputy Browne. Perhaps we, collectively, can organise a meeting that involves a representative of the council, either the person involved in housing activation in Wicklow County Council, the director of service or the chief executive, to address this important issue. I thank the Deputy for his advocacy on this and many other issues.

Protection of Voice and Image Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I congratulate the Minister of State on her new role and thank her for taking this Bill. I thank her and the Minister, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, for agreeing to support the Bill and facilitate its movement to Committee Stage. I look forward to working with the Department to address the underlying issues within the Bill. I am happy to consider how we amend it to deal with some of the challenges that new technologies are posing to our digital identity.

I am conscious that this is a justice Bill. I know that, procedurally speaking, it is difficult to do but if it were possible for this to be referred to the Committee on Artificial Intelligence, it might work in a more effective way. If not, and it is referred to the justice committee, given the urgency of some of the issues, it is important that the underlying matters are addressed.

I first started taking an interest in some of these issues around deepfakes and misuse of our digital identity nearly a decade ago. At the time, people might remember that there were fairly poor deepfakes. There were some deepfakes of Nancy Pelosi slurring her words. They were pale imitations. I went the Museum of the Moving Image in Brooklyn, New York. It was

exploring the issue of where deepfakes were going to go. The first mass watched event was the moon landing. It may not be widely known but there were two speeches prepared for President Nixon at the time. The speech he delivered was the speech for a successful moon landing. However, another speech was prepared in the event that the moon landing did not go well. What would he have had to deliver to the American people and the globe? Using footage of President Nixon, the museum reconstructed the speech that would have been delivered had the moon landing been unsuccessful.

5 o'clock

I remember sitting and watching it in the museum, which had been set up like a sitting room from the 1960s. This was not political nerds watching all of this. I was convinced this was Richard Nixon. I thought it was particularly believable.

We have obviously seen technology move on in the last decade. We saw deepfakes in the presidential election. They were not great deepfakes and I was surprised by some of the people who had been taken in by them. I hosted a meeting with the Irish Recorded Music Association in the audiovisual room here in Leinster House in March. An Irish company, AudioStack, by taking just a couple of moments of my speaking in this House, was able to replicate or synthesise my voice and provide a speech that sounded as if I was delivering it in Leinster House. It was probably far more eloquent than I am, but colleagues who were listening at the time were absolutely convinced that this was the case. While this is a problem that we would be very aware of in a political context, there are concerns if our digital identity is misused in circumstances where it could have a personal impact. We all get dodgy text messages or our parents receive them and ask if they are a scam. Generally, people are getting much better at picking out those text messages. However, if you receive a telephone call and you think the voice you hear is your mother, father, son, daughter, loved one or somebody close to you, and you act on the basis of that, it can have potentially serious consequences. We have already seen that in other jurisdictions in cases of bank fraud where people use automated means of interaction.

This is also a problem for our musicians and artists and others in the creative industry. I am glad that IMRO and Irish Equity are among those who have been raising issues in relation to this. It is important that we listen to those voices that are expressing concerns in this area. What this legislation seeks to do is essential, namely, to protect artists and musicians such that others will not seek to commercially exploit their identity in an unauthorised way. We know that a lot of streaming services, for instance, are starting to remove deepfakes and so on, but there remains a real difficulty with how we can protect our own digital identity.

What this Bill is seeking to do, in protecting our digital identities, is to make it an offence to misuse someone's voice, image or likeness without their permission and for malign purposes. This is not about someone making up a funny meme or anything like that. It is for instances where it is very clear that there are malign purposes involved. We need to start to talk much more about our digital identity. We have done a very good job nationally and at European level in protecting our data rights but our digital identity now also needs to be protected.

As we see artificial intelligence develop so rapidly, the need for legislation in this area has never been as important. We have to remember, even in terms of how we speak in this House, our voice is an intrinsic part of who we are and we have to ensure we do not allow others to

use it for the purposes of fraud or to misrepresent us. Technology now exists that allows for our voice or image to be simulated or replicated in such a way that it is believable to others. There are benefits to that and this legislation does not try to prevent that from happening. What the Bill seeks to do is to make it an offence where someone knowingly uses or infringes upon the use of an individual's name, photograph, voice or likeness by publishing, performing, distributing, transmitting or otherwise making it available to the public in any medium for the purposes of advertising products, events, political activities, merchandise, goods or services or for the purposes of fundraising, the solicitation of donations, the purchase of products, merchandised goods and services or to influence elections or referendums. Equally, it will make it an offence to distribute, transmit or otherwise make available on any algorithm, software tool or other technology, the primary purpose of which is the production of an individual's photograph, voice or likeness. These actions must be done without the individual's permission - if it is done with the individual's permission, it is not intended to be an offence - and with the intent to cause harm or to be reckless.

As I said, I am perfectly happy for the legislation to be amended and addressed on Committee Stage. I am open to that. This issue has come up time and again on both the artificial intelligence committee and the media committee. There is an urgency about being able to address this. We know Members of this House have seen their image associated with products they have nothing to do with. We have seen prominent journalists and economist purporting to sell things. We all think we are smart enough and we will not fall for it, but we know that people are so doing.

There are incredible, amazing creative possibilities in the use of AI and new technology but we also have to guard against harms. This is about protecting our own digital identity and protecting all of us, as citizens and consumers. For those in the creative industries, we need to protect their right to their voice, their expression and their identity against misuse. I urge the Minister of State to move with legislation in this area as quickly as possible.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): Before I ask the Minister of State, Deputy Ardagh, to address us, I extend my congratulations to her on her recent appointment and to wish her all the best in her role.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach Gníomhach. I welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, on this important initiative proposed by Deputy Malcolm Byrne. The Deputy is to be commended on his work on this issue over many years and I am pleased to advise that the Government does not propose to oppose the progression of this Bill.

As artificial intelligence becomes more sophisticated, so too do the ways in which it can be misused, as outlined by Deputy Byrne. For many women and girls in particular, the unauthorised manipulation of their image or voice is not simply a technological issue but a deeply personal and traumatic violation of their dignity, privacy and sense of security. We have already seen how AI-generated content can be used to harass, intimidate and humiliate individuals, often with devastating consequences for their mental health and reputation. Legislation such as this sends an important message that innovation must always be accompanied by responsibility and respect for fundamental rights. It is often said that

legislation struggles to keep pace with technology but Deputy Byrne has ensured that this House is actively engaging with these challenges, rather than simply reacting to them. I am, therefore, pleased to advise that the Government does not propose to oppose the progression of the Bill.

The Government recognises the importance of the digital economy to Ireland and the profound opportunities presented by AI. We are committed to reinforcing Ireland's position as a digital leader and regulatory hub and to strengthening our profile as a location for investment and a global centre for applied AI. Ireland possesses a vibrant and established innovation ecosystem, attracting eight of the leading providers of foundation AI models, which have chosen Ireland as their European headquarters. However, the evolution of AI technologies has given rise to new risks and challenges outlined by Deputy Byrne, including safety and privacy risks. We are committed to providing timely, robust and comprehensive responses to such challenges as and when they may arise.

Ireland will continue to be a strong voice in Europe for a digital economy which supports competitiveness and innovation, while also protecting data privacy and fundamental rights. In that context, consideration of the Bill's contents is timely. As AI tools have become more capable, with AI video becoming more proficient at depicting people realistically, opportunistic scams have proliferated across social media that misuse AI to impersonate public figures, including the Taoiseach and Deputy Byrne himself, as he outlined. These are clear attempts by fraudsters to exploit the online public through digital deception. Across a broad range of countries, deepfakes of various politicians, business leaders and celebrities have been circulated advertising fake investments intended to trick members of the public into sharing their bank details.

The realistic reproduction of a well-known figure's voice or likeness adds a veneer of authenticity and credibility to such financial scams. We have also seen a proliferation of AI-generated disinformation campaigns spreading falsehoods with the deliberate intent to deceive. Hyper-realistic synthetic media, including the use of deepfakes, has been increasingly deployed to influence political discourse, erode public trust and foster polarisation in many countries, including Ireland, especially - and worryingly - during election cycles.

There have been very significant concerns about the misuse of generative AI for the non-consensual sharing of intimate images or the creation of child sexual abuse material. It should be noted such content is already illegal under Irish law. Platforms must remove it when reported and very large online platforms must mitigate the risk of it appearing on their services in the first place.

The Government supports the Deputy Byrne's initiative and looks forward to working with him on it. The Protection of Voice and Image Bill 2025 seeks to address a real harm and growing threat in tackling the non-consensual use of an individual's personal characteristics and identity for the purpose of advertising, political messaging, fundraising or influencing public opinion. The Bill recognises the use of digital tools, including AI, to replicate or generate an individual's personal characteristics without that individual's consent and for clearly malicious purposes must be policed. The Bill will undoubtedly play an invaluable role in the push for further concrete actions to address this issue. While we will seek to continue to foster innovation and creativity, we must ensure that proper safeguards are in place against misuse of AI and other digital technologies, as the Deputy has clearly outlined.

Determining the means of most effectively addressing the misuse of generative AI and other digital tools will require further legal and policy analysis, taking account of existing legal remedies, statutory provisions and the wider national and EU regulatory framework. While lauding opportunities, we should not be afraid to also discuss the attendant risks that may also arise. It may be the case that the creation of a specific and delimited criminal offence category relating to the unauthorised creation, use and distribution of such personal identifying characteristics could play a role in addressing these harms.

There are existing criminal law provisions that address the misuse of deepfakes in certain circumstances. For instance, the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020, known as Coco's Law, creates an offence of distribution or publication of an intimate image without consent with intent to cause harm to the victim and attracts a maximum penalty of up to seven years' imprisonment, as well as an offence to threaten to distribute or publish such an image. The Act also provides for a strict liability offence, with a lower penalty, for engaging in the recording, distribution or publication of an "intimate image" without consent, with no requirement to prove an intention to cause harm. The definition of an "intimate image" under the 2020 Act is intentionally broad and includes any visual representation of a person. This includes intimate images, such as deepfakes, which have been altered or doctored prior to their distribution or publication. Similarly, the Child Trafficking and Pornography Act 1998 is framed so that no distinction can be made between AI-generated material and other child sexual abuse material. The production and distribution of child sexual abuse material attracts a sentence of up to 14 years' imprisonment.

Coimisiún na Meán, as Ireland's online safety and media regulator, is at the heart of Ireland's online safety framework, including the regulation of social media. Under the online safety framework, there is an obligation on platforms to act on reports of illegal content. A failure by a platform to protect against illegal or harmful content being shown can lead to significant financial sanctions and, under the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act, continued non-compliance can lead to criminal sanctions for senior management.

Under the Digital Services Act, the European Commission has powers with respect to the proliferation of illegal content online on platforms and the protection of fundamental rights, including protection for minors. The EU Council and Parliament also reached political agreement on 7 May 2026 on the proposed the digital omnibus on AI. The proposed measure will prohibit AI systems that generate non-consensual sexually explicit and intimate content or child sexual abuse material, such as AI nudification apps. It is intended this specific ban will take effect from 2 December 2026.

There is currently no stand-alone provision under Irish law that provides that identity theft or fraud constitutes an offence. However, it is addressed through a combination of legislative measures, primarily the Criminal Justice (Theft and Fraud) Offences Act 2001 and the Criminal Justice (Offences Relating to Information Systems) Act 2017. Section 6(1) of the 2001 Act provides for a broad offence of making gain or causing loss by deception, which can be applied to the fraudulent use of another person's identity. This can encompass a range of identity-based misconduct, including the use of deepfakes, where deception results in financial or personal gain. Separately, the use of deepfakes in certain circumstances could constitute harassment offence under section 10 of the Non-Fatal Offences against the Person Act 1997, where such use seriously interferes with another's peace and privacy or causes them alarm, distress or harm.

It is also important to be cognisant of existing civil remedies for individuals who have been subject to the unauthorised digital cloning or imitation of their likeness, voice or persona by AI systems. Under Irish law, a person can already take a legal action against a natural or legal person who makes a defamatory statement to another person. The Defamation Act 2009 defines a defamatory statement as "a statement that tends to injure a person's reputation in the eyes of reasonable members of society". Such a statement includes a visual image, sound or gesture and a statement that is published on the Internet or via electronic communication. Further, the Defamation (Amendment) Act 2026 provides a statutory power for the Circuit Court, previously in the High Court, to issue a Norwich Pharmacal order directing a digital services provider to identify an anonymous poster of defamatory online material. This makes it a lot more accessible to members of the public. If defamation is proven the usual remedies, damages and an injunction to remove or restrain publication are available. In recent years, a number of individuals have taken High Court actions relating to online content, including the use of deepfakes, that seek damages for defamation, malicious falsehood, data rights infringement, personality rights appropriation and passing off. Social media platforms are frequently named as defendants in such actions, primarily as a mechanism for content removal and identity disclosure of third parties posting content.

Data protection law may also be relevant in addressing the unauthorised use and dissemination of synthetic deepfakes using generative AI tools. Content relating to personal characteristics is regarded as "personal data" and, accordingly, data controllers are required to demonstrate a lawful basis for processing such data. Creating or sharing an AI-generated video of an identifiable individual entails the processing of that individual's personal data. Unless this processing falls within a lawful basis under GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018, which is unlikely if done without consent or any legitimate justification, it is unlawful.

Section 42 of the Consumer Protection Act 2007 prohibits misleading commercial practices including, under section 43, false information on the existence, extent or nature of any approval or sponsorship, whether direct or indirect, of the product by others. The unauthorised use of someone's image in advertising material to suggest that the person endorses or is affiliated with a product could arguably be considered a misleading commercial practice. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission is responsible for enforcing advertising rules in Ireland.

The regulatory framework for AI at the domestic and EU level is also very much evolving. The EU Artificial Intelligence Act introduces a legal requirement that aims to ensure a high level of protection of health, safety and fundamental rights against the harmful effects of AI systems in the European Union. The new AI office of Ireland will be established in 2026 as an independent statutory entity which will act as the central co-ordinating authority for the EU AI Act. Under the AI Act, certain AI practices will be prohibited and certain AI systems and uses of AI by providers and deployers will be subject to legal requirements in terms of governance, transparency and responses to risks and incidents.

The EU Artificial Intelligence Act regulates deepfakes, primarily through strict transparency obligations rather than outright bans. Article 50 of the EU AI Act introduces transparency obligations in four situations. These are, first, when AI interacts directly with people, second, when AI generates synthetic content, third, when AI is used for emotion recognition or biometric categorisation and, finally, when AI creates deepfakes or text published on matters

of public interest. These obligations apply to all AI systems used in the four situations set out in Article 50, not just to high-risk systems.

Deployers using AI to create deepfakes will be required to disclose that the content has been artificially generated or manipulated. Deployers publishing AI-generated text with the purpose of informing the public on matters of public interest will be required to disclose the text is AI-generated unless it has been subject to human review and editorial responsibility. The proposed approaches include persistent visual labels, opening disclaimers for video and audible warnings for audio. These obligations apply from 2 August 2026.

It is evident that Deputy Byrne's Bill is aligned with a considerable number of recent legislative reforms, whether criminal, civil or regulatory, that seek to impose appropriate guardrails to protect privacy and fundamental rights. However, I am not convinced the creation of new criminal offences, beyond what is already provided for, is necessarily the best strategy to address the issues the Bill seeks to tackle, particularly if undertaken without regard to the existing and developing regulatory framework.

A criminal justice approach is applicable only after a deepfake has been deployed to cause harm and may well be an appropriate means to address the most egregious harms caused by the misuse of generative AI tools, such as the development, distribution and use of so-called nudification apps. On the other hand, a regulatory approach can enforce compliance, platform accountability and technical standards before deepfakes reach the public. I commend Deputy Byrne on bringing the Bill forward. I look forward to hearing the views of Members on it.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I congratulate the Minister of State on her appointment. We are likely to see swaps in some committee Chair positions in the next while. Deputy Byrne was doing a good job as committee Chair, leaving out the circumstances.

I welcome the Bill. In some ways we are dealing with an issue that is accelerating at a pace we have not seen before. That is one of the reasons I support this legislation. It is not that this is the only part of the armoury to deal with this; it is but one tool. We need to ensure that we have in our legislative system the tools required to react as quickly as possible. While we understand deepfakes and we can laugh about some of them, such as the crude ones that kids get up to that have been around for years, we need to think about the tools that are behind it and the ability to create deepfakes, as Deputy Byrne mentioned. At the push of a button, somebody can create my voice and play it back to somebody on a phone with me giving them an instruction. That has the potential to destroy people's careers and marriages or to result in suicide. That is on a one-to-one level, but what if it is a state actor, as they call them now, doing this? We have all had a laugh at clips of Donald Trump in Lego form coming from Iran. Literally one minute after an incident happens there is a new Lego video of Donald Trump being an idiot, as he is, but it is funny. That is the level it can be done at, and that is the speed it can be done at. That is the danger of it.

Apart from us legislating for it, one of the big issues is that we have to hold the companies that have the platforms and programmes to account, those who hold the purse strings because, at the end of the day, this is all to do with money. They have to put in place the protections that are required but they also have to act when something happens. The biggest failure in the digital media age we are in is that the big companies are very slow to act. If you ring them or send them an e-mail to say what is online is libellous or if you press the button to say something

is malicious, it does not get taken down straight away. It is not suspended while the company adjudicates. In the vast majority of cases where I have reacted to posts or stuff online, it has never been taken down. What version of our law are they reading? If somebody accuses you online of a crime, that is the equivalent of libel. While you can go to court, by the time you get there it will have been seen by hundreds, thousands or millions of people because of the speed of technology. It is not suspended until you win the case. If I make a charge, it should be suspended while the company adjudicates. I have no problem with that.

As regards the incident we are dealing with, the programme most people were discussing at the time was Grok but it is not just one programme. It did not stop there, because that kind of ability to use people's images and to manipulate them and present them as reality is still available. We must have a way to protect people. Our image is our image. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of pictures of me. I am not too precious about whatever shape, size or whatever I am, but my image cannot be taken and put into another image to create a fake. I worked in the media for years so I know how to use images, but now it can literally be done by a child.

There is now a Bollywood film that was created from ten other films. The main actor is dead. All of the songs are new songs but they use his voice. The film has been sold and people have gone to see it, knowing it is not a fake but something created by AI that is considered brilliant. None of the other actors got a penny and the main actor is dead. The only people who benefit are those in the film company. That raises the issue of the protection of the image and who owns it when you die. Does your partner or your family own it?

This presents dangers. Mention was made of Nixon and the moon landing. We can all laugh at that, but if somebody like Deputy Byrne can be taken in, it just shows what is possible. That occurred a number of years ago. We have gone beyond that. Things can be smoothed out. You do not see six fingers on people any more in the pictures. It has gone beyond it. This technology is learning the whole time. It is now at the stage where it is teaching itself from its mistakes and identifying them. That is the nature of it. I am not afraid of it, but there are a lot of people who are afraid of it. A lot of older people are panicking. We have to find some way of helping them get around the problems that exist and teach them how to identify, as much as we can, what is fake and what is not fake. The only way we can do that is to show them examples. Way back when I was only a young fella, about 50 years ago, I remember doing a course in school. We had an imaginative teacher and he taught a media studies course. It was an extra class. He used to show us different pictures. He would block out one part and show that blocking out the context could change the interpretation and the purpose of the image. That was a photograph in a classroom of kids who were 13 or 14 years old. Now we have a computer that can do that and a lot more, for example, change the scenery or the background. It can be done for fun sometimes, which is what most people are doing, but it is not for fun when you start manipulating somebody's voice and what they are saying.

We have laws that protect us in some ways already. The Minister of State referred to some of them, but we have to be able to act quickly. Some of our laws were brought in to deal with libel. It was a form of assault on people. The way to assault people now is through an image. You went to court and took action but the damage was restricted to a small circle of people who saw it. If it was on *The Irish Times*, you had a circle of maybe 50,000 people in the whole country who saw it and it died. If it was on the television, maybe a few more saw it. Now,

literally at the click of a button, a million people can see it, so the damage is done there and then. How do you call that image back? How do you call back screenshots and everything else? How do you stop people sharing? We saw, even this week, images that should not be shared. Those very graphic images from Belfast were shared worldwide in an instant and then used by other actors. That was not a case of anybody doing anything to change those images, but a voice-over could be put on it.

I think it was only a few hours later that the second person was there. There was no such thing and it was proven. However, it gets a head of steam and that head of steam is what you are trying to protect against here, to make sure that people understand it is illegal to do it in the first place but then that you have the power to stop it and to call it back before it does further damage.

I support this. There are concerns about the freedom of speech, satire, etc., and we will address them on Committee Stage, when this gets to the committee, because it is important we do as much of this collegially as possible. It is not only us as politicians being precious; it is our whole society.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I also join in congratulating the Minister of State, Deputy Ardagh, on her appointment and wish her the very best as she takes on this important and challenging role.

First of all, I commend Deputy Byrne and thank him for continuing with this legislation. Deputy Byrne had this on First Stage in April 2025. If we think of how far AI has developed in that time, this legislation is needed now more than ever before.

Let us think back to 2025. Deputy Byrne introduced this Bill on First Stage and the entire Grok controversy arose at the end of 2025 leading into this year. Had his Bill been enacted, a lot of the concerns that we have seen might not have arisen, particularly around Grok and different nudification apps. It shows the importance of this legislation.

Obviously, it needs to be discussed on Committee Stage. We will discuss it then, ideally at the artificial intelligence committee as well as the justice committee.

Progressing this legislation is critical in terms of getting to grips with the misuse of artificial intelligence, not only in Irish society, but globally. If it were to be progressed in the Houses, this could be an example of best practice to other countries, showing them how to do it.

Deputy Byrne has covered most of the issues, as has Deputy Ó Snodaigh. I do not want to go over them too much. If we think of an older or elderly parent getting a call on a Saturday night that a son or daughter is in trouble, needs help, needs money or whatever it may be, and that call has been made through nefarious means, it is something that everybody fears, particularly if you look at the exploitation of older people when it comes to financial issues. Those are critical, as are people's music, art and entire identities. As the world is becoming more international, our individual identity is far more important to us than ever before. That includes our likenesses, namely, how we look and sound. Our likenesses being advantage of is something that we need to tackle head on.

While the Minister of State outlined that the EU AI Act covered a lot of ground in terms of various issues, such as how AI interacted with people and generated synthetic content and how

it was used for emotional recognition and biometric categorisation, it does not cover the issue of the misuse of people's images, voices and likenesses. The Bill is crucial and key to getting to grips with and coming to terms with that.

We all will be aware of the transformative impact that AI is having but there need to be guardrails. We have seen a lot of misuse of AI and we have to do as much as possible in terms of the regulation of artificial intelligence. While the EU AI Act has been passed, the general scheme of the AI regulation Bill here is progressing through the House. The national AI office will be established by August of this year. That does not mean that we stand still. AI is changing quickly, and sometimes it is quite frustrating how slow Parliament here and, indeed, parliaments around the world operate. If we were to get to grips with the fast-changing element of artificial intelligence, then it should not be that First Stage of Deputy Byrne's Bill was in January of last year and in June 2026, nearly a year and a half later, we are discussing it on Second Stage and then moving on to Committee Stage. This is the type of time-sensitive issue where we need to find a method within this House to move legislation more quickly.

Deputy Ó Snodaigh spoke about the large tech and AI companies. There needs to be a lot more done in terms of how they are regulated and how they answer not only to this House, but to the Garda and international police forces around the world, because if a complaint goes in, it can take weeks for any type of response. Meanwhile, that content has in some instances gone viral or stayed up and traumatised people.

There is a far bigger responsibility. We need to be doing more in this House to hold the large tech companies, and particularly the AI companies, to task for what they are and are not doing to protect people. That is a crucial element as well.

In fairness, the Bill goes a long way to protecting the individual identity that I mentioned previously. I will work with Deputy Byrne in terms of progressing this legislation. I commend him on this and give him my full support.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): I thank everyone for their contributions and Deputy Byrne for bringing this Private Members' Bill before the House. As Deputy Ó Cearúil says, Deputy Byrne was way ahead of the curve in relation to this. When they mention art imitating life, the Deputy's Bill came before the issues, especially when it came to Grok and the controversy we saw in late 2025.

I noted something Deputy Ó Snodaigh mentioned in relation to Grok. On foot of the controversy and the concerns that we had, and as he will probably be aware, the European Commission launched a formal investigation of X under the Digital Services Act, DSA, on 26 January. Coimisiún na Meán is formally now involved with the European Commission in the investigation and was instrumental in the work leading up to its launch. The new investigation will assess whether the company properly assessed and mitigated risks associated with the deployment of Grok's functionalities into X in the EU. This includes risks related to the dissemination of illegal content in the EU such as manipulated sexually explicit images, including content that may amount to child sexual abuse material. Coimisiún na Meán will continue to formally support the European Commission as it conducts its investigation into X. I suppose this case is really a test case for other AI platforms and we all will be watching what happens there.

In relation to the review of criminal and civil legislation, if you look at the Defamation Act, the idea of changing the jurisdiction for Norwich Pharmacal orders from the High Court to the Circuit Court has really democratised access to justice. Without needing to spend huge money on High Court fees, people can now go to the Circuit Court and get a Norwich Pharmacal order. That is a really big step in terms of trying to figure out who is behind these anonymous AI-generated posts. It is something that is really welcome.

Regarding criminal legislation, I am committed - I know the Minister is committed - to ensuring it is sufficiently robust to protect people from digital harms. Technology is evolving rapidly. Dr. Mike Ryan's narrative that he used during Covid, namely, that we had to act fast, comes into play here. When we are drafting legislation, we obviously have to do it right, but we also have to act rapidly because the technology is evolving at such a rapid pace that it is hard for us mere mortals to keep up with it. One of the problems that we face in democracies is trying to keep apace with the speed at which we change, and the ability of companies to instigate commercialised products is effectively way faster than we can respond to them as legislators. That is a big problem we have across the EU when it comes to regulating cybersecurity, AI and the misuse of images.

As we have outlined, the rapid development of generative AI raises diverse challenges across the board in relation to data protection, intellectual property rights, defamation, copyright and harms that more clearly fall into the criminal sphere. However, many of the issues that this Bill seeks to address might be better addressed or supplemented by civil remedies and regulatory models that we see coming from the EU. That said, it is important for us to have the discussion and shine a light on the sort of vacuum that is there when it comes to legislation relating to technology and AI.

The way it is exploding is frightening, particularly for the young and the old. We have seen older citizens subjected to financial fraud and crime, with texts that seem to be from their children, for example, claiming to have lost their phone and needing money. It is so simple and people are falling for it. Young people are being made the subject of AI-generated videos. Such content might not be something Deputy Ó Snodaigh or I would be upset by but young people seeing altered videos of themselves can have significant mental health implications. We really need to look at that.

From an education point of view, young people must be taught resilience and strength. There is an educational aspect in terms of how we can protect them emotionally from AI and in the social media space. We must evolve to meet the challenges that arise. We have a collective responsibility, across Departments and across the EU, in so far as we can, to channel technology where it may be of most benefit and to curb the instinct to misuse or abuse it. Technology should serve us, not be used as a tool to control or manipulate us. That really is the crux of the matter.

Deputy Byrne's Bill prompts the House to consider its core purpose and key responsibilities. The GDPR protects our personal information, the EU AI Act will regulate the use of AI tools, Coimisiún na Meán regulates online content on our behalf and Coco's Law prohibits the publication of intimate images without consent. The Deputy's Bill seeks to build upon that foundation. We need to be aligned with EU thinking on this and related issues. We must balance any necessary actions with being open to the development and growth of new

technologies. I commend Deputy Byrne on bringing forward this Bill. I commend it to the House.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I thank Deputies Ó Snodaigh and Ó Cearúil and the Minister of State for their contributions and their support. The Minister of State outlined the current legislative provision in this area but the reality is it is not working. If the legislation were working, we would not be seeing the proliferation of deepfakes and other continuing problems. While I acknowledge that the jurisdiction of Norwich Pharmacal orders has been extended to the Circuit Court, that is still prohibitive for many people, particularly those who do not understand the justice system.

The Minister of State referred to Coco's Law, which came about following the incredible campaigning by Jackie Fox. She was often told there was legislation already in place to deal with much of what she was seeking. However, Coco's Law, and the public information campaign that followed, was so successful because while people do not necessarily need to know the detail of the legislation, it is fairly certain that most people in Ireland now know not to use intimate images of others without their permission.

We need to get to a situation where there is an awareness in society that we should not use somebody's voice, image or likeness in a malign way without that person's permission. We might think that should be obvious but, unfortunately, it is not. In order to enforce that, we need to have criminal sanctions in place. As Deputy Ó Snodaigh said, the legislation is not a silver bullet. A broader series of measures must be in place. Our challenge is that we need to shift to a situation where we enforce a digital duty of care on technology companies such that they have consideration, before they allow products onto the market, as to how those products may be used. If they are misused, there must be the capability to take action.

AI has incredible potential and I am a huge advocate of it as a tool to achieve particular goals. However, we know the consequences of its misuse, which include fraud, theft of intellectual property, which is a big issue for creatives, and suicide. We all need to understand our digital identity and what it means. Talking about Coco's Law reminds me of one of the successes of the GDPR. There probably are not many people who have read the entire regulation and know it inside out but, overwhelmingly, people do know that they must not use the data of others for any purpose save that for which they have expressly given permission. We need to move to thinking in the same way about digital identities, namely, that people cannot misuse another person's identity and voice for malign purpose. We certainly need to protect freedom of expression in the context of satire and so on but this legislation deals very specifically with cases where such usage is for malign purposes and in, many cases, for particular gain.

I spent many hours dealing with the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill, both as a member of the media committee and a Member of the Seanad at the time. A lot of the work that was put into that legislation was quite far-reaching, including the setting up of the Office of the Online Safety Commissioner. One of the concerns I had was that we were not taking strong enough action against some of the technology companies when they failed to take action. It was always my view that where a provider wilfully or recklessly allows an online harm to go out on a platform, there should be consequences and individuals should be held responsible. The problem, as the Minister of State mentioned, is that a lot of technology companies will just

write off significant financial sanctions as business costs. I do not accept and never did accept that provision for non-compliance leading to criminal sanction is strong enough within existing legislation. If we have been successful in that regard, why then, as part of our EU Presidency agenda, have we said that online safety is one of Ireland's top priorities? Clearly, it persists as a challenge and a problem.

As Deputy Ó Cearúil mentioned, this legislation was introduced before the arrival of Grok and so on. Those developments are impacting on society in many different ways. Our first obligation as legislators is to ensure the safety of our citizens, in the online space as much as in the offline space. We are going to see the misuse of digital identities grow in a whole variety of ways. While I am really appreciative of the Government's decision to allow this legislation to progress, I ask that there be movement to address these issues. I am not precious as to which exact legislation is progressed but it is clear that what we have currently is not strong enough. I recognise there will be challenges regarding extraterritoriality and all of that but there is an obligation on us to be able to protect people right now. It is critical that we take action on this.

In the same way as there was a campaign regarding the misuse of intimate images, we need to start talking about protection of digital identity and how people can protect their own voice, image and likeness. We need a dedicated campaign about copyright both specifically for the creative industries and more widely. My view is that when people are having digital family conversations, they will have to introduce family safe words. If members of my family want to make sure it is actually me they are talking to, they could ask me for the family safe word. Do we need to start looking at public information campaigns in that regard?

I encourage the Minister of State to work on building an awareness of our digital identities. Citizens do not necessarily need to have recourse to all the legislative provisions she listed but they need to know why their digital identity is important and that sanctions will be imposed on those who, for malign purposes, seek to misuse another's digital identity. I very much thank the Minister of State for accepting the legislation. I look forward to engaging further as it progresses.

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 5.50 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 16 Meitheamh 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 5.50 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 16 June 2026.