



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions.....	534
An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business	545
Forestry (Critical Infrastructure) (Amendment) Bill 2026: First Stage	562
Planning for Constitutional Change Bill 2026: First Stage.....	563
School Meals Nutritional Standards Bill 2026: First Stage	565
Data Protection Act 2018 under (Section 60(6)) and (Section 51(3)) Regulations 2026: Motion	567
Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion.....	567
Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion.....	568
Appointment of Committee Cathaoirligh: Motion	568
Ceisteanna - Questions	569
Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements.....	569
Artificial Intelligence	580
Criminal Justice (International Cooperation on Electronic Evidence and Other Matters) Bill 2026: Second Stage	588
Health (Abolition of Three Day Wait Rule) (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage [Private Members]	610
Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions	639
Job Losses	639
Social Media.....	641
Export Controls	644
Export Controls	646
Tourist Accommodation	648
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions	650
Business Supports	650
Company Law	652
Artificial Intelligence	654
Foreign Direct Investment.....	656
Departmental Strategies	659

Export Controls	661
Artificial Intelligence	664
Small and Medium Enterprises	666
Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters.....	668
Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate.....	669
Special Educational Needs	669
Educational Reform.....	672
Disability Services	675
Heritage Sites	679

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 16 Meitheamh 2026

Tuesday, 16 June 2026

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

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The Government is failing to tackle the scourge of dereliction. Every day, people pass homes, buildings and derelict sites in their communities. Houses are left to rot while land hoarders and speculators get off scot-free. I cannot tell you how angry and demoralised people seeking a home feel when they see all of this, not to mention the impact on our cities, towns and villages, with rows of derelict homes that are magnets for dumping, rats and antisocial behaviour - symbols of decay. Volunteers who keep neighbourhoods clean, community groups and sporting organisations without a base all look on in anger.

The housing Minister announced what he called a "war on dereliction" in October last year, and this was followed by Simon Harris announcing, and re-announcing, plans for a new derelict property tax. There were plenty of soundbites, press releases and big promises. Today, finally, he brings his tax proposal to the Cabinet. The questions people will be asking are whether this is the big step forward that is so badly required and if it will bring the necessary pace to tackle dereliction head on. The answer to both of those questions is "No", because the tax will not come into effect until 2027 and collection of the tax may not start until 2028. Today, we learn the tax will not apply to the entire State, but only to places with populations of 4,000 people or more. This phased approach means that thousands of derelict properties will not be captured by the tax in its initial phase.

If the Government is serious about dealing with the blight of dereliction, urgency is required. It has to put it up to those responsible for dereliction with legislation and serious financial penalties that will get homes and buildings back into use. Sitting back and pushing the derelict property tax out for another two years is not the mark of a Government intent on getting the job done. It is incredible that there is nothing in Simon Harris's proposal to ensure the collection of the more than €30 million already owed in derelict site levies. We told the Government that this money was not being collected and that local authorities did not have the capacity to collect it. We gave the Government the solutions, but instead, it gifted a multimillion euro amnesty to land hoarders. Ní leor leatharracht maidir le foirgnimh tréigthe.

Caithfidh an Rialtas gníomhú go práinneach agus go héifeachtúil chun dul i ngleic leis seo i gceart agus chun tithe agus foirgnimh a thabhairt ar ais in úsáid.

It is time to get serious on the issue of dereliction. We need a derelict property tax with real teeth. We need to penalise property hoarding and incentivise homes and buildings being reoccupied. Property hoarders who are not playing ball must be hit hard. The tax should be introduced now and ratcheted up - doubled, we believe - every year.

Of course, we have to ensure that every last cent owed by property hoarders is collected. Anyone who hoards property must pay the price and does not simply get to walk away. That is what urgency looks like. That is what ambition looks like. That and that alone is what will bring thousands of homes back into use.

The Taoiseach: I would dispute what the Deputy has said and her analysis and presentation of it. Dealing with vacancy and dereliction is multi-stranded and must involve a multi-stranded approach. As far back as 2022, the Government introduced what I would consider to have been a game-changing initiative in terms of the vacant property refurbishment grant, which provides up to €50,000 for vacant properties and up to €70,000 for derelict properties. Since its launch in 2022, a total of 17,486 applications have been received; over 13,000 have been approved; €285 million had been paid out by quarter 1 of this year; and over 5,300 vacant or derelict homes have been returned to use. That is proactive and going at this in a very significant and pragmatic way, and it has yielded results.

Then we have the new vacant above-the-shop grant which was introduced last April. That provides up to €140,000 to convert vacant upper floor commercial space into housing alongside a €5,000 expert advice grant. We have regeneration and local authority action. Government has allocated €150 million through the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund to tackle vacancy and dereliction. About €142.5 million has already been allocated and more than 1,300 properties approved for intervention. Dublin City Council has received €10 million with approximately €9 million still available for deployment. That allows local authorities to acquire vacant or derelict properties, carry out works and return them to productive use or sale.

The town centre first policy is a significant initiative to support community-led regeneration and reuse of vacant buildings in towns across Ireland. Cappoquin in Waterford is a good illustration. It has gone from 33 derelict properties to 11 in five years through a plan from the Cappoquin Development Association supported with investment from the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht through the town and village renewal scheme and Rural Regeneration and Development Fund.

We provide support to local authorities to address vacant housing. The local authority vacancy rate was 2.75% at the end of 2024. It had been a 3.18% prior to that. That is the national residential vacancy rate. We have made a lot of progress in terms of social housing.

In terms of the derelict property tax, the Government took a decision last year to change it and to move the function from local authorities and to move it from a levy to a tax to be implemented by Revenue. I would appreciate the Deputy's support for. She is indicating she will support it wholeheartedly. It needs legislation and it will be legislated for in this year's

finance Act but a lot of work has to happen and is happening to make sure it is accurate, comprehensive and up to date.

There is a tendency always for the Deputy and others to be all things to all people. She has said the local authorities did not have the capacity; they did have the capacity. The reason we are moving this to Revenue is that local authorities have not succeeded at all in implementing the derelict sites Act as it was fashioned. Some local authorities did. Limerick and others had the capacity to do it; others just did not bother. I do not want to be criticising people for the sake of it but the bottom line is this. On another day in this House people will decry the lack of devolved authority in government in Ireland but here is an area where local authorities really did not go after it-----

Deputy Mark Ward: You are in control of housing.

The Taoiseach: -----in any effective way. That has to be said and articulated. Tá an Rialtas ag déanamh gach aon iarracht an fhadhb seo a réiteach. Tá dul chun cinn le feiscint anois sna deontais éagsúla a chuirimid i bhfeidhm.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: According to the census, there are up to 180,000 vacant and derelict properties across the State. That cannot stand at any time but particularly in the grip of such a serious housing crisis.

The failure to collect that more than €30 million in the derelict site levy speaks to an ambivalence or, certainly, a slowness on the part of the Government.

Let me just repeat the problems here that need to be solved: delaying the introduction of this tax, which is a tax we recognise is absolutely necessary,-----

The Taoiseach: The Deputy supports it.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: -----until 2027 and the collection of it until 2028; and the Government saying it will only apply to places with populations of more than 4,000 people. None of that makes sense at a time when we need immediate, comprehensive action. By the way, the level of tax-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: The financial penalty has to be significant and ought to be ratcheted up against those who do not play ball.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate the Deputy's support for the Government's initiative on the tax front. It is not being delayed. In many ways, what is happening here is illustrative of the inaction and the absence of a comprehensive database to bring in a tax in the first instance. Work is ongoing between the Department of housing and the Department of Finance in that regard. Local authorities have had the Derelict Sites Act for decades. There are deficiencies in terms of identifying all of the properties that come under dereliction, not necessarily vacancy

because not all vacant properties are derelict. We have to make that point. This is going to be done properly and comprehensively-----

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Slowly.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Very slowly.

The Taoiseach: -----and in a way that ensures there is a very defined and precise database to enable the tax to be levelled by Revenue. We will do everything we can to accelerate this. There is no delaying of this in any shape or form. It will be legislated for in the forthcoming Finance Bill, which it has to be legislated for. I welcome the Deputy's support for it.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Cian O'Callaghan of the Social Democrats.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The board of the Rotunda has now said it will abide by national healthcare policy and ensure that consultants on public-only contracts are not breaching them by treating private patients. How confident is the Taoiseach that he can rely on what the board says? At the weekend, the *Irish Independent* revealed more concerning details of practices at the hospital. Consultants on public-only contracts who deliver babies for private patients at the weekend are routinely gifted with sums of up to €1,500 by consultants contracted to do that private work. The hospital is aware of this and described it as a long-standing practice. The hospital also says that the payment of these gifts is, "personal to the consultants and the hospital is not involved". Given that women are giving birth in the Rotunda and are treated by consultants employed by the Rotunda, this is clearly nonsense. The hospital is very much involved. It just does not want to act.

Whistleblowers have informed my colleague, Deputy Pádraig Rice, that the payment of these gifts is not confined to the Rotunda. It is happening at Cork University Maternity Hospital, CUMH, too. It takes place at weekends because of the way the Rotunda and CUMH are operating their rosters. They each have just one roster while other hospitals are operating two, one for public patients and one for private patients.

Whistleblowers have also come forward to Deputy Rice about issues at University Hospital Galway. The hospital has a deal in place to do laboratory work for a private hospital and consultants on public-only contracts are being asked by management at the hospital to do laboratory work for private patients. While many consultants on public-only contracts are refusing to do this, it is nonetheless leading to big delays in the processing of samples for public patients. This includes public patients with cancer. As the Taoiseach knows, an early cancer diagnosis can save a life while a delayed diagnosis can be fatal. Delays are so bad at the hospital that it is outsourcing some laboratory work for both public and private patients to commercially run labs. This is at an enormous expense to the public purse.

Was the Taoiseach aware that some consultants in the Rotunda were receiving gifts of up to €1,500 to deliver a baby? Did he know that this was also happening in Cork University Maternity Hospital? Has Revenue started an investigation into these gifts, given that no tax is being paid? Is the Taoiseach concerned that this could give rise to a level of fraud if insurers

are being billed for work consultants have not done? Was he aware of the issues at University Hospital Galway? Is he concerned that public patients are receiving-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: -----delayed diagnoses for life-threatening conditions?

What actions will the Taoiseach take to address this?

The Taoiseach: First, the last Government moved in terms of negotiating the public-only consultant contract. We spent a lot of time and did a lot of work on it. We negotiated that with the IHCA. The Government not only expects that to be fulfilled, but will work relentlessly to ensure its enforcement and fulfilment. People cannot be signing contracts and then arbitrarily varying those contracts or deciding to ignore them. Neither can hospitals that are funded predominantly by the State do that either. It is an imperative that the public-only consultant contract is implemented and that it works as it is supposed to across the entire health service. Strong progress has been made in contract uptake and in increasing consultant capacity, but the clear focus now, on the Minister's behalf, the Department's and the HSE's, is on delivering in practice, particularly extended hours and weekend services for patients. More consultants are now rostered for evening and Saturday work, but the current levels remain too low and need to improve further.

We are fully committed, from the Government's side, to the implementation and enforcement of the public-only consultant contract. As I said, there has been strong national uptake - about 3,416 consultants had signed up as of 29 May of this year, including 1,220 new entrants and 2,196 consultants who have switched from the older contracts. This means that about 69% of all consultants working in our hospitals are now on the public-only consultant contract. Consultant numbers themselves have also increased significantly, with 51% more consultants now working in our hospitals than in 2020, strengthening overall capacity. The fundamental issue and the rationale for the contract is delivering stronger consultant presence on site, including at evening times and at weekends, so that the patients see the benefits of this contract.

As the Deputy knows, the contract allows for rostering from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday to Friday and 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Saturdays. At the moment, current figures show that only 37% of consultants are rostered for evening working and only 11% for Saturday. That is far too low and simply has to improve. The HSE has governance and programme structures to strengthen its oversight, reporting and accountability and the Minister is very clear about engaging with all of the hospitals to ensure compliance and implementation.

In terms of the Deputy's two questions, the answers are "No" and "No". I was not aware of what was contained in the report at the weekend in respect of gifts to consultants who turned up. Again, as the Deputy knows, Revenue is independent, but I am sure Revenue read the article, as the Deputy and I did. It is a matter for Revenue now to pursue any issues that arise from that.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Clearly, this is an issue beyond the Rotunda. There are instances in Cork and Galway. There is an emerging pattern around the country of breaches of the public-

only contract. The Taoiseach and the Government have a responsibility to patients and to the taxpayer to ensure that the contract is being implemented. He is clearly not aware of the different breaches around the country. The Taoiseach, the Government and the Minister for Health need to get a grip on this. They need to get ahead on this. They need to take actions to ensure that the public-only contract is actually being implemented and enforced. What are the Taoiseach, the Minister for Health and the Government doing to ensure that the public-only contract is being adhered to? Is he going to get a grip or a handle on this? When are we going to see results in terms of ensuring that the public-only contracts are actually implemented?

The Taoiseach: First, the Deputy mentioned whistleblowers. I have not had access to those whistleblowers. I do not know whether they have formally given their information to the HSE or to the Department. Are they whistleblowers as per the Act or are they people who have gone to the Deputy directly? The Deputy might clarify that at a later stage; he does not have the opportunity now and I appreciate that. That is an important point. It needs to be clarified and the Deputy needs to be very transparent about that because I do not have access-----

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Taoiseach needs to be transparent about what he is doing to address this.

The Taoiseach: I do not have access to that information. What I can say to the Deputy, however, is that the Minister is extremely strong on this. The Government brought in this contract, which, in itself was a radical change from what had historically been the case. We are determined that it has an impact and an effect. As far as the Government is concerned - I was very clear last weekend in my statements on this, and the Minister likewise - we will not tolerate any variation from the contracts that people have signed up to.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: What are you doing?

The Taoiseach: That will have to be implemented. I would like the Social Democrats to support that. They did the last time-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. The time is up. We move to the Labour Party's Deputy Bacik.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: The Minister for housing has declared a "war on dereliction"; fighting talk and a striking turn of phrase. This is the Government's tactic. It is to flood the airwaves with repeated announcements, deflect responsibility and spin its failures to save face. This week, the Tánaiste sought to pin responsibility for vacancy and dereliction on councils alone, a convenient distraction from years of Government failure. Who has been in charge of national housing policy for the past decade? It is the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste.

For years, the Government ignored the growing number of vacant and derelict properties blighting the country. Meanwhile, rents and house prices have spiralled, homelessness continues to rise and people are losing hope. After years of inaction, it seems the best response from the Government will be a thinly-veiled attempt to pass the buck.

What has this so-called war on dereliction delivered? A delayed measure, already announced in last year's budget, the renaming of a 35-year-old levy and a promise that Revenue will now collect it. If it worked, this could be significant but, as with so many of the Government's housing plans, it is a half measure, delayed and diluted, and arbitrarily deployed, initially only to urban areas with populations of 4,000 or more. As if dereliction did not affect small towns and villages when we all know it is a blight on every community. PAYE tax is paid by every employee, so why this selective approach? The Government said it is phasing this in but why this approach and why rule out these small towns and villages which are also blighted by dereliction?

Speculators and land hoarders in every part of the country, not just in larger urban centres, are profiting from the misery caused by the chronic shortage of homes so unless this new tax is set at an effective and meaningful level, speculators will keep sitting on their assets, literally. Derelict buildings on empty streets across the country will remain a visual reminder of the Government's failure to get off the fence and fix housing.

We are all hearing from people who have been directly affected by this. Every day, I hear from people who have received an eviction notice and who can find nowhere else; nowhere to rent and nowhere to buy. Each case and each family situation is heartbreaking. I am supporting one such mother of three, who has had her eviction notice and now feels she has no option but to overhold. She and her young family have literally nowhere to go and in Dublin Bay South, they see vacant houses and derelict sites all around them.

People like that young mother need the Government to act now on dereliction. The Labour Party is calling for the introduction of compulsory sales orders - a new mechanism to force persistently vacant and derelict properties back into use. We are calling on the Government to fund vacancy and dereliction teams in local authorities across the country. The Taoiseach is not a commentator; he has effectively been in government for a decade, so when will he and his Ministers stop blaming everyone else for the vacancy and dereliction crisis? Will the Government introduce the stronger measures needed to bring empty homes back into use and to generate greater housing supply to fix this housing crisis?

The Taoiseach: Just to say, Fianna Fáil came back into Government in 2020. I was not in government for the past decade. Facts matter. We did not have the executive authority we now have.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: We all know the arrangement.

The Taoiseach: The most significant measure we have taken in terms of dereliction-----

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: The Labour Party was in government.

The Taoiseach: -----is the introduction of the grant to refurbish derelict and vacant housing. There is no question about it. I took a personal interest in that because when I walked in rural areas or urban areas I could see dereliction. The Minister at the time, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, introduced it. Some 17,500 applications is no mean change and 13,000 of them have been approved so that has been a significant initiative. So, it is not years of doing nothing. That is

a very significant measure the Deputy chooses to ignore. Around €285 million has been paid out by quarter 1 of 2026. That grant scheme has been extended to 2030.

The vacant above the shop grant will do significant work as well. The Government has allocated €150 million through the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund to tackle vacancy and dereliction, and €142 million of that has already been allocated. Again, this charge of inaction, as if nothing is happening, is just not true. There are many more initiatives as well.

The Government launched the CPO activation programme in 2023 to support proactive local authority acquisition of vacant and derelict properties. Approximately, 11,000-plus properties engaged, 400 CPOs commenced and 250-plus were completed. Proposals are also being advanced to centralise certain CPO powers to An Coimisiún Pleanála. The existing unpaid derelict site levy will remain a charge on affected properties and continue to be collected by local authorities.

In terms of the replacement of the derelict site levy with the tax, I think we all have to agree. It seems very clear to me.

Deputy Bacik mentioned 35 years with regard to derelict sites. Does anybody acknowledge there has been some weakness here in local government in terms of implementing the derelict sites levy? No, but Deputy Bacik chooses to blame central government. We need to make up our minds in the Oireachtas. When we delegate and gift powers to local authorities, there comes a time when there has to be accountability from local authorities as well. When we look at the tables in terms of who did what at local authority level, there are differences. Some are far more proactive than others but no one on the Opposition side ever wants to criticise this aspect of it because it has to be the Government's fault for everything. We have a very double-standard approach to regional delegation of power and local authority devolution. The reason we are transferring this to Revenue is because we believe Revenue has a tendency to concentrate the mind a bit more than local authorities have done. That is the bottom line. When people see Revenue coming, behaviour will change but we are going to have to do it in a comprehensive way. We are going to have to do it in a proper, precise way, again illustrating some degree of inaction by local authorities in terms of having ready registers and ready maps of properties-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up, Taoiseach, and Deputy Bacik will respond now.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I have listened carefully and the Taoiseach's answer is again a textbook response by Government. People like the young mother in my constituency are sick of central government looking to claim ownership for any win but absolutely looking to absolve itself of responsibility for any failure. It is buck-passing to local authorities and it is utterly shameless and meaningless to people who are looking for action. Yes, of course we acknowledge that one third of local authorities collected no derelict sites tax revenue in 2024. Clearly there are issues with the existing model but it is the job of central government to fix it. I have several questions because the Government has no sense of urgency and there is no sense of urgency from it on these new announcements. Why is the Government introducing this new tax on a selective basis? Why, when all employees have to pay PAYE, is this new tax, even once it finally comes in, going to be confined to urban areas with a population of 4,000 or more? Has there been

pressure from somewhere? Why is this arbitrary distinction being made? Is it not true that the new tax will not be collected until 2028 at the earliest?

The Taoiseach: The point I am making is that the reason it is over 4,000 is because that is where the housing need is and it is where there is the greatest degree of dereliction.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Who says?

The Taoiseach: It is also the first phase of this because this is a mammoth task. Notwithstanding the Derelict Sites Act being there, the database as inherited is not sufficient to immediately introduce a tax when we do not have a comprehensive database on derelict registers the length and breadth of the country. This is a tax that is coming in, so it will have to be done properly and in a very precise and effective way that will make a difference. It is very important that we get it right and do it properly.

We expanded the living city initiative in the last budget and that will help significantly with regeneration in cities as well. The URDF and the rural community development fund are doing an awful lot of work in towns across the country and in cities in terms of bringing back to life city streets. Sometimes people might say Deputy Bacik is textbook Opposition and that everything has to be the Government's fault but the point I make is that a lot of progress has been made in a lot of areas. We need to do more-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up and we will move to the Independent and Parties Technical Group and Deputy Healy.

Deputy Seamus Healy: As Fianna Fáil leader, the Taoiseach led the party into a confidence and supply arrangement with Fine Gael in 2016, ten years ago. That was in the wake of large-scale water protests, which resulted eventually in the abolition of domestic water charges and the setting up of a special Oireachtas committee on water services. I and former Deputy Thomas Pringle represented the Independent TDs on that committee. That Government, which the Taoiseach supported, promised and committed to bring forward a referendum to put public ownership of water services into Bunreacht na hÉireann. Ten years later, we are no nearer to that referendum. I compliment former TDs and colleagues, Joan Collins and Thomas Pringle, for their efforts in pursuing this referendum and introducing the Thirty-fifth Amendment of the Constitution (Water in Public Ownership) (No. 2) Bill 2016. In the intervening years, that commitment has been given by successive taoisigh and Ministers.

In 2017, the Oireachtas committee on water unanimously agreed that a referendum should be held. In 2019, the then Minister, Eoghan Murphy of Fine Gael, promised that a referendum would take place in the first half of 2020. The programme for Government in 2020, Our Shared Future, again promised a referendum to "Retain Irish Water in public ownership as a national, standalone, regulated utility." In November 2022, Micheál Martin, as Taoiseach, told the Dáil that the Government intended to hold a referendum on housing and water in, as he said, the near future, and that the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, would be in a position to act on these issues early in the new year in 2023. In March 2023, the then Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, said the Government was committed to holding a constitutional referendum to keep Irish Water in public ownership.

Ten years later, and after all those commitments, we are no nearer to that referendum. Where is the referendum relating to the Thirty-fifth Amendment of the Constitution (Water in Public Ownership) (No. 2) Bill 2022? When will the Minister bring this Bill forward to the Dáil? When does the Government intend to call a referendum to put water services into the Constitution as a public utility?

The Taoiseach: First, I do remember the chronology of events very well. Regarding the issue of keeping the provision of water in public control and ownership, the Government has fulfilled that.

Deputy Seamus Healy: No, it has not.

The Taoiseach: Irish Water is entirely publicly owned and will remain so. Recently, the Government, in the context of the national development plan, NDP, allocated unprecedented funding to Irish Water for the development of water infrastructure across the length and breadth of the country.

The urgency and imperative right now is to fundamentally improve the water supply infrastructure. It is a key utility, and the State is investing unprecedented amounts of taxpayers' money to make sure that we get the big wastewater treatment plants through. These include the eastern and midlands project. It will be interesting to see if the House will support that very important public infrastructure. If it does not happen within a decade or so, the midlands, Dublin and other areas on the east coast will be running out of water. It is likewise with the wastewater treatment plant and the Dublin drainage project. Big projects are under way, and that is where all the focus has been and will continue to be.

It is arguable at this stage whether a referendum is really required at all in respect of this matter. There is unanimity in the House in respect of keeping it in public ownership. It will stay in public ownership. Of course, when it comes to constitutional amendments, the devil is always in the detail and in the framing of the language and the wording. That is always problematic and challenging at the best of times.

Deputy Seamus Healy: It has been ten years.

The Taoiseach: The more important point is that there are no proposals from anybody around the privatisation of Irish Water or any of the water services.

The more important focus for us is repairing and upgrading the existing infrastructure, but also expanding it. Utilities are key to the future of our society and economy, and that is why we are putting huge amounts of money and equity into Irish Water to make sure it has the capacity to do the type of work that is required. In the last three years, particularly in the context of the national development plan, the allocation underpins the significant growth and development of water infrastructure and supplies in this country. The key question will be whether we can get community and political buy-in to the kinds of projects that the country requires and avoid partisan rows that would undermine the national and public interest in terms of getting these projects done.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The Government has certainly not honoured its ten years of commitments, as I outlined. All those commitments have been broken. The Taoiseach has not answered the questions. We can only presume that he and the Government wish to keep the door open to the future privatisation of water services in this country.

The Taoiseach must know that if that happened, it would be an absolute disaster. We only need to look across the water to the UK to see this. The UK water sector struggles with a combination of massive debt, failing infrastructure and underinvestment. It is now generally accepted that the UK privatised-for-profit water services model is flawed. Profits and dividends are prioritised over modernisation. Thames Water, for instance, has a debt burden of about €20 billion and is facing collapse. The Taoiseach should close the door on privatisation, announce a referendum, as he and previous taoisigh committed to over the past ten years. He should honour those commitments.

The Taoiseach: I remember the negotiations when we were in opposition but part of the confidence and supply agreement to make sure the country had a Government, which is something the Deputy has never quite had to worry about because he is always in splendid isolation-----

Deputy Seamus Healy: What about the referendum?

The Taoiseach: -----and splendid opposition, which is his entitlement.

An Ceann Comhairle: Abide by the rules.

Deputy Seamus Healy: The Taoiseach promised a referendum.

The Taoiseach: However, the point I am making is that what we negotiated was-----
(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: If I could be allowed to answer-----

Deputy Seamus Healy: The Taoiseach has not honoured his commitment-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy should allow the Taoiseach to answer.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Answer the question.

The Taoiseach: I am trying to be the Deputy is interrupting.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is interrupting.

Deputy Seamus Healy: He is not answering the question; he is deflecting.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

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

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Data Protection Act 2018 (Sections 51(3) and 60(6)) (Scoping Exercise in response to requests from Dignity4Patients) (Amendment) Regulations 2026 (*without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately*)
- Motion re Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions (1) (*without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately*)
- Motion re Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions (2) (*without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately*)
- Motion re Appointment of Committee Cathaoirligh (*without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately*)
- Criminal Justice (International Cooperation on Electronic Evidence and Other Matters) Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (*to conclude after the first round, not to exceed 3 hours and 34 minutes and any division claimed to be taken immediately prior to Committee Stage on Wednesday*)

Tuesday's private members' business shall be Second Stage of the Health (Abolition of Three Day Wait Rule) (Amendment) Bill 2026, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

- Criminal Justice (International Cooperation on Electronic Evidence and Other Matters) Bill 2026 (Committee and remaining Stages) (*to conclude within 2 hours*)
- Guardianship of Infants and Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2026 (Report and Final Stages) (*to conclude within 1 hour*)
- Finance Bill 2026 (Committee and remaining Stages) (*to conclude within 2 hours*)
- Insurance (Disregard of Certain Medical History and Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025 (Report and Final Stages) (*to conclude within 1 hour*)
- Microenterprise Loan Fund (Amendment) Bill 2024 (Amendments from the Seanad) (*to conclude within 1 hour*)
- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Directive on combating firearms trafficking and other firearms-related offences and amending Directive (EU) 2024/1260 (*to conclude within 1 hour and any division claimed to be taken immediately*)

- Motion for Further Revised Estimate for Public Services 2026 [Vote 26] (back from committee) (*without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately*)

- Motion re Proposed Approval by Dáil Éireann of the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 (Designation of Meath County Council) Order 2026 (*without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately*)

- Motion re Proposed Approval by Dáil Éireann of the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 (Designation of Carlow County Council) Order 2026 (*without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately*)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion *re* Data Centres, Energy Use and Climate change, selected by the Labour Party.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Statements on Rare Diseases (not to exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes)

Thursday evening business shall be the Motion *re* Report entitled "Report on Inclusive Education for Persons with Disabilities", sponsored by the Joint Committee on Disability Matters.

Proposed Arrangements for this week's business:

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

(a) the time allocated to Government business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business and the Dáil may sit later than 10.48 p.m.; and

(b) private members' business shall be taken following proceedings on the Second Stage of the Criminal Justice (International Cooperation on Electronic Evidence and Other Matters) Bill 2026, with consequential effect on the commencement times for the items following in the ordinary routine of business;

2. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Data Protection Act 2018 (Sections 51(3) and 60(6)) (Scoping Exercise in response to requests from Dignity4Patients) (Amendment) Regulations 2026 shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

3. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions (1) shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

4. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions (2) shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

5. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Appointment of Committee Cathaoirleach shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

6. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Criminal Justice (International Cooperation on Electronic Evidence and Other Matters) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion at the end of the first speaking round and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

(b) on conclusion of the first speaking round, or where speeches conclude before the 3 hours and 24 minutes have elapsed and no other member is offering, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a speech in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; Provided that any division claimed on the Second Stage proceedings shall be taken immediately prior to Committee Stage on Wednesday; and

(c) members may share time; and

Mins	20	20	20	12	4
Mins	20	12	4	20	12
Mins	4	20	12	4	20

7. notwithstanding anything in Standing Order 177(2), the proceedings on Second Stage of the Water Services (Repeal of Water Charges) Bill 2025 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours.

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders:

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

(b) the Order of the Dáil of 9th June 2026 referring the Finance Bill 2026 to the Select Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Sector Reform, Digitalisation, and Taoiseach is hereby discharged and Third Stage of the Bill shall be taken in Committee of the whole Dáil;

(c) any motions to be taken without debate shall be taken on the conclusion of the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Directive on combating firearms trafficking and other firearms-related offences and amending Directive (EU) 2024/1260; and

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

2. the proceedings on Committee and Remaining Stages of the Criminal Justice (International Cooperation on Electronic Evidence and Other Matters) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours by one question, which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration;

3. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Guardianship of Infants and Child Care (Amendment) Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 1 hour by one question, which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration;

4. the proceedings on Committee and Remaining Stages of the Finance Bill 2026 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 2 hours by one question, which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Finance;

5. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Insurance (Disregard of Certain Medical History and Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2025 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 1 hour by one question, which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Finance;

6. the proceedings on the amendments from the Seanad to the Microenterprise Loan Fund (Amendment) Bill 2024 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 1 hour, and any amendments from the Seanad not disposed of shall be decided by one question which shall be put from the Chair, and which shall, in relation to amendments to the Seanad amendments, include only those set down or accepted by the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment;

7. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann for a Directive on combating firearms trafficking and other firearms-related offences and amending Directive (EU) 2024/1260 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 60 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

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

— opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 10 minutes;

— speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin, Social Democrats, the Labour Party, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 7.5 minutes per party or group;

— speeches by non-party/group members – 7.5 minutes in total; and

— a speech in response by the Minister – 5 minutes;

(b) members may share time; and

(c) any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

8. the proceedings on the Motion for the Further Revised Estimate for Public Services 2026 [Vote 26] shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

9. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Proposed Approval by Dáil Éireann of the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 (Designation of

Meath County Council) Order 2026 shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately; and

10. the proceedings on the Motion *re* Proposed Approval by Dáil Éireann of the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 (Designation of Carlow County Council) Order 2026 shall be taken without debate and any division demanded thereon shall be taken immediately.

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

1. notwithstanding anything in Standing Orders, topical issues may be taken earlier than 7.24 p.m. with consequential effect on the commencement time for Motion *re* Report entitled 'Report on Inclusive Education for Persons with Disabilities', and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil; and

2. the Statements on Rare Diseases shall not exceed 2 hours and 25 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply:

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

(b) following the statements, a Minister or Minister of State shall be called upon to make a statement in reply which shall not exceed 10 minutes; and

(c) members may share time.

Mins	25	15	10	10	3
Mins	10	10	3	9	10
Mins	3	9	10	3	5

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements for the week's business agreed to?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They are not agreed.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: They are not agreed. I listened with interest to the Tánaiste, Deputy Simon Harris's, confirmation of Fine Gael's plans around Irish reunification. We are waiting to hear what the Taoiseach's plans are. For weeks, we have asked for statements on Irish unity. Later today, Deputy Mary Lou McDonald will introduce a Bill for constitutional change about responsible planning for Irish unity, a citizens' assembly and a Green Paper. We would love to hear the Taoiseach's plans. Maybe he could do that through statements in the Dáil as soon as possible on Irish unity.

The Taoiseach: Where is the Deputy's Green Paper?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: We are waiting for the Taoiseach's plans.

The Taoiseach: Where is the Deputy's plan?

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Taoiseach. I call Deputy Farrelly.

The Taoiseach: Chancer.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: It looks like the Government is hell-bent on introducing a social media ban for young people under the age of 16, despite the research and experience from other countries telling us it simply will not work. I am asking for speaking time on this really important issue so the Taoiseach and Tánaiste, instead of speaking on podcasts and in media interviews, can come to this House to debate it.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: There is significant concern in relation to the new workforce development plan proposed for special needs assistants, SNAs, right across this country. A significant amount of SNAs have contacted TDs in this House on the wording and the extra responsibilities they will have to undertake because of this plan. I understand there was stakeholder engagement on the plan. That is to be welcomed but that is not the feeling on the ground among SNAs. It is important that this feeling be heard in this House.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I have repeatedly asked for statements in the House about the use of Shannon Airport by the US military and about the use of our airspace to transport weapons to Israel while it continues to slaughter people in Gaza. Every single day, people are being murdered by the Israelis in Gaza, and we have very likely facilitated some of that either through the US military using our airports-----

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

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: -----or our airspace being used to transport weapons to these mass murderers.

Deputy Michael Collins: We are back to square one again in relation to the short-term lets. This was discussed at the Cabinet meeting today. One Minister has said it is going to include strong enforcement laws and the Revenue Commissioners coming down hard on short-term lets. The Taoiseach said in a statement here in the Dáil that any short-term let over seven years would not need planning permission. Is that the case? Yes or no?

The Taoiseach: No.

Deputy Michael Collins: We need statements on it.

Deputy Mary Butler: I thank all the various Whips for their commentaries. We can discuss all these matters again on Thursday. To clarify, statements will be held on Irish unification, as the Tánaiste has said previously, very shortly. I can confirm it this on Thursday but the Order of Business stands. We have a huge amount of legislation to get through, as everybody can see.

An Ceann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements for this week's business agreed to?

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: They are not.

Question put: "That the proposed arrangements for this week's business be agreed to."

The Dáil divided: Tá, 82; Níl, 69; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Boland, Grace.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brennan, Brian.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Shay.	Brady, John.	
Brophy, Colm.	Buckley, Pat.	
Browne, James.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Burke, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Butler, Mary.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Butterly, Paula.	Collins, Michael.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cronin, Réada.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Crowe, Seán.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cullinane, David.	
Canney, Seán.	Cummins, Jen.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	Daly, Pa.	
Chambers, Jack.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Clendennen, John.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Collins, Niall.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Connolly, John.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Cooney, Joe.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Gannon, Gary.	
Cummins, John.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Currie, Emer.	Gould, Thomas.	
Daly, Martin.	Graves, Ann.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dillon, Alan.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Dolan, Albert.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Hearne, Rory.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Foley, Norma.	Kenny, Martin.	

Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Geoghegan, James.	Lawlor, George.	
Grealish, Noel.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Harkin, Marian.	McDonald, Mary Lou.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Heydon, Martin.	Murphy, Paul.	
Higgins, Emer.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Keogh, Keira.	Nash, Ged.	
Kyne, Seán.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Lahart, John.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Lowry, Michael.	Nolan, Carol.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
Maxwell, David.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
McGrath, Séamus.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
McGreehan, Erin.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
McGuinness, John.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Quaide, Liam.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Rice, Pádraig.	
Murphy, Michael.	Sheehan, Conor.	
Neville, Joe.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Connor, James.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Donovan, Patrick.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Feargháil, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Ward, Barry.		

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

Question declared carried.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: Sinn Féin is this evening bringing forward important legislation to end the mandatory three-day wait for women who need an abortion. This wait is causing real damage to women. It has pushed some beyond the 12-week period, meaning they cannot access services here in Ireland and have to travel. Women who have suffered sexual assault or who live with domestic violence or coercive control are left in a really awful situation and it has meant hardship for many women who struggle to get a GP appointment in their county. Changing the law and removing the three-day wait would ensure that women could access healthcare when they needed it. I believe we can do this together and I hope every TD will look to trust, to care and to compassion when they cast their vote on this matter tomorrow night.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I recognise that this is a very sensitive issue. There are a range of opinions and perspectives in this House and, indeed, among the public. The people voted to repeal the eighth amendment in 2018 and to provide free, safe and legal access to termination services. We have made a lot of progress since then on the implementation of the Act. I am aware of the arguments for and against the removal of the three-day waiting period. It is important we have a respectful debate in the House. I intend to vote for this to go through to Committee Stage. On Committee Stage, there will perhaps be a need for consequential amendments, which I think the Minister has flagged with Deputy Cullinane. That only relates to the actual issue and does not undermine - in fact, it enhances - the intent of the amendment.

Deputy Rory Hearne: People are sick of seeing derelict buildings across this country when they cannot get a home of their own but the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste's blaming of councils is shameless. The Taoiseach was in government during the Celtic tiger when councils were gutted. Fine Gael has been in government since 2011 and has starved local authorities of funding. The reality is the new derelict sites tax, just like the vacant homes tax, is designed to fail. There are over 20,000 derelict properties but it is only going to apply to those on the register, which is in the region of 2,000 homes. The tax will actually apply to a fraction of derelict sites and buildings. Will the Government give councils sufficient capacity to ensure that every derelict building is put on the register? Will it bring in the tax immediately for all derelict buildings? Will it ensure that councils have the funding to compulsorily purchase derelict buildings on the register and turn them into homes?

The Taoiseach: First of all, councils have not been gutted.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Of course they were.

The Taoiseach: That is a ridiculous statement and a stupid statement to make.

Deputy Rory Hearne: It is not stupid. The Government did it during austerity.

The Taoiseach: There have been very significant investments made. There has been very significant allocation of resources to local authorities.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Government absolutely destroyed councils' capacity.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, out of respect for other Members, we need to stick to the time and the rules.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The stupid statement is the Taoiseach's.

A Deputy: Withdraw it.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Hearne, please. I ask that you refrain.

Deputy Rory Hearne: He just said I made a stupid-----

An Ceann Comhairle: I do not care. Everybody else has to have an opportunity.

Deputy Rory Hearne: It hit a bone because it is true.

The Taoiseach: There has been very significant allocation of resources to local authorities and we have increased funding on a whole range of fronts. The bottom line is we are moving to Revenue to impose a tax. A lot of work has to be done to do this properly. That work is under way and will be resourced. It is very important that we do this with good precision and we do it comprehensively. I believe that this move, because it is Revenue and is a tax, will change the psychology around this and the implementation of it. It did not happen under local authorities for a long, long time-----

Deputy Rory Hearne: That is the Government's fault, not theirs.

The Taoiseach: -----and the Deputy cannot use the lazy excuse of resources.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Bacik.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I want to raise the very serious issue of road safety with the Taoiseach. Ireland is now one of the few European countries where road deaths are increasing despite an official target to halve fatalities by 2030. Behind the figures of fatalities and injuries are lives lost, families devastated and communities traumatised. The Crowe report on roads policing was clear about the need for stronger enforcement but there has been a fall in the number of checkpoints and breath tests for motorists and there are nearly 400 fewer gardaí on our roads than there were in 2009.

3 o'clock

The Government's road safety strategy is not being delivered. In addition, today we see a concerning report from *thejournal.ie* based on a study it has done, showing that almost half of all speeding prosecutions never reach conviction in the courts and showing some disturbing regional variations across different court districts.

How does the Taoiseach propose to address these issues and ensure that our roads are safer? In particular, how can we address enforcement and see an increase in the number of roads police?

The Taoiseach: First of all, I agree that every fatality on Irish roads is one too many. For well over a decade or two, we had seen dramatic reductions in road fatalities and injuries, but in the last number of years, post-Covid in particular, there has been an incremental increase with some moderation of that.

We have a clear road safety strategy. Progress has been made to deliver on phase 2 of the action plan for the period 2025 to 2027. There have been 12 primary transformative actions and 77 support actions.

Progress to date includes the following. The default speed limit was reduced from 80 km/h to 60 km/h on rural and local roads in February 2025. Local authorities are now working to lower speed limits, where appropriate, to 30 km/h in urban and built-up areas by March 2027. The first national safety camera strategy was published on 29 April. There is much more I do not have the time to go through here.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time is up. I call Deputy Charles Ward.

Deputy Charles Ward: I have raised this multiple times over the past few months. I welcome that the Minister of Health has signed off on the end-to-end review for funding of new drugs in Ireland but we have said on many occasions that for children suffering from Duchenne muscular dystrophy, DMD, time is muscle and children with DMD face a blatant inequality under the current system.

I am sure the Taoiseach will be aware of two boys in Donegal. Diarmuid O'Sullivan has DMD, as does his brother. His brother is on a trial and has access to the medicine, but Diarmuid does not. Aaron Langan lives in Laghey, ten minutes from Belleek, County Fermanagh, where the drug is readily available. Can the Taoiseach give us a timeline on the review of Ireland's approval system for drugs such as givinostat? The families cannot wait. We need to make sure we get on this now.

The Taoiseach: There are three points. First, we are acutely aware of the pressures and anxieties in families in relation to a number of drugs pertaining to rare diseases. There was good news last week in terms of the HSE drug group approving givinostat and sending it forward to the senior leadership group, which will now consider it. Hopefully we can get this progressed as quickly as possible. There are other drugs. Skyclarys is on the agenda, among others. In fact, we are increasing the number of approvals on a year-by-year basis. The recent pharmaceutical agreement arrived at with the Irish Pharmaceutical Healthcare Association, IPHA, and the Government provides for better timelines in terms of getting drugs approved.

The Minister has also signed off on a review, which, I think, is very important, but only made that decision following work up from her Department officials who have given considerable thought to this because what we will see now and into the future is a greater volume of what used be called orphan drugs for rare diseases. Where companies in the past never invested, now they are. That is going to come at us fairly significantly.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy O'Flynn.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Cork alone has 1,788 derelict properties. Nationally, nearly 19,000 homes sit idle while people sleep on sofas or in their cars, working adults are in their parents' box rooms and there will be over 17,000 people in homeless services tonight. The Government has a derelict levy which is obviously not working. The Government has watched some of the local authorities fail to collect a single cent. The Minister for Finance is now blaming local government. It is worth noting that 31 of the local authorities are largely controlled by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael councillors. There are 493 Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael councillors out of 949. Will the Taoiseach now own his own failures - every empty house, every family on a waiting list, every night someone spends in emergency accommodation? Will the Taoiseach explain, not only to this House but to the 61,000 households on waiting lists, why the Government answer to its own failure is always the same - to find someone else to blame?

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: In this case, the Government is blaming its Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael councillors.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy was a long time a councillor. He knows the intricacies of this more than anybody does in terms of the application and enforcement of derelict site levies. There has been very significant progress in Cork in terms of housing. There needs to be more and we need to do more but in terms of the housing schemes that have started, been developed and are continuing, particularly along the docklands and, more recently, the schemes at Creamfields, Ballyvolane and many more, there are a lot of big housing projects under way in Cork. Moving from a levy to a tax will make a difference.

The other key issue is that the grants are very substantial for derelict and vacant houses, at €70,000 and €50,000, respectively. That is having a huge impact, with about 17,000 applications. Nothing like that had happened before we introduced it in 2022. It has made a big difference and will continue to make a difference in respect of this.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I raise the ongoing challenge of providing adequate home support hours to some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. Every week, families across Carlow and Kilkenny contact my office after being told that approved hours cannot be delivered because there simply are not enough carers available. Older people and people with disabilities are being left without the support they need to remain safely and independently in their own homes. In many cases, family members are forced to step in, often at considerable personal and financial cost.

We all agree that supporting people to live at home for as long as possible is the right approach but that commitment means little when approved services are unavailable. The situation is causing distress and huge pressure for families, hospitals and residential care services. What immediate actions will be taken to ensure approved home support hours are not just approved on paper but are actually delivered in practice?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising what is a very important issue for many people across the length and breadth of the country. We have a target for 2026 of 26.7 million home care hours. Additional hours will be delivered through a mixture of public and private provision, with a focus on addressing persistent waiting lists in certain areas of the country. Preliminary data shows that as of 31 March, 6.55 million hours were provided in the year to date, which is about 541,000 more hours than in the same period last year. A total of 61,000 people were receiving home support at the end of the month, while 66,000 had received home support since the start of the year.

There had been issues previously in respect of recruitment and so forth but the Minister has made, and continues to make, significant progress in relation to that. We will continue to allocate resources to this. It is a growing issue and we will continue to look to address it.

Deputy William Aird: I raise the urgent issue of waiting lists for orthopaedic surgery, especially hip and knee replacements, at Midland Regional Hospital Tullamore. In recent months, I have received numerous queries from constituents who are in severe pain and unable to engage in day-to-day life while they wait for surgery. Many of them have been told by their consultant that they are a priority but they are still waiting more than eight months, and longer in some cases, without any confirmed date for surgery. This is not acceptable. It is also very frustrating for patients to learn that the same treatment is available across the Border with almost no waiting list. People who can no longer endure the pain are being forced to look outside the State for timely care. Those who cannot afford to do so are left waiting indefinitely. This is not equality. We must increase orthopaedic capacity, reduce waiting times and ensure that those who require urgent surgery undergo their procedures without further delay.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue. I will raise the points he made regarding Midland Regional Hospital Tullamore with the Minister for Health as to whether there are specific issues there. There is a lot of work under way in terms of development of surgical hubs, the National Treatment Purchase Fund expanding its programme in regard to particular specialties - the public-only contract should help in that regard - and continued investment in capacity. We acknowledge that more needs to be done in terms of getting the waiting times down. The sooner people can have intervention and surgery, the better the outcomes. We will continue to address the issue the Deputy raised.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Applications for the very much-needed special school that is due to open in Balbriggan closed on 29 May. It is very likely to be oversubscribed.

As the Taoiseach can imagine, there is quite a number of anxious parents wanting confirmation that this school is going to open. I am concerned at the fact that I have now been contacted by SNAs who cannot find any information about the recruitment process, which leads me to believe it may not open in September as has been promised.

I am not expecting the Taoiseach to have the answer here this afternoon - it would be unfair of me to expect that - but I ask him to engage with the Minister for education to get confirmation that the much-needed special school for Balbriggan will open in September.

The Taoiseach: I will raise this issue with the Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, and the Minister for education, Deputy Naughton, in respect of that new school for Balbriggan. I do not have the specific details here, but we are working flat out to get as many places available through classes and new schools as quickly as possible to make sure pupils have places in September.

Deputy John Brady: The people of Wicklow are constantly being let down by chronic failures in public transport. The badly needed 199 Bray to Glendalough bus service promised in 2024 and procured last year is still not operating there. People in Wicklow are equally frustrated by the two-year delay in upgrading the chronically unreliable 132 route, leaving west Wicklow commuters stranded, with buses continuously breaking down. For months now, the Department, along with the NTA, has repeated that no funding is currently available for new services in 2026, and discussions are ongoing. How much longer must Wicklow communities wait? There has been €7 million spent on storing electric vehicle buses due to a lack of charging infrastructure; €20,000 on storing another 98 buses for God knows how long; and a failing IT system in Irish Rail, with €50 million being written off. The question has to be asked: where is the so-called Minister for Transport in this? When will the Minister finally take responsibility for-----

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

Deputy John Brady: ----- his ministry, do his job, stop the waste and deliver services?

The Taoiseach: There were about 15 questions there but I think the Deputy started with the 199 Bray to Glendalough route, which I understand is a significant issue; other Deputies from Wicklow have also made that point to me. Obviously, there has been a significant expansion in transport services in recent years, with considerable public expenditure allocated to it. We are continuing to look at other services that need to be expanded and the Minister will be working with the NTA and TII on a range of issues in that respect.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Is iomaí duine atá i mo Dháilcheantar a théann amach ag obair go dian gach lá. Like in the Taoiseach's constituency and many others around the country, people in my constituency go out and work hard every day and they need to understand that the Government has their back in ensuring work continues to pay. We need to continue making progress on tax and ensuring low- and middle-income workers in particular see that work pays and they get the worthwhile results and desserts of the hard effort they engage in every day.

Will the Taoiseach support me in calling for measures to assist those hard-pressed families up and down the country and to continue to ensure hard work does pay and there is fairness across the board?

The Taoiseach: Aontaím leis an Teachta. Tá géarghá go dtuigeann na daoine a bhíonn ag obair Domhnach is dálach go mbeidh faoiseamh le teacht. I am confident that in the forthcoming budget we will have a comprehensive framework to try to programme decisions on tax and other areas to help middle-income and low-paid workers with their tax burden.

We have significantly reduced the tax burden for the low-paid. In particular, the number who are not paying tax has increased significantly in recent years. Without question, there is a need to provide tax relief to workers. We will take the opportunity in the next budget. Obviously, a lot of work and discussions have to continue with the three parties in government before the finalisation of proposals in respect of the budget. That is one of the issues that is certainly under active discussion.

Deputy Brian Brennan: I wish to speak today about the proposed reforms to the criminal legal aid system, which include the introduction of a flat fee payment model for legally aided District Court cases. It is proposed that solicitors would receive a single payment of €455 for District Court criminal cases, regardless of the number of court appearances involved. Members of Criminal Justice Solicitors Ireland have raised serious concerns and are urgently seeking engagement on this matter. They have already begun withdrawing service from certain aspects of criminal legal aid work until further notice. This will have a detrimental impact on the operation of courts and the administration of justice. Further engagement must be opened as a matter of urgency.

I have spoken to solicitors in Wexford and Wicklow who have told me of one case where a solicitor made as many as 27 appearances on behalf of one client. How is this a reasonable payment for that level of work?

The Taoiseach: We need to be careful on all fronts in the sense that the Minister fully recognises the critical role played by the legal profession in the effective administration of criminal justice. There is no intention here to reduce the cost to the State of providing criminal legal aid. I will just point out that expenditure on criminal legal aid in the District Court has nearly doubled, from €19 million in 2015 to €37 million in 2024. The reform here is primarily aimed at improving efficiencies, speeding up case resolution - there is an issue if there are 29 appearances - and reducing unnecessary adjournments, while ensuring fair and sustainable remuneration for legal practitioners. There is a lot of merit in what the Minister is proposing. He met with the Bar Council on 27 May and the Law Society on 29 May, last week. The Department will continue to engage with all relevant stakeholders, including the Law Society and Bar Council, in advance of the reforms being introduced.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Garda vetting is an important process to ensure the safety of children in many settings, such as schools, creches and sports clubs and, in the case of bus drivers and escorts, school buses. It takes at least three to seven weeks in some instances to get Garda vetted. Could this process be streamlined? Many people find themselves having to be Garda vetted three or four times if they are driving a school bus or working with schoolchildren, even as a volunteer. People working in creches have to do it if they want to work in different creches. Going back to the school buses, I could have a driver who is Garda vetted but cannot drive for the fella down the road who might be stuck for a driver of a morning because he would need to be Garda vetted for that person as well.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Could it be streamlined? Could we have a card or something like a driver's licence-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy has asked the question and his time is up.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: ----that would show a person had vetting for a number of years? The card could be used in each place.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy is being unfair to his colleagues.

The Taoiseach: I will raise the issue with the Minister. Garda vetting is an important mechanism but, from my understanding, the legislation provides for or obliges repeated securing of vetting for different functions or roles. There is a case to be made for some streamlining of that. If a teacher or escort, for example, receives Garda vetting, then I take the point that there is a need to look at whether they should need a second Garda vetting for another activity a month later.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: Ballinacurra Weston in Limerick is one of the most disadvantaged areas in this State. This time last year, the Minister, Deputy Calleary, acknowledged it was an area forgotten by the State and that it now has Government support. He made those comments while visiting Our Lady of Lourdes Community Centre. That same centre is now facing the daunting task of telling local families there are no early childcare places for their children. We are not just talking about a few families but, rather, 214 children on a waiting list who are unable to access early childcare places in Our Lady of Lourdes early years service. While staff are busy preparing for September, there are no playschool places available at all. The stark reality facing many families is that the majority of local children will not have access to integrated early years education and family supports, and parental choice simply does not exist. Staff in the area are having to tell families they have no place for their child. Early intervention, as the Taoiseach knows, particularly in more disadvantaged areas, is critical to child development.

I ask the Taoiseach to ensure that local demand will be met-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach to respond.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: -----or will Ballinacurra Weston once again be forgotten by Government?

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

The Taoiseach: Is it that the existing service has been closed?

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: No, the waiting list has 214 children on it. It is completely overwhelmed.

The Taoiseach: I will raise the matter with the Minister to see if any intervention can occur there.

Deputy Ryan O'Meara: Many communities I represent in north Tipperary and north-west Kilkenny want to know when the Government is going to introduce updated guidelines for onshore windfarms. Last December in this Chamber I received a commitment that we would see regulations this year to update the 2006 regulations we are currently dealing with.

In April I received a response to a parliamentary question which stated that a review of the 2006 wind energy development guidelines had been undertaken as part of a national planning statement on wind energy under the Planning and Development Act 2024. Included in this was noise, setback distance, shadow flicker, community obligations, community dividend and grid connections. It appears that some progress might have been made but a clear commitment was made to me here last December. When will the Government produce new guidelines for modern technology for onshore wind farms?

The Taoiseach: I welcome the raising of the issue. There has been work done and the review is under way, as the Deputy has said. The Minister for energy has engaged with the Minister for housing on this. One Department has the responsibility for the planning statement under the Planning and Development Act but the energy Department has significant responsibilities here as well. A further public consultation process will take place on the draft NPS and accompanying SEA environmental report. Communities, organisations and individuals will have the opportunity - we are hoping in the latter part of the year, perhaps late autumn. I will not have a specific date until the engagement between the two Departments is finalised and we are in a position to bring forward a draft statement.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: Successive governments have been derelict in their duty to respect and properly manage the extensive national resource that is the 5,000 acres of the Curragh Camp. The Government proposes to rectify that problem with a proposal in the programme for Government to bring forward a new management structure. A year and a half into the Government, we have yet to see that. In a year in which there is greater misuse, greater abuse and greater degradation of the plains and when a greater number of illegal encampments are taking place, there is huge public cynicism about what is going to be done. I ask the Taoiseach to give the House the commitment today that the Government will bring forward before the end of this year the necessary legislation to rectify this problem.

The Taoiseach: I appreciate the Deputy's raising the issue. It is a very serious issue and it has dragged on for a number of years between different Departments and Government agencies. I have intervened. I spoke with the National Park and Wildlife Service to see if it could take a stronger role in terms of the Curragh because it is an important landmass in itself. The Department of Defence has obviously had a key role there historically. Part of our discussions centre on whether we can develop a national park as part of this but there is still some work to

be done. I am engaged on it with the relevant agencies and Departments and I will continue to do that until I get a resolution.

Forestry (Critical Infrastructure) (Amendment) Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Martin Kenny: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Forestry Act 2014 to provide for the effective management of critical infrastructure corridors and forestry management, and to provide for related matters.

As Deputies will be aware, this is a Bill to deal with the forestry situation. It is to amend the Forestry Act 2014 to provide for the effective management of critical infrastructure corridors and forestry management and related matters. We all remember Storm Éowyn and the havoc it caused across the country to many thousands of households that were left without electricity and, as consequence of that, were also left without water. Roads were blocked by fallen trees with people cut off for days in many cases. In my constituency covering Sligo, Leitrim and south Donegal, along with many other countries in the north west, we were severely impacted by the storm with power outages and water outages. This was not the first time; it has been happening on a regular basis. As these storms seem to continue to become more frequent, we cannot allow these extended power outages to continue or indeed to become the norm. The biggest issue the ESB faced in restoring electricity was forestry where trees had fallen upon power lines and the corridors for the power lines were blocked for days. These corridors had to be cleared before repair works could be carried out.

This legislation, the Forestry (Critical Infrastructure) (Amendment) Bill 2026, would prevent this happening in the future. The Bill aims to establish minimum corridor widths for specific categories of critical infrastructure as currently outlined under the forestry standards manual. The critical infrastructure is defined as water mains, gas lines and electricity lines of varying voltage capacities. The minimum width of forestry corridors for critical infrastructure shall be as follows: 15 m width for water mains; 15 m minimum distance for gas lines; and a 30 m minimum corridor shall apply where a gas line has been installed after the forestry has been planted. Minimum width corridors for electricity lines shall be as follows: 55 m centre minimum width in the case of a 10 KV capacity line; 55 m centre minimum width for a 38 KV capacity line; 61 m centre minimum width for a 110 KV capacity line; 60 m centre minimum width for a 220 KV capacity line; and 74 m centre minimum width for a 400 KV capacity line.

The Government promised to introduce legislation on this but has failed to do so and nothing has happened. It has been 18 months since Storm Éowyn wreaked havoc across the country. We all hear from Government that the legislation is being progressed but nothing has happened. We need to get this legislation passed as soon as possible because we do not want a situation where we have more weather warnings and more storms and people start to worry again that they will be left without electricity, water and heat.

I am asking for cross-party support for this legislation. We are open to getting everybody to come together to find a solution for something that has affected thousands of people across the country.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I am very glad to co-sponsor this legislation with my colleague, Martin Kenny. For those living in Roscommon and Galway, the people I represent, and particularly for those in north Roscommon, no part of Roscommon is immune from trees falling on power lines during storms. Storm Éowyn really put a spotlight on the issue, with householders at the time left for 15, 16, 17 or more days with no electricity, no water and in some cases no heating either. We have a vicious circle when this happens. A storm comes. There is huge damage. We talk about what needs to be done and all the failures but nothing happens.

When a storm hits, I get a call from certain people in my community and I know what they are going to say: the trees have fallen and the electricity is down. It is important to acknowledge the ESB workers given the sites they have to go out to as well as those engaged in tree felling and tree services and what they have to try to deal with and the conditions they have to endure when they are under pressure to get power back.

This issue needs to be resolved once and for all. We need to do right by those householders who, when a storm comes and trees fall causing major issues, suffer outages for days on end. This is something that can be solved. For new forestry now being planted when we have the new forestry programme, we need to ensure that we get this right. We have to do that for householders and particularly for vulnerable customers. Being on a vulnerable customer list with ESB does not mean much bar an acknowledgement and some bit of notice of a power outage if that is possible. This is something the Government has a say on. It is something that we can do and we can make a difference. We can end that vicious circle for householders in rural areas who pay a lot more for their electricity than those in other parts but then suffer from outages. It is not right and I ask Members to support the Bill.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Planning for Constitutional Change Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for planning and preparation for the possibility of constitutional change on the island of Ireland, in accordance with the right of self-determination of the people of the island of Ireland as recognised by the British-Irish Agreement Act 1999 and as provided for in the Multi-Party

Agreement reached at Belfast on the 10th day of April 1998; to require the Taoiseach to prepare and publish a Green Paper; to provide for the convening of a Citizens' Assembly from within such resources as are available under the Vote for the Department of the Taoiseach; to require periodic reporting to the Houses of the Oireachtas on progress; and to provide for related matters.

Ending partition and Irish reunification is the very best idea for the future of Ireland. It presents an immense historic opportunity for our country and our people to realise our potential economically, socially and politically. Unity is the vehicle by which we can achieve full nationhood and build a new 32-county Republic, a Republic where resources are used not to enrich the privileged few but to make life better for working people, for families, for children and for our young people.

The unity conversation is under way but conversation alone is not enough.

To seize the opportunity of reunification, the Government must step forward and lead. This requires work, planning and preparation. That is what this Bill directs the Government to do, that is, to proactively plan and prepare for the reunification of Ireland and to put this work at the heart of the Oireachtas.

The Bill obliges the Government to draft and publish a Green Paper on Irish reunification within 12 months. The Green Paper must cover a range of topics, including public finance, taxation, public services, human rights, governance arrangements and relations between Britain and Ireland. Drafting this Green Paper requires consultation with the broad spectrum of society, civil groups, experts, all political traditions and, of course, unionist and Protestant representatives.

Second, the Bill obliges the Government to establish a citizens' assembly on Irish unity within six months of the publication of the Green Paper. Convened and funded by the Department of An Taoiseach, this will bring together representatives of the people of Ireland from all communities and citizens who have a stake in the future. It would be a forum for real discussion on what a new united Ireland would look like.

As we approach the 30th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, it is important to acknowledge the scale of transformation in Ireland. More and more people now see that partition has failed communities and Ireland. There are encouraging signs of growing support for Irish unity in successive electoral results, demographic change, contributions from civic society, opinion polling and public commentary.

I very much welcome the Fine Gael initiative on Irish unity announced by the Tánaiste at the weekend. However, what we need is a Government initiative on unity. We need work and action. We need ambition and urgency. We need to plan and prepare for unity referendums.

It is now two years since the joint committee on the Good Friday Agreement published its major report on constitutional change. This was a positive, exciting, cross-party vision for a united Ireland. It called for a whole-of-government approach to immediately start planning for Irish unity. It recommended that the Government publish a detailed Green Paper and establish citizens' assemblies, and our legislation provides for those very things. Two years is far too long to wait for progress on what is the most important national conversation of our time. It is time to move forward with pace.

Treoraíonn Bille Shinn Féin an Rialtas chun pleanáil agus ullmhú le haghaidh Éireann aontaithe trí Pháipéar Uaine a fhoilsiú agus tionól saoránach ar aontacht a bhunú. Is deis ollmhór é an t-athaontú. Is é an smaoineamh is fearr é do thodhchaí na hÉireann.

The Bill that we move today is about putting planning for a united Ireland at the top of our agenda. That is what the future demands of us and of the Government. The need to prepare for Irish unity is urgent. The position of “Yes, but not now”, can no longer hold. We can achieve a united Ireland in our time. The Bill obliges the Government to pursue that future with vigour, ambition and determination to complete our journey from peace to unity and nationhood.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I move: "That the Bill be taken in Private Members' time."

Question put and agreed to.

School Meals Nutritional Standards Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Jen Cummins: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide for the making of regulations by the Minister for Health providing for nutritional standards and related requirements for school meals provided under school meal schemes funded by moneys provided directly or indirectly by the State or local authorities; to provide for the enforcement of such regulations by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland; and to provide for related matters.

As this is my first Bill in Dáil Éireann, I am both very proud and nervous. It feels like my maiden speech all over again. It has taken 16 months of work since I was elected in November 2024 to bring this forward and I will thank a few people first. I thank my team, who are in the Public Gallery. They are diligent, hardworking and great craic to work with. It has been an absolute pleasure to get this over the line today. I thank the wider Social Democrats membership as well as the parents, school staff and children who contacted me about their experience of the hot school meal programme. Without their input, I would not have had the impetus to move this forward. I thank the members and the secretariat of the education committee. We spent a number of weeks talking about hot school meals and published a report. We also had the opportunity to go to Finland to experience the hot school meals programme there.

I particularly thank the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers, OPLA, which drafted this legislation. The office is such a help, particularly for new TDs who need that help and guidance. I thank the children with whom I worked since the late nineties. I have worked in a number of communities throughout his city. I have worked with the children in Blanchardstown youth theatre, Cabra youth service and Ballymun Anseo school completion programme. I also worked with children and young people for my doctoral research. Those young people taught me that this country has a lot of problems that need to be changed, and that is why I am a politician. I could not change them out there, so I came in here in the hope that I could change something. While we are going nice and slowly, I am still going to keep marching on.

I wish to thank my family. My dad and husband, who have worked in the food industry, are sitting in the Public Gallery. I hope I am not going to cry. I thank my children who have to put up with me never being there and talking about stuff that I am sure they do not want to talk about. All of us in this House who have children know the challenge it is to do this work every single day. I thank them for being there and putting up with me.

I will now move onto the Bill. The hot school meals programme came into place because there were children in this country arriving to school every day hungry, and that is not acceptable in this country in 2026. A number of years ago, a pilot was started. Anyone who has heard me speak about education before knows I am not a fan of pilot schemes but that pilot scheme came into place and it was subsequently rolled out. It is now on offer to every primary school in the country. While it also exists in some secondary schools, I am not going to talk about that today. That is another day's work.

This Bill will ensure that the nutritional standards of any school meal served is of a high standard. That is important because a child cannot learn if they are hungry. Equally, they cannot learn if they are not nourished properly. Some of the food that was sent to me was a challenge in that regard. This programme is universal because if a child is hungry and everyone gets a meal, no one knows who is hungry. Everyone is eating the meal and, therefore, no one knows who the hungry child is. That is the huge benefit of this being universal.

When it comes to the nutritional value of the meals, some of the meals sent to me had no vegetables. They had no balance or colour. They were unpalatable. I showed some of those photographs to members of the education committee, including to Deputy Darren O'Rourke, who is in the Chamber. Other people have been sent photographs of the hot schools meals. This is not acceptable. It is a waste of taxpayers' money to have food served in schools that is not correct. It is also unfair on the children.

This Bill would place nutritional standards on a statutory footing. At the moment, they are guidelines. This would bring them onto a statutory footing. It would require the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, to introduce regulations to cover appropriate portion sizes, as we saw challenges with junior infants being served the same amount as a child in sixth class. Anyone with children knows, they eat a different amount of food. It would also address the quality, quantity and balance of the food, as well as appropriate portion sizes and methods of preparation. It would ensure certain food types are offered on a rotating basis.

The Bill would allow for the prohibition of certain foods as well as the inclusion of healthy drinks and the provision of vegetarian options, as well as dietary requirements. It would also

provide for the enforcement of the food legislation through the Food Safety Authority of Ireland. It would amend the Education Act 1998 to insert the words "to promote a healthy life and healthy food environments for students" into section 9(d). That is a bit technical, but that is all right. At the heart of this Bill, it is about recognising that every single child in this country deserves to have access to nutritious food that supports their health, development and ability to learn. Children learn better when they are nourished. Habits for eating healthy food start at a young age. I ask, therefore, for cross-party support for this Bill.

An Ceann Comhairle: Is the Bill being opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Mary Butler): No. I congratulate Deputy Cummins on her first Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank Deputy Cummins. I also commend her husband on his wonderful Christmas cake that I had the pleasure of tasting last year.

Data Protection Act 2018 under (Section 60(6)) and (Section 51(3)) Regulations 2026: Motion

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

That Dáil Éireann approve the following Regulations in draft:

Data Protection Act 2018 (Section 60(6)) (Scoping Exercise in Response to Requests from Dignity4Patients) (Amendment) Regulations 2026, and

Data Protection Act 2018 (Section 51(3)) (Scoping Exercise in Response to Requests from Dignity4Patients) (Amendment) Regulations 2026,

copies of which were laid in draft form before Dáil Éireann on 11th June, 2026.

Question put and agreed to.

Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion

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

That, notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Dáil of 5th February, 2025, or in the Order of the Dáil of 15th April, 2026, setting out the rota in which Questions to members of

the Government are to be asked, Questions for oral answer following those next set down to the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence, without any change to the allocation of Priority Questions:

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Minister for Further Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine

whereupon the sequence established by the Order of 5th February, 2025, shall continue with Questions to the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance.

Question put and agreed to.

Ministerial Rota for Parliamentary Questions: Motion

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

That, notwithstanding anything in the Order of the Dáil of 5th February, 2025, or in the Orders of the Dáil of 15th April, and 19th May, 2026, and today's, setting out the rota in which Questions to members of the Government are to be asked, Questions for oral answer following those next set down to the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality shall be set down to Ministers in the following temporary sequence, without any change to the allocation of Priority Questions:

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Minister for Further Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Minister for Health

whereupon the sequence established by the Order of 5th February, 2025, shall continue with Questions to the Minister for Rural Community Development and the Gaeltacht.

Question put and agreed to.

Appointment of Committee Cathaoirligh: Motion

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

That Dáil Éireann, with effect from 17th June, 2026, appoints—

(a) Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil to be Cathaoirleach of the Committee on Artificial Intelligence, and

(b) Deputy Shane Moynihan to be Cathaoirleach of the Committee on the Irish Language, Gaeltacht and the Irish-speaking Community.

Question put and agreed to.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements

1. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the most recent EU leaders' meeting or Council. [12965/26]

2. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the most recent EU leaders' meeting or Council. [12978/26]

3. **Deputy Shay Brennan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the most recent EU leaders' meeting or Council. [12979/26]

4. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the recent EU Council meeting. [22415/26]

5. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the recent EU Council meeting. [22418/26]

6. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the informal meeting of EU member state leaders in Cyprus on 23 April 2026. [31137/26]

7. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the informal meeting of EU member state leaders in Cyprus on 23 April 2026. [31144/26]

8. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the most recent EU leaders' meeting or Council. [34545/26]

9. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the recent EU Council meeting. [41807/26]

10. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the most recent EU Council meeting. [42082/26]

11. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the most recent EU leaders' meeting or Council. [43625/26]

12. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the recent EU Council meeting. [44844/26]

13. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the most recent EU Leaders' meeting or council. [44964/26]

14. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the most recent EU leaders' meeting or Council. [45026/26]

15. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the recent EU Council meeting. [45028/26]

16. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the most recent EU leaders' meeting or Council. [45326/26]

17. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the recent EU Council meeting. [45328/26]

18. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the most recent EU leaders' meeting or Council. [45332/26]

19. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the most recent EU leaders' meeting or Council. [45453/26]

20. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the most recent EU Council meeting. [45468/26]

21. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the most recent EU Leaders' meeting or council. [45616/26]

22. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the most recent EU Leaders' meeting or council. [45620/26]

23. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his attendance at the most recent EU leaders' meeting. [45639/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 23, inclusive, together.

I joined leaders in Cyprus for an informal meeting of the European Council on 23 and 24 April. The main focus of this meeting was to discuss the geopolitical situation including in the Middle East and Ukraine, and to discuss the next multi-annual financial framework for 2028 to 2034, which is essentially the next European Union budget. At the meeting we had an

important exchange with Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, who attended in person. We reaffirmed our steadfast support for Ukraine and agreed on the need to increase pressure on Russia to end its war and engage in meaningful peace negotiations. We welcomed the two recent decisions to strengthen Ukraine and increase pressure on Russia, first the €90 billion loan to support Ukraine's overall budget and defence needs in 2026 and 2027, and the 20th package of sanctions to weaken Russia's war machine.

On the Middle East, leaders welcomed recent ceasefires in Iran and Lebanon and urged all parties to engage in good faith to achieve peace. We expressed our support for diplomatic efforts to achieve a negotiated solution to the conflict. In response to the impact that the conflict in the Middle East is having on energy prices, President Costa also underlined the importance of co-ordination and stressed that the European Union must speed up its energy transition and accelerate the deployment of homegrown clean energy sources to ensure energy security. Affordability of energy for households and businesses and its centrality to Europe's competitiveness were also discussed. Leaders also considered the European Union's next multi-annual budget, or multi-annual financial framework, MFF. Leaders will return to this discussion at our next meeting of the European Council in Brussels on 18 and 19 June next. This discussion will be based on an updated proposal with figures, the so-called negotiating box, prepared by the Cypriot Presidency. We will work with President Costa during our upcoming Presidency of the European Union with a view to securing agreement by the end of the year if at all possible.

Leaders also returned to our discussions on Europe's competitiveness. On the margins of the meeting, the President of the Republic of Cyprus, as the rotating President of the Council of the European Union, and the Presidents of the European Parliament and the European Commission signed an agreement on the implementation of the "One Europe, One Market" roadmap, delivery of which will be a central focus of our European Union Presidency. Leaders also held a number of exchanges, including the usual engagement with European Parliament President Roberta Metsola and a working lunch with the leaders of Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and the Gulf Cooperation Council, where we discussed shared challenges and emerging opportunities for co-operation. In the lead-up to Ireland assuming the Presidency of the Council of the European Union on 1 July, I have been visiting my counterparts in European capitals to hear their views on key files and priorities. This has included visits to, among other countries, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, France, Italy and, most recently, Hungary.

An Ceann Comhairle: There were 23 questions, and while not all the Deputies are present, most are. I propose that Deputies have 30 seconds each, with a minute for the Members who tabled two questions. I will inform them who they are.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I wish the Taoiseach well during the time of the Presidency of the EU Council. When I submitted a parliamentary question to the Department of Enterprise on a domestic issue, where I did not get a satisfactory response, the Department said that was due to competing work priorities, including the upcoming Presidency of the European Union. Given that in response to other parliamentary questions, 300 additional staff have been hired across all Departments for the EU Presidency, how can we ensure that the focus of the Government remains on domestic issues?

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I believe that the Taoiseach will have the next meeting of EU leaders next week. What will be on the agenda next week? Will the leaders be discussing the suspension of the EU-Israel trade agreement?

Deputy Shay Brennan: Ireland takes the chair of the 2028-2034 MFF negotiations in July. This is a pivotal period in these complex and highly consequential negotiations. Delivering a finalised agreement within our term would be of significant reputational benefit for Ireland. Will the Taoiseach give an assessment of the prospects for achieving that and outline what he sees as the key pitfalls and opportunities for Ireland in holding the chair at this pivotal moment?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Boyd Barrett has one minute for his two questions.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I am involved with a coalition of Palestine advocacy groups, anti-war groups and others who are planning protests around the forthcoming EU Presidency, particularly around the shameful, inexcusable complicity of the European Union as an institution and as individual states with Israel's ongoing genocidal crimes against the Palestinian people. Would people not be right to protest? Can the Taoiseach explain how it is in any way acceptable that any states across Europe, including our State, continue to do business, trade and in some cases are involved in arms going to Israel? As we know, €20 million worth of dual-use exports from this country went to the IDF.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. Your time is up.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: How can it be acceptable when this regime is in the dock for genocide and commits crimes on a daily basis against Palestinians?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Murphy has one minute for his two questions.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Has the Taoiseach had any discussion about local democracy with his European counterparts, and about the fact Ireland has the lowest levels of autonomy and local democracy in all of Europe? I will give the Taoiseach a dramatic illustration of this. I have raised before with him the attempt by South Dublin County Council to massively hike rents for 20,000 families - council tenants, housing assistance payment, HAP, tenants, homeless HAP tenants and approved housing body, AHB, tenants - at an average of €1,000. It is trying to do this without a vote. It was not included in the budget. Then it tried to say it was going to be implemented from 1 July, because it is an executive function and the council can just set it. Eleven councillors signed a motion to call a special meeting to hear a section 140 motion to stop this rent increase going ahead until the previously unanimously agreed consultation would take place. Just yesterday, council management ruled that out. The motion is considered invalid and the request for a special meeting of the council is not being granted. One of the reasons the council is doing so is that it says the motion is effectively seeking to prevent the performance of a function which the chief executive is required by law to perform. The chief executive is not required to increase rents. Can the Taoiseach confirm that? Does he agree that the councillors should be allowed to meet and vote?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We know the issue in relation to the Israeli genocide and continuing violence. We have seen no movement on the EU-Israel Association Agreement. Where is it now? What can be done to move that on? If we cannot move it on, we have to accept that we have to do what we can. We are all disappointed as regards the occupied territories Bill and the fact that services will not be included.

Given the Tánaiste's foray into the issue of a united Ireland, would the Taoiseach consider that now is the time for the Government to do something and move properly?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Quaide has one minute for his two questions.

Deputy Liam Quaide: More than 500 Ukrainian residents in Trabolgan, east Cork, are facing eviction from the holiday village. They include 167 children and 74 pensioners. Many of those children are settled in local schools. These are people who fled war and have over time become part of the community in east Cork. Local teachers, SNAs, volunteers and community groups have worked in partnership with them to help the children settle, build trust and give the families a sense of stability after trauma. I appreciate that a temporary accommodation arrangement such as this cannot last unchanged forever, but the State has a duty of care here. Any transition for these families must be humane, carefully planned and properly communicated, not a jolting upheaval for families who have already lost so much, particularly as Ukraine has been facing increasing bombardment in recent months. What plans does the Government have for the residents in Trabolgan?

How will vulnerable groups such as older adults, disabled people, or those whose homes or towns have been destroyed or occupied by Russia be treated?

Deputy Mark Ward: The European Union has proposed a new delegated Act that classifies nitrous oxide as harmful to reproductive health and this is to come into place by February 2027. In January of this year, the Government kicked down the road by nine months the Sinn Féin legislation that would have regulated nitrous oxide. What has the Government done in the past five months to tackle the misuse of nitrous oxide? What has it done to prepare for the EU delegated Act that is coming in next year?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It has been reported that Ireland has signed a memorandum of understanding, MOU, with the French Government around the purchase of military hardware and the training of Irish soldiers by the French army. I understand this may include the location of French soldiers and military hardware in Ireland. I understand it is to aid interoperability between the two armies. There are major concerns the MOU will limit future procurement competition and therefore push up prices, and there are also concerns as to whether this MOU seeks to provide French military cover to Ireland. We have already tied ourselves into British military cover in our skies and seas. Many in Europe see the west coast of Ireland as a weakness in military defence-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. I call Deputy Ruth Coppinger.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: -----and the location of French planes here could reduce mobilisation time for the French. Will the Taoiseach address these concerns?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The world has its first trillionaire, thanks largely to the policies of the likes of the EU and the G7. Should billionaires exist? Should a trillionaire exist? Elon Musk is now richer than 46% of the world's population, 3.8 billion people. He makes \$1 million a minute. It has been estimated that \$1 million could feed 5,500 for a year. It is wealth you cannot even spend. It is wealth that is not in any way used to further humanity. As we see, he is able to persuade kids in Belfast to throw rocks-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. I call Deputy O'Gorman.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: -----and people to hate trans people. Should such a person exist?

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: On Saturday, I had the privilege of joining members of the Bosnian community in Ireland, in the TU buildings in Blanchardstown, to mark the 31st anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide. We had an update from Ireland's new ambassador to Bosnia on our ongoing diplomatic relations with that country. One clear point that came out was the sense from Bosnians here and in their own country that the pathway towards EU accession is not clear. Will the Taoiseach use the EU Presidency to put a focus on Bosnian accession to the European Union?

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I welcome the conclusions of the recent European Council meetings about the need for a focus on competitiveness because that is a vindication of the view that the economy and jobs are not things that just happen; they are the result of policy and of a deliberate effort to grow our economy and jobs. Will the Taoiseach speak about the priorities the Presidency has for improving competitiveness in Europe, especially the opportunities for Irish companies that want to scale up, and for creating and deepening a Single Market that incentivises a good environment for rapidly growing European and Irish companies as Europe takes its place in the world?

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: The conflict in Sudan is causing devastating levels of hunger and displacement. The Sudanese community here in Ireland is making the point that the conflict will continue. There is serious concern regarding violence in the Kordofan and Blue Nile states and the expected intensification of conflict in North Darfur. Day after day, people are being killed, but because it is happening on the African continent it barely raises any comment across the political establishment throughout Europe. Will the Taoiseach report on his attendance at the EU Council meeting in relation to Sudan, and will he commit to ensuring it is a priority in future meetings of the Council?

The Taoiseach: The first question was from Deputy Malcolm Byrne. The additional staff in the Department of foreign affairs are focused on the Presidency and that is why they were recruited. As I have said before, it will mean a very significant additional workload all round but the Government is absolutely determined to maintain its focus on the domestic agenda, both within the Dáil and in terms of policies and the implementation of them. Already, we are

working on the budget and we have had a number of preliminary meetings, which is earlier than normal, because of the Presidency and we have to reorganise our schedules and so on. The Presidency simply means a heavier workload all round. We have obligations to deliver not just a strong, competent and efficient Presidency but one that leaves an impact for the better for the European Union and for our own citizens as well.

Deputy Ó Cearúil raised the issue of the EU-Israel Association Agreement. I wrote to the President of the EU Council some weeks ago asking that he would put this issue on the agenda for this week, on Thursday and Friday, in respect of the need to respond to the Israeli waging of war on Lebanon and the continued subjugation of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, and that Europe simply has to respond. I followed up on that issue - that the Council simply has to respond - during my meeting with Kaja Kallas, the high representative, when she visited late last week. The issue is whether we can secure a majority to support a suspension, if not of the entire agreement, at least of elements of the agreement and that is proving challenging. In my view, a vote should be held at some stage and the issue should be put to a vote, either at the Foreign Affairs Council, FAC, or at a future Council meeting.

I would make the point, and other questions were raised on this, that Europe remains the largest donor to Palestine of any entity across the world, and to Palestinians more generally. It remains the largest donor to the Palestinian Authority, by significantly more than its neighbours. Yes, there are issues in terms of the inability of Europe to develop a consensus on Israeli atrocities in Gaza but Europe has been to the forefront in providing a continued range of supports. There has been a lack of access to Gaza. It is quite extraordinary that international authorities and powers, bar the UN and others, have not been allowed into Gaza and that the international media has not been allowed into Gaza to witness the horrors that have unfolded. That is something I have been consistently pushing for.

Deputy Boyd Barrett also raised this issue and I reassert that point. There are positives to the European contribution to Palestine as well, which we should not lose sight of. For example, it is arguable that without the European Union, the Palestinian Authority would be in even greater difficulty because Israel has withheld all revenues that are legitimately owed to the Palestinian Authority, which is impairing its capacity to deliver services in the West Bank. There is a greater encroachment in the West Bank, which needs very urgent attention from the international community because it will render non-viable, if it continues, the prospect of a two-state solution.

I think we have to be careful of the words "complicit in genocide". It is a wonderful slogan to articulate but I think it is unfair.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We are.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is very clear what it means.

The Taoiseach: Some countries support Israel but not all do. Many EU member states do not, and that number is increasing. We just need to keep working. The pressure has to be on Israel, not on Ireland and not on other governments that are doing everything they can to put the pressure on Israel.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: We tried.

The Taoiseach: It is just a fair point. I have made this point repeatedly.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: There is no pressure on them.

The Taoiseach: On a separate question, Deputy Murphy raised the issue of autonomy. It is kind of a paradoxical proposition he put to me, because he said we have the lowest level of local autonomy and at the same time is asking me to intervene in what councils are doing.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I am not asking the Taoiseach to intervene.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, we have ten others to come in.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I am asking that councillors get a vote.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please co-operate with the Chair.

The Taoiseach: There are various frameworks. We cannot have it both ways and we tend to have it both ways. We just had a debate this afternoon on derelict sites and all of that and everybody was saying it is all our fault. You cannot have it both ways and then say, in respect of this, that we should intervene and essentially take over the powers of local authority executives, or indeed councillors, for that reason.

Deputy Paul Murphy: No, you should not. The council should.

The Taoiseach: I do not have the specifics of it but-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: Did you legally direct the council to increase rents? That is what the council is saying.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Murphy, you know you are working against the Chair.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Did you legally direct the council to increase rents?

An Ceann Comhairle: I am asking the Deputy to co-operate with the Chair.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Did you?

The Taoiseach: No.

An Ceann Comhairle: I am asking the Deputy to co-operate with the Chair, on behalf of your colleagues, to get an answer.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I know you did not. That is what the council is claiming.

The Taoiseach: No, but you want me to intervene.

Deputy Paul Murphy: No, I do not want you to.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Murphy.

The Taoiseach: I will speak through the Chair.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I am happy to get that clarified.

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, please.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Ó Murchú also raised the EU-Israel Association Agreement and the occupied territories Bill. Again, I did get it on the agenda of the European Council meeting this week. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, also has raised it repeatedly at FAC, and we will continue to do that.

In terms of Deputy Quaide-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What about the united Ireland question?

The Taoiseach: Sorry?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What about the united Ireland question?

An Ceann Comhairle: Please, Taoiseach, do not invite questions.

The Taoiseach: All right. Deputy Quaide referred to 500 Ukrainians. Have they received notice? I will talk to the Minister in respect of that. There is a significant number there and, obviously, the impacts for the children will be significant. I will revert to the Deputy.

4 o'clock

As Deputy Quaide acknowledged in the question, there are issues in terms of commercial premises, the costs involved and the sustainability of all of that. Transition is important, particularly in terms of children attending schools. That has to be handled with care.

Deputy Ward raised the issue of nitrous oxide and the regulation of it. I will speak to the Minister. Obviously, the transposition of the EU directive is under way. We are continuously transposing EU directives. This is a significant issue and it does need regulation.

To respond to Deputy Tóibín, the Government put out a tender. We can involve a member state of the European Union in joint procurement to accelerate the procurement of needed defence capability. In this case, it was radar and sonar in particular, which are urgent. In my view, it is a significant deficiency that we do not have radar. The entire motivation, while

respecting all of the laws governing procurement - and, by the way, it has taken quite a number of years to get to this point - is that we do have capacity to do this with people and to do it in a way that can accelerate the process so that we have capability.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is not just radar.

The Taoiseach: Interoperability is a long-standing principle. If we operate in places like Lebanon on peacekeeping missions, we require interoperability. Currently in Lebanon, we are with Polish troops in IRISHPOLBATT, some Hungarian troops and some Maltese who train in Ireland. Our roles, as Deputy Tóibín knows, are always peacekeeping, peace monitoring, civilian support and so on like that. I do not see any conspiracies.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There are other military vehicles included in the-----

The Taoiseach: Deputy Coppinger asked a philosophical question. She could have asked it a century ago as to whether there should be a millionaire. Of course, a lot of this trillionaire stuff is on paper. America has its system and Ireland has its system. We have a fairly progressive taxation system in Ireland where the highest paid by a long shot - the top 5% - pay nearly 50% of all income tax. I can check that but it is roughly where we are. We have a very progressive tax system here. I do believe in a progressive tax system. It is arguable that it could be too high at some levels and we do need entrepreneurship, individual innovation and to incentivise people in life as well, but we need a strong collective underpinning that in terms of our social protection system and a lot of State intervention in our society and in our economy. Ireland is not America in that respect. America has a different ethos and always had. There has always been a debate in the United States between big government versus less big government. People are entitled to have that debate in different societies and to vote accordingly. Just as they look askance at some of our practices, we look askance at some of theirs, to put it mildly.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We have billionaires as well. It is not just an American thing.

The Taoiseach: We do not have any trillionaire.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: We have billionaires. I asked whether billionaires should exist.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Coppinger, please.

The Taoiseach: I am not being facetious but what Deputy Coppinger is asking is whether someone should take all of the wealth at some stage. We have a different view of the creation of wealth and so on. I was at an event recently honouring Chuck Feeney. He got rid of all of his wealth in an altruistic and philanthropic approach. He made it his aim to get rid of all his wealth before he died. Ireland's universities benefited from this, as did many charities.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Taoiseach is picking out one example.

The Taoiseach: It is a bit more complex than we have time to discuss.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is a yes-no answer.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Roderic O'Gorman spoke about Bosnia-Herzegovina and its succession path to the European Union is a bit more complex than others. There are challenges within Bosnia-Herzegovina, particularly Republika Srpska in terms of how it is operating. We will work with it to try to progress the application.

Deputy Shane Moynihan spoke about competitiveness. A roadmap has been agreed between the Council, the Parliament and the Commission on the competitiveness roadmap, which gives us a lot of work to get done and the files are there. We think we can get a lot done on the savings and investment union, the establishment of the 28th regime for SMEs, the industrial accelerator Act, simplification of regulation, deepening of the Single Market and the grids package. There is a hell of lot there in the competitiveness agenda that we need to develop.

Deputy Shay Brennan spoke about the multi-annual financial framework. This will be very complex. The Cypriots have come up with a negotiating box, which is the first real concrete attempt to try to put figures on the general orientation of the budget. It is our job now to look at this and take soundings, and it will be our job to produce a negotiating box, which we will do, for the October meeting. Then the President, Antonio Costa, and ourselves will have to assess whether we can get it over the line by December. A lot of people want us to get the budget done by December but there are competing demands. People want a defence component in it because there are 5% deficits on the eastern flank, with Finland, Poland and all of these countries. There are big deficits now because of trying to defend themselves and have defence capability against Russia. Meanwhile, people want to have a stronger competitiveness fund or have a stronger Common Agricultural Policy, which we do. People want much more for less and there is great difficulty getting own resources on top of the GNI approach to providing revenue to the European Union. It is worth remembering that the budget is about 1% of European GDP. It is not a huge amount in the overall total. There is a lot of debate to happen. Some want us to borrow. The French are strong advocates of that while Germany is very clear that it does not want any more collective borrowing, as we had during Covid. It is a lot of work. We want to land this before the end of the year.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We will now move on to the next group of questions.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for his latitude.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: I asked about Sudan.

The Taoiseach: I apologise. I have been raising Sudan consistently at European Union meetings. It is shocking and horrific and it has not got the same international attention or profile as other wars have. The level of human displacement in Sudan is quite shocking. I have called on some of the neighbouring states that are arming the different belligerents to stop because there is too much external manipulation of Sudan, too much external interference and too much provision of weaponry to the different elements on the Government side and the rebel

side. The people are suffering. There is a virtual genocide happening there as well in terms of the level of killing. We need to stop wars in this world and stop conflict. The world leadership needs to get together because it is creating new norms that are robbing people of any concept of human dignity and the importance of every single life. It is awful what is happening in Sudan and I appreciate the fact that Deputy Farrell has raised it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: As we are due to finish questions at 4:26 p.m., I ask Members to keep to 30 seconds each or so.

Artificial Intelligence

24. **Deputy Malcolm Byrne** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the revised national digital and AI strategy. [16306/26]

25. **Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the revised national digital and AI strategy. [16307/26]

26. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the revised national digital and AI strategy. [16308/26]

27. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the revised national digital and AI strategy. [34546/26]

28. **Deputy John Connolly** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the revised national digital and AI strategy. [37324/26]

29. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the revised national digital and AI strategy. [41561/26]

30. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the revised national digital and AI strategy. [41564/26]

31. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the revised national digital and AI strategy. [41808/26]

32. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the revised national digital and AI strategy. [44845/26]

33. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the revised national digital and AI strategy. [44965/26]

34. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the revised national digital and AI strategy. [45027/26]

35. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the revised national digital and AI strategy. [45327/26]

36. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the revised national digital and AI strategy. [45331/26]

37. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the revised national digital and AI strategy. [45454/26]

38. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the revised national digital and AI strategy. [45462/26]

39. **Deputy George Lawlor** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the revised national digital and AI strategy. [45469/26]

40. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the revised national digital and AI strategy. [45510/26]

41. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the revised national digital and AI strategy. [45617/26]

42. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the revised national digital and AI strategy. [45621/26]

43. **Deputy Paul Lawless** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the revised national digital and AI strategy. [45640/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 24 to 43, inclusive, together.

The Government published our new national digital and AI strategy, a commitment in the programme for Government, in February. Digital Ireland – Connecting our People, Securing our Future sets out the Government's ambition to 2030 to strengthen Ireland's position as a digital leader and a global hub for applied AI innovation. Through Digital Ireland, we are building on our strengths, our well-established reputation as a digital hub, an exceptional talent base and a vibrant innovation ecosystem to ensure our economy reaps the benefit of digital and AI for growth and competitiveness, to enhance public service delivery and to empower our people to thrive in a digital society.

The strategy sets out 20 high-level objectives and 90 specific deliverables, reflecting the breadth of ambition across Government on public service delivery, enterprise, infrastructure, cybersecurity, digital regulation, online safety and skills and talent. It outlines five strategic mutually reinforcing ambitions - apply, grow, invest, lead and empower - reflecting the agile approach needed to succeed in a fast-evolving digital world. Included in it are applying digital and AI technologies to enhance how we deliver our public services and drive responsible AI adoption across the public sector; growing our digital economy and competitiveness and strengthening our profile as a location for investment in a global hub for applied AI; investing

in secure and resilient future-proofed digital infrastructure, including building our cybersecurity capacity; leading as a trusted, agile and forward-looking digital regulatory hub and centre of excellence; empowering our people, workers and businesses to thrive in a digital economy and society through responsive and inclusive digital and AI skills and literacy opportunities; and enhancing our online safety framework at national and EU levels to protect vulnerable cohorts, in particular children and young people.

We will continue to be a strong voice in Europe for a digital economy that supports competitiveness and innovation while protecting data privacy and fundamental rights. This includes continuing to advocate for an ambitious and dynamic approach to digital simplification. Digital Ireland reiterates our commitment to strengthening Ireland's position as an EU centre of excellence and digital regulatory hub and to ensuring a modern, cohesive and well-resourced regulatory framework that is responsive to the evolving digital age.

We are mindful that technological advances such as AI will, inevitably, bring labour market disruption. The strategy includes a range of measures to support all workers, in the public and private sectors, to navigate and mitigate the impact of potential job displacement, including through responsive and accessible skills supports. I recently proposed that the Government, trade unions and employers establish a forum under the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, to explore specifically the impacts of AI and wider digital change on the workplace in more detail. The updated strategy was developed through extensive cross-Government and stakeholder consultation, and regular stakeholder engagement will be a central feature of its delivery.

I will read the rest but will first allow others to come in.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: As I understand it, it is proposed that the Government is going to proceed with a ban on access to social media apps for those under 16. While I am agnostic about this because the evidence is quite mixed as to its effectiveness, particularly regarding the ability of young people to get around such bans, it will not be effective on its own unless there is a major programme of education. I believe it is critical that instead of focusing on and placing all the pressure on children and young people, we instead look at placing a greater digital duty of care on the tech companies. In any consideration, however, I ask that the views of children and young people be taken into account and that there be engagement with children and young people and their representatives.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I welcome the progress made to date in relation to the national digital and AI strategy, with the 20 objectives and the 90 deliverables. Things such as the AI skilling platform, AI Ready, are already up and running. We have seen progress made with the regulatory sandbox and the AI office, which is due to open in August. There are a lot of competing demands here and a lot of priorities, including some that are crucial and time sensitive. Are there specific action items, with times aligned to them, in relation to the plan over the next 12 months? I appreciate it runs until 2030, but some elements will need to be completed sooner rather than later.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I very much welcome the publication of the revised national digital and AI strategy. It recognises that AI and digital technologies are transforming how we

do business and compete in the global economy. Will the Taoiseach outline how the strategy will support our SMEs in County Louth and across the country to adopt AI and digital technologies in a practical way? Skillnet is at the forefront of this process. It works directly with businesses and workers to help develop the skills needed for improved productivity and to remain competitive. I believe we need to front-load funding to unlock this potential. This strategy needs to strengthen collaboration between industry, Skillnet and our higher and further education sector to build the talent pipeline needed for Ireland's digital future.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We are already seeing displacement due to artificial intelligence. We know that there are huge possibilities in relation to innovation. As my constituency colleague just said, it is necessary that we allocate funding and resources, whether through Skillnet or however else we do it, to make sure that businesses, including local businesses in County Louth and everywhere else, have the facilities and resources to implement artificial intelligence.

How exactly does the Government intend to deliver the social media ban for under-16s? There is much evidence concerning the difficulty of actually doing this. I think there will be engagement with not only young people but a huge number of stakeholders. The pressure, though, really needs to be on the tech companies. We know they are running addictive-by-design recommender algorithms that are about keeping people online, no matter how bad the information being put in front of them is or whether they are under or over 16. We really need these companies to be brought to account.

Deputy John Connolly: Similar to previous speakers, I urge a note of caution. The impetus seems to be focused on introducing a ban on social media for those under 16. Deputy Malcolm Byrne mentioned the importance of getting the input of children in the decision-making process. The children's committee held a number of meetings regarding this issue. It met experts from the world of academia and those who worked with children and young people. It also met young people themselves, who had very strong feelings about the practicalities of this ban and how it would work, if, indeed, it did work. There was a much stronger feeling that we must be better at holding the platforms and social media companies to account for the content on their platforms and for the addictive methods they use to ensure that young people are using them excessively.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I agree entirely. The Taoiseach has said that, "Social media is the public health issue of our time". It is nice that he has discovered it after voting against the Bill to ban recommender algorithms just a few months ago. However, does the Taoiseach think that this public health issue just stops as soon as people turn 16? Does he think that people are then suddenly immune to addictive design, to infinite scroll, to the manosphere and to pro-eating disorder content being spewed out at them? All of that will remain on social media if under-16s are barred from it because that is what is core to the big tech business model. We know from Australia that many under-16s find it easy to bypass the age verification. We cannot rely on it to keep our kids safe. The answer is very clear. It is what the media committee, the AI committee and every expert recommends: clean up social media at source by turning off the toxic algorithms that big tech profits from.

Deputy Eoin Hayes: When the Government announced the AI strategy in February, there was a very long press release, but it did not mention the word “jobs”. I want to raise a specific case in my constituency. Covalen made 720 workers redundant, and it blamed 540 of those lay-offs on AI. The company works for Meta. A total of 540 workers were under the two-year mark for statutory severance payments and they also have a six-month cooling off period. The company has refused to meet with their union, even though 30% of the workforce are members of the Communication Workers Union, CWU. In this AI strategy, what will the Government do to strengthen and uphold workers’ rights in the age of AI lay-offs?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Social media is robbing childhood from many young children. It is putting enormous pressure on children, isolating them and creating situations where there is 24-hour bullying. This is leading to all sorts of distortions in relation to children’s understanding of the world.

One suggestion I made to the Taoiseach previously was for the Government to seek to ban the purchase of smartphones by those under 16. That would be far easier to implement. It would not completely erase the challenge of the issue, but it would significantly mitigate it.

In terms of AI, we have a real problem. The Government is too uncritical of AI. AI is leading to the loss of potentially hundreds of thousands of jobs in this country, stealing the creativity of authors, creating a massive demand for energy, putting downward pressure on cognitive ability in education, and putting enormous power in the hands of a few wealthy oligarchs. We need far more global regulation of this enormous power.

Deputy George Lawlor: Despite it being early days in the digital and AI strategy, do we have any feedback on how the Observatory for Business AI Readiness, OBAIR, is performing in actively assisting regional businesses to adopt AI? What are the tools it is using to immerse itself in the businesses in regional parts of the country?

The Taoiseach: I thank all of the Deputies who raised various issues. I think the common denominator among all the contributions is the issue of protecting children, in particular, from the very harmful effects of social media. I understand and share parents’ concerns about the damage being done to children by social media. It was not today or yesterday that I described it as “the public health [challenge] of our time”.

Deputy Paul Murphy: The Taoiseach voted against-----

The Taoiseach: It was actually over two years ago when I made that very point at our own Ard-Fheis in terms of the challenges. There is no question that it is harming cognitive development and making many children’s lives much more challenging, difficult and, in some cases, miserable. It can facilitate bullying and much worse. It is ruining childhoods for too many children, so action needs to be taken.

I respect Deputy Malcolm Byrne’s right to be agnostic on some solutions, but we have to work on a number of fronts. I can recall the case with other addictive substances, such as tobacco. People always said that if we banned it, or banned the pack of ten, people would find a way around it. Kids used to get single cigarettes at the time we banned it.

We just made it harder. It does not mean there is complete compliance or complete coverage, but at least we are making it more restrictive and denormalising what has now become normal. I suggest there is an incremental series of steps that we have to take in respect of this.

Our preference is for an EU-wide approach. I attended a meeting recently hosted by President Macron on the banning of social media for under-15s and under-16s. The European Commission, with President von der Leyen, is bringing forward proposals in respect of this quite shortly. Commissioner McGrath, whom I met on Friday, said this to me as well. An EU-wide approach basically means taking on the platforms and saying to the platforms that they are preventing access. That would be more straightforward for the platforms to implement. It would avoid gaps in application and enforcement for regulators. An EU-wide approach to digital services, because they are provided across borders, would be a more effective way of doing this.

I was taken by the Oireachtas committee's report. It was well researched, to be fair. I accept we do need to debate this. The precise mechanisms by which access to these platforms would be prohibited need to be worked out. I also accept what Deputy Malcolm Byrne has said about the views of children and young people being ascertained. We have a history of doing that, in fairness – even before the Department of children was established. I remember the idea that one would consult children and young people being laughed at in the early 2000s. Now it is the norm. Regarding child poverty last year, we convened a group of young people to consult on the relevant issues. We do it across the board, and there is no reason we should not do it for AI.

I will come back to Deputy Ó Cearúil on his question on specific times and actions. The more important thing is to get the substantive stuff done. What is interesting is that, in some of the economic appraisals, Ireland is doing quite well in attracting investment because of AI and the levels of skills within the country already. We have to look at this as both a challenge and an opportunity. Sometimes too much of the debate can be on the challenge side of it, with not enough on the opportunity. I will come back to the matter.

Deputy McGreehan is spot on in terms of the skills issue. Skillnet will have a major role.

One of the issues we will discuss with the social partners, and which we have encountered in recent times, relates to our having used some of the fund for skills, the National Training Fund, for universities and so on. There is an argument that we should try to ring-fence some of that fund for AI skills training. There will have to be a massive nationwide programme on upskilling because the focus should be on redeployment. There are opportunities within the public sector in terms of changing the nature of work, and new opportunities to redeploy and maybe achieve more effective outcomes as a result. Training is going to be key, and we will consider front-loading funding in respect of that issue.

Deputy Ó Murchú also raised Skillnet, the under-16s and the addictive algorithms. These are the issues that I understand the European Commission will be addressing. I would make the point, however, that last year we brought in a restriction in schools concerning the utilisation of smartphones, and the Deputies opposite lampooned and attacked it.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The Taoiseach had a way of doing it. We can move on.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Nine euro socks.

The Taoiseach: There was not a better way of doing it. Deputy Tóibín was at it as well.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Taoiseach should not provoke him because we have only five minutes left, or two minutes.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: The Taoiseach is having a laugh now.

The Taoiseach: Through the Chair, we need to be consistent on this. It worked.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I was asking about how the Taoiseach would implement a social media ban.

The Taoiseach: It was impactful and it was a start in getting young people out of utilisation. By the way, all of the Deputies should leave their phones outside the Dáil. Let us start here. We are talking about the pervasive impact. All of the Deputies have mobile phones.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am trying to stay in contact with a committee.

The Taoiseach: They do not concentrate on the job at hand.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: How could Deputy Ó Murchú miss these words?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy just pressed it now again.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: They are multitasking. Give them a chance.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I was putting it out of the way. As I said, it is addictive.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Connolly raised the issue of the importance of having children and young people involved. I agree with that. Deputy Paul Murphy and Deputy Connolly raised the issue of what happens at 15 or 16. The education piece is very important, but it is the scale and the overwhelming nature of social media that seem to me to be quite different from the scale associated with earlier restrictive practices like censorship of books or other material in the past. Access to social media is universal; that is the problem. In previous eras, we endeavoured to educate for these reasons. As with most issues, it is a combination of education, prevention and restrictive laws at the same time. We have never had a *laissez-faire* approach to any issue that could potentially damage children and young people, so we cannot have the same *laissez-faire* attitude to social media either. However, I take the point that the mechanisms by which we achieve this are important and are still up for debate. The Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Services, Reform and Digitalisation, Deputy Jack Chambers, is working on this with the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport, Deputy Patrick O'Donovan, as well, because the former of the two has responsibility for the

implementation of the EU digital wallet, which is a factor in age verification. There are thorny issues around that as well, which I expect Deputies will come to us on. It is about holding platforms to account over the material they are providing.

I believe I have answered some of what Deputy Paul Murphy said. It is about what people can and should not have access to, and the companies have to respond. That is why an EU approach would be the optimal one. We will act ourselves, obviously, if we do not have that, but we already have significant laws in place. However, this is moving it on. It is interesting that the UK has made announcements. We will examine the Australian model and so forth.

On the AI strategy, Deputy Hayes said jobs were not mentioned. Jobs are critical. I did mention jobs but the point the Deputy is making is that people were laid off in Covalen. We have to be careful, too. Some companies are saying jobs are being lost because of AI but we must ask whether this is the cause in all cases. In other words, is it the application of AI that is causing job losses in some instances or is it decisions to invest hugely in AI and then look for resources elsewhere within an organisation or a company? It could be a bit of both. It is surprising that many of the workers are under the two-year mark. At best, that suggests fairly poor human resource planning. We have labour law here and workers have rights and entitlements. We will again work on the situation raised. I am not familiar with the specifics but I believe there are labour laws governing some aspects. The company should meet the union and engage with it on this.

I discussed most of the issues Deputy Tóibín raised. I would not say we are too uncritical of AI. We are not, but I made a point earlier that it is about challenges and opportunities. We have to look at the opportunities as well as the challenges, and also the reality. The Deputy might not like AI, but for me it has many potential benefits-----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Local regulation.

The Taoiseach: -----particularly in health diagnostics, in terms of what it can do in disease prevention or understanding pathways in getting to develop medicines and interventions that could accelerate really better treatments for people in a whole range of areas. Therefore, there are opportunities. I visited Analog last week, and it is very clear to me that it is already looking towards the next era, when sensors and semiconductors will be engaging with AI. Essentially, it is going to be quite dramatic. We can either watch and bemoan the emergence of AI or we can seek to be ahead of the posse because we have to be competitive and have to protect and create jobs for people.

It is probably a bit early to refer to the observatory on AI business readiness, but I will ask the relevant Minister, Deputy Burke, to respond to the Deputy on it. We have to evaluate measures we have implemented to determine what is happening. I appreciate the point the Deputy is making but business adoption is a key part of the strategy.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That concludes Taoiseach's Questions. We will now move to Second Stage of the Criminal Justice (International Cooperation on Electronic Evidence and Other Matters) Bill 2026, a Government Bill sponsored by the Minister for justice. The Taoiseach is using his phone.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I spotted that. Well spotted, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Multitasking. I admire him.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: And he told us not to bring them into the House.

**Criminal Justice (International Cooperation on Electronic Evidence and Other Matters)
Bill 2026: Second Stage**

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

I am grateful for the opportunity to bring this important Bill before the House. Electronic evidence is now central to almost every criminal investigation. While data flows globally, law enforcement authorities across Europe are often in need of foreign-held evidence for domestic cases, including data held by service providers in this jurisdiction. Electronic data is volatile and can be easily deleted, altered or moved. The emergence of cloud computing, where the exact physical location of data is often dynamic, has brought another set of jurisdictional difficulties for criminal investigations.

Existing means of legal co-operation between countries, namely mutual legal assistance, are slow and complex. As a result, law enforcement and judicial authorities often experience difficulties in accessing electronic evidence relevant to an investigation, rendering prosecutions ineffective. Increasingly, law enforcement has become reliant on voluntary co-operation with service providers but this method lacks enforcement power, fails to protect fundamental rights and leaves it up to service providers to determine the legitimacy of requests.

It is to address these deficiencies that I am introducing the Criminal Justice (International Cooperation on Electronic Evidence and Other Matters) Bill. The Bill delivers on the programme for Government commitment to implement the EU e-evidence package. That package provides a clear, legally certain and efficient process for law enforcement in one member state to directly request electronic evidence from service providers established in another member state, while protecting fundamental rights.

Ireland's role is central to implementation of the e-evidence package. It is expected that up to 600 service providers could designate their addressee in the State, and it is estimated that the number of production orders issued to those service providers will be in the hundreds of thousands annually. This has significant implications for Ireland's tech sector and criminal justice system. How we implement this framework matters well beyond our borders. Implementation will enhance Ireland's reputation as a hub for digital regulation and ensure effective and timely access to digital evidence in tackling serious crime to the benefit of all EU citizens.

The EU e-evidence package, which this Bill seeks to implement, is composed of two separate but interdependent legislative instruments: the e-evidence regulation and the e-evidence directive. The regulation, which the Oireachtas agreed to opt in to in 2018, has direct effect, while the directive is an internal market instrument which is binding on Ireland. The regulation imposes an obligation upon service providers to preserve or produce electronic

evidence at the request of a judicial authority of another member state, imposing a legal obligation upon them to do so. The directive requires that member states ensure service providers offering services in the EU designate an addressee to process incoming orders. It also obliges member states to check that service providers adequately resource and empower addressees to respond to production orders.

Both the regulation and the directive require that penalty provisions be put in place to address issues of non-compliance as and when they arise. The Bill provides for the establishment of the office of director of criminal justice international co-operation. This office, headed by a director with statutory powers, will serve as the regulatory body for implementation of the EU e-evidence package in Ireland. The Bill provides that the director will be designated as the central authority under both the e-evidence regulation and directive, and as the enforcement authority under the e-evidence regulation. The director will be responsible for the monitoring and enforcement of compliance by service providers with the e-evidence regulation, as well as their obligations under the e-evidence directive. The director will have the power to impose financial penalties on service providers that are in contravention of their obligations under the e-evidence regulation or directive. The director may also refuse certain production orders on various grounds, including that the execution of the order might violate fundamental rights or where the conduct for which the order has been issued is not an offence in this jurisdiction.

Unfortunately, and notwithstanding the significant efforts made by my officials and the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel, the transposition deadline for the e-evidence directive of 18 February 2026 could not be met. Transposition of the directive via this Bill is, therefore, imperative for Ireland to achieve. The e-evidence regulation applies from 18 August 2026. The Government intends that this target will be met. The director will also be assigned the role of competent authority for the scrutinising of incoming removal orders under the EU terrorist content online regulation, addressing a separate outstanding legal obligation.

I will turn now to providing an outline of the various provisions of the Bill. The Bill is composed of five Parts and a Schedule. Part 1 is comprised of standard provisions concerning the Short Title, commencement and expenses, and the definition of key words and terms used in the Bill. It also addresses matters relating to the designation of the director as the competent authority under Article 12(1)(b) of the terrorist content online regulation.

Section 1 of the Bill provides for the Short Title and commencement of the Bill. Section 2 provides for the definition of terms used in the Bill. Section 3 is a standard provision regarding expenses incurred in the administration of the Bill. Section 4 provides for the designation of the director of criminal justice international co-operation as the competent authority for the purposes of Article 12(1)(b) of the terrorist content online regulation. Section 5 is a necessary companion provision to section 4, providing for the revocation of the European Union (Online Dissemination of Terrorist Content) (Designation of the Commissioner of An Garda Síochána as a Competent Authority) Regulations 2025, SI 375/2025. These regulations provide for the designation of the Garda Commissioner as competent authority, which was done on a temporary basis pending the enactment of this Bill. Section 6 provides for the service of notices or other documents under this Bill, including by electronic means. Section 7 is a standard provision relating to regulations and orders to be made under this Bill.

Part 2 of the Bill, comprising sections 8 to 22, inclusive, provides for the establishment of the office of director of criminal justice international co-operation, the appointment of the director and staff, the functions of the director and other related matters.

Section 8 provides for the establishment of *oifig an stiurthéra um chomhar idirnáisiúnta ceartais choiriúil* or, in the English language, the office of director of criminal justice international co-operation. The holder of this office shall be known as the director of criminal justice international co-operation and is referred to in the Bill as "the Director". As Deputies will be aware, section 9D(1) of the Official Languages Act 2003 provides that the default and mandatory position is that newly established statutory bodies should be named in Irish only. However, provision is made in section 9D(1) for the departure from this in future enactments. Naming and establishing this body solely in Irish would adversely affect its messaging and visibility to both competent and central authorities in other EU member states that would not be familiar with the Irish language or the requirements of the 2003 Act. Section 8 also provides that the Schedule to the Bill shall have effect in relation to the director. The Schedule details the provisions applicable to the director, providing that the director will be a corporation sole with perpetual succession and official seal and power to sue and be sued and to acquire, hold and dispose of land, etc.

Section 9 provides for the appointment of the director, while section 10 sets out the circumstances in which a person is not eligible for, or is disqualified from, the office of director. Section 11 is a standard provision, providing that a person cannot simultaneously hold office as both director and as a Member of the Oireachtas or a member of the European Parliament or a local authority. Section 12 provides for the resignation and removal of the director. The appointment of members of staff of the director is provided for in section 13 of the Bill, while section 14 provides for the appointment by the director of a deputy director from a member of staff of the office. Section 15 provides that the director may engage consultants and advisers. Section 16 provides that the director will be indemnified against legal costs and damages relating to the carrying out of his or her functions. Section 17 outlines the various functions of the director and provides that the director will be independent in the performance of those functions. Section 18 is a standard provision providing for the delegation of functions of the director to a member of staff. Section 19 provides that the director may enter into an information-sharing agreement with certain national authorities. Section 20 provides that the director shall submit an annual report to the Minister, while section 21 sets out the statistical information that the director must collect and submit to the Minister.

Section 22 provides that the director may issue guidance notes to service providers.

Part 3, comprising sections 23 and 24, provides for the designation of the director as the enforcement authority and central authority, respectively, for the purposes the e-evidence regulation.

Part 4, comprising sections 25 to 30, inclusive, provides for the designation of the director as the central authority for the e-evidence directive. It also sets out the various obligations of service providers and actions that may be taken by the director in relation to their implementation. Section 25 is a standard provision providing for definition of terms used in Part 4 of the Bill. Section 26 designates the director as the central authority in the State for the e-evidence directive. Section 27 provides that service providers must designate a designated establishment or a legal representative for the receipt of, compliance with and enforcement of

decisions or orders. Section 28 acts as a companion provision to this, providing that service providers must ensure that designated establishments or legal representatives have the necessary powers and resources to comply with decisions and orders. Section 29 provides that service providers must notify the director of the addresses and contact details of their designated establishments and legal representatives. Section 30 provides that service providers and their designated establishments or legal representatives shall be jointly and severally liable.

Part 5, comprising sections 31 to 70, inclusive, provides the necessary enforcement mechanisms for non-compliant service providers. Section 31 provides for the definition of terms used in Part 5 of the Bill, including key phrases necessary to the mechanics of the Bill. It defines "e-evidence regulation obligation" as an obligation under Article 10, 11 or 13(4) of the e-evidence regulation. It also defines "relevant obligation" as an obligation on a service provider to, where applicable, designate a designated establishment or appoint a legal representative in accordance with section 26; provide a designated establishment or legal representative with the necessary powers and resources in accordance with section 27; comply with a notice in accordance with section 27; or notify the director in accordance with section 28. Section 32 is a standard provision intended to protect legal privilege. Section 33 creates an offence if certain persons, including staff of the director, an authorised officer or an adjudication officer, make an unauthorised disclosure of information acquired while performing functions under this Bill. Section 34 creates an offence where a person knowingly gives false information or evidence to the director or an adjudication officer. Section 35 provides for the appointment of authorised officers by the director for the purposes of the Bill. Section 36 provides for the powers of those authorised officers.

Section 37 provides that a judge of the District Court may issue a search warrant authorising an authorised officer to enter a place. Section 38 provides that the director may request that a service provider provide a compliance report to enable the director to confirm that the service provider is complying with a relevant obligation. Section 39 provides that, where the director is of the opinion that a service provider has contravened a relevant obligation, the director may either enter into an agreement with the service provider in respect of the alleged contravention or cause a directed investigation to be started. Section 40 provides that the director may enter into a written agreement with a service provider setting out the steps to comply with a relevant obligation. Section 41 provides for definitions of terms used in Chapter 4 of Part 5 of the Bill. Section 42 provides that the director may direct an authorised officer to undertake a directed investigation. Section 43 provides that an authorised officer shall submit a copy of the report to the director and the service provider concerned. Section 44 sets out the actions that may be taken by the director having received and considered an investigation report, including referring the investigation report to the chief adjudication officer for the purposes of conducting an adjudication. Section 45 provides for the definition of terms in Chapter 5 of the Bill. Section 46 provides that, for the purposes of undertaking an adjudication, the chief adjudication officer shall assign an adjudication officer. Section 47 provides that service providers shall not be liable to be penalised twice for the same contravention. Section 48 sets out the actions an adjudication officer shall take for the purposes of assisting him or her in the making of a decision as to whether a service provider has committed a relevant contravention. Section 49 provides that an adjudication officer shall make a decision on the balance of probabilities as to whether a service provider has committed, or is committing, a relevant contravention.

Section 50 sets out that the maximum financial penalty that can be imposed on a service provider can be no greater than 2% of the total world annual turnover of the service provider in the preceding financial year. Section 51 provides that an adjudication officer must send the director and the service provider concerned a written notice of a decision. Section 52 sets out the circumstances in which a decision as to contravention and financial penalty take effect. Section 53 provides that a service provider may appeal against a decision. Section 54 provides that, where there is no appeal, the director shall make an application in a summary manner to the Circuit Court for confirmation. Section 55 sets out procedural and other matters concerning the conduct of an oral hearing by an adjudication officer. Section 56 provides that an adjudication officer may, before making a decision as to contravention or the imposition of a financial penalty, refer a question to the High Court. Section 57 provides that an adjudication officer may award the costs of proceedings against the service provider or director for improper conduct. Section 58 provides that the Minister may make regulations. Section 59 provides that a payment made by a service provider in respect of a financial penalty shall be paid to the Exchequer.

Section 60 sets out the circumstances in which a person is not eligible for appointment or disqualified from holding office as an adjudication officer. Section 61 provides that a person cannot simultaneously hold office as an adjudication officer and be an elected person. Section 62 provides for the nomination by the director of persons for appointment as adjudication officers. Section 63 provides for the appointment by the Minister of adjudication officers. Section 64 provides that an adjudication officer is independent. Section 65 provides that the Minister shall make regulations. Section 66 provides that the director may require staff, or persons on contract or appointed as advisors, to assist adjudication officers. Section 67 provides that summary proceedings for an offence may be brought and prosecuted by the director. Section 68 provides that summary proceedings for an offence under the Bill may be instituted at any time within two years. Section 69 provides for liability by corporate entities. Section 70 provides that, where a person is convicted of an offence under the Bill, the court shall order the person to pay the director any costs and expenses incurred.

The provisions of the Bill have been drafted with a view to successful implementation of the EU evidence package. However, this is not only about compliance. It is also about leadership. It is an opportunity to enhance Ireland's position as a European hub for digital regulation and a trusted partner in international justice. For law enforcement, it means faster, clearer and legally secure access to the evidence needed to tackle serious crime and for citizens, it means confidence that their data and rights are protected, as we enhance our capacity to fight crime in the digital age.

The regulation provides that access to personal data through the mechanism of European production orders will be subject to existing data protection rules and principles. In particular, the regulation reiterates the requirements of necessity and proportionality and sets out the key safeguards in this area, including the limitations on the types of data that can be requested and the ability of enforcing States to object to orders under certain circumstances.

The EU-evidence package will be implemented in a manner which respects fundamental rights and freedoms, including individuals' rights to privacy and data protection. I look forward to hearing the views and observations of Deputies and answering their questions on this important Bill.

Deputy Mark Ward: I welcome this opportunity to discuss the EU e-evidence package and this legislation, which seeks to transpose it into Irish law. The broad purpose of this package and legislation is evidently worthy. With an estimated up to 80% of court cases involving electronic evidence in some format and relevant companies often being headquartered outside the jurisdictions where the crime is alleged to have been committed, we should, of course, seek to introduce efficiencies where existing processes may struggle with scale. The question then is whether the Minister has got the approach right. I remain unconvinced he has for various reasons.

Another week has passed in which the Minister has engaged in poor parliamentary practice. Here we are again debating a Bill on Second Stage when the deadline for Committee Stage amendments has already passed. If something were to come up in this debate, I would not be able to table an amendment on it because the deadline has already passed. That is bad practice. This follows a number of instances where Bills have been similarly rushed and, especially in recent weeks, we have had motions to extend the purpose of other Bills - some multiple times - to introduce various unrelated subject matters to legislation already in process. All this means is that legislation passes through these Houses with the bare minimum of scrutiny, and in some cases virtually no scrutiny at all.

The reason the Minister will give that this legislation must be rushed is that the transposition deadline was last February and with the directive due to come into force in August.

I put on record Sinn Féin's utter disgust that the Dáil is seeing its constitutional mandate limited by the Minister, arising from his failure to meet his obligation to process legislation in a timely and competent manner. That needs to change. Taking such an approach to the Dáil plays a role in undermining public confidence in our political institutions. I invite the Minister to reflect on his role in that.

I understand the Department officials considered whether any existing State body or agency could take on the functions of this office but found there is no existing criminal justice body equipped to deal with the task required by the e-evidence package. We also know the majority of orders across the EU are expected to be processed through Ireland, so what we are dealing with is important, substantive and could have a significant impact in Ireland. While the e-evidence package has been presented in terms of efficiencies, it is not at all apparent it will not have the opposite impact in Ireland. The Department seems to think there will be minimal impact on court services but the Courts Service itself seems much more circumspect and has stated there is limited data available on the number of cases that may arise after commencement. It went on to say the Department's projections may prove optimistic. That is hardly a ringing endorsement.

Then there are the efficiencies the office is meant to bring. With the majority of orders expected to be processed here, it will be the Irish taxpayer who picks up the tab for virtually the entire European Union. The Minister will say it is a small price to pay and arises out of foreign direct investment but I would be interested whether he could provide a single example whereby an individual member state was on the hook to such an extent regarding a single directive or regulations. From our engagement with Department officials, it seems the Minister cannot even tell us the scale, the cost or where this new body is going to end up. There is €2.8 million set aside for this year to provide for 29 staff and associated costs. Officials see it moving upwards to 150 staff but there seems little certainty that will be a cap of sorts, especially

given indications it is already intended to expand the remit of this new office to include the European investigation orders.

Significant concerns also exist about the safeguards in this Bill. Department officials acknowledged at the committee that in theory the regulation is based on the idea of full faith and credit in the member states' legal systems. "Theory" is doing an awful lot of heavy lifting here. In the past decade, we have seen democratic backsliding from some European Union states as well as issues with the rule of law. We have seen interference in the judicial system, European governments seeking to deny fundamental rights and the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia due to her journalism exposing major acts of corruption. These are just a few examples.

I, therefore, have major concerns with the approach of this Bill and the potential for rogue governments, or elements in governments, to abuse the trust and authority the Minister would vest in them. I appreciate he may say the entire European project might be based on such a theory but in this instance we are talking about fundamental rights. We are talking about political persecution. In that context, that seems designed to minimise judicial and Irish oversight.

Sinn Féin is not alone in having a critique of safeguards in the e-evidence package generally. As highlighted by Digital Rights Ireland in its submission to the justice committee, in an article on balancing efficiency and fundamental rights in this package, one academic described the e-evidence package as having minimal fundamental safeguards, so there is an absolute need for any Irish legislation to empower a Minister to suspend co-operation, where necessary. There was also extensive discussion at the Oireachtas justice committee on the issue of dual criminality and in particular how the civil law systems will relate to Ireland's common law tradition. I do not believe engagement with Department officials answered all the questions raised or left members entirely reassured. Sinn Féin believes there needs to be strong, robust provisions in any Irish legislation that ensure information may only be provided where an alleged offence constitutes an offence under Irish criminal law.

Sinn Féin is also concerned about the administrative burden this could place on SMEs. The Government's SME test identified this will impact SMEs more than larger companies and that they will incur administrative and compliance costs, notably working against ongoing efforts to increase competitiveness and reduce administrative and regulatory business. It would be more useful if the director of this office had an ongoing, explicit mandate to ensure minimal administrative burden for the SME sector specifically. An area of particular concern to me is the ability of smaller SMEs to meet the required timeframes necessitated by this legislation, which could be as little as eight hours in the case of an emergency order.

Section 49, as the Minister said, provides that in exceptional circumstances, where a service provider is in breach, an adjudication officer may decide not to impose a financial penalty. The Bill later clarifies such exceptional circumstances may include a micro-enterprise of fewer than ten people not responding to an emergency order. I am not at all confident this is robust enough a safeguard for SMEs. In any small businesses, not just micro-enterprises, it would not be exceptional to not have 24-7 cover, which is in effect what this Bill mandates them to have.

Sinn Féin welcomes that it is envisaged a decentralised IT system will be developed to facilitate engagement and reporting to SMEs. It would be of use if the Minister could provide an update on the status of this in his closing remarks. While the Minister's Bill makes provision

for engagement and information-sharing with other relevant public bodies like the Garda, Coimisiún na Meán and others, there is nothing in here on the Data Protection Commission. Given the concerns that exist, it would be reassuring for the Minister to, at the very least, similarly facilitate formal engagement between the office and the Data Protection Commission.

The proposed legislation is rushed. It leaves too many questions remaining on key provisions, especially about sovereignty, safeguards and the rule of law. Consequently, Sinn Féin cannot support this Bill in its current format.

Deputy Martin Kenny: There is no dispute that an office of this nature is required. International co-operation, especially in regard to electronic data is obviously something we continually need as we move into the modern age. An awful lot of criminal cases will reach for information that is being stored in the cloud somewhere and an application will have to be made to try to pull that information down. That can often cause, as the Minister is well aware, huge delays in the criminal process and in moving cases forward, so this type of legislation is obviously needed. The way we are connected electronically across the world and across Europe is evidence of that.

It is unfortunate this legislation is being rushed in the way it is. It is not allowing for the proper kind of scrutiny we need for something of this scale being established. The time we have to debate it is very limited. It is supposed to come into effect on 18 August with the EU regulation. To suggest the office would be up and running given the huge scale of this is extremely ambitious but perhaps the Minister will enlighten us as to how that is going to happen. That it could be done in such a short time would be pretty amazing. If we were able to do everything else as quickly here, we would be well ahead of things but we are where we are.

The EU evidence regulation was adopted three years ago in 2023. Many people are pointing to the delay as being due to some level of incompetence, possibly on the part of the Government. We are now deciding we are going to rush it through the House. It is estimated service providers based in Ireland will receive in excess of 300,000 orders per annum because of the number of these information technology companies based here. Expecting the office, which is to be set up in such a short time, to be able to deal with that volume is something we really need to get answers about. Answers have not been provided in respect of that to date.

There are serious questions about the financial and human resources this office is going to need. We are all aware of the difficulties people have in recruiting staff, especially where technological expertise is needed, as it certainly will be in respect of this office. It is even very difficult to get administrative staff, so I just do not understand how the Minister expects that this office is going to get established in that short period. The adequate level of resources needed is something that needs to be addressed.

5 o'clock

We are aware that there are concerns in relation to the lack of safeguards and incentives for service providers to consider data rights and other rights. We also have laws around privacy and laws to prevent overreach. That has to be taken into consideration.

There is a right to appeal in the legislation and that could significantly increase times and put pressure on our Courts Service. Five member states issued statements expressing concerns

about the protection of fundamental rights and the application of effective judicial review under the e-evidence package. The concerns related to grounds of refusal in a case of manifest breach of fundamental rights. There are a number of those rights. One is the possibility of double criminality. It is about whether Ireland will inadvertently contribute to human rights abuses. That is something we all have to be conscious of. We see a level of, quite frankly, fascism arising in many states around the world. The impact that may have has to be considered. Would Ireland facilitate the prosecution of individuals who have committed acts that would not constitute a criminal offence here? I notice in the Minister's opening remarks he suggested that would not happen. That is welcome if it is the case.

There is the requirement for a publicly accessible register providing information on requests from other member states and questions around how those requests will be processed and their respective outcomes. There is a lack of safeguards and incentives for providers to consider data protection rights and other fundamental rights. In all these situations, the right to privacy and fundamental human rights have to be protected.

We are aware of the debates around social media in many jurisdictions. In most cases, it may come down to social media companies' preparedness to co-operate with the criminal justice system, which has been unfortunately absent in most cases to date. I hope the level of penalties put in place will be enough to do that. There is provision for 2% of annual turnover; in other circumstances, it can be up to 10% of annual turnover. Is this something we are falling short on? We need to have sharp teeth when it comes to dealing with these companies. To date, that has not been the case and they have been allowed to get away with far too much in many jurisdictions. I am not just picking on Ireland or the European Union; it has been a global phenomenon.

My colleagues, Deputies Carthy and Ward, have tabled a number of amendments that they hope will provide assurances and protection to Irish citizens and to small and medium providers, who also need to be protected. This Bill is coming at the eleventh hour. It is very rushed. It is a big piece of legislation and is establishing something that will have a major impact. It is impossible to support legislation coming in this manner. The Minister's Department would do well to sit down, look at how it prepares and work out systems for the future because this is not the way to proceed on matters of such importance.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Taking up on what Deputy Kenny said, there are two things. This is not the first time we have dealt with legislation like this. We are talking about transposing the EU e-evidence package, the regulation and the directive. It has been on the books for a considerable amount of time. It has taken too long for us to get to this point and now that we are, as per normal, it is utterly last minute. We want a sufficient amount of time to do some element of due diligence.

My colleagues, Deputies Ward and Kenny, have spoken about some of the issues. Where technology meets domestic and international law, we all know the difficulties that are involved. For those involved in investigating and prosecuting crimes, there is a requirement that they can get the evidence. Sometimes, the first time you see issues of antisocial behaviour or whatever is when they are up on TikTok or somebody has taken a screen grab on Snapchat. You are sent that and you send it to the guards. The guards talk about the difficulties they have in getting that information and getting it in the correct format, even when dealing with companies that

are based here. We want to see this office set up to deal with these issues for those across the European Union looking for evidence, particularly given that a significant number of the big players in the tech world have their headquarters here. Therefore, there will be multiple contacts.

Deputy Kenny spoke about 300,000 requests. It is hard to see how this office, no matter how it is resourced, would not be overwhelmed by that. We need to have the systems, know-how and technology to deal with this. There is a huge issue when dealing with social media giants from the point of view of delivering evidence. Nearly every committee in the Oireachtas has dealt with the big tech companies, such is their impact on and footprint in the world in which we live. It has generally been from the point of view that we have insufficient regulation and leverage to deal with what they offer, which is social media platforms that are addictive by design, have recommender algorithms and are based on keeping people online no matter what the material is. They will say they offer a service that goes above and beyond the law and that the minute nefarious material is there, they get rid of it. What anyone realises who has lived in the real world, used any of these platforms or talked to the young people in front of the children's committee, the EU affairs committee or the media committee is that these companies have made little effort in relation to facilitating those who have had information put up that is detrimental to them. I have a particular issue with it.

We know what sort of material we are talking about. We are talking about sometimes intimate material, including intimate material produced through artificial intelligence. I have no doubt this office will be dealing with a huge number of these issues. When we talk about Coimisiún na Meán, the Data Protection Commission and even the European Commission, I am not quite sure they are sufficiently resourced to take on Google, Meta or TikTok. I think I said before it is like having your winter league team going up against Barcelona at their best. We need to resource the office. There is a particular issue in relation to this office. We are talking about social media bans but we are not next or near having a conversation and ensuring we have the tools-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy Ó Murchú.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: -----to really put it up to these companies so we can make this place safer for all who use social media, particularly young people,-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Thank you, Deputy. I call Deputy Gannon.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: -----and tackle the issues in relation to disinformation and even more nefarious material that we keep seeing.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Do you know when the clock goes red, Deputy? Just in case you do not know-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am colour-blind.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is when the Chair asks you to move on.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Nobody is for a second disputing the problem this legislation is trying to solve. The reality is electronic evidence now forms part of almost every criminal investigation, whether organised crime, fraud, child exploitation, trafficking or terrorism. The days when investigations were confined to physical evidence and paper trails are long gone. The need for international co-operation is real, as is the need to modernise how evidence is gathered, but good intentions do not automatically make good legislation.

What concerns me about this Bill is it feels like another example of a Department of justice, led by the Minister, that has become obsessed with speed, efficiency and finding shortcuts, and increasingly detached from the practical realities of delivering the public services and judicial services we need. In short, it is all hurry and no pace.

When you scratch beneath the surface of this proposal, there are enormous questions that remain unanswered. The first is resourcing. During pre-legislative scrutiny, the Department told the committee that Ireland could ultimately become responsible for processing over 300,000 electronic evidence requests every year because so many of the major technology companies operating across Europe were headquartered here. With 300,000 potential requests, the Department has budgeted exactly €2.8 million and allocated an initial staff complement of 30 people. I struggle to understand how anyone can look at those figures and conclude that they remotely add up to the seriousness of what we are discussing. The Department itself admitted during scrutiny that it did not yet know how many of those requests would require intervention and what the final staffing requirement would be. It admitted that the office may eventually require 150 staff or more. Let us be honest about what is happening here. We are being asked to establish a major new State body with significant powers and responsibilities without knowing how much it will ultimately cost, how many staff it will require or whether the proposed model is remotely capable of coping with the workload that is potentially coming, and it is being sold to us in the language of efficiency. Everything is about speeding things up. Everything is about streamlining processes but there is a difference between efficiency and what appears to me to be wishful thinking on the Minister's part. If he genuinely believes that 30 staff can oversee a system potentially dealing with hundreds of thousands of requests every year, we are not building an efficient system; we are building a backlog, building delays, building appeals and, ultimately, building costs - far greater costs than if the system had been properly designed and resourced in the first place.

The second major concern I have is regarding the human rights implications of this Bill. One of the most important issues raised during pre-legislative scrutiny was the reality that not every EU member state had the same track record when it came to civil liberties, democratic standards and human rights protection. We heard concerns about democratic backsliding, surveillance powers, and journalists, activists and minority groups who potentially might be targeted. The answers we received about hugely important matters, such as abortion rights, freedom of expression and LGBT rights, were not particularly reassuring. In fact, the Department acknowledged that if the new office did not intervene within the required timeframe, the service provider may simply proceed regardless. I ask the Minister to think about that. The safeguards in the system are only as strong as the capacity of the office tasked with enforcing them, which brings us directly back to the resourcing issue because rights-based protections on paper are meaningless if the body responsible for protecting those rights is overwhelmed from day 1, and that is precisely why the amendments to the Bill are so important. Amendments dealing with human rights protections, double criminality, transparency and

reporting requirements are not attempts to derail the legislation. They are attempts to make it workable. They seem like attempts to introduce the safeguards that many people assumed would already be present. The amendments requiring greater scrutiny would not constitute an offence under Irish law and the amendments strengthening accountability are fundamental safeguards that this Bill needs, and if the Government is not willing to accept those safeguards or bring forward alternatives that achieve the same objective, I do not believe that this legislation is tenable in its current form. The Department is effectively asking us to trust a system of extraordinary scale while simultaneously admitting that it does not yet know what scale that system will operate at. That is the exact moment when safeguards matter most. Not after something goes wrong or rights have been infringed, but before these powers are granted.

This Bill does not exist in isolation. It is part of a pattern of decision-making within the Department of justice, led by the Minister, where efficiency increasingly appears to trump expertise. I will highlight one recent example of that that left me shocked to my core, namely, the contract awarded to respond to the arrival of unaccompanied minors. A management services company, one that specialises in pest control, was awarded that contract. You could not make that up. At the same time that highly skilled organisations with extensive experience in trauma-informed care for children and young people were applying for that work, a management company that specialised in pest control was awarded the contract, but, apparently, that is where expertise mattered. That is where efficiency mattered. That, unfortunately, is exactly the same mindset that seems to underpin legislation such as this - the belief that if we centralise enough, automate enough, outsource enough and streamline enough, somehow everything will become cheaper, quicker and better. That, quite clearly, does not work, because public services are not about managing units and every time we try to squeeze complex human problems into simplistic administrative solutions, we end up paying for it later. We will see this over the next couple of years. We will pay for it more through appeals. We will pay through delays. We will pay through court challenges.

If this office is under-resourced, if decisions are rushed and if safeguards fail, millions of euro will ultimately be squandered dealing with the consequences - far more than would have been spent getting it right in the first place. That is why I believe we can do better than this, that we can have a system that facilitates international co-operation, tackles serious crime and allows evidence to move efficiently across borders, but that we can also have a system that is properly resourced, transparent and built on realistic assessments of workload rather than opportunistic assumptions. If this legislation is genuinely expected to deal with hundreds of thousands of requests every year, we should stop pretending that €2.8 million and 30 staff constitute a serious answer to that challenge because we owe the public something better than that.

I believe there is a pattern here. We are talking about efficiency. It happened last week in the Dáil during the miscellaneous provisions Bill the Minister brought through where we questioned the fact that we had so many different aspects of the judicial system all contained within the same Bill and the Minister's response was that he was getting a lot done. There is a difference between being in a hurry and having some pace that brings lasting achievement. I have not seen any of it and we will not see any of it in this Bill either.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Criminal Justice (International Cooperation on Electronic Evidence and Other Matters) Bill 2026. The objective of this Bill is to support efforts to tackle crime being facilitated over the Internet.

The large drugs cartel being organised on an encrypted app, the fraud run from a server in another country, the grooming of a child through a social media account or the money laundered through a chain of digital transactions - none of these crimes respects a border. The evidence sits on servers that may be in Dublin, in Frankfurt, in any country or in a data centre on another continent. The development of the online ecosystem has outpaced existing legislation, and even where national governments have introduced legislation, the transnational nature of the problem means an EU-wide response is warranted and necessary to address the issue.

Today, when a Garda investigation needs evidence held on servers in another member state, the process is slow. A European investigation order can take up to 120 days. A mutual legal assistance request takes, on average, ten months. Think about what ten months mean in a live investigation. Data is deleted, trails go cold and victims ultimately wait. A suspect who should go before a court remains at large. That delay is not a technical inconvenience; it is a gap that major criminals regularly exploit.

This Bill closes that gap. It transposes the EU e-evidence directive and gives further effect to the e-evidence regulation. Together, they create two new tools. The first is the European production order. This will allow a judicial authority in one member state to obtain electronic evidence directly from a service provider in another. It must respond within ten days or, in an emergency, within eight hours. It is ten days instead of ten months. The second is the European preservation order, which allows authorities to require that specific data be preserved so it is not lost while a fuller request is prepared.

The scale here is significant. It is expected that up to 600 service providers could designate an addressee in Ireland. The number of production orders issued to providers based here is anticipated to exceed 300,000 every year. Our own authorities are likely to issue around 2,000 orders to providers in other member states to advance investigations here at home. These are not abstract figures. Each order represents an investigation into a real crime affecting real people.

To manage this, the Bill establishes a new office, the office of director of criminal justice international co-operation. The new office is necessary, as it centralises functions that would otherwise be scattered across existing bodies. The State is right to centralise the skills, expertise and responsibility to one office. There will be a single point of contact for cross-border co-operation on electronic evidence. The director will monitor and enforce compliance by service providers and will have the power to impose financial penalties where providers fail to meet their obligations.

On the previous speaker's point about staffing, it is clear that the office will be built up on a phased basis, with the process to appoint a director now under way.

When the State takes on new powers to access people's data, the safeguards matter as much as the powers themselves. The Bill, and the package behind it, takes that seriously. It is important to note the protections being proposed. The framework guarantees strong protection of fundamental rights, including the right to the protection of personal data. A person whose data is sought is entitled to legal remedies. Where it is warranted, the authorities of the member

state in which the provider is established will be brought in through a notification mechanism and can stop the production of data on a defined list of grounds. The director here in Ireland will scrutinise certain incoming production orders and may refuse them on the grounds set out in the regulation. Where a provider faces a conflict of laws, a specific procedure involving a judge or a court applies. All of this will be run through a secure, decentralised IT system that authenticates everyone taking part. Requests for sensitive data will not be flying around on email. These are real checks, not just window dressing.

The Bill also does something sensible in joining up our response to terrorist content online. Under the EU's terrorist content online regulation, removal orders can be issued requiring hosting providers to take down terrorist material. The receiving state must be able to scrutinise those orders to ensure they do not breach the regulation or, indeed, fundamental rights. Ireland struggled to find a suitable body for that scrutiny role. The Garda Commissioner was designated on an interim basis to address an infringement case. The Bill assigns that scrutiny function to the new director, where it sits naturally alongside the very similar task of scrutinising incoming production orders. It is a coherent fit and puts a proper, permanent arrangement in place.

The transposition deadline for the e-evidence directive was 18 February this year. I welcome the work to date by the Minister and his officials on the legislation. Ireland hosts a large share of Europe's digital economy. Many of the service providers that other member states will turn to for evidence are based here. That gives us a responsibility and an opportunity. By implementing this package fully and on a proper footing, we confirm Ireland as a serious centre of expertise for digital regulation and a reliable partner in the digital Single Market. We give legal certainty to the businesses operating here. We also give confidence to our European partners that when they come looking for evidence of a serious crime, Ireland will be ready to assist lawfully and quickly.

This Bill is about giving An Garda Síochána and our courts the modern tools they need to investigate modern types of crime while protecting the rights of citizens at every step. It honours a commitment in the programme for Government, it meets our European obligations and it makes us a more compatible and trustworthy partner in the fight against serious cross-border crimes.

Deputy George Lawlor: This is an important Bill that deals with the most serious of questions, namely, how we keep our citizens and citizens of neighbouring states safe and how we co-operate with our European neighbours to ensure the rights of our citizens are protected. The Minister has publicly stated that the Bill is an important step in demonstrating Ireland's commitment to implementing the EU's e-evidence package and improving access to digital evidence for serious crime investigations. It is about how we make sure that the digital world is one where laws are enforced, rights are safeguarded and the technology giants upon which so much of modern life depends play their part and are held accountable.

I understand that the rush to legislate is not unusual for EU deadline-driven legislation. We faced similar time pressures in the past when implementing EU directives or regulations with fixed application dates. However, the seriously reduced opportunity to engage with this Bill in the House is both unfortunate and somewhat disrespectful to Members. Given the package was

first endorsed in the EU in 2023, it really beggars belief that we could not have had far more dialogue on it before now.

The Bill puts in place an entirely new office and staff to enforce its rules. The Department has made clear that this body will grow to a substantial size and carry a significant budget with it. Ireland, being home to many of the world's biggest technology and digital services firms, can expect to have a large workload arising from these EU rules. We can be leaders in that but it is absolutely vital that we get it right from the off. We must be sure that the procedures and bodies we put in place to carry out the work are properly resourced and are given not just enough powers but the right powers. This is a Bill that deserves close scrutiny in the Oireachtas. The questions at play are simply too important to risk getting it wrong.

International co-operation on law enforcement is absolutely essential, particularly in the digital space. Digital evidence does not respect borders, and police forces and enforcement bodies simply cannot afford to operate in national silos when it comes to online evidence. The European Union is in a unique position globally to put the mechanisms in place to ensure its member states' national and local law enforcement bodies co-operate in this area. That idea was at the heart of the EU's e-evidence package and it is at the heart of this Bill. It is a sensible and welcome idea. However, we in the Labour Party have some questions about the legislation, which we will raise as it progresses through the Oireachtas.

The first issue I raise concerns privileged material. It is an issue that has been raised repeatedly in the House in recent times. Repeatedly, the Government has been slow to recognise the importance of protecting legal or journalistic privilege when bringing forward legislation. That has been particularly true in relation to legislation coming from the Department of justice. Subsections (3) and (4) of section 32 allow for the compelled disclosure of potentially privileged material subject to a subsequent High Court determination, with a 30-day window to apply. The key word here is "subsequent". The 30-day window runs from the date of disclosure or taking of possession but there is no explicit ban or any kind of interim restraint on the use of that privileged material while the court application is pending.

It is essential to address this issue and, to that end, we have tabled amendments to make clear in the Bill that where an authorised officer or adjudication officer compels disclosure or takes possession of a record that may be subject to legal privilege, the officer cannot use, copy, communicate or act upon that record before the High Court's determination. Our amendments will be debated on Committee Stage tomorrow. I hope the Government will look closely at the issue and accept the amendments. This is common sense. Legal privilege must be protected throughout the process. The Government recognises that by including section 32 in the first place but we need to ensure that there are no potential loopholes. We cannot have a situation where legislation potentially allows for the free usage of material that might later be ruled privileged by the High Court.

We also have serious questions about the resourcing of the new office of the director of criminal justice international co-operation and the potential costs associated with it. Those concerns were raised during pre-legislative scrutiny and I have yet to see a convincing answer to them from the Government. As the home to a very large number of digital service providers, Ireland can expect a larger number of requests relative to our size than other member states. How will the Government ensure that the new office can handle that large volume of work without doing so being to the detriment of the current workings of the Department of justice?

We have heard that the expectation is that the office could grow in size to 150 staff. The estimate based on current numbers is that it will deal with 24,000 notifications each year. However, the actual number could be much higher. The Department has said that the number of notifications sent to the office will only be known once the regulation comes into effect. There is real potential for two different scenarios, neither of which is welcome. We could have an under-resourced office that cannot keep up with the amount of work landing on its desk, leading to long waiting times or even mistakes being made, or we may have an office that keeps expanding and taking an ever-growing share of the Department's expenditure and requiring ever-growing staff numbers. There is a real risk of a very large cost arising that balloons over time.

I have no doubt that this work is important, even vital, but how will the Government ensure the potential costs and resourcing requirements are properly managed?

We can look at the example of the National Cyber Security Centre, which is a key public body aimed at keeping digital space safe. It has been under resourced and overworked throughout its existence. We cannot afford to keep making the same mistakes, and the Government has done nothing to earn our confidence that this new office will not face similar challenges. Can the Minister give real assurances that this body will be properly resourced to undertake the substantial job of work that will come across its desk and that a proper assessment of the potential for future growth in a number of notifications that it deals with has been carried out?

Finally, it is essential that Ireland does not risk double criminalisation and we do not end up facilitating the prosecution of individuals who have committed an act that would not constitute a criminal offence here in Ireland. This issue was also raised at pre-legislative scrutiny. For example, if an EU member state were to criminalise the provision of online information about abortion services, would there be a risk that Ireland would be required to collaborate in evidence-sharing about a potential breach of that law? I have seen the Department's response to the committee's pre-legislative scrutiny report, which seems to point to Article 12(1)(d) of the e-evidence regulation for reassurance on this point. However, it still seems to be the case that service providers based in Ireland, as distinct from the new office itself, could be compelled to co-operate on such a case. I would welcome more clarity on this from the Minister. Can he assure the House that this legislation will not undermine Irish law in any way?

International co-operation on digital law enforcement is absolutely vital, particularly within the EU; no one on these benches will argue with that. However, there are significant elements of this Bill that need greater clarity from the Government, and we will continue to press those as this Bill moves forward.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I commend the Minister and his Department on bringing forward the Bill. The Government committed to implementing the e-evidence package and to establishing the new office of the director of criminal justice international co-operation, CJICO, in the programme for Government. It is welcome to see that commitment now being progressed.

The Bill is practical and necessary and will strengthen Ireland's ability to access digital evidence to support criminal investigations. It will also help to ensure those involved in serious and organised crime can be brought before the courts and ultimately brought to justice. We all

know criminal gangs do not respect borders and that their activities are not confined to one village, one county or even one country. Criminal networks are international, and their communications are often online. Their financing, planning and contacts can move across borders in seconds. We have to be able to respond to that.

We cannot underplay the importance of international co-operation. We have seen in recent weeks how working closely with other jurisdictions and law enforcement agencies can lead to major breakthroughs in tackling transnational organised crime and can bring significant players in the criminal underworld to justice. When gardaí can co-operate effectively with their counterparts in other countries, it becomes much harder for these criminals to hide behind borders. In today's day and age, everything is done through digital means and crime is no different. A person in this State can easily communicate with a group on the other side of the world to organise a drug shipment, move money and co-ordinate other criminal activity. This can happen quickly and discreetly, and the evidence of that activity may be held by a service provider in another EU country. In these circumstances, any delay can seriously damage an investigation.

Investigations into organised crime are increasingly dependent on digital evidence and there are countless cases where convictions have been secured based on digital material. We have to support An Garda Síochána insofar as possible to make it faster and easier for it to access electronic evidence. Speed matters in any investigation and it is particularly important in organised crime cases, where those engaged in this activity will often try to cover their tracks, encrypt their communications or delete incriminating material entirely. The European production and preservation orders provided for in the e-evidence package and this legislation will be an important tool in ensuring relevant evidence can be obtained or preserved quickly. The creation of the new office of the director of criminal justice international co-operation is very welcome and the Bill gives that office real teeth by giving it the power to monitor and enforce compliance by service providers.

Criminals are quick to adapt and will seek to carry out their activities wherever they can. The State must be a step ahead of them and must be able to respond urgently. We need to look ahead of the curve to see what technology is coming down the tracks so that we can keep up with it. In particular, AI as a tool can be very positive while also nefarious at the same time. This Bill will help close gaps criminals have been able to exploit. It will improve co-operation with our European partners, support the gathering of new evidence and, most important, assist in holding those involved in serious and organised crime to account.

Deputy Barry Ward: Cuirim fáilte roimh an mBille seo. Déanaim comhghairdeas leis an Aire freisin as ucht an luais a bhí leis. Nuair atáimid ag labhairt faoin dlí ag an leibhéal Eorpach, is gá dúinn na rialacha mar sin a chur sa dlí sa tír seo. Déanaim comhghairdeas leis maidir leis sin. Ag an am céanna, bhí mé ag éisteacht leis an díospóireacht anseo freisin. Tá a fhios agam go bhfuil daoine sa Teach seo a bhfuil inní orthu faoi rudaí atá sa Bhille agus ceisteanna atá fós le freagairt ag an Aire. Labhróidh mé fúthu siúd ar feadh tamaillín. While it is obviously very important to implement this legislation and to give legal effect to the European regulations and directives in law in this country, it is important that we do so in a way that is effective, above challenge and is going to work.

I note what the Minister said about the likelihood that many of the companies that will be affected by the EU e-evidence package will give their addressee in this State. This will possibly result in hundreds of thousands of requests, under the package, being brought to companies in this State and therefore being subject to regulation within this State. That is a significant administrative burden, so I would certainly welcome an assurance from the Minister that resources will be given to the office to ensure it can carry out its function. That is what I mean when I say it must be effective. If we are to give legal meaning to this legislation, it must be something where the CJICO to be established here will be able to do the work it has to do.

However, let me say this on co-operation with our European colleagues: I cannot think of a single example where it was not absolutely in Ireland's interest to be part of exercises and co-operation agreements exactly like this. As a small country in Europe, albeit one in which digital and technological regulation has come to the fore for us because so many companies have been headquartered here, it nonetheless serves us at every head's turn to be part of co-operation agreements with our European colleagues so that we can share information with them and will also be the beneficiaries of access to information across the European Union.

Looking specifically at law enforcement, I have listened to colleagues who have said crime does not respect borders, and they are absolutely correct in that regard. When we look at European law enforcement, we should be moving, to the greatest extent possible, to a single jurisdiction on this Continent so that we can accelerate the enforcement of law and the prosecution of those responsible for breaking the law. That said, we also need to build safeguards into all legislation. I listened to what was said about concerns relating to potential discrepancies between law in one member state and this member state and the idea that Irish addressees or companies based in this jurisdiction would therefore be aiding another jurisdiction to prosecute an offence that is not known to law in this jurisdiction. Safeguards are important. I know reference was made to Article 12(1)(d). I must say I am satisfied this gives the assurance required. In this context, for example, with the European arrest warrant framework that came into law over 20 years ago, at that time, if I remember correctly, during the debates there were also concerns regarding offences in other countries that were not offences here. The concern was that people would be extradited or surrendered all the time to other European countries for matters we do not recognise as against the law here. Again, notwithstanding the concerns expressed by Members at that time, that framework specifically addressed that, and in a similar way to what Article 12 does in the e-evidence package with a view to saying, "Actually, no, you cannot do that." We have seen in the European arrest warrant framework, for example, that it is something the High Court must establish here before the extradition or surrender ever takes place. The High Court here must be satisfied that the offence complained of by the jurisdiction seeking to have a person surrendered is a matter known to Irish law. I would say the same must be true in terms of the operation of the CJICO and it satisfying itself. Article 12 gives that but, again, I would be grateful to hear confirmation from the Minister that he is also satisfied Article 12 does this.

The reality is that we are not just a geographic island but also, in many ways, a legal island within the European Union. The common law jurisdiction that operates here has benefited us hugely from the point of view of continuity over time in the interpretation of the law by our judges. It has also benefited us in the sense that international businesses and individuals coming to this State can rely on a rule of law that is consistently applied and the direction of which can be visibly seen.

They can have confidence that our system applies the law in a way that they can predict and therefore they can abide by.

There are other technical common law jurisdictions in the European Union - Cyprus and Malta, for example. They are more hybrid than we are. We are essentially the last pure common law jurisdiction left in the European Union after Brexit. We have to be mindful that different legal systems create different ways in which crime is prosecuted. In many respects, I have concerns about the way certain matters are addressed by courts under civil law jurisdiction and the rights that we take for granted in this jurisdiction may not be as openly available to citizens in other European countries. That is not to call into question the effectiveness or the fairness of their legal systems; it is just different. However, because of that difference, we have to create that balancing act between the two to ensure that there is not an injustice perpetrated because of a request made from one country to an addressee in this country in relation to something that may be at variance with our laws. I would be grateful to the Minister for confirmation that there is not an issue under Article 12 and that that satisfies any concerns that might exist in that regard.

I come back to the efficiency issue in relation to the operation of the CJICO. I ask the Minister to address the question of resources that will be made available to it. If, for example, hundreds of addressees who are based in this jurisdiction are nominated by companies in the digital space in Europe and we find hundreds of thousands of requests being made from across the European Union to this jurisdiction, will the resources to be available to the CJICO to deal with those requests? Has provision been made or consideration given to how that will happen?

Again, I refer to the European arrest warrant framework in this regard. Countries have applied it differently without any criticism. For example, Poland identified the European arrest warrant framework as a very effective way of getting citizens, particularly from Ireland, to go back to Poland. There has been criticism in the Supreme Court of the minor nature of some offences on which the return of a Polish citizen from Ireland was sought by Poland. Again, that is something that had to be dealt with by the Supreme Court. If, for example, the CJICO feels that a request is frivolous - in using that word I do so without any criticism - or more minor than may have been envisaged initially in this Bill or in the package generally, is that something that CJICO will be empowered to deal with itself? Will it have recourse to the courts? What will the ultimate arbiter be if addressees in this jurisdiction are receiving requests from other European countries that are just beyond the pale or beyond what we envisaged when this package was put together?

At the end of the day this e-evidence package makes perfect sense. The notion that we would be delaying criminal prosecutions because of administrative difficulties in transferring e-evidence from one entity to another or across borders is nonsense. We should not tolerate that. We should not encourage it. We should be doing everything we can in a legislative context to avoid that happening. That is what this Bill does as I understand it. It does not mean that it is perfect. It does not mean that it is not worth looking at the possible pitfalls that we may have experienced in transposing similar applications of European legislation into national legislation.

Has consideration been given to the possibility that one country might be very zealous - I will not say overzealous - in its pursuit of requests to addressees who might actually be resident in this jurisdiction? How will we deal with that? Is it sufficient for the CJICO or is it something

that will require recourse to the Irish courts? If there is recourse to the Irish courts to solve those issues, what about the capacity of the courts to deal with those questions as they arise? We already have a criminal justice system and a court system generally that is under strain. We do not have enough judges. We do not have enough frequency of cases travelling through the courts. Will there be a dedicated court? Is that something that will create a blockage in the system? Has consideration been given to this?

All of this comes back to the basic point of this. We are a small entity within the European Union. We have had a universally positive experience of being part of the European Union and we have benefited enormously from co-operation with other European Union states whether through international co-operation on criminal justice matters, trade, travel or the free movement of ideas, goods and services, and all of the principles that we have come to take for granted as being part of the European Union. These are all good things for us.

I welcome the Bill from the point of view that it transposes the EU e-evidence package. It is important and it will benefit us. In the final analysis, our job in this House is to look at this Bill and the manner in which it transposes that package. Does it do it in a way that still serves us? More importantly, does it do it in a way that avoids pitfalls that will sometimes emerge from transposing complex legislation that is meant to apply to 27 states - hopefully in the near future more - by narrowing that into our jurisdiction and fitting it, like the peg that goes into a hole, into our specific common law jurisdiction. Does it work? Are there pitfalls and have all possible unintended consequences been considered? I am quite sure the Minister thinks they have but I would be very grateful to hear what specific considerations in that area have been given.

Maidir leis an mBille féin, tá mé thar a bheith i bhfabhar an Bhille agus an mhéid a dhéanfaidh sé maidir leis an dlí agus an dlí Eorpach atá ag teacht go hÉirinn. Is maith an rud é. Is maith dúinn é mar mhuintir na hÉireann. Cuirim fáilte roimh an mBille agus tá súil agam go rachaidh sé trí Thithe an Oireachtais leis an luas céanna lenar tháinig sé go dtí an Teach seo.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to speak. I welcome the introduction of this Bill which will ensure that electronic evidence needed for criminal investigations can be requested by law enforcement from service providers. What I am thinking about is the apprehension of drug lords who are ruining our society and causing so much mayhem in families. We see youngsters committing suicide and the disruption of families. As I said, the mayhem it causes is terrible. I support any way that we can apprehend these people rapidly because they have our society completely ruined. It is happening in most rural places, villages and towns, and of course our cities. The effect it is having on family life is desperate.

In relation to international co-operation, is this only with countries within the European Union's jurisdiction? It needs to go further than that. We need to have the same co-operation with countries outside of the European Union. Every one of us here knows they are coming from every part of the world. My worry, as I have said to the Minister here before, is our exposure along our coast. In many places even Kerry, we no longer have Garda stations. I worry, and many people worry, that drugs are coming in along the shore at night when they know nobody is monitoring or knows what is going on. We need more surveillance for that reason alone. That is a very important reason.

We know the existing means to get the electronic evidence needed for criminal investigation is slow and complex, and depends on the goodwill of service providers. When we are in the vein of apprehending criminals, we should not be impeded in any way. It should not be down to goodwill as to whether they give the evidence or not. It should be mandatory that they give it. I am just talking about drugs and the desperate situation that we have in our country at the present time. We know the Garda is doing very good work in apprehending big amounts of drugs but that only tells you the amounts that are getting through. The disruption caused and the harm they are doing to our youngsters is terrible.

More and more cases depend on electronic evidence, so any improvements in this process is welcome if it ensures criminal investigations can be progressed in a timely manner.

My concerns, however, relate to the total cost of implementing this and running it each year. So far, the financial implications amount to a budget allocation of €73,000 for pay costs in 2026. In the context of the costs we have today with other things, that is a minimal amount of funding. I do not know how that can be effective or adequate. A total of €3 million in capital expenditure has also been allocated for the building of an IT system necessary to connect to the EU decentralised IT system. I must make way for my colleague, Deputy Carol Nolan.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I wish to speak about the Criminal Justice (International Cooperation on Electronic Evidence and Other Matters) Bill 2026. It is a Bill that gives the State and the European Union sweeping new powers to obtain, preserve and transfer electronic evidence at extraordinary speed. I raise a simple question: why is the political will so strong in some areas but so weak in others? When it comes to digital surveillance and cross-border data demands, the State is prepared to move mountains. This Bill creates a system where Ireland becomes the central enforcement hub for the entire EU's e-evidence regime. Matheson LLP, in a detailed legal analysis, warns that Ireland will face significant operational demands and, potentially, substantial volumes of foreign data production orders, all under extremely tight deadlines, sometimes as short as eight hours. The machinery can move quickly when Europe needs it to. The political will is there when the European Parliament calls. The urgency is there and the resources are being found. When we look at another area, however, such as the identification of individuals entering our State through the migration system, including those who may be wanted abroad for serious crimes, the urgency suddenly evaporates. We still do not have a fully effective identity verification system at our borders. We still have gaps in biometric checks and delays in information-sharing. We still have well-documented cases in the public domain where individuals wanted abroad have entered Ireland undetected. I ask again: why is the State prepared to build a high-speed, high-capacity surveillance compliance machine for the EU but not an equally robust system to protect our own borders and people? That question needs to be answered.

This Bill will allow foreign authorities to obtain identifying data from Irish-based companies at speed. It will allow Ireland to process hundreds of thousands of requests every year. It will require gardaí and our courts to prioritise and bow down to these demands even though they are already stretched to the limit. However, when it comes to identifying individuals entering our State - individuals who may have no documentation, no verified identity and, in some cases, criminal histories abroad - we still rely on systems that are slow, inconsistent and, in many cases, simply not fit for purpose. That is the contrast that I wish to

highlight here this evening. I do not seek to undermine any co-operation or policing. Rather, I ask why the political will is uneven and unbalanced.

We can build a rapid-response, digital evidence system for Europe but we cannot build a rapid-response identity verification system for Ireland, which is a small island. Why is that? That is the question. We can enforce foreign data production orders within hours, but we cannot reliably confirm who is entering the State. We can impose major compliance burdens on Irish companies, but we cannot impose equivalent standards on the systems that protect our borders.

I support international co-operation and effective and efficient policing, but I also support consistency, balance and, above all, common sense. If we are prepared to grant sweeping new powers in the digital sphere, then, surely, we must show the same determination in the physical world at our borders, in our migration system and in the basic task of knowing who exactly is entering this State. This is the contrast that I am raising here today. It is a contrast that deserves answers.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I am glad to take the close of this Second Stage debate on behalf of the Minister, Deputy O’Callaghan. I acknowledge with great thanks the engagement shown by all those present, particularly Deputies Mark Ward and Carol Nolan, in relation to today’s discussion on what is an extremely important Bill.

The significance of Ireland’s active engagement in the EU’s e-evidence initiative, particularly as we progress towards Ireland’s looming Presidency of the Council of the European Union, is substantial. Ireland’s success in attracting industry at the forefront of technological innovation carries significant associated responsibilities. The nature of the services provided within the State by service providers has had many positive benefits for citizens across the European Union. However, the benefits of technology to our citizens can also prove beneficial to those who wish to cause harm or profit from crime. Fortunately, the usage of technological services can be logged and tracked, providing an avenue for the detection and prosecution of crime both within the State and across the European Union.

I commend service providers for their active engagement on the implementation of the EU e-evidence package and their recognition that they can play an important role in addressing criminal activity. The office that will be established under this Bill will be a central hub for digital and judicial co-operation and will bring coherence, efficiency and expertise, enhancing Ireland’s role in the international judicial co-operation space. By investing in this office and centralising these responsibilities, we can ensure that Ireland speaks with one clear, expert voice in the EU and global regulatory forums.

Ireland’s position as a technology hub for many of the larger service providers in the EU means the regulatory model we adopt will have significance beyond our shores. As a result, the office and its director established by this legislation will play an important role in the modernisation of evidence-gathering for criminal justice investigations throughout the European Union. The director and the office will have the critical task of ensuring service providers comply with lawful requests and that fundamental rights, data protection and privacy rights are upheld. This is not a small undertaking and it will require co-operation between service providers and judicial authorities alike.

Service providers have dual obligations. They are both gatekeepers for their customers' data and, potentially, if unwittingly, holders of information that may be crucial to criminal investigations. The various processes, procedures and safeguards outlined in both the e-evidence directive and regulation, together with those contained in the Bill, provide the means by which the director and the office will weigh these potentially competing interests.

While the Government expects compliance from service providers, the Bill also provides for the imposition of potentially significant penalties for non-compliance with the requirements of either the directive or the regulation. The inclusion of the provision for an adjudication officer, in line with advice from the Office of the Attorney General, ensures that fair procedures with regard to the assessment of the validity or degree of fines imposed will be in place.

I advise Deputies that the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, intends to speedily progress this Bill through the Houses, thus ensuring that Ireland is ready for the launch of the e-evidence regime on 18 August 2026. Committee Stage has already been arranged and the Minister looks forward to actively engaging with Deputies on the details of this Bill. While the Minister is prepared to consider suggested amendments, he advises Deputies that there is likely to be limited scope for their acceptance. The requirements imposed by both the directive and the regulation, as well as legal advices obtained by the Office of the Attorney General, limit what can be accommodated. However, the Minister, and the Government more widely, can ensure Deputies that progression of the Bill will send a positive signal to the Commission and member states that, as we take up the Presidency of the Council of the European Union, we recognise Ireland's importance in ensuring the success of the EU e-evidence initiative and its objective.

Question put.

An Ceann Comhairle: The division will be taken immediately prior to Committee Stage of the Bill, which will be taken in committee of the whole Dáil on Wednesday, 17 June 2026.

6 o'clock

Health (Abolition of Three Day Wait Rule) (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage [Private Members]

An Ceann Comhairle: The Government has indicated that it is not opposing the Second Reading of the Bill. I call Deputy Mary Lou McDonald to move the Second Reading.

Deputy Mary Lou McDonald: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

This is an important piece of legislation before the Dáil. It is a Bill to remove the mandatory three-day wait for women who need an abortion. It goes without saying that every woman must have the space, the understanding and the support she needs to come to her decision in her time. Any woman making this decision will have given it very deep thought. We should never underestimate, dismiss or discount that reality. To force a woman to wait for three days is just wrong. Tomorrow night, every TD will have an opportunity to right that wrong, to vote to change the law to remove this barrier to healthcare for women and to uphold the promise of repeal and take a significant step toward compassion. After all, that was the guiding principle when the people voted to repeal the eighth amendment eight years ago. We said then that we

would trust women, and that is what we must do, not just with words or promises but with delivery.

In truth, the three-day waiting period should never have been introduced. In fact, the original review of the legislation states very clearly that the three-day wait has to go. This is a considered recommendation based on real experience and the real impact of the enforced wait on the lives of women. This wait has caused huge harm and trauma. The three-day mandatory wait has seen women pushed beyond the 12-week period, meaning that they cannot access services here in Ireland. Eight years after repeal, some women are still forced to travel abroad. Women who have been sexually assaulted, who are the victims of domestic violence or are in abusive coercive relationships are left in the most awful of circumstances. The wait is also a very serious problem for women who have difficulty accessing a GP and services in their own county. Many are forced to travel for hours for the initial appointment, only to be sent away and told to return again after three days. I cannot tell the Minister of State the level of distress, suffering and emotional anguish for women across the country that this has caused. None of this is care. None of this is fair. None of this is compassionate.

The three-day wait simply denies women the right to come to their decisions about their healthcare on their own terms and in their own time. It is wrong that women are forced into this arbitrary delay when they have already made a decision and presented themselves to their doctor. The three-day wait is not healthcare. It does not make services safer or better. It only serves as a barrier to women accessing the service they need. I believe there is widespread support across our society to end this three-day wait, for us to live up to the declaration that women are trusted and that we are respected to make decisions in our own time with compassion, space, understanding and care.

Today, we can change the law. Irish women have been failed in so many ways for such a long time. We now have an opportunity to put one of those wrongs to right.

I am conscious the review of the legislation asks that the Dáil and the Oireachtas consider other matters, including fatal foetal anomaly, and I urge the Government to establish the expert panel necessary to give us the advice, as an Oireachtas, in respect of those matters.

I acknowledge the Government has indicated support for this legislation. I very much welcome that, and the support from Members right across the benches in this House. It is so important we work together to make this really essential change and that we all do the right thing by women.

When the people voted to repeal the eighth amendment in 2018, it was a watershed moment, and the message was loud and clear; the days of women being denied the right to make decisions about our own healthcare were over. Trust, compassion and care; those were the values the Irish people chose to back. By voting to remove the three-day wait we can take a significant step to honouring that promise because for too long women have been let down. This is our opportunity now to ensure compassion and trust prevail.

Deputy David Cullinane: In 2018, the people voted in a historic referendum to appeal the eighth amendment and to remove legal barriers preventing women from exercising choice over their own pregnancies. This Bill is about respecting and trusting women in exercising that choice to access the care they need when they need it. It is about recognising that women do

not take this decision lightly, that this is something they consider deeply and that they do not need the State or politicians to force them to wait for longer, as if they cannot be trusted to make decisions about their own pregnancies for themselves in their own time.

This is a straightforward and targeted Bill. It does just one thing. It proposes to remove the mandatory three-day wait for access to an abortion during early pregnancy. It does this by deleting section 12(3) and by amending section 12(4) to remove the requirement for three days to have elapsed before a termination can be carried out. It does not require an abortion to happen on the day of a first consultation but when a woman is certain that this is what she wants, it allows her to make that decision for herself in her own time about her own pregnancy without a mandatory delay. I am open to working across the House on an amendment to clarify this further in the Bill, and I hope to do so. I understand there may be a number of technical amendments needed by Government if and when this Bill goes to Committee Stage.

Under the current law, when a woman attends a doctor seeking a termination of pregnancy within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, the doctor must certify that it has been fewer than 12 weeks since the end of the pregnant woman's last period. A woman must then wait for at least three days before the doctor can carry out the procedure. The termination cannot happen at all if a woman subsequently times out of the 12-week period due to the mandatory delay. Instead, our Bill allows the termination to take place as soon as may be desired by the woman in her own time. This allows women who have made up their mind to access care when they seek it and still allows time for reflection for a woman who still needs time to think about this decision. This is important because the clear feedback from women is that they were being pushed beyond the 12-week threshold by the three-day mandatory wait or were unable to secure a second appointment on time, which denied them their choice to end a pregnancy.

Sinn Féin has always been clear and consistent that we did not approve of the mandatory waiting period; that it puts women in difficult positions; and that it is not compassionate to women who have suffered rape or sexual assault, to women who learn of their pregnancy late or to women who are subject to controlling or abusing partners and for whom that first appointment may be the only appointment they get.

The three-day wait was examined as part of the review of the operation of the Act. Its removal is one of the clearest recommendations arising from that process. We recognise in law and in policy that women should have access to abortion services on the basis of their own choice. This was the compassionate position put before the people in 2018 and it is the basis on which services have been provided since. The question before us now is whether the State should continue to impose an arbitrary delay after a woman has already made her decision and presented to a doctor. I do not believe that it should. This waiting period does not provide care. It does not provide support. It does not make any service safer. It simply makes access harder, especially for those who can least afford delay. It can create real difficulty for women: for women who have travelled for long distances; for women arranging time off work or childcare; for women in crisis; and for women living with coercive, controlling partners, or domestic violence. For many women, having to return days later is not a small inconvenience but it can be a very serious barrier and has been identified as such.

Removing the mandatory waiting period does not mean that the termination must take place on the first day. It does not remove a woman's ability to take more time if she wants to and in those circumstances she should and she must be supported. What this Bill does is remove the

requirement that the State must force every woman to wait, regardless of her circumstances, her decision, her health or her needs.

This Bill clearly sets out the Sinn Féin policy that was endorsed at our Ard-Fheis earlier this year. This Bill strikes the right balance. It is the right change to make. It is overdue. It respects women's decisions. It removes an unnecessary barrier to care. There are many other issues that these Houses should and must work through, arising from the review of the Act. I commend this Bill to the House.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I am immensely proud to have played an active part in campaigning to repeal the eighth amendment. I had so many people share their very private and personal experiences with me on the doorsteps in Drogheda and the wider parts of my county. Activists of all political hues joined together under the banner of Together For Yes. We asked voters to trust women and we asked them to support providing compassionate care at home. We met daughters, mothers, sisters and grandmothers from all walks of life who had their own harrowing experiences of being forced to travel, forced to borrow money and, crucially, being forced to wait to access terminations.

In my home county of Louth, 66.5% of voters said "Yes" to repealing the eighth amendment. At a time when we watched women's rights and autonomy being eroded in other parts of the world, activists young and old took pride in playing their part in reclaiming their bodies and rights here at home.

Now, more than six years on, we know that forcing women to wait for a mandatory three-day period is having a negative impact and that it is a barrier to accessing the same compassionate care people voted for. To the best of my knowledge, a three-day waiting period enshrined in law does not apply to any other medical procedure, yet here we are this evening debating the removal of a mandatory wait that is applied to women's healthcare. The waiting period does not provide care. It leaves women exposed, isolated and vulnerable. It adds unnecessary stress and anxiety to what is an already difficult decision and sometimes in awful, harrowing circumstances.

Nobody makes the decision to access a termination lightly and removing this mandatory three-day wait will not stop anyone who wants to take more time to make their decision. Removing this unnecessary wait period is the right thing to do and instead of offering isolation, we would be offering compassion. Women deserve dignity, women deserve respect and, crucially, women deserve trust - trust to make that decision for themselves in their own time about their own pregnancies without a mandatory delay.

Deputy Ann Graves: Removal of the mandatory three-day wait period for abortion in early pregnancy is a hugely step forward for women the length and breadth of this country. As it stands, it affects women's access to healthcare right across Ireland; women from all different backgrounds who have made their choices for many different reasons. We have to put the health of women to the forefront and this is key to the Sinn Féin legislation. This Bill supports and trusts women. It allows women access to healthcare in a respectful and understanding way and it respects their choice.

Ireland has come a long way in my lifetime. We are a far more understanding and caring society than the one I grew up in but we still have more to do. I have seen the negative spin around this on social media. It does not reflect the needs of the women in Ireland or the views of the wider public. I have seen some people attempt to muddy the waters, play politics with women's health, and make baseless claims about this Bill. This Bill is focused on the three-day wait and nothing else. I acknowledge all those women and men who campaigned against the original eighth amendment and then successfully campaigned to remove that amendment from the Constitution.

The three-day wait should never have been introduced and has had serious consequences. It is time for the law to change and this will be a significant move towards removing barriers to women accessing healthcare.

Since the repeal of the eighth amendment and the passing of abortion legislation, there have been concerns expressed at the mandatory three-day wait and the negative implications it has had for women. A review of the legislation recommended that it had to go. Any woman making this decision will not have done so lightly. Removing the mandatory wait does not mean a woman cannot take more time if she wishes, this option will still, of course, be available but forcing a woman into a three-day mandatory wait is not on. It has had a very negative effect and it is cruel. It has meant that some women time out and have to travel abroad simply because they cannot get access to care. Perhaps they have difficulty getting a GP appointment in their area.

It has had serious consequences for women in very difficult circumstances where they are victims of domestic violence or sexual assault, and are being forced into additional trauma and distress. I am working with a woman in my constituency who was abused for years by a close family member. When she discovered she was pregnant she was devastated and decided on a termination. She had her mind made up and there was no question but she found the three-day delay very difficult to deal with. Not only had she to deal with abuse, which she is now addressing, thankfully, she has also suffered through an additional needless wait.

Sinn Féin published the legislation and moved First Stage on 7 June, a number of weeks after our party's Ard-Fheis endorsed the position. I am happy the Government is supporting the Bill but to those TDs who may have doubts about it, I ask them to please stop and think about the women they know. I ask them to put themselves in their shoes, support them, trust in them and please do the right thing by supporting the Bill.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I thank my colleagues in Sinn Féin for the Bill. At its heart, this legislation is about one simple principle, which is trusting women. The mandatory three-day waiting period does not provide care and it does not provide support. What it does is make women wait. It delays access to healthcare at what is already one of the most difficult moments in their lives. Do we really believe that women have not already thought long and hard about this decision before they walk through the door of a GP or consultant's office? It is not an easy decision and it is not one taken lightly. By the time a woman seeks an abortion, she has already gone through an agonising process of reflection and consideration.

The State should not be in the business of imposing barriers based on an outdated notion that women cannot be trusted to make decisions about their own healthcare. For some women this delay can be particularly cruel. Think of those experiencing coercive control, women

trapped in abusive relationships, and victims of domestic violence, rape and sexual assault. For these women every extra day can mean further distress and trauma. Imagine the courage it takes for a young woman who has been sexually abused to come forward to seek medical help and to make a decision about her future. The last thing she needs to be told is to go away and wait. We cannot justify forcing victims of rape, sexual assault and abuse to endure additional waiting periods that serve no medical purpose.

There may also be women in situations of rape or sexual assault who find out late about their pregnancy due to the trauma they are enduring. Making them wait could mean them reliving the trauma for days more than they should. We all know that accessing a GP in a timely manner is becoming increasingly difficult. This also causes delays and anxiety. The mandatory waiting period does not ease this burden but prolongs it and extends the agony at a time when compassion should be the guiding light. We must also remember that some women could be going through this alone.

The Bill does not require an abortion to take place at the first consultation. It does not remove the option of taking more time. Any woman who wishes to wait three days can still do so. This choice will remain entirely hers. What the Bill does is remove the mandatory wait. It removes the State-imposed delay and allows a woman, in consultation with her healthcare provider, to decide what is right for her and when. The legislation recognises a very simple truth, which is that women are capable of making decisions about their own lives and their own bodies.

We said during the referendum campaign that we would trust women. If we meant these words, then we must mean it now. The question in the Bill is straight forward. It is whether or not we trust women. We have heard from countless women who have been forced to endure this waiting time. They have told us it did not change their minds and that it did not provide comfort or offer reassurance, it simply prolonged what was already a difficult experience. This legislation is not radical but it is compassionate and it gives women the respect they deserve.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I am taking this debate on behalf of my colleague, the Minister for Health, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill, who unfortunately is unable to be here this evening as she is attending a meeting of EU health ministers in Luxembourg. I assure the House she would have been here otherwise and I am sure that Members will appreciate that it just was not possible for her to be here this evening. I have spoken to the Minister and I will seek to reflect her views and the views of the Department in the information provided in the debate on the Bill.

I thank Sinn Féin and Deputy Cullinane for their work on this Bill. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate. Like the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and many of us here in the House, I have heard the experiences of women who have availed of termination of pregnancy services. Their honesty and their feedback are so appreciated and so valued. The Minister has also heard the views of clinicians and medical practitioners. I recognise that there is a broad spectrum of sincerely held opinion on the issue of termination of pregnancy, and on the removal of the three-day wait.

This House needs to facilitate an open and respectful debate to reflect both sides of the argument and all views. It is important that all voices are heard and that we respect and listen to each other. The Government is committed to ensuring that there is safe and equitable access

to termination of pregnancy services. I assure the House that this remains an ongoing priority. I am also aware that the arguments for and against the removal of the mandatory three-day waiting period have been well aired in the public domain.

At the outset, one very important thing to do is to point out that the current model of care, which includes the three-day wait, is safe and effective. There are some very practical and operational considerations and challenges involved in abolishing the three-day wait. These are not insurmountable. However, I do have a responsibility to the House to be frank and to set them out. It is critical that when we are required to vote, we do so on the basis that we are making an informed choice, so I will now set out some of the implications of the Bill.

I understand the reasons behind the three-day wait and the reluctance and concerns of those who oppose its removal. I am aware it was included in the 2018 Act, the outline of which was published as part of the information campaign on the referendum itself. It allows individuals to consider their decision carefully and avoid feeling rushed or pressured. It was intended to act as a legal safeguard demonstrating the serious and irreversible nature of the decision. From an operational perspective, the waiting period provides a structured and predictable pathway for service users and providers.

The HSE advises that the current model of care is safe and effective and that, as it stands, the model of care for termination of pregnancy services, the national clinical guidelines, service configuration and public information materials all centre around the requirement for a three-day wait. The provision of services would, therefore, have to be fundamentally reconfigured if this Bill were to pass. It would, therefore, require careful consideration and planning. The removal of the statutory waiting period would have implications for the current model of care, the national clinical guidelines, service configuration and public information materials, as I have said.

Clarification would be required regarding whether assessment and treatment could occur during the same visit, whether same-day treatment would be expected or simply permitted, and whether any reflection period would remain available at the request of the service user. The existing service model is based on separate stages of assessment, certification and treatment. Any move towards a more flexible or same-day pathway would necessitate changes to clinic scheduling, workforce deployment, patient flow arrangements and administrative processes. Consideration would also need to be given to the potential impact on service demand and capacity, particularly if there is an increase in requests for treatment on the day of assessment. As I have said, these are not insurmountable.

It is also important to point out that some of the logistical difficulties or burdens associated with the three-day wait have been alleviated by the introduction of the blended model of care for termination of pregnancy services in the community. This model, as Members may be aware, was first introduced in response to the Covid pandemic and has been approved as the enduring model of care. Under this approach, it is possible for one of the two consultations required for termination in early pregnancy, usually the first, to take place remotely.

On the other hand, it is necessary to recognise that mandatory waiting periods represent a departure from the norm when it comes to health. In most areas of healthcare, informed consent is based on a patient's capacity, understanding and voluntary decision-making rather than a

prescribed waiting period. This debate provides us with the opportunity to reflect on whether it is necessary or, indeed, appropriate to retain such a requirement here in Ireland.

I am aware that there are many who continue to view it as a necessary protection that provides women with a valued opportunity for reflection and consideration before treatment proceeds. Some will point to the gap in the numbers between those presenting for a first appointment and those proceeding to terminate the pregnancy. They will argue that the provision is saving lives. It is worth mentioning that the figures quoted in this respect are not collated for, or a reflection of, evaluating the effectiveness of the three-day wait. They are simply claims for payment from community providers, which are subject to review and change.

There are many reasons a woman may not return for a second appointment with a community provider. First, she may be over nine weeks pregnant and therefore be transferred into the hospital system. She may not have been pregnant at all. She may miscarry, or she may travel abroad for care. Undoubtedly, there is a proportion of women who are changing their minds, although many studies, such as that of the Irish Family Planning Association, IFPA, would suggest that the figure is quite small. It would be important to ensure that any proposed amendment to the current legislation makes provision for the retention of a reflection period should a woman wish to avail of it.

It is important to emphasise that women can continue to change their minds if they so wish. The lack of a mandatory reflection period would not mean a woman could not change her mind. She is perfectly at liberty, after discussing the matter with her doctor, to decide not to proceed with the termination. The decision is hers and hers alone. Moreover, there are supports available to assist her in making that decision, should she wish to avail of them. The HSE-funded My Options service offers non-directive counselling and information for people experiencing an unplanned pregnancy. My Options is staffed by professionally trained counsellors who are experienced in providing support to women experiencing an unplanned pregnancy. The ethos of the service is client centred and counsellors take their lead from the person contacting them for information and support.

More fundamentally, we must acknowledge the difficulties that the mandatory waiting period can present for some women. It may in some circumstances create an unnecessary delay once a clear and informed decision has been made. Some women have said that it creates practical challenges relating to travel, childcare, employment and other personal circumstances. Moreover, the additional appointments and administrative processes can push patients past gestational limits. These can pose particular difficulties for vulnerable groups and individuals.

The unplanned abortion care study, commissioned as part of the review of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018, explored the experiences of individuals accessing abortion services under section 12 of the Act. The findings indicate that the mandatory three-day waiting period was a recurring feature of discussions across the majority of interviews conducted. Participants expressed a range of views regarding its value and impact. While some regarded it as a procedural requirement that had to be navigated, others viewed it as a barrier or deterrent to accessing care. Very few participants considered the waiting period to have been beneficial to their own decision-making process, although some acknowledged that other women might value additional time for reflection.

Internationally, the landscape has also shifted somewhat away from mandatory waiting periods. Health bodies such as the United Nations and the World Health Organization, WHO, take a clear and evidence-based position on mandatory waiting periods for termination of pregnancy. The WHO, in its 2022 abortion care guideline, explicitly recommends against mandatory waiting periods, arguing that research shows that such delays offer no medical benefit and instead only restrict access to care and undermine service provision. These concerns are echoed by human rights bodies within the United Nations. In addition, while reflection periods were a feature of the legislative regimes in many European countries at the time of the introduction of the 2018 Act, a number of jurisdictions, including Spain, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, have since removed them, reflecting a broader trend towards reliance on standard informed consent processes.

In conclusion, I would like to once again thank Sinn Féin for introducing this Private Members' Bill. It is important that we as legislators provide a forum to debate important issues. The requirement for a mandatory waiting period is primarily a policy choice, and we need to consistently look at our policies. This Bill provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the operation of the three-day wait. Those who support the passage of the Bill will point to the significant burdens enforced delays can cause, while those who oppose it will argue that the waiting period is not a barrier but a protection against rushing into a choice a person may later regret. The key challenge now in coming to a decision on the Bill is to find the appropriate balance between protective measures and compassionate, timely access to healthcare.

I would like to conclude my remarks by making it clear that should this Private Members' Bill pass Second Stage, there will be full access to appropriate legal and drafting expertise to ensure there are no unintended consequences and that the legislation will be as robust as possible if it passes. I look forward to a constructive engagement.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank my colleague, an Teachta Cullinane, for bringing forward this legislation. I look back on the speeches given on the day the post-repeal legislation was introduced here in the Dáil. The three-day wait was opposed by Sinn Féin, the Labour Party and People Before Profit, PBP. I have to say that we were right to oppose it. I am glad to say that other parties that did not take the opportunity that night have come to the same conclusion.

The three-day wait is nothing more than a political construct. It was not recommended by the citizens' assembly, and anyone who watched the proceedings, as I did, knows the assembly was very comprehensive in its deliberations. It was not recommended by the eighth amendment committee, of which I was a member. In all of our hours and hours of discussion over many months, we never recommended a three-day wait. It was inserted by Fine Gael, and I hope that I will see many Fine Gaelers in here tomorrow voting in the right way this time to get it gone.

I would like, as I generally do when I discuss abortion healthcare, to recall those many people who campaigned for access over so many decades. These include people like my parents, who campaigned against the insertion of the eighth amendment, and Ailbhe Smyth, who, as we know, was a tireless campaigner for women's rights. I also recall those women who were the victims of regressive laws and denied access to care. These were women like Sheila Rodgers, who was a very good friend of my mother's, Ann Lovett and Savita Halappanavar, and there are many more whom I do not have time to list this evening.

My activism on abortion rights did not start with repeal, and I am not naive enough to believe that it will end with one debate or one law, because I know this is a fight that we must continue. I was a small child when I first marched with my mam for abortion access. Then, we were marching for information. I marched with my friends to get the State to legislate for X. I marched and campaigned with my daughter and, although he was tiny, with my grandson for repeal. At every stage, we count our wins, we accept our losses and we keep going. This legislation is evidence of that. We will keep going.

Let us get the three-day wait gone. Let us mark our progress. Let us keep campaigning for women's rights, because I am long enough around and long enough campaigning to know that one piece of legislation without consensus makes a point. Building consensus and getting the law changed makes a real difference.

Deputy Réada Cronin: Repeal was a movement built by women for women. It was a movement built to trust women, to listen to women and, ultimately, to care for women. It was a proud moment for the women of Ireland who fought tirelessly to ensure equal access and healthcare for all. I remember that we did great work in north Kildare and in the Kildare Coalition for Repeal. I think we knew after the first canvass that this referendum was going to be won. It inspired hope in so many of us and truly turned the page for progressive politics here in Ireland.

This is only the beginning, though. We are still fighting and legislating for healthcare services for women. The three-day wait rule should never have been introduced following the repeal referendum. I would go so far as to say that women's healthcare should never have even been in the Constitution at all. The removal of this rule is critical if we are to honour the repeal of the eighth amendment. Sinn Féin has always been against the three-day rule. The citizens' assembly and the Oireachtas committee did not look for it. This rule neither trusts nor listens to women. In fact, the three-day rule treats women with suspicion, suggesting we cannot come to conclusions on our own. All it does is make access to healthcare harder for all of us, and this is not what women need, especially not those who have extremely difficult circumstances, including women who have suffered from domestic violence, coercive control by a partner or rape. A three-day wait is the very last thing a woman in those circumstances needs. This is a time when they need to be listened to and shown compassion.

Let us be honest about the three-day rule itself. Some claim it leads to fewer abortions, but as the Minister of State said herself, that is simply not the case. There are examples of some women actually suffering a miscarriage during the three-day wait. This is a time when they need care and not to be hanging on. The truth is that a woman can take as many days as she needs herself to make that decision. She does not need to mark off a date with a medical professional and then come back three days later. However many days she takes to decide within the law, that is up to her. I implore TDs to vote in favour of our motion and show that Ireland trusts and listens to women. Bíodh muinín againn as mná na hÉireann.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: The three-day wait has to go. I am glad to get the chance to speak on this Bill. I welcome Sinn Féin's constructive and consensus-seeking approach on this key issue affecting every woman in this State in one way or another. It is a modest proposal, doing the bare minimum in implementing a key recommendation of the O'Shea report.

The three-day wait is backward, causing harm to women and forcing them to go abroad for essential healthcare. When the Irish people voted for repeal, they voted to trust women, give them ownership over their own bodies and allow them to choose whether they were prepared to carry and welcome a child into the world. This is a very serious decision, and we can all rest assured it is given serious consideration by mná na hÉireann. No woman having an abortion is making the choice lightly or frivolously. We have a responsibility to take women's agency seriously and to trust their judgment. We cannot, on the one hand, say we are giving women the choice and, on the other, say they have to wait. It is paternalistic and patriarchal, taking control away from women regarding decisions to do with their own bodies.

We have all heard stories of the awful predicament this rule leaves women in and, as such, it represents an unacceptable barrier to access. Women who are victims of sexual violence and coercive control, women who do not have easy access to GP care and women who learn of their pregnancies late cannot afford to wait. These women should not be punished for the failings of society.

This Sinn Féin Bill takes an important step towards a compassionate vision of healthcare that places the well-being of patients at the centre. This is only the first step. Many other barriers remain for women accessing reproductive rights. Crucially, abortion care needs to be removed from the law related to criminal offences in the Statute Book.

Caithfear fáil réidh leis an tréimhse feithimh trí lá chun rochtain a fháil ar ghinmhilleadh. Níl sé ag coinneáil le spiorad an reifrinn repeal a thug cearta do mhná maidir le féinriar colainne. Teastaíonn uainn smacht a thabhairt do mhná ar chinntí a bhaineann lena gcolainn féin agus muinín a chur iontu go bhfuil siad ag déanamh an chinnidh chirt dóibh féin. Tá an tréimhse feithimh ag déanamh dochar d'an-chuid ban agus ag cur iachall orthu taisteal. Molaim do gach Teachta sa Teach seo tacú lenár mBille agus muinín a léiriú i mná na hÉireann.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Just over eight years ago, the people of this State made a decision. They made that decision to repeal the eighth amendment. We saw how it impacted on people. It impacted on young people and older people. We saw how this created a movement that saw young Irish people who were scattered across the globe come home to vote in what they felt was a critical referendum for their future.

Many of us here, including me, got involved in campaign groups with people of a variety of political viewpoints to make a change we all felt was necessary. We knocked on doors, had long conversations with many people and, on 25 May 2018, the people voted and made the decision to repeal the amendment. That decision was rooted in a trust of women – a trust in women's decision-making and a deep need for compassion around women's healthcare.

It is now eight years later and we now have women with lived experiences who have spoken to all of us in this Chamber and who have felt the need to share their stories in order to help others. The question of the mandatory three-day wait has been to the forefront of this conversation. Sinn Féin has been clear from the get-go that we are opposed to the three-day wait and that it hinders women's ability to access the care they need. This is not just something we believe but something women have told us consistently since the repeal of the eighth amendment.

As with everything, there are many examples and differing realities concerning how people are impacted. I am conscious when I give examples of those impacted that there are people watching today who have had different experiences. Of course, we think of all of those experiences. However, the issues of coercive control and domestic abuse are becoming far more prevalent in public discourse. With greater recognition of the effects they have, we realise the reality for women in such scenarios is that access to a first medical appointment may be incredibly difficult to arrange. It can be impossible to arrange a second one. Some women may find out later in pregnancy that they are in fact pregnant and, therefore, the three-day wait may push them out of the timeline that allows for termination. It is not showing the compassion to survivors of sexual assault and rape that they should be shown within the healthcare system. There are, of course, many other scenarios, but it ultimately comes down to the fact that the three-day wait is not grounded in the compassionate healthcare that women need. I hope this Chamber votes to get rid of it tomorrow evening.

An Ceann Comhairle: We now move to the Social Democrats. Deputies Pádraig Rice and Sinéad Gibney are sharing time. They have six minutes each.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: On behalf of the Social Democrats, I am delighted to welcome this Bill and say we will be supporting it. We support access to free, safe and legal abortion. We need to trust women, listen to them, provide care with compassion and remove barriers to access. There are currently too many barriers to accessing terminations in Ireland, and the three-day wait is a core part of that and needs to be removed. We are strongly in support of that.

As others have said, the three-day wait is medically unnecessary and insulting to women. It is the only form of healthcare with a State-imposed delay. It is a paternalistic restriction, and we have a history of paternalistic attitudes in our healthcare service that need to be undone. It is interfering with women's ability to make decisions about their own bodies and it is having a disproportionate effect on vulnerable groups, including those experiencing domestic violence, those who have language-based access issues, those who struggle to access a GP, and many others. We are aware that the World Health Organization recommends against the provision because there is no medical evidence for it. It is beyond time that the three-day wait was gone.

We are aware that there are other barriers, like people being forced to take additional days off work just in order to go back to the second appointment. Therefore, the provision is completely unnecessary and needs to go. We are also aware that there are huge issues in accessing GP services across the country. My party had a motion setting out a 20-point plan on how to improve access to GP services. Some women are forced to travel between counties to access GP services and, under the three-day wait, are forced to do that twice and at a huge personal cost. Therefore, the provision absolutely needs to be removed.

Others will talk here about the number of people who change their mind or do not return for the second appointment, as the Minister of State referred to, but this is not just about people changing their minds. There are issues around having miscarriages, negative pregnancy tests, ectopic pregnancies, having gone to another doctor, having gone over time, having travelled abroad and having been pushed over the 12-week limit between the two appointments. There are many reasons people may not return to the second appointment. They may have difficulty accessing an appointment.

There is an uneven distribution of services across the country and that impacts marginalised and vulnerable women in particular. The IFPA conducts an annual analysis of its services, and this is probably the most detailed qualitative data set available. It has found that 98% of its clients proceeded to access abortion care following the three-day wait. This data makes it clear that women are affirming their decisions before consulting a medical professional. The IFPA has said that standard practice regarding informed consent is that doctors encourage patients to take additional time if that is what they need, but there is no scientific support for imposing a time limit. Women will still be able to have that time to make the decision, but it just will not be enforced.

It is welcome that the rule will be removed and it is welcome to hear that there is significant support across the House, including, I understand, from the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and others in government, for making this change. From the Social Democrats' perspective, we would have gone further. Our Bill a number of weeks ago would have gone further with the changes.

The O'Shea report had a series of recommendations. The review was provided for in the original legislation in 2018. The O'Shea report should not be allowed to sit on a shelf and gather dust. Its recommendations should be implemented in full, and we need to make progress beyond just the three-day wait, including on decriminalisation. The arrangement is having a chilling effect on doctors, and there is the possibility of a 14-year prison sentence.

We also need to make changes in terms of fatal foetal abnormality to ensure no more women have to travel abroad. That was core to the referendum. I was the secretary of Cork Together for Yes for a long time and I knocked on many doors and spoke to many women. When we were campaigning in Cork and across the country, it came up time and again that women should not have to travel abroad to access services that should be available in Ireland. Until we make all the required changes, women will continue to travel abroad, and we cannot have it. We must be brave in this Oireachtas, go further and implement those changes, particularly in respect of the 28-day limit in terms of fatal foetal abnormality.

We know that, in most European countries, it is recognised that fatal foetal conditions and the length of neonatal survival are unpredictable and most other countries avoid having specific day counts. We should follow suit here.

The Social Democrats would have liked to have gone further. However, I hope this Bill passes and makes progress. I hope it is enacted and put on the Statute Book. I have a concern that that is as far as this Oireachtas will go and we will be left waiting until the next Oireachtas or longer, that women will be left waiting and the political energy and capital was spent on this one change as opposed to the further and deeper reforms that are needed and are recommended in the O'Shea report, which was commissioned by the Government. I would like the Oireachtas to do more and to remove more barriers, provide expanded access and address the concerns being set out by doctors and women. I would like the Oireachtas to go further.

There has been positive engagement from the Minister in working with Opposition parties on amendments and improving Bills. I wish a similar approach were adopted to Opposition legislation in other areas. I would like a more constructive approach to be adopted by the Government to matters we raise rather than rejecting them out of hand.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I also welcome the Bill and thank Sinn Féin for its work in bringing it to the Dáil floor. Repeal is deeply a part of who we are as a party. There are many members and, indeed, elected representatives within our party who were politically mobilised and activated by their experience in repeal and who feel passionately about the full implementation of the repeal movement and what it means for women and reproductive rights in Ireland.

I welcome, most importantly, the opportunity to address what is a legislative gap that was identified in the O'Shea report and urgently needs to be addressed. The three-day wait is a hangover of the infantilising, patronising and misogynistic treatment of women that we have seen recur many times in our provision of health services in this country. Symphysiotomy is another example. There are many more ways in which women have been mistreated through the provision of healthcare and this is another example. What we learned from the repeal campaign and the stories of so many women, and, since then, the implementation of the legislation and the provision of abortion care in Ireland, is that women know their own bodies. Women need to be trusted.

Twenty-six years ago, I was in the middle of a crisis pregnancy. I was a young woman. I was not in a relationship with my daughter's father. In many ways, people would have expected me to be a prime candidate for an abortion. I remember from the moment I got pregnant that I wanted the baby. We talk a lot about choice. For me, it was compulsion. There was no decision-making. When we think about choice and what women go through, we think that they sit down and tot things up. That was not my experience. Many friends of mine have accessed abortion care. On paper, they probably had the types of circumstance that people would not have assumed would prompt them towards termination. The reality is that we, ourselves individually and in consultation with appropriate healthcare providers, know our minds, bodies, health and circumstances, and we know our own family planning. We need to be able to access it. The imposition of a three-day waiting period goes against all of that. By all means, if people wish to self-impose a three-day waiting period, they absolutely should if it makes sense to them. Going back to that determination of choice, we need to speak to and listen to women, and we know that the three-day waiting period, if it is imposed in a mandatory way, is wrong and redundant and simply must go.

It is regrettable that this legislation does not cover the comprehensive gaps we know are there. The O'Shea report came of the review mechanism that was built into the 2018 Act. It provided an analysis of the implementation and a clear roadmap for how to address those gaps. Those operational gaps have been filled, as we know, by the Department through the provision across multiple hospitals and all the different ways it can be done without legislation. There have, however, been tumbleweeds in respect of the legislative changes recommended in the report.

It is welcome that the Bill is being welcomed by the Government. There are indications that Government representatives will be voting in favour of it. However, I find it hard to stomach that our own legislation was not supported in the same way just a couple of weeks ago. Any concerns about these additional measures, which we know need to be addressed, could have been ironed out on Committee Stage. The Minister of State spoke in her opening comments about an open and respectful debate. That is all we were seeking in providing for comprehensive coverage of the gaps that were identified by Marie O'Shea in a way that we believed would provide a positive legislative roadmap going forward. If we cast our minds

back to 2018, we know it was the case that many voters in Ireland were swayed by the stories of women who had experienced fatal foetal abnormalities and how the Irish healthcare system treated them. That experience continues today. Women who welcome the pregnancies and want these children are being forced to travel and to bring back their baby's bodies in the boots of their cars. That is happening this week and we must address it.

We will continue to push for the full legislative changes that are required, that were recommended in the O'Shea report, and that will bring Ireland up to the level of care that we know women deserve in reproductive healthcare. I look forward to proposing amendments to this legislation that I know our party will support and I look forward to discussing on Committee Stage how we can proactively support that. As Deputy Rice has pointed out, it would be such a shame to expend all of our political capital addressing one isolated part of what we know is a comprehensive set of legislative gaps and make those women wait. I believe most of us in society connected with those women as part of this dialogue in recent years. We must help them to find the solutions they need.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I thank Deputy Cullinane and Sinn Féin for bringing forward the Bill. It addresses one part of the O'Shea report. I am disappointed that there is an element of cherry-picking from the O'Shea report. If we are accepting the bona fides of the report, we should be looking at all the issues it addressed. I express the Labour Party's disappointment with Sinn Féin that it is singling out one issue. It is, however, the one issue on which there seems to be greater political consensus compared with some of the other issues identified in the O'Shea report and in that spirit, I very much welcome the Bill.

I stand here a little bit frustrated that it has taken another Private Members' Bill to discuss this issue. As the Minister of State knows, the legislation committed to a three-year review. That took way longer than planned. The O'Shea report has been gathering dust in the Department of Health for three years. The Minister came into the Chamber a month ago to express her own personal position with regard to the part of the O'Shea report relating to the three-day wait. We are not going to be a lot further along after this debate in providing those assurances. It is now in the power of the Government to ensure we have speedy passage of this legislation, whether it is the Sinn Féin Bill or a Bill brought forward by the Government. The reality is that there are women out there looking on who have either recently found themselves in this circumstance or may over the coming months. We have had hours of debate in this House but very little progress. Even if this Bill does pass this evening, there is now an onus on the Government to expedite the legislation to ensure that we get rid of the three-day wait.

Back in 2018, I was extremely proud to be a part of the Dublin Central Together for Yes campaign. In fact, I will look back on it as one of the most unique and special campaigns I have ever been involved in, given the cross-party support at the time, and night after night, the message from the doorsteps to us was that we could not continue to export our problem, an Irish problem.

7 o'clock

When two-thirds of voters cast their votes in support of repealing the eighth amendment back in 2018, I passionately believe they were not voting for 1,500 women to still have to go abroad to access a termination in the following years. In 2023, just one year, 240 women had to travel to England - and that is just England - to access a termination of pregnancy because they could

not access it here because they timed out of the 12 weeks or because of the rules on fatal foetal abnormalities. The three-day wait plays an important part in delaying and blocking women's access to that necessary healthcare. There is absolutely zero clinical indication for the three-day wait period and it has to go. It is frankly demeaning and degrading to send a woman away who comes to request an abortion. I was struck by what Deputy Gibney said about her pregnancy more than 20 years ago. When women turn up to the doctor they know what they want. It is not a question of them having to be sent away to reflect. When women take the decision to approach a doctor to ask for a termination, they have already thought long and hard about it. It is frankly moralistic and paternalistic and a political fix, which was not proposed by the citizens' assembly or the special Oireachtas committee on abortion care. It was simply a political fix that was put in place to try to make the legislation more palatable, as opposed to it being the right thing to do.

There are women out there who, for a whole variety of reasons, fall outside the 12-week mark because of the logistics of the three days, because of trying to access their GP locally, because they are in domestic violence situations or because they have to take time away from work. I was struck by an email I received today from a woman in my constituency who thanked God that she had the luxury of being located close to a medical practitioner who could provide the service and thanked God she had the reality of a flexible working arrangement to be able to access that service. Many women in many parts of the country simply cannot. In particular, if there is a language barrier or a cultural issue with regards to accessing a GP, those issues are exacerbated.

I should note a pause was put on language interpretation services in our part of Dublin in recent months, which was frightening for many patients because that service is absolutely necessary for patients to be able to access healthcare in the way the Minister of State or I or any of the rest of us here can when we go to our doctors. Thankfully, it has now been restored, but the reality is they are the challenges and stumbling blocks women face when they go to their doctors. The three-day waiting period must go. It is simply paternalistic. The reality is that we have seen wait periods being removed in many other European countries. They are almost non-existent in most other European countries and Ireland needs to fall into line with that, because, as was said clearly in the O'Shea report and we know from talking to many doctors, there is no clinical indication for this.

On the Minister's comments on the legislation, I welcome the exploration of the issues. The cynic in me might say that we have not spent as much time talking about the issue of accessing GP care for the past 12 months as we did in the few minutes during the Minister of State's contribution. The logistical issues of clinical scheduling, patient flow, service demand and capacity are broader issues related to access to GP care. The reality is that in many parts of the country we have significant waiting lists for access to GPs. That is on the Government because of its failure to ensure there is a fair and even distribution of GPs across the country. In my constituency, in Cabra there is one GP to every 3,000 people and in the north inner city there is one GP to every 3,500. In other areas, it is one GP to 1,500 people. There is a huge inequity of access. It is not just for women who are trying to access termination of pregnancy. Many people are affected by the systemic shortage of GPs across the country.

I have already said this legislation should be expedited - this legislation or the Government's legislation - after tomorrow night, when I hope it will pass. I implore all TDs on the

Government benches to do the right thing, not to pass judgment on women but make sure they afford women the opportunity to do the thing that is best for them, their families and their bodies and not to pass judgment about what is right or wrong.

I cannot let the occasion pass without talking about fatal foetal abnormalities, because I passionately believe that has to be part of the conversation. Unfortunately, it is not part of this legislation, but it is hugely important to the Labour Party. There are serious questions about the clinical indication with regard to the 28 days. Neonatologists and obstetricians talk about the extreme difficulty of being able to predict with any great certainty, with regard to fatal foetal abnormalities, whether a baby will pass away within the 28-day limit. The Labour Party believes the 28-day limit has to be reviewed. I listened to a woman named Holly on Cork's 96 FM this morning who spoke eloquently and bravely about the loss of her daughter Hazel. She had been yearning for a baby, but the reality was when she was 14 weeks pregnant, there was a realisation that there was a fatal foetal abnormality. As there could not be certainty about whether it would happen within 28 days, she felt she had to travel. There will be many other families who want to stay the course and give birth to that baby in this country, but others will not. Again, this is about trusting women. If we are to take the key message from the 2018 referendum to repeal the eighth amendment, it is about trusting women and, crucially, trusting doctors. Again, our legislation is not built to trust doctors with how it seeks to criminalise and suppress those making decisions and the rigid definition of fatal foetal abnormalities.

This has been a long time coming. We should not be here in 2026, eight years after the referendum and five years after the review should have been completed, still talking about just one part of the updating of our termination of pregnancy legislation. Eliminating the three-day wait needs to be the simple part of the conversation. My appeal to the Minister of State is for the Government to back this proposal tomorrow night - not just have a free vote - and give a firm and clear commitment it will progress the abolition of the three-day wait as speedily as possible, ideally before we rise for the recess, because there will be women who will be affected by our lack of action in the Dáil over the summer and into the winter months.

Deputy Seamus Healy: I welcome and support this Bill. In December 2018, the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Bill was signed into law. Section 7 of the Act provided that a review of the operation of the Act be carried out. That review was included to facilitate monitoring of the operation of the legislation in practice as well as of the delivery of services. A public consultation commenced in December 2021 and concluded in April 2022. Submissions to the consultation were accepted in several formats, including online, by email and by post. Almost 7,000 submissions were received and reviewed and the review found that, while the vast majority of early-stage terminations were accessed smoothly, significant structural and legislative barriers remained, including the three-day wait rule addressed by this proposed legislation. The report recommended the removal of the mandatory three-day wait, stating it delays time-sensitive healthcare and is demeaning to patients. As these services are not operated 365 days per year, the three-day wait can extend to four or five days, particularly if the first visit is towards the end of a week and if there are public holidays.

The mandatory three-day wait may cause women to time out of eligibility for care in Ireland as well. The review was also subject of a report by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health and the committee supported the package of measures recommended by the review and stated work should be advanced to give effect to the recommendations without any delay. It

recommended the Minister for Health should bring forward appropriate proposals as a matter of priority.

Access to GP services seriously impinges on this issue, especially for women in rural areas. It is increasingly the case GPs are not accepting new patients and GP appointments can be delayed for a week or more. This issue affects rural areas and areas of deprivation most. The statistics from the WHO show we are seriously under-resourced when it comes to GPs. The norm is one GP to 1,000 people but our figure is one GP to 1,759 people and can be as high as one per 3,500 people in some areas. A survey in 2024 found two thirds of GPs in rural Ireland could not accept new patients. This gives rise to a clear urban-rural divide, with rural women being disadvantaged. I support the Bill.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: It is absolutely terrible that women and anybody who can become pregnant have had to wait eight years for this to happen. There has been no Government Bill and no Opposition party one up to now either. It is a crying shame that people have had to endure this.

The O'Shea report made it very clear, especially about the three-day wait. I hate that term. It should be called a second doctor visit or something because people get the erroneous impression it just adds three days to the wait. However, particularly if an appointment is at the end of the week, if you have been trying to make a GP appointment for over a week then in most cases you will be waiting a week or two and in surveys that have been done a quarter of the women interviewed were waiting more than three days for the second visit. This especially affects the marginalised, rural women, anyone who is a victim of domestic violence, people in homeless accommodation and people who not have public or car transport. The poorest in society always pay the price. Unnecessary delays just add barriers for women.

There were other recommendations in the O'Shea report, such as that medical reasons be looked at again. I put on record that there is no other country where there is a distinction made between fatal and severe abnormality. It was only done in Ireland on the Oireachtas committee to avoid a debate about disability in the repeal referendum. Now people are suffering because of that. Imagine babies' bodies are still being transported in the backs of cars, as was testified only recently on the radio. There were also recommendations on safe access zones and where conscientious objection blocks any provision in an area. In the corridor here today I heard two men discussing women's healthcare, as if we need more of that in this country. They made the claim there are 10,000 children alive because of the second visit. It is put out by people who seem to submit AI parliamentary questions or whatever. I have never seen anything to back that up. The IFPA has said 98% of women go ahead. I also want to make something clear. From talking to Women on Web when abortion was illegal and we were trying to help people access it safely, that group made the point that sometimes when women received the pills online they did not go ahead because they could clearly make that decision without pressure and stress, so that is not an excuse for being patronising towards women.

I obviously welcome that Sinn Féin has put a Bill on abortion before the House, I think for the first time. I had a Bill on this I proposed on First Stage in January but I did not have the Private Members' time, so I am obviously glad for parties with more time to put these measures, but we cannot ignore the timing and the context here. A couple of weeks ago we were here with a Bill which had very important things about decriminalisation, things that the health

spokesperson for Sinn Féin supported in 2021, because I found statements on it. There is backtracking going on and this was cover, but I am glad there is a Bill being put because I wanted to put such a Bill and I am delighted somebody else is doing it.

It is also important not to rewrite history. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael did not win repeal. It was a grassroots movement that won repeal. There are people claiming here all the things they did for repeal. It is a bit like the GPO in 1916 and all that. Not everyone was there and some parties did not support this in the committee. In some parties no TDs supported it. It is very easy to jump on when everybody agrees. It is not easy when you are pioneering repeal Bills. When I put the first repeal Bill 11 TDs voted for it. Let us have progress but let this not be a cover for backtracking on essential women's rights. We need to go forward and fight the tide that is pushing back against people's right to bodily autonomy. We have seen the religious right and far right in the US take away abortion rights and we cannot allow this to happen in Ireland.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I am pleased to be able to support this Bill on behalf of the Green Party. We were proud to campaign in support of repeal in 2018. During that campaign we worked with activists from all parties and none to share that central argument that Ireland needed to listen to women and to empower them to make their own decisions about their own bodies. The people responded to that argument and responded with compassion, especially to the stories that were shared throughout that campaign. Collectively we worked to bring a really historic change in our country.

That work is not yet complete and we need to continue to listen to women and to respect their right to choose on all aspects relating to their healthcare. I reaffirm the term "healthcare" because the three-day waiting period was not introduced as a health measure but as a political consideration and we know it is not something required by principles of care or good clinical practice. The World Health Organization said very clearly these waiting periods are unnecessary and of course the O'Shea report recommended its removal.

In speaking on this Bill I should acknowledge that just a couple of weeks ago I was speaking in favour of legislation that also sought to remove the three-day waiting period and in addition sought to address other issues that were highlighted in the O'Shea report. While this Bill is more narrow in its scope than I would prefer, it is important not to let perfection be the enemy of good and to recognise the removal of the three-day wait is in itself a positive step. I am hopeful that, should this Bill go to Committee Stage, we will be able to look again at the other elements of the O'Shea report and indeed add elements to this Bill via amendments, especially to do with the issue of fatal foetal abnormalities. The current law in that area creates deeply traumatic circumstances that can put women and families in incredibly difficult situations. Those issues are not addressed in tonight's Bill and I will look to bring forward or support amendments if this Bill moves through the House, which I hope it does. I will look to support amendments that would address the issue of fatal foetal abnormalities.

The referendum campaign in 2018 was one by a coalition the repeal campaign forged and it was a prime example of the kind of progressive co-operation we can see across political parties and with people who had no prior political involvement. I hope on this particular matter we will see this co-operation extend to the Government benches as well. I welcome that a free vote is being permitted on this and that the Taoiseach has indicated he is going to be supportive, but we need that firm commitment from Government and in particular from the Minister for

Health that if there is a positive vote on this Bill on Second Stage we will see the Government engage seriously with this legislation and with the central issue of the removal of the three-day wait.

The Government can demonstrate its seriousness by making sure this Bill is rapidly tabled on Committee Stage. In 2023, the rallying cry of the repeal campaign was "Women Won't Wait". Women should not have to wait in 2026. We have the opportunity now to continue the work begun in 2018 and to remove a condescending and paternalistic approach to an already difficult decision that many women in Ireland have to make.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Last year there were 10,852 abortions in Ireland. The lives of 10,852 living human beings were ended last year as a result of the legislation that was passed a number of years ago. It is the highest figure on record. It is equivalent to 400 classrooms of children who are no longer with us as a result of that abortion law. It is absolutely heartbreaking. In all the politicking we see in this Chamber today on this issue, there is absolutely no recognition of the human cost or of the human devastation of thousands of lives lost annually. In 2018 there were 2,879 abortions and since that law was deregulated the number has surged. It has tripled in just seven years and yet there is no effort by the political establishment to understand why there is such a surge. There is no effort to ameliorate this awful human cost.

So high is the abortion rate today that it is affecting the birth rate. It is not the only reason the birth rate is falling; the cost-of-living crisis, the housing crisis and the cost of childcare are all pushing down the birth rate, but you cannot have 10,852 abortions annually without impacting on the birth rate of a country. In 2009, there were 77,000 children born in Ireland; 54,000 were born in 2024. That is a startling collapse in the birth rate.

The really shocking thing is that the lack of housing, the cost of living and the cost of childcare are not more to the fore in Sinn Féin's approach to this Dáil. Dozens of women gave birth last year while homeless. Thousands of couples are postponing having children or not having children at all, not because they do not want a family but because the policies of the Government make it so difficult for them to have one. What is the response of the political establishment? Three separate abortion Bills this year and it is only June.

Sinn Féin experienced a collapse in support in recent years. It has become confused about where it stands in the political spectrum and is flip-flopping on a number of core values. This Bill is its effort to readjust itself in the political spectrum. It is more about political competition than about making an effort to deal with the bread-and-butter challenges families face. I say that because it is not based on evidence. Abortion is a massive decision and is irreversible. A child cannot be brought back after an abortion. It can lead to a lifetime of regret for mothers. For any big decision, a time of reflection is key. There are few elective procedures that can be done on the same day. You cannot have a mole removed, have cosmetic surgery or be sterilised without a period to wait and reflect.

We know the three-day wait is working. How do we know this? This is key - it is because 10,000 mothers who attended their first abortion meeting simply did not attend the second. There are 10,000 children alive today as a result of the three-day wait.

When the abortion review was discussed at the health committee, I asked the chair of the review a direct and important question: before recommending abolishing the three-day wait,

had she spoken to one woman who went to the first abortion appointment, took three days to reflect, changed her mind and kept her baby? She admitted on the record of the committee she did not speak to one woman who availed of a three-day wait - an incredible admission. The Government report recommended a change in the law to get rid of the last remaining protection and nobody who authored that report sought to speak to one mother who availed of that reflection period. No author of the report took the time to speak to one of the thousands of children alive today and ask their view of the reflection period. There are thousands of children alive, some sitting around family tables, some playing in their gardens or simply laughing to cartoons on television, as a result of this law, yet it is Sinn Féin's objective to get rid of it. It is an incredible situation. Have members of the Sinn Féin front bench spoken to any of these mothers or children?

I received an email today. I am sure the other Deputies got it too. It is one of many I have received on this issue. It concerned an individual who accompanied her friend to an abortion appointment in 2022. Her friend, who had just found out she was pregnant, was adamant she wanted an abortion and very likely would have taken an abortion pill then and there if it was offered to her. By the time the three-day wait had elapsed, she had changed her mind, having received support from her friends and got over the initial shock of being pregnant. Today, according to that email, the woman often remarks that she cannot imagine her life without her son. The person sending the email questioned why Sinn Féin was pushing for the three-day wait to be abolished and why it was doing it without consulting the people it had affected.

Listening to local and national news stations, I can tell many people are disappointed with Sinn Féin using its chance to speak today not to tackle the cost-of-living crisis or the cost-of-childcare crisis but to push for more abortions. There is no desire for this change; it is not being raised at the doors. There are no petitions, protests or email campaigns. In fact, it is the opposite - many people are shocked and angry. It is no wonder they are shocked and angry because they were lied to right through the political debate.

Simon Harris said in an interview in *The Times* in 2018 that the proposed legislation would allow women to access care on consultation with their doctor for up to 12 weeks only. He stated: "In this case, a three-day pause would be in place for women to access all information and counselling and make a considered decision." That is what the leader of the Minister of State's party said. Simon Harris could see in 2018 there was a need for a woman to access information and counselling ahead of a life-changing decision, one we all recognise has a heavy physical and mental weight. The Tánaiste knew this pause was required to make a considered decision that was irreversible. Why is the Tánaiste now removing that considered decision? What happens when any of us is rushed, during a crisis situation, into an ill-considered and irreversible decision? Simon Harris also said three days must elapse between certification and the procedure being carried out, that this provision was not unusual and that several countries in Europe, including Belgium and Germany, had similar provisions. That is the leader of the Minister of State's political party.

The Taoiseach, from Fianna Fáil, said clear commitments were given during that campaign for a framework for the facilitation of this. As we went door to door, we spoke of the framework for the referendum and the three-day wait period. When you have a referendum, it is necessary to fulfil those commitments. The two leaders of the Government are supporting this. I am not particularly surprised we have a flip-flop from Simon Harris, or even Micheál Martin, on this

- two TDs on the record as stating in this Chamber they fully recognise an unborn child is a living human being. When the media and political winds changed, they voted for abortion. A simple case of "These are my principles and if you don't like them, I have others". Many people, including a large number who voted for repeal, are disgusted at being duped by the political establishment in relation to this.

It will be interesting to see how the vote is carried out. Tomorrow there will be a free vote in Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and maybe some of the other parties. Sinn Féin will not have a free vote on this - probably the only mainstream political party in western Europe and north America to enforce a whip on this issue. There are TDs in Sinn Féin today who are against this and they will have to vote against their conscience, their better judgment and the evidence if they want to remain in that party. I believe that is wrong. Those individuals should have the opportunity to vote in the direction they want to.

The right to life is a human right. It is the most important human right we have. No other right - the right to free speech, the right to assemble - can be guaranteed without the right to life. If you take the right to life off any human being, that is a major challenge to all the rest of their human rights.

The definition of a human right is that it is universal. It applies to all humans and if an unborn child is not a human being, what species is the unborn child?

It is really important that we have a time for reflection ourselves in Leinster House. We have to remember, first of all, what we need to do in relation to giving mothers across this country the economic confidence to be able to raise their families. We have to look at the evidence of this committee, a committee that completely ignored the 10,000 women who did not attend the second abortion meeting and the thousands of children who are alive today as a result of it. We also have to look to the clear commitment that was made right across this Chamber in relation to that legislation and ask ourselves is this what we are saying to the people of Ireland - "Vote for this and in a few years, we will radically change it." I would implore any of the TDs opposite, who have a free vote and who can exercise their judgment on this issue, to make sure that one of the last protections that exists in this State in terms of the most vulnerable is protected.

Deputy Carol Nolan: There are moments in this Chamber when the sheer disconnect between political rhetoric and the political reality becomes almost unbearable. If Sinn Féin truly wants to build a future worth having, it should start by protecting the children who are meant to inherit it because while Sinn Féin tours the country promoting its future of Ireland commission report, which is full of language about hope, opportunity and the next generation, the very same party is here assisting in the passage of laws that guarantee no future at all for thousands of Irish babies in the womb.

You cannot speak about building a shared future while simultaneously dismantling the last remaining safeguard that has already saved up to 10,000 lives and Sinn Féin knows this. The data is not mine; it is the HSE's own data provided to me through parliamentary questions. That data shows that thousands of women do not return after the three-day period. That is proof - proof that the waiting period gives women time, space and the chance to reconsider under pressure, coercion or crisis.

What is truly staggering is the moral incoherence of a party that claims to care about Ireland's future while actively working to ensure that thousands of Irish children will never have one. Sinn Féin wants to talk about unity, about nationhood, about the Ireland of tomorrow but how can you speak about tomorrow when you refuse to protect the children who would live in it today? How can you speak about sovereignty when you will not even defend the sovereignty of the most basic human right - the right to life?

The three-day period is one of the few remaining commitments that voters were told explicitly would be part of the 2018 framework and Sinn Féin's attempt to erase it shows how out of touch they have become with the values of ordinary people. I have received hundreds of emails asking TDs to vote "No" from all around the country.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: "Safe, legal and rare" was the line in 2018. HSE data shows that between 2019 and 2024, 10,426 women who attended an abortion appointment did not return after the three-day cooling-off and waiting period. That proves that those ladies took time to reflect and made a different decision to what they might have made if they did not have the cooling-off period. The waiting period was presented as an important safeguard within the legislation.

There are close to 11,000 abortions taking place in Ireland every year. Over 60,000 abortions have happened since the law changed in 2019. Abortion now ends the lives of one in every six babies in Ireland. This, in my opinion, is a national tragedy.

I respect that people hold different views on abortion and they are perfectly entitled to their views but the question is whether politicians should now remove safeguards that formed part of the framework presented to the public in the first instance. I believe that what is happening now is blatantly wrong.

Why is there such a rush to dismantle a measure that was presented to voters as part of the balance in the legislation? It does not make sense. What it proves is that what was presented and what was sold to the public at the time by the politicians who were supporting the introduction of this change in the legislation is now being twisted and turned into something different and the safeguard is being removed. That is wrong. I respect everybody's right to hold the opinion that they have on this very important issue but I believe what is happening here is blatantly wrong and I completely disagree with it.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Gabhaim buíochas le gach duine a labhair faoin ábhar tábhachtach seo. I welcome the Bill and I thank Sinn Féin for bringing it forward. I voted recently with the Social Democrats on its Bill. I suppose when it comes to anything what I always do is ask for advice from my team, my family, my sisters and my mother. I stood up in the Chamber and made a very clear point as to why the three-day wait should be abolished, particularly for a fatal foetal abnormality. I meant every word I said then and I still do. The main issue for me is whether we trust women. That is still the question and the answer for me is still "Yes".

I recognise that Sinn Féin has taken a different approach. I respect everyone's opinions. I will set that aside. The legislation is for the women it is meant to serve and I commend Sinn

Féin on that. I would disagree fundamentally with an Teachta Tóibín. I wonder whether his party giving a free vote on this issue.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There is no need. The TDs are on the same side.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Lovely.

The O'Shea report spoke about what was given to it. Three years on, women are still living with it. I would like to say to all the women across Dublin Bay North who financially would not be able to go the UK or to have an alternative means for abortion that we will be standing with them. We hear them. I spoke to a lot of these women at the doors. I represent Dublin Bay North. We had over 500 campaigners and it was the largest "Yes" turnout in the country. Those voters were promised change. They were not promised a review that would sit on a shelf. I welcome the engagement so far with my office on this. Removing the waiting period improves access for women and it will end the postcode lottery.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk on this. I cannot support Sinn Féin's Bill nor did I support the Social Democrats a week or so ago. It is my firm belief that the birth of a child is a wonder. It is better than anything. The child is entitled to the right to life, like we got a chance at it.

On this three-day wait, it surely is not much to have to wait when the birth of a child is at stake - a human being who has a right, once they are conceived, to be born and to live. Three days more cannot be that much and it could save the life of the child, and it has done so. A girl or a woman should get a few more hours to reflect on it and to look at options other than destroying the life of a little baby, a boy or a girl. No one knows or could imagine how much they would contribute to the world and to their families and the difference they could make. Too often, I see couples who fail to have children. Would it not be nice if they could adopt a child if the mother does not want to hold onto it?

I cannot vote for this Bill. I could never consider doing so.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I come to this debate as someone who voted to repeal the eighth amendment and is respectful of the freedom of conscience vote for Members of the parties of government but also with a clear sense of our obligations as legislators in a representative democracy. Section 7 of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018, the Act this Private Members' Bill proposes to amend, statutorily required a full review of its operation three years after its commencement date of 1 January 2019. That review was commissioned by the then Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly. It was initiated at the end of 2021 and carried out by Ms Marie O'Shea BL.

Drawing on extensive evidence, including 58 service user interviews, 43 provider interviews, 188 GP survey responses and 6,976 public submissions, the report was published in April 2023. It was unequivocal in its finding that there is no clinical basis for a mandatory three-day wait. The report went on to identify as an unforeseen practical consequence of the three-day rule that women are timing out of care, particularly when scans, referrals, weekends or bank holidays intervene. The report, which is now three years out of date, cites how many women already face delays before presenting, whether due to miscalculating gestational age,

work and family pressures, financial constraints, language and cultural barriers or domestic abuse. The mandatory wait compounds those delays and can push women over the 12-week limit.

Perhaps the most important finding was that clinicians told the review that their training enables them, as it would in every clinical care setting, to identify uncertainty or coercion and to advise additional time where the clinician deems it appropriate to do so. They noted that they would continue to that even in the absence of a State-imposed three-day rule, which is a blunt instrument and is against best practice, including WHO best practice. In simple terms, we should trust our doctors and we should trust women. It is for those reasons that I will be voting in favour of removing the three-day wait and in favour of this Bill advancing to Committee Stage to enable an up-to-date examination of the impact of the rule three years on from the O'Shea report.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to respond to this debate on behalf of my friend and colleague, the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill. I sincerely thank all who contributed, both those who I agree with and, in particular, those with whom I do not agree. For the entirety of my life, disagreement on this issue has sometimes led to the worst scenes in politics, where party politics, personal ambition and personal focus from across the spectrum have, unfortunately, really diminished the level of debate and taken the political discourse into a place where the heart of the issue we are talking about has been moved into the abstract. It is a vitally important development that we are able, in 2026, to have what I would say has been a relatively civil and constructive debate in this Chamber in which we disagree with each other agreeably and respect fundamentally the right of all Deputies in the House to have their own personal or political party opinion and their own approach to this issue.

The Government is absolutely committed to ensuring there is safe and equitable access to termination of pregnancy services. In that respect, it is worth acknowledging the substantial progress that has been made to date. Termination services in early pregnancy are now provided in all 19 maternity hospitals. There also has been a sustained increase in community providers, with their number currently standing at 492. The revised model of care introduced in response to the Covid pandemic is now approved as the enduring model of care. Under that blended approach, it is possible for one of the two consultations required for termination in early pregnancy to take place remotely. As outlined earlier by the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, this alleviates some of the difficulty that may be associated with the mandatory three-day waiting period in that it reduces the time and expense involved in travelling to the doctor's surgery twice. It also improves access for many women and addresses geographical and logistical barriers. Safe access zones legislation came into effect on 17 October 2024 under the Health (Termination of Pregnancy Services) (Safe Access Zones) Act. The cumulative effect of all these measures is to substantially reduce barriers and increase access to services for those who need them. The feedback received directly from clinicians indicates that the service is working well. This is particularly significant if we take account of the fact it is a relatively new service that has been built up from the ground.

There is a broad range of sincerely held and articulately expressed views on termination of pregnancy and the removal of the three-day wait. In the interests of being helpful, I will briefly address some of the points raised while I have been in the Chamber. The Minister, Deputy

Carroll MacNeill, will, of course, continue to engage with Deputies from across the House on this issue. Deputies Sherlock and O'Gorman called for wider political co-operation to expedite the progress of the legislation. It is my understanding that the Minister has engaged in an element of consultation with the service providers and with politicians of all shades. She will continue that. The vote on this Bill tomorrow evening will decide at what rate that proceeds. This is not a straightforward process. Regardless of where people stand on the issue, we all know that any legislation that comes from this may be quite different from what we now envisage. It must be implemented in a practical way.

Deputy Coppinger made clear her view that the full recommendations of the O'Shea report should be put in place. There is a multitude of recommendations, as has been detailed in some depth from a legal point of view by Deputy Geoghegan. All of those recommendations are being taken on their merit. I understand why there is some frustration.

On Deputy Tóibín's point, I say sincerely that I have no interest in engaging in any politicking on this matter. I do not want this to become a political debate about the substance of the issue, regardless of people's stance on it and their deeply held personal convictions. We can all agree that the views expressed are all deeply personally held convictions. A person's stance on this issue is not one to which any of us has come lightly. It is my fundamental belief that what we voted on in 2018 - I campaigned on one side and some of the Deputies here campaigned on the other side; that is politics - was the decision to repeal the eighth amendment from our Constitution and to provide for termination of pregnancy services as a legislative matter. That is the core issue on which we voted. There were many other aspects of the campaign and I completely take Deputy Tóibín's points in that regard and those eloquently made by Deputies Nolan and Michael Healy-Rae. Fundamentally, however, the decision was taken by the Irish people to empower the democratically elected Members of the Oireachtas to legislate on these matters, as is done in jurisdictions around the world.

That was the fundamental decision and it is the basis on which we approach the debate this evening. The Government will not oppose the legislation because it has declared a conscience vote for Deputies from both parties in government and the group of Independent Deputies who support it. In that context, it is important to set out my own personal view. I would have been supportive of the Bill introduced a couple of weeks ago by the Social Democrats. I was the sole Fine Gael Member to vote for the Bill brought forward by People Before Profit in the previous Dáil. I am absolutely consistent on this and, as such, I am supportive of the Bill before us and very grateful to the Sinn Féin Party for putting it forward. That is not the case for some other members of my party and some others of my fellow party TDs. They are empowered to make a decision on the Bill in their own right.

As Deputy Coppinger rightly said, the proposals in this Bill were brought about by a grassroots campaign. I know what it was like to be the sole Fine Gael Member who voted for legislation on this issue in the previous Dáil. In 2014, in a local authority vote, the three people who voted in favour were the two People Before Profit councillors and me. There is a divergence of views on this issue that does not align with a narrow political division. We must respect that people reflect on it deeply and come at it from a very personal point of view.

Last night, I had the distinct honour of addressing the annual general conference of the International Planned Parenthood Federation, which was held in Dublin. An event like that being held here would have been completely unthinkable not so long ago. The people gathered

came from more than 100 different countries around the world where they have seen clear legislative backsliding, not just in areas like this but more generally when it comes to gender equality, the rights of women and the rights of minorities, including those of minority faiths. They see real political and administrative pressure being put on their livelihoods. They came to Dublin because they know it is a safe place to have their conference and have a discussion, where people can disagree with them but not persecute them. I am delighted the Government is now in a position to support the federation. I signed off last night on a doubling of our funding to it.

That is something I will continue to do in my work as Minister of State with responsibility for international development in a situation where an arbitrary culture war being waged somewhere else has seen maternal health in the poorest countries in the world drop to some of the worst levels seen. We are living in a time when HIV-AIDS infection rates, after 25 years of reducing, are now rising again. That is fundamentally due to political decisions. AIDS rates are going up, malaria rates are going up and the level of infant mortality is rising because of political decisions. It is in the context of my work in international development that I want to ensure Ireland continues to be a safe and progressive place to be a woman, first and foremost, and everything that goes with that. The strides made by us in our constitutional decisions in recent years are something that go above and beyond politics. The tenor of those debates, going back to the citizens' assembly, the debates in the Seanad and at the eighth amendment committee, chaired by my dear friend and then Seanad colleague, Catherine Noone, were reflective of a better Ireland than the Ireland that voted when I was an infant in my mum's arms to insert the eighth amendment into the Constitution.

Regardless of what everyone feels about the issue, and I fundamentally respect that, they were not good debates and not good politics. It created a system of othering that none of us can stand over, whether we believe in the decision to legislatively pursue removing the three-day wait or not. From a deeply personal point of view, this legislation is welcome and I will, of course, support it but I think we all know - those of us who believe in this - that we can do more and we have a responsibility to do more. That will not come from a party-political decision, and there will be opposition to that which is healthy and democratic.

The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has stated she will also support this legislation, as will the Taoiseach and Tánaiste. The decision taken by any other Member on the Government benches, whether they are a ministerial officeholder or other, is for them. I have laid out my very clear opinion, which I think can be respected by the Chamber, and we can continue this debate. If it is to be passed tomorrow night, and I sincerely hope it is passed by a majority in this Chamber, we can progress a legislative debate in the manner we have been able to achieve - a debate, I believe, on the most sensitive of topics on this island, carried out in a way that does not drag in unnecessary comparisons and which does not provide a campaigning platform for attack and negativity. At the end of the day, somewhere around the country at this moment is a 14- or 15-year-old girl who has been raped and is being faced with a very serious decision. She does not need politicians, particularly male politicians, using her as a political football. My appeal to the Chamber, whatever one's conscience is - and I respect it - is to please debate as if that young person is watching.

Deputy David Cullinane: Hear, hear.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Tacaím leis an mBille agus tréaslaím leis an Teachta Cullinane as é seo a thabhairt chun cinn. Is Bille tábhachtach é agus tá sé riachtanach. Tá sé ciallmhar. This is an important legislative change. At the end of the day, and as far as I can see it, we are talking about a three-day wait for women to be able to access essential healthcare. Fundamentally, that is what this is about. It was never necessary in the context of the repeal of the eighth amendment and it is one of the strongest recommendations of the O'Shea report.

The testimony brought forward by many women is that the three-day wait has created immense difficulties, particularly for women who are coming from a background where they are experiencing coercive control or domestic violence, where attending even one appointment is an enormous challenge, much less trying to return again within that period. Ultimately, it has a significant impact on their ability to make the right decisions for them. People have talked about consideration. This does not abolish consideration; this abolishes a mandatory requirement and constraint on women who are very clear on what is necessary for them and what is necessary for their needs and healthcare. It does not abolish consideration, and it does not mean people cannot make their own decisions and give their own thoughts on that.

I would also make the point that in the review of the legislation, the O'Shea report asked the Oireachtas to consider other matters, including fatal foetal abnormalities. It asked that an expert panel be established to examine those issues and advise the Oireachtas accordingly. That is important and should proceed. People have talked about the human cost. There is a profound human cost for parents and for women who have no choice but to travel because of the situation they are in. The Oireachtas needs to address that and an expert panel needs to be established in that regard.

The three-day wait period is unnecessary, it is wrong and it is causing profound hardship, particularly for vulnerable women in difficult situations. I welcome this Bill and the fact many Members of Government intend to support it.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I am standing here as a man, and to be honest, I cannot imagine a situation where I would be told by my doctor to go away to have a think about things and come back in three days. It is just wrong, it does not make sense and it is not right. Why would anyone be told, when it is a health issue, to go away and think about it? How patronising is that?

This legislation is about protecting women, helping them at a very difficult time and giving them all the support we can. I am a father of two daughters - two brilliant girls. One is a teenager and the older girl is 20-years old. They are kind and intelligent. I trust them, I trust their friends and I trust their peers. I trust women to make their own decisions. Why am I getting involved in their healthcare? I will be there to support them and to be with them but at the end of the day, this is their decision and that is what we must respect - women's decisions.

I think about Ann Lovett, who died 42 years ago in a grotto. I think about Sheila Rodgers, who left two children behind her. I think of Savita Halappanavar, who would have turned 44 years of age this year. So many other stories over the decades were brushed under the carpet and that we never knew about but some people know - maybe their families or friends know. Those women who had tragic deaths, and all those tragic stories, are why we are here this evening to support this legislation.

I thank the Taoiseach, Tánaiste, the Minister for Health and the Minister of State for coming along with us. I know not everyone can come with us because some people oppose it but I ask everyone to respect the debate and process because at the end of the day, this is about women's healthcare and trusting women to do the right thing. I want to send a clear message: this is above politics, politicians and above me as a man. This is about women being respected and being given the support and the trust we should all have in them.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: When the Irish people voted to repeal the eighth amendment, they voted to trust women and to trust the decisions they made about their own healthcare, their own bodies and their own lives. However, they also trusted legislators. They trusted them to listen to that O'Shea review when it came through and to act on the decisions or recommendations that came out of it. Ultimately, when repeal happened, it put the ball firmly in the court of this House. It is now up to us to do what is right, and it is right to remove the three-day limit. I did not agree with it at the time and I certainly do not agree with it now because we know this is more than just an inconvenience. For some women, this has some very real consequences. For women living with intimate partner abuse and domestic violence, those three days, each and every one of them, is another barrier to healthcare. For survivors of rape or sexual assault, being forced to navigate an unnecessary delay adds further trauma to an already devastating experience. The Minister of State spoke of a 14-year-old, and I agree with him. We never need to see another case like we have in the past.

We also know there still remains, to some degree, limited levels of services, and obtaining a GP appointment can be very difficult in some areas. For those women who discover their pregnancy later than expected, these three days can mean the difference between accessing healthcare here or being forced to travel abroad, and that causes distress. It has pushed women beyond the legal time limits for care in their own country. That is not what repeal intended to do. It is certainly not what I campaigned or voted for.

To be clear, there will always be the option for a woman to wait. It will always be there but it will be her choice whether it is one day, two days or three days; it will not be mandatory and will not be set down arbitrarily in legislation. This Bill recognises every woman's situation is different, and that decisions about healthcare are best made by the women themselves, supported by their doctors and not dictated to. If we want to get to a compassionate healthcare system, we must remove barriers, not reinforce and create them. Removing this three-day waiting period brings us that little step closer to a healthcare system that respects dignity, autonomy and access to timely care.

Deputy David Cullinane: Compassion and respect has always underpinned my approach to this issue. Like the Minister of State, I campaigned for repeal. I knocked on doors and I argued, debated, listened, agreed and disagreed.

8 o'clock

In fact, some of the best exchanges I had were with people I disagreed with because they sharpened my awareness of the complexity of this issue and the fact that people come at it differently. At every single door I knocked on where I disagreed, I respected the opinion of the person who made an alternative argument. At the end of the day, the people voted in overwhelming numbers for change and for abortion services in certain circumstances. In that

spirit, I have to say that some of the claims made today by some TDs in this Chamber are just factually wrong. Some people say that the HSE data indicate that 10,000 children are alive today because of the three-day wait. That is simply not fact and simply not the case. Nowhere in any publication or in any parliamentary question response does it say it that. There are conflation of data and a misunderstanding of actually what the HSE was saying. People know that and it needs to be put on the record.

Equally, I want to deal with the other issues that people raised suggesting that this legislation does not go far enough and that there are other recommendations in the review, as there were. One of those was on the grounds of fatal foetal abnormalities. Actually, the author of the independent report recommended that there would be an expert-led stakeholder review of that particular issue to look at the wording and to come back with recommendations for legislators. I believe that whatever changes we make have to be right. There cannot be any unintended consequences which is why I am grateful that the Minister and the Government are making resources available for me to be able to perfect the Bill which is before us. I believe it will pass and if it does pass, I want to make sure that it goes to Committee Stage and ultimately passes. I agree that other issues have to be dealt with. I ask the Minister for Health to set up that review panel to look at those other issues, make recommendations and then let us evaluate them on their merits with the independent data that we have.

I thank all Deputies who have spoken with respect and in the spirit of co-operation, listening and engaging. I respect all the different opinions which have been raised and I will ignore all the political charges that were made against my party and will not respond to them because I think this is about moving forward and making sure that what we voted for is what women get. For me that is the most important part of this legislation and this debate.

Question put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Paula Butterly): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 17 June 2026.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Job Losses

137. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment if he will provide an update on his engagement with a company (details supplied) regarding recent job losses and redundancies announced by the company; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45929/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: I am covering the questions for Deputy Conway-Walsh. I ask the Minister to provide an update on any engagement with Covalen regarding recent job losses and redundancies announced by the company and to make a statement about it.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): The Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, is making his way back from Strasbourg and he should be joining us shortly. I will take some of the priority questions in his absence but he will be here later in Question Time.

As the Deputy will be aware, on 27 April 2026 Covalen informed its employees of its intention to reduce its workforce. Covalen is a Dublin-based provider of customer experience, business process outsourcing and managed services, headquartered in Sandyford. The company provides services across customer support, operations and content moderation. Covalen forms part of the Cpl Group, an international talent solutions and outsourcing provider headquartered in Dublin, operating across multiple markets and sectors. The company operates within a global outsourcing model where activity levels are aligned to client demand. My understanding is that the company has been impacted by a shift in client demand, resulting in a reduction in the volume of services required and a requirement to adjust operations accordingly.

My foremost concern, and that of the Government, is the potentially impacted employees and their families during this uncertain time. IDA Ireland has established internal processes for managing potential job loss situations with its client companies. This involves proactive engagement with site leadership of the company and its parent company to explore options to avoid or minimise any job losses.

In respect of impacted employees, IDA is proactively engaging across its client base to identify potential redeployment opportunities where there is a skills match. IDA has also facilitated connections between interested companies and company representatives, and this work is ongoing. IDA has been engaging at a senior level with the company to ensure it is aware of the full range of IDA supports available at this time. IDA remains in contact with the company regarding recent developments.

Deputy Pa Daly: I appreciate what the Minister of State has said about IDA but he will be aware that over 700 employees at the Meta contractor were told that they would lose their jobs which will be replaced by AI. They have written to the Minister requesting intervention. I want to know what engagement the Minister has had. What has the Department done to assist the impacted workers?

As the Minister of State is probably aware, last week Covalen workers and the CWU gave a briefing in the audiovisual room outlining the situation facing the 700 employees. I thank Deputy Boyd Barrett for facilitating that. These workers explained how they were being asked to train AI systems to do their own jobs, effectively digging their own graves. These are mostly content reviewers, watching some of the most horrific content online so that we and our children do not get to see it. While at work, there are no psychological or mental health supports. Some have been hospitalised from the traumatising impact and what have they been given? They have been shown the door with the bare minimum redundancy package. That highlights the attitude of some of these tech companies.

The employer is imposing a six-month cooling-off period which would prevent them taking up employment in similar roles. What are they supposed to do? Many of them are non-Irish nationals on critical skills visas with no family support network, which is all the more reason for the Government to step in.

Deputy Alan Dillon: As I said earlier, my first and overriding concern in this situation is for the workers affected and their families who are facing a very uncertain time. IDA has been very active and proactive in its engagements at senior level with this company. That is very much with the clear focus of exploring all options to minimise job losses and also support the business through this transition. At the same time, IDA Ireland is working intensively to support the impacted employees. As with any redundancies, the industrial relations mechanisms of the State step in. Inevitably, there is a process that both the Government and the company have to abide by. In these situations, we certainly do not stand back. We are eager to engage early. We are eager to engage and support workers directly. We want to work with them to secure alternative employment wherever possible.

Deputy Pa Daly: These are vulnerable workers. Covalen had turnover of €722 million and a profit of €26.2 million and despite that is offering statutory redundancy, which is an absolute scandal. The parent company works on many other public sector accounts for the Government. An employer that treats employees like this really needs to be looked at when the public sector contracts are up for grabs. Some 20,000 jobs have been cut by the tech sector. This should be a wake-up call for Government. Government and the Department should be meeting them. These workers are not asking for any special treatment but they need the Government's help to end this six-month cooling-off period, so that they can work again in the same sector, put money in their pockets with a fair redundancy scheme, reform the redundancy procedures to improve their terms and legislate for their right to join a union. It is absolutely scandalous in this day and age that unions are kept out of some of these tech companies. I ask the Minister to intervene on behalf of workers to ensure they are treated fairly and receive what is due to them.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his question. It is essential that any redundancy process is co-ordinated fairly, transparently and in full compliance with the law. Ireland has a strong, robust legal framework in place to protect workers experiencing redundancy. That includes a 30-day consultation process in the case of collective redundancies. There are clear obligations required on Covalen in this regard to engage meaningfully with employee representatives. Indeed, any statutory redundancy entitlements and notice protections need to be enacted. That consultation is not just a tick-the-box exercise. It needs to be genuine, meaningful and focused on mitigating job losses wherever possible. That is where our focus is currently, along with raising concerns with regard to any issues that may arise. We will continue to work with the IDA and Covalen.

Social Media

138. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the steps his Department is taking to implement the recommendations of the recent report of the Committee on Arts, Media, Communications, Culture and Sport around the use of recommender algorithms on social media platforms; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45933/26]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Increasingly, large amounts of different groups are recommending that toxic algorithms be turned off by default. Most recently, the Oireachtas Joint Committee

on Arts, Media, Communications, Culture and sport, of which I am a member, made such a recommendation in our report. I would like to hear the steps the Department is taking to specifically deal with that measure to turn off algorithms.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for her question. Enhancing online safety, particularly for children and young people, is a whole-of-government priority. I recognise the important work of the committee, particularly the engagement with stakeholders from a wide range of backgrounds who informed the committee's recent report, which is an invaluable aid to understanding how online safety and participation can be improved.

In considering the committee's report, it is important to note the significant body of legislation already in place that provides the foundation for Ireland's online safety framework, including the regulation of online platforms. In Ireland, Coimisiún na Meán is firmly established at the heart of the online safety framework, which comprises the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act, the EU Digital Services Act, DSA, and the EU terrorist content online regulation. In particular, the EU Digital Services Act contains provisions that specifically address recommender systems. Platforms must explain in plain language the main parameters their systems use to suggest content to users and provide options for users to change or influence these parameters. Additionally, very large online platforms and search engines that use recommender systems must allow users, including minors, the option to use recommender systems that do not rely on profiling.

Providers of online platforms are obliged to put in place measures to ensure a high level of privacy, safety and security of minors on their services, including a ban on adverts based on profiling, where the user is a minor. These online platforms and engines must also conduct a yearly assessment to identify and mitigate potential system risks associated with the design of their recommender algorithms.

I know the committee's report recognises the sound foundations that are provided by the DSA and the online safety code. It also notes the investigations under the DSA that have been taken by Coimisiún na Meán.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

The European Commission also has investigations ongoing into the use of recommender algorithms by a number of online platforms. This is EU regulation in action.

The recently published National Digital and AI Strategy 2030 contains measures that further reinforce the Government's commitment to enhancing online safety as a whole-system priority. In this context, the EU audio visual media services directive, which is the basis for Ireland's online safety code, is currently being evaluated and further measures are likely to be proposed at European level.

Online safety is under the remit of the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport, Deputy O'Donovan. His Department is currently assessing the ten recommendations set out in the committee's report, with a view to identifying and engaging the various Departments that will have a role in considering next steps. My officials will work closely with the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport in that regard.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: It is clear that the current legislation and regulatory framework are not working. The Minister of State talked a lot about the obligations on these platforms to allow users to adjust their settings and basically push back against algorithmic profiling and so on, but it is clear that it is not working. There have been multiple US cases recently where we see that the design of these products themselves promotes addiction, and the secret sauce behind all of them is the algorithm. Whatever the Minister of State is describing in terms of the existing regulatory framework, it is not working.

The Data Protection Commission, DPC, essentially failed because if it had properly enforced the GDPR, we would not have had to set up Coimisiún na Meán. It now has a whole suite of European Union regulation to enforce, but it is still failing. We are now setting up an AI office within the Department of enterprise, which is just going to add to the complexity of a regulatory framework that is not working.

This is not just about children. These algorithms are toxic and problematic for all of us. I will go into detail on how. This is not working as it stands. Users are not to be blamed.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for raising these concerns. I understand the concerns being raised and the impact recommender algorithms have on children. They are valid. Certainly, the Government takes the matter seriously. This is not simple. While it might sound straightforward to just ban recommender systems in theory, it needs to be evidence-based. There are also risks of unintended consequences. Having been a member of the media committee and having listened to many of the social media platforms, I am aware that recommender systems also form part of the solution. They do not just amplify harmful content. They are used as filters and to prioritise safety signals. They also reduce exposure to illegal and harmful material.

Through the Digital Services Act, we are focused on platforms reducing the risks with these algorithms and ensuring that we have continuous enforcement. The DSA has measures in place that are currently in existence and legislated for. They need to be enacted. That is the responsibility of the European Commission, along with Coimisiún na Meán.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: As I said, they are not working. I am not proposing a ban on algorithms. What I am saying is that algorithms are the way these products are being made addictive. We are all suffering as a result. They are radicalising people, promoting harmful content and polarising our society. We need to turn them off by default, and turn them off entirely for children. There are no unintended consequences in that regard. It would bring us back to the Internet that we used to enjoy, where we were not constantly bombarded with material that is trying to sell us things or keep our eyes locked on a screen.

This is more important than ever as AI develops. AI will go further than just keeping our eyes on the screen. It is seeking to make emotional connections with us that would exploit us further and make us more addicted to these products. We have to turn off the algorithm by default. We are going to spend the next year discussing this ban for under 16s, which is not going to work because it penalises children and raises major privacy concerns, when we know the solution is to turn off toxic algorithms by default and fully for children. That is what we need to do.

Deputy Alan Dillon: A lot of work is being undertaken in our engagement with social media platforms. That includes age verification and working hand in hand with the European Commission. Coimisiún na Meán is central to the enforcement role. We have seen many investigations in recent times. I believe we need to focus on a more co-ordinated approach through European regulation. These are many global platforms that have a global reach. Ireland alone cannot take a central role. We have to work with our partners to try to alleviate this. Work is under way in many ways to protect minors and children. The issue of restricting social media for under 16s will be debated in this House and I believe we need to put protections in place. I agree with the Deputy that algorithms are central to that.

Export Controls

139. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the reason the export of €20 million worth of dual-use technology to the Israel Defense Forces and the Israeli Ministry of Defence was sanctioned by his Department in 2024; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45930/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: We have all seen the devastation Israel has unleashed on the Middle East since 2023. Gaza has been razed to the ground, hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced and 70,000 have been killed. At the same time, in 2024, at the height of this onslaught by Israel, the Minister's Department approved €20 million worth of dual-use technology to the IDF and the Israeli Ministry for Defense. Will the Minister explain to the people of Ireland, and the people of Palestine, why the Government gave approval for this?

Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Peter Burke): My Department's responsibilities centre on the control of exports of dual-use and military items under EU and national legislation. Controls and export of dual-use items are administered by my Department in accordance with EU Regulation No. 2021/821 of the European Parliament and the Council, setting up a Union regime for export controls, brokering, technical assistance, transit and transfer of dual-use items. The bulk of dual-use exports from Ireland, including those to end users in Israel, are mainstream business ICT products, both hardware and software.

They are categorised as dual-use items as a consequence of the fact that they incorporate strong encryption for ICT security purposes.

The primary purpose of export controls is not to block trade or exports, but to enable the free movement of legitimate goods while ensuring that certain sensitive categories are subject to appropriate regulation. All export licence applications are considered by my officials in accordance with criteria set out within the relevant dual-use and military EU and national regulations and Ireland's international obligations and responsibilities as members of non-proliferation regimes and export control arrangements. Each application is assessed individually, considering the nature of the items, the destination country, the identity of the end user and the intended end use. Ireland's export control decisions are guided by the EU common position and its criteria, which include respect for human rights, international obligations, regional stability and risk of diversion to another end use or end user.

The risk profile of an application is impacted by current geopolitical factors, the end user, the items in question and their ability to be misused. This risk profile can change on a case-by-case basis. If an application is deemed high risk and the exporter is unable to provide strong assurances to mitigate the risks identified, the application will be denied. As each application is treated on a case-by-case basis, the available verifiable information at the time and associated risk assessments can change from application to application.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Minister for the reply. Have there been any reviews of the position since 2024? Let us talk through the facts. As the Minister has explained, to export dual-use technology, which is technology with civilian and military capabilities such as computers, chips and software, a licence is required, as the Minister explained. At least 11 dual-use licences were granted for goods, worth €35 million, to be exported to Israel, €20 million of that in 2024 alone at the height of the attacks on Gaza. *The Currency* reports that the end user of these goods were the IDF and the Israeli Ministry for Defense. There are severe consequences under international law for exporting dual-use goods to a state sponsor of terrorism or a conflict zone. Crimes Israel committed in Gaza and is continuing to commit are under investigation by the International Court of Justice. The UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory has already found that Israel has committed genocide against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. The Israeli Prime Minister, Netanyahu, and former Minister of Defense, Yoav Gallant, have arrest warrants against them. The Minister cannot claim he did not know what was happening. Is Ireland going to be complicit in continuing to support the genocide in Gaza because of decisions taken by the Department?

Deputy Peter Burke: First, I robustly refute that Ireland, in any circumstances, is supporting genocide in Gaza. This country has been a firm supporter of international law. We have worked with the people of Gaza and Palestine to ensure we recognise the State of Palestine. We supported UNRWA at a very difficult time when Commissioner Várhelyi tried to take a unilateral decision. We were the first to support it. We joined the ICJ case and provided a significant amount of humanitarian aid.

In relation to export controls, with regard to every single item that is exported, there has to be proof what the end user is and, essentially, where the product will end up. The Department independently licenses those products in line with EU legislation and the framework established by the EU. As I said, that is grounded in humanitarian law, ensuring there are no unintended consequences from the exports. That has been critical to our approach in the Department. We always stand by that firm application process.

Deputy Pa Daly: I asked whether there had been any review because no dual licences for export to Israel were granted in 2025 and 2026. Was there some recognition that the technology was being used to facilitate military action across the Middle East, or did something change from 2025 onward? Why did the Government continue to permit dual-use exports in 2024 at the height of the onslaught and attacks? These are questions that need to be answered. Was there a change in tack? Did the Government review it? Did it realise that it had been making a mistake and that parts of the State were complicit?

In May 2024, Ireland recognised, finally, the State of Palestine, but in the same year, €20 million worth of technology was sanctioned to the IDF and the Israeli Ministry of Defense to assist them. By the end of that year, every single hospital in Gaza was either damaged or destroyed, 70,000 people had been killed, families were wiped out and homes and schools had been reduced to rubble. It is incomprehensible that an Irish Government would still continue to use dual licences to export to Israel. While the Government is speaking out on banning the exports of goods, actions speak louder than words.

Deputy Peter Burke: There has been no review. There has been no change in policy. Our regime is robust and strong. In no circumstances is it contributing in any way to genocide in Gaza. We have a very clear protocol, as established under the EU framework on the export of dual-use items. Applications have reduced and changed from year to year. That is the reality here. It is not the case that our policy has changed or something happened to cause us to review our policy. We have a clear framework in line with European Union and international obligations.

Ireland has been firm in its support of the people of Gaza. We are firm in calling out genocide and recognising the State of Palestine. We were firm in supporting UNRWA at a difficult time. We were firm in joining the ICJ case, standing up in the highest international forums - the UN and others - and, critically, in calling for a review of the EU-Israel Association Agreement and calling for sanctions in that regard. We were firm in all those measures, standing up for the vulnerable citizens in Palestine.

Export Controls

140. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment for an update on his Department's investigation into exports to Russia from a company (details supplied); when the investigation is expected to be completed and if the findings will be reported in a full and transparent manner; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45931/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: The Minister was recently on the airwaves speaking about the huge volume of exports to Russia from the State and assuring us that the figures presented by the Central Statistics Office were, in fact, incorrect. He is on record saying that the CSO was the gold standard for statistics and that a current investigation of the plant in Aughinish would be carried out by the Department. We all want openness about this. Will the Minister update the House on the investigation and confirm whether it has been completed? Will he publish its findings?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for this important question. I will first make a clarification. I never said the CSO was incorrect. I said the management of Aughinish Alumina had furnished incorrect information to the CSO and that the company was working with the CSO to rectify same. I want to be clear. The CSO is the gold standard and I never implied it was incorrect in any way.

Ireland remains unequivocal in its continuing support for Ukraine after Russia's unjustified invasion. I remind the Deputy that Aughinish Alumina is not subject to any sanctions by the EU and alumina is not a sanctioned good. Therefore, its export to other countries, including

Russia, is not restricted. For context, the Aughinish Alumina plant is Europe's largest refinery and one of the most important suppliers to the EU aluminium sector. Since it began production in 1983, the Aughinish plant has also been a supplier of energy to the national grid and is a significant employer in the Limerick area.

My Department is currently investigating the matters raised in a recent report in *The Irish Times* report about Aughinish Alumina and its exports to Russia. I take the matter of potential sanctions violations very seriously. The report indicates the potential for the alumina being refined and ultimately processed into aluminium for use by the Russian military and sourced through a sanctioned entity. Therefore, the Deputy will appreciate that this is a highly complex investigation with multiple strands. It has necessitated my Department's engagement with other bodies within the State and with other member states, as well as with the company itself. Officials within my Department are working independently on this investigation. Upon its conclusion, engagements will be had at official and political level with the European Commission to discuss, as appropriate.

I am not in a position to comment on specifics of the investigation while it is ongoing because to do so could adversely affect its outcome. I must allow due process to be adhered to. I recognise the high-profile nature of this investigation. The Government will make a statement once it is completed. I cannot give a timeframe for the conclusion of my Department's investigation. While the Department is working as quickly as possible, it is crucial that this investigation is carried out thoroughly and in line with due process where all aspects are considered.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Minister for the reply. Can he give an approximate time? Will it be by the end of the year, the middle of next year or the end of next year? As the Minister said, there is a question and it is valid. Legitimate questions are being asked about the plant exporting raw material to Russia to fuel the illegal attacks on Ukraine. Everybody in the House appreciates the level of employment the company provides in the Limerick and north Kerry area. At the same time, nobody is saying that its products should be used to assist an illegal war effort. There is a question mark. Society is questioning how it has been permitted to continue and why the Government has been so slow to conduct an investigation.

The Ukrainian Embassy has expressed serious concern about the continued sales to Russia, including for weapons such as ballistic missiles, hypersonic missiles and Shahed drones, the weapons we hear are being used against Ukrainian cities every week.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Pa Daly: I will finish on this. Even if it was an error to state that 80% of the company's exports went to Russia in 2025 and the true figure is 45%, that is still unacceptable.

Deputy Peter Burke: We need to ascertain where that 45% is going because there are many aspects of the economic model of every country that requires alumina. The material is used for making medical devices and in the food processing and automotive sectors. Obviously, the EU is a very significant importer of alumina as it is a critical raw material. It is important to put that on record.

I refute the statement that we were slow to commence an investigation. Once this report was published in *The Irish Times* and other authorities came forward with information, we immediately opened an investigation. We are in contact with the Swedish authorities and the Ukrainian authorities about the evidence they have received. We are updating the European Commission weekly on the investigation. Ireland has supported robustly and unanimously every one of the 21 rounds of sanctions against Russia for its illegal invasion of Ukraine. We will not tolerate it if it is proven that alumina is ending up in the Russian military complex. The Government of Ireland will take action in that regard.

Deputy Pa Daly: It is important, as I think the Minister will accept, that the Government step in, maybe with EU officials, to diversify this plant's market away from Russia because jobs are needed in the area and must be saved. That will not be an issue if the Russian exports are stopped, so it is a distraction to frame this as a risk to Limerick jobs. There is a huge global market for alumina and aluminium products outside of Russia - in Europe and other stable economies. The main reason alumina is not on the EU's Russian sanctions list is that any sanction would disproportionately damage European industry. This does not absolve the Government of its responsibility to prevent Aughinish Alumina from fuelling the Russia war effort and drone campaign against Ukrainians. We do not want to see any items or products from Ireland being used to facilitate weaponry directly or indirectly - we are a neutral country - in any illegal war in Ukraine, or anywhere else for that matter. We must be completely confident no products are ending up in the hands of the military. Will the Minister give an approximate timeline for the completion of the review? Has he given the individuals preparing the report a deadline by which he wants to see results?

Deputy Peter Burke: As the Deputy said, jobs must be saved. It is hard to reconcile that with his further statement in relation to Russia. We have to be clear that products are being exported to Russia that are being used in the Russian military complex, action will have to be taken. There are no easy answers to this. There are a huge number of jobs involved. The plant is responsible for a critical raw material. Any action would have big implications for Europe in the context of its security, for our grid, given that approximately 200,000 homes are powered by the plant, and for the Port of Foynes. There are serious implications but, as a country that upholds the rule of law and takes its obligations to citizens and human rights very seriously, we have to be to the fore on this.

I do not want to pressure those doing the investigation. I know a lot of meetings are taking place this week in respect of it. I hope to have the report very shortly. The investigation will not go on for months or years. It will be a quick investigation and I hope it will begin a process of ascertaining whether the supply chain is concealed, or not. What I am trying to establish here is whether there is a concealed supply chain and whether the company can prove that to the independent investigation and the Commission.

Tourist Accommodation

141. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment to update the house on the short-term letting Bill 2025 coming from his Department. [45285/26]

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for this very important question. In April last year, I obtained Government approval for the general scheme of the short-term letting and tourism Bill. Once enacted, this Bill will provide a statutory framework for regulating the short-term letting sector, including the establishment of a national register.

This register, which has been broadly welcomed by the tourism sector, will be implemented and managed by Fáilte Ireland in compliance with the EU short-term rental regulation. The register will launch on 1 December 2026, with a legal obligation on all operators to register by 31 December 2026. The new housing policy for short-term let activity was set out today at Cabinet by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy James Browne, in a national planning statement. The statement provides a balanced framework that supports sustainable tourism, protects communities, maintains housing supply and enables clear, consistent decision-making for both property owners and planners.

The new housing policy restricts the approval of new planning permissions for short-term lets in cities and larger towns with a population of over 20,000 in the last census. However, planning permission for short-term letting can be granted to preserve heritage or traditional buildings unsuitable for the long-term housing market. Upper floors in mixed-use buildings or small structures beside an owner-occupied home can also be approved, provided neighbours are not adversely affected. Permission will generally be favoured where a dwelling has been used continuously for short-term letting for at least seven years without enforcement action, in line with established use rights. A simplified administrative version of the application process for retention specifically for short-term lets will be introduced.

Short-term let accommodation providers in towns with a population of less than 20,000 have two years to meet planning compliance and additional provisions are being included in the Bill to give effect to this measure. This work will be completed shortly. I intend to bring the Bill to Government in the coming weeks to seek approval for publication, and to advance the Bill to enactment by early autumn.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I ask the Minister to give confidence to the sector - the long-established self-catering operators who have been operating legally for many years - that they will not be forced out of business as a consequence of the new short-term letting regulations?

Deputy Peter Burke: I know the Deputy has done a lot of work on this matter. In towns with a population of less than 20,000 in areas of the south and west coast where it is not viable to build a hotel and where short-term lets for tourism are needed, we will have a simplified administrative process for providers who have been in operation for more than seven years. We have issued a planning statement which will have a presumption for those operators to be granted planning. It will be a simplified process and there will be a presumption they will be granted planning to ensure they can continue in operation. As Minister, I want to see short-term lets continue in areas where they are needed, such as the west coast and the south. Kerry is a prime example, as are counties Mayo, Leitrim and Longford and rural County Galway. There are areas that need short-term lets to absorb the capacity because there is no hotel accommodation available. We will also bring forward an accommodation strategy this year to try to incentivise the growth of high-quality hotel accommodation as well, which will be another weapon in our armoury.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I thank the Minister. I know his heart is in the right place on this matter, which is the reason I am asking him the questions. What communications has he had on the national planning statement? Will the statement be made available for consultation with stakeholders before implementation? What would the Minister like to see in it?

Deputy Peter Burke: I have had significant negotiations with the Minister, Deputy James Browne, to achieve a balance. Obviously, it is critical that we have accommodation in our cities, where there is acute pressure on housing units - we are in a housing crisis - and that those units are made available for wider society. Equally, in areas where the tourism sector is very important, and tourism drives economic activity in rural Ireland, it is important that short-term lets that have already been in operation are able to continue. The planning statement will be published and it will state that there will be a presumption of planning to be approved on all short-term lets in areas with a population of less than 20,000. There will be a simplified application process for such operators to go through and there will be a two-year window for them to regularise once the register comes into operation.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Deputy Healy-Rae can follow up with the Minister in writing.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Business Supports

142. **Deputy Albert Dolan** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment if he is exploring new measures to assist with the cost of doing business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45347/26]

Deputy Albert Dolan: Essentially, what I am asking about is the cost of doing business. With rates, insurance, electricity and labour costs, the costs of doing business over the past few years have soared and while the Government has, at times, tried to intervene and support people, I want to know what plans the Minister has to further support businesses?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy for his question.

The Government continues to actively monitor cost developments across all sectors of the economy.

The small business unit was established in the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment last year, fulfilling a programme for Government commitment. There are a number of tools this unit and the Department will use to enable its work, including rigorous implementation of the SME test. The SME test tasks policy makers to consider the impact that any new policy, legislation or regulation may have on SMEs and to mitigate those impacts, where appropriate.

Access to grants and support programmes has been simplified through the launch of the national enterprise hub. This is hosted and operated by Enterprise Ireland and has over 250

different supports for businesses from 32 Departments and agencies. Since its launch in 2024, the national enterprise hub has handled over 15,000 inquiries. Monthly volumes have grown steadily, with over 940 queries received in May alone, representing a 33% increase on the same period last year. The average response time has consistently remained within 24 hours. The hub's website has also attracted significant interest, with over 300,000 visits since its establishment.

The small business unit has responsibility for the local enterprise offices and we are ensuring the LEOs are properly resourced to help small businesses. A review of the full suite of LEO supports is currently under way, while the Department and Enterprise Ireland are completing a review of applications for all LEO grants to reduce the number of questions and simplify requirements.

The cost of doing business advisory forum was established in June 2025 as part of the programme for Government commitment to ensure we reduce business costs and ease regulatory burdens. This forum serves as a structured platform to bring together enterprise representative bodies and a number of sectors across Departments, State agencies and regulators.

Deputy Albert Dolan: Go raibh maith agat a Aire Stáit. I appreciate the update and the work that is ongoing. A key area I want to highlight, and I know the Minister of State is hearing this regularly, is energy costs. Energy remains one of the largest overheads for SMEs, particular in the hospitality sector, the manufacturing sector and the agribusiness sector. Small businesses do not have the same purchasing power that larger entities or corporations might have. It might be feasible for a large entity to buy the energy coming from some renewable energy development but this is not feasible for small businesses and small manufacturing entities. We have so much talent in our communities. I think of all the great businesses in Galway East that have massive energy costs but do not have the scale to purchase power at that level. What is the Minister of State doing specifically to support further solar grants and energy efficiency and reduce long-term energy costs? The price of electricity is simply too high.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank Deputy Dolan for his question. I know he has been big advocate of ensuring our energy system is supported and remains resilient and sustainable. Across government, through the Department of climate and energy, we are driving the delivery of renewable energy and solar PV. Through SEAI grants we have seen a huge uptake in the number of businesses that have adopted new technology in regard to solar PV and energy efficiency measures, which is very important. The SEAI does wonderful work to engage with businesses throughout the country.

The cost of doing business advisory forum brings together decision-makers, enterprises and businesses, regulators and key agencies. We see work undertaken by the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, on how we structure the cost of energy in terms of transparency on what businesses pay for. We want to go further in how we regulate that market.

Deputy Albert Dolan: The Government has to go further, in particular for small and medium enterprises that do not have the scale to acquire electricity at a discounted rate. This is who we have to consider and support.

I want to move on to another cost of business issue which is constantly coming up for me, in particular in recent weeks. It is with regard to rates. Commercial rates are increasingly becoming a frustration for businesses. I understand that rates were not revalued for a long time but the revaluation has led to significant costs imposed on businesses. Sometimes there is a value question. The businesses pay rates but they could be in a rural location and they just are not seeing the value of what they are paying. There has to be better engagement from local authorities on this. Has the Minister of State assessed the impact that increased rates costs are having on small and medium enterprises? What does he plan to do about this cost?

Deputy Alan Dillon: The challenges around rates are always contentious for small businesses and retailers in every town and city. It is not a function of the Department of enterprise to control that. Rates are a very important revenue stream for local authorities and central to delivering the required services. Deputy Dolan knows, as a former councillor, how important it is and how contentious it is for executive management to ensure it has this income stream. However, we do need to make better utilisation of how rates are proportionately absorbed by a lot of small businesses. I will undertake a review of the local enterprise offices to ensure there is more structure in place. We see rates abatement for many new businesses that may establish in towns, whereby a percentage of the full rate is forgone in the early years. That is very important. Rates are a devolved function of councillors and local government but we need to modernise them in the current era and see how we can support businesses in future.

Company Law

143. **Deputy Shay Brennan** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment to outline any assessment his Department has undertaken of the need to update company law to facilitate the greater use of distributed ledger technology for the tokenisation of funds set up as Irish companies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45470/26]

Deputy Shay Brennan: Ireland's funds industry manages trillions in assets and supports over 20,000 jobs. It is one of our most significant internationally traded sectors. Globally this sector is now moving rapidly towards tokenisation and the use of distributed ledger technology. Will the Minister advise what assessment the Department has undertaken of whether our company law framework, including the Companies Act 2014, ICAP and the Investment Limited Partnerships Act are fit for purpose to support this transformation?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Brennan for his question on a very important sector for the Irish economy. Tokenisation, the process whereby an underlying asset or pool of assets, tangible or intangible, is converted into digital tokens that act as its proxy, could fundamentally reform how capital markets operate, enabling real-time trades, increasing transparency and liquidity, expediting clearing and ultimately providing for atomic settlement.

As the Deputy is aware, the Minister for Finance, who has lead policy responsibility for this area, published a funds sector 2030 report in October 2024. The report, titled Funds Sector 2030: A Framework for Open, Resilient and Developing Markets, is a wide-ranging review of the funds and asset management sector. The report included a recommendation that the

industry continue to engage with the Central Bank of Ireland and the Department of Finance, as necessary, "with a view to mapping out a pathway for adoption of tokenisation".

I am advised that the Department of Finance fully supports and encourages the work that industry has undertaken thus far to assess what can be done within the current legislative and regulatory frameworks. Officials from that Department are considering submissions from industry regarding proposed changes to the current legislative framework. This work is being done and led by that Department, and following this work my Department will examine any proposed legislative amendments to the Companies Act put forward by the Department of Finance, as is the current practice in the normal course of events. This is in tandem with other work involving negotiations by the Department of Finance as policy lead in this area, such as work at EU level involving financial services regulation. The Deputy may also be aware that, in line with recommendation 17 of the report, the Central Bank published a discussion paper on tokenisation last March, with submissions being invited by 5 June. I understand the intention now is for the Central Bank to publish a feedback statement following this consultation period.

Deputy Shay Brennan: I thank the Minister. He will appreciate there is an urgency about this issue. The core requirement from the funds industry is quite narrow. It is recognition that distributed ledger technology is a valid medium for share issuance for transfer, registration and record keeping. No radical change is being sought, just some targeted non-technology-focused amendments to key relevant Acts. Major international asset managers are already launching tokenised fund products, particularly in the money market funds where Ireland is Europe's leading domicile. Is the Department aware of what legislative changes need to be implemented and of the urgency with which clarity needs to be communicated to fund managers?

Is the Minister actively considering legislative changes at this time, and if so, over what timeframe?

Deputy Peter Burke: I am very much aware of how important the funds sector is to our employment landscape. Over 60,000 jobs and, as the Deputy pointed out, trillions in assets are domiciled here. As I said, the Department of Finance has the lead policy responsibility for the area. Distributed ledger technology, as the Deputy pointed out, provides a game changer for the sector. It records transactions, and transactions that are recorded in multiple places at the same time. This can provide a huge opportunity for Ireland.

What is happening here now is that submissions have been sought. They have been coming into the Central Bank. The Department of Finance will communicate to our Department what changes are needed in the company law code, because our Department is responsible for this area. We will support the growth of the sector in that regard because we have seen how much it has contributed to our economy in terms of jobs and this being a highly regulated sector that has a pathway into the European market that is significant for Ireland. I can, therefore, assure the Deputy of my full attention to this matter.

Deputy Shay Brennan: The Minister will appreciate that the risk here is a straightforward competitiveness one. If competing jurisdictions provide clearer legal certainty first, the product development and the jobs that go with it will go elsewhere. The question is not whether

tokenisation or distributed ledger technology will become a core component of the funds industry, but whether Ireland will be ready in time to maintain its leading global position in the funds sector.

Our reputation in financial services was largely built on anticipating market developments and rapidly adapting to them. Does the Minister accept that timely action on this issue is necessary and will he commit to engaging with industry stakeholders on specific legislative amendments that have been identified and other requirements that would support the industry?

Deputy Peter Burke: I am constantly engaging with stakeholders. Indeed, I meet many of them during my weekly business with the Department. I have had some very exciting job announcements in the financial services sector and have discussed this issue in detail with it and in relation to the work the Department of Finance has undertaken. It has been present for some of those announcements, so we are very much aware of the opportunity here. Ireland will absolutely be at the forefront to grasp that opportunity with both hands.

I should also point out the highly skilled workforce we have and the capacity to ensure that grows is so important for the sector as well. We are well set, therefore, to grow it further. The IDA has a number of exciting companies growing in this space. There is also our own fintech sector with Fenargo and others that have grown exponentially in recent years. I assure the Deputy of my full attention, and I am working closely with the Department of Finance and the Central Bank on this issue.

Artificial Intelligence

144. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the way in which his Department is supporting businesses to adopt artificial intelligence into their day-to-day work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45350/26]

Deputy Albert Dolan: Artificial intelligence, AI, is one of the biggest economic opportunities facing Ireland over the next decade. It has the potential to transform productivity, innovation and competitiveness across every sector. What is the Government doing to position Ireland as a leader in AI adoption and development?

Deputy Alan Dillon: The Government recognises that the adoption of AI and digital technologies presents a significant opportunity for Irish businesses to enhance productivity, competitiveness and innovation across all sectors of the economy. The recently published national digital and AI strategy, Digital Ireland - Connecting our People, Securing our Future, sets out a clear roadmap for Ireland's digital and AI adoption and development in the years ahead.

One of the key priorities in the strategy is fast-tracking enterprise technology adoption, particularly in SMEs, to boost productivity and competitiveness. Under the AI - Good for Business initiative, a national AI and digital awareness roadshow has been established in tandem with local enterprise office, LEO, regions. The roadshow, which is already under way, helps SMEs to understand the practical benefits of AI and digital tools, showcases real SME success stories, and highlights the LEO supports available. Having participated in one of these

roadshows in Galway in April, it is very encouraging to see the high levels of interest and uptake of AI by SMEs.

These supports include the Grow Digital voucher, which offers up to €5,000 to small businesses with under 50 employees to adopt digital tools like ecommerce, AI, cybersecurity, and website development. The digital for business consultancy scheme is a free service which connects businesses with expert advisers to assess needs and develop tailored plans. The European digital innovation hubs, EDIHs, in Dublin, Cork, Mullingar and Sligo offer hands-on support to help SMEs to understand, test and adopt advanced technologies. My Department recently allocated an additional €23 million in funding for these EDIHs to support SMEs in their uptake of AI and other cutting-edge technologies.

We are building on existing supports and developing a targeted sectoral strategy to develop and drive AI adoption. Enterprise Ireland will also appoint an AI sector champion to spotlight AI opportunities, and the charter for digital inclusion will also encourage larger businesses to support smaller ones in adopting digital tools.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I am firmly of the opinion that the countries that adopt AI responsibly will yield the greatest benefits over the next generation. We can be economic leaders through AI and we can show what a society is capable of. A part of where this conversation has to be is about the societal benefits that can come from AI-gained efficiencies.

With those efficiencies, however, come a lot of concerns. We have to address the challenges that there will be around job displacement and workforce skills and ensure that people can upskill, develop and wield the power that AI will give them as individuals. How is the Government going to ensure that Ireland will not simply be depending on other countries' AI but that we have some sort of AI independence? The Minister of State will have seen over the weekend that access to Fable and Mythos outside the US was shut down. How would we respond if we were dependent on AI services and they got shut down?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy very much for his questions. I feel that one of the biggest barriers to AI adoption is not the reluctance to adopt the technology but is around awareness and understanding. This is why it is important that we get businesses engaged early in respect of how it can enhance their effectiveness, efficiencies and productivity. That is why we have the Grow Digital voucher, ensuring that experts can create digital plans and allow the technology to be embedded in a system. We are working on the AI observatory to make Ireland an international hub for AI adoption. That is very much part of the whole AI plan, and we really want to see SMEs as a success story in respect of the adoption of AI.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I would say that we need to be careful. I welcome the Grow Digital vouchers, but this would lead to businesses depending on those vouchers to get the expertise and skills to be talented with AI. The whole idea of AI is that it is going to be usable by anybody for anybody with their own critical thinking and their own ability. It is going to be about allowing people to gain the skillsets and the critical thinking capacity to use AI. I would be careful not to fund so many vouchers that people become dependent on them.

Another point is that the benefits of AI need to be felt and spread right across the country. From the point of view of the Government particularly, and this is something I have called for

before, an AI hub for the west of Ireland is needed. We have an incredible medical technology and medical device sector in Galway. The Minister of State knows the huge investment Dexcom has made in Athenry. I would love to see a med tech AI hub in Galway that works with these companies to deliver next-generation technologies that can impact the globe.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I would certainly like to see more investment and I support the call made by the Deputy for having more centres of excellence in the west of Ireland around AI adoption. It is part of the Government's policy for balanced regional development. I know the project in Dexcom, in the Deputy's area, is significant and needs to be supported.

The new AI office will ensure that innovation is very much balanced and that safeguards are put in place. We are very much focused on the digital skills and talent area. We have one of the highest graduate levels in science, technology, engineering and maths, STEM, and we need to capitalise on this in respect of how AI is adopted.

9 o'clock

I take the Deputy's point that early planning is very important for businesses, and that is why we need advice from experts to develop the associated skill set but also the plan for how to adopt the technology, having regard to how important it will be for businesses.

Question No. 145 taken with Written Answers.

Foreign Direct Investment

146. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the measures being taken to improve Ireland's competitiveness in order to attract and retain foreign direct investment, FDI; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45439/26]

149. **Deputy Tom Brabazon** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the action he is taking to increase Ireland's attractiveness as a destination for FDI; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45635/26]

Deputy Tony McCormack: Competitiveness is so important to Ireland as an open market economy. What measures have been taken by the Department to improve Ireland's competitiveness to attract and retain FDI? Will the Minister of State make a statement on it?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I propose to take Questions Nos. 146 and 149 together.

FDI is a key element of our economic strategy, with investments by IDA Ireland client companies consistently generating high-skilled jobs nationwide. The Department works closely with IDA Ireland and other stakeholders to ensure a strong pipeline of FDI into Ireland.

In light of the rapidly evolving global landscape and given the challenging international economic and trading environment, the Government is implementing a whole-of-government response to the challenges Ireland is facing, as set out in the Action Plan for Competitiveness and Productivity. The action plan strengthens Ireland's attractiveness for FDI by improving the business environment through measures on innovation, skills, infrastructure and cost

competitiveness, ensuring Ireland remains a stable, competitive and future-ready location for global investors.

Complementing this approach is IDA Ireland's own strategy, *Adapt Intelligently: A Strategy for Sustainable Growth and Innovation 2025–29*. This strategy identifies clear opportunities for Ireland to win investment in key growth areas such as digitalisation and artificial intelligence, semiconductors, health and sustainability. This strategy reaffirms IDA Ireland's focus on maximising opportunities for existing and new clients to invest in regional locations. Building on the excellent performance over the previous strategy, IDA Ireland is targeting 55% of investments in regional locations over the five years of the current strategy.

Last year the Department launched *Silicon Island: Ireland's National Semiconductor Strategy*, which aims to make Ireland a global leader in semiconductors. The strategy promotes national policies and investments to further stimulate chip design and manufacturing capabilities. Later this year, we will also launch a national life sciences strategy, reflecting the level of importance of this sector to both foreign and domestic companies and the opportunities for its further development.

Investment remains strong. A total of 323 investments were secured by IDA Ireland during 2025, representing a 38% increase on the previous year and the highest number of projects on record secured by the agency. Employment in IDA Ireland client companies increased by 1.5% year on year in 2025 to 312,400. The Government is fully aware of the competitiveness challenges this country faces as we continue to compete for FDI. We are taking the necessary steps to position Ireland for the future and we will continue to place cost, planning, energy and research and development at the centre of forward-looking policymaking.

Competitiveness is a matter for all of Europe. The Government announced last week our Presidency priorities, which are centred on three key areas: competitiveness, values and security. My colleague, the Minister, Deputy Burke, will assume the chair of the EU Competitiveness Council in July and we will have an opportunity then to progress really important files to align with European ambition in this regard.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I welcome the Government's continued focus on competitiveness and attracting investment through IDA Ireland. It is clear that the international trading environment has become more challenging in recent years, with increasing trade barriers and growing competition for investment globally. Given Ireland's reliance on international trade and FDI, will the Minister of State outline the key actions being taken across government to strengthen our competitiveness? In particular, what progress has been made in areas such as infrastructure delivery, skills development and regulatory efficiency, which are increasingly important factors for companies considering Ireland as a location for investment?

As sure as day follows night, and as we see in the economy, after every boom there is a recession. Things are getting tight at the moment. We are no longer in a position of comfort. Companies from other parts of the world will be looking at Ireland from a fiscal point of view, so what is the Minister of State's Department doing to make sure we remain as competitive as possible?

Deputy Albert Dolan: FDI decisions are going to be driven by talent, innovation and, ultimately, infrastructure. When I say infrastructure, I am talking about public transport, housing and everything that goes into the quality of life of the employee because, ultimately, companies are going to locate where the talent wants to be.

In Galway, as I have mentioned previously, we have a significant medtech sector. It is absolutely incredible what has happened there over the past 30 years. That does not just happen. We need to see a continued push to drive more investment into Galway and into our medtech sector. Beside the site where Dexcom Ireland has been developed are additional IDA lands that are prime for development for more jobs for east Galway. That is what I push for here this evening.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputies for their questions. I absolutely agree that competitiveness is not just for today; it is about preparing for the next decade. That is really important. That is why the Government is developing Enterprise 2035, which will be a long-term strategy focused on enterprise growth while also ensuring we have widespread job creation throughout the regions. It will be focused on skills, lifelong learning, innovation, access to finance, digital and green transitions, and building resilience against the uncertainty within our global economy. We have seen from global shocks how exposed we are. We have had the trade and tariff wars. We have had the challenge of supply chain disruption with the Middle East. I contend, in the knowledge that I am speaking to two rural TDs, that we are very much focused on ensuring the Government is investing but that investment benefits every region in the country. That is why over 57% of all new investments were based in regional Ireland. That is not accidental; that is a result of Government policy.

It is also about targeting regional property development and the next-generation sites to ensure they are serviced and brought forward, but also that we have strategic planning from IDA Ireland and that IDA Ireland is considering all the four corners and not just at our main cities and thoroughfares. This is about ensuring the high-value sectors Deputy Dolan talked about and the life sciences and semiconductor sectors, which create high-quality jobs and that anchor within regions, bring considerable employment but also act as a catalyst for indigenous companies to service the big multinationals. That is very important. We need to continue to work across government to make sure that happens.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I welcome the strong performance in attracting investment into Ireland and the commitment to balanced regional development. As we look at the next phase of growth, it is important that counties such as Offaly and the wider midlands continue to benefit from new investment opportunities. Will the Minister provide an update on the measures being taken to support regional locations in competing for future investment? We are grateful in Offaly, particularly in Tullamore, for the investment by IDA Ireland in lands for a new IDA Ireland park. What progress has been made in getting the infrastructure into this park and what progress has been made in strengthening regional enterprise infrastructure, skills provision and site development so areas such as the midlands will be well positioned to secure a greater share of future jobs and investment?

Deputy Albert Dolan: I welcome the Minister of State's mention of the next-generation sites. As he knows, outside Oranmore there is potential for one of the country's most strategic sites.

It was reported in the *Business Post* over a year ago that the Minister, Deputy Burke, was to bring a memo to the Cabinet about potential investment in Galway to upgrade the infrastructure on Mutton Island and wastewater infrastructure, and to provide a new link off the motorway and a new rail stop at the site.

Can I have an update? Where is that currently? Did that memo ever come to Cabinet? Will the Minister be able to provide an update about the prospects of a company selecting that site for a chip fabrication plant or whatever the preferred option is?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I again thank the Deputies for their questions and their support for continued investment in the regions of Offaly and Galway. The Minister is continuing to progress the next generation sites. That is important. He is progressing the west, which is important, initially. I hope we will have an announcement shortly in that regard. It is important that what we announce is serviced. There is a plan to ensure the site can be energised and there is access to utilities, critical services, etc. At Government level, that memo has been brought and approved, but not yet announced.

With regard to regional balance, the action plan for competitive productivity is important for how we continue to deliver the skills and talent within the regions. Offaly has had recent success with Bord na Móna's collaboration with Amazon. It is important to build on tech, data centres and everything that goes with them for job creation. It is also important that the infrastructure and planning continue to evolve to meet the needs of the local regions and areas. There are various strategies that the Government is currently working on and that will be brought forward, such as the new national semiconductor strategy and the new life science strategy. There will also be investment in infrastructure through the national development plan. These are all important competitive measures that will set Ireland apart for future investments in our regions. We are competing globally. There is no denying that it has been a challenging period to attract more international companies here to Ireland. IDA Ireland is doing a great job and the Minister, Deputy Burke, is actively working with the agency on a day-to-day basis.

Departmental Strategies

147. **Deputy Paula Butterly** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment to provide an update on the national tourism food strategy, in regard to timelines and funding which will enhance the tourism sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45619/26]

Deputy Paula Butterly: Will the Minister provide an update on the national tourism strategy, particularly with regard to the timelines and funding that will be required to enhance our food tourism sector?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the Deputy for a very important question relating to tourism, which is our largest indigenous sector. The programme for Government includes a clear commitment to support and expand food and drink tourism, reflecting its importance in shaping visitor experiences. Food and beverage accounts for approximately 34% of all visitor expenditure. A New Era for Irish Tourism, the Government's national tourism policy, focuses on sustainable development of our tourism sector and increasing the regional and seasonal

spread of tourism activity. It includes a commitment to develop a new national culinary strategy to strengthen the quality and reputation of Ireland's food offering. This strategy will build on and complement destination experience development plans that place a strong emphasis on food at a local level. It will support the strengthening and promotion of authentic, sustainable experiences alongside the development of food trails and festivals that drive demand and help sustain over 46,000 tourism-related businesses. These objectives also clearly align with wider Government measures to support competitiveness, which include the reduction in VAT to 9% for food and catering services from next month.

Delivering on these commitments requires strong co-ordination and a clear focus on outcomes. In this context, I established a tourism policy oversight group, which will meet for the first time on 8 July. This group will bring together representation across government, agencies, local authorities and industry stakeholders to oversee, monitor and support the delivery of the 71 policy objectives. This group will be supported by targeted delivery streams, including a dedicated culinary stream, to ensure alignment across national and local government. All the key sectors will provide strategic oversight of the strategy's development and delivery.

Tourism Ireland is implementing a refreshed culinary tourism approach overseas, addressing outdated perceptions of Irish food and showcasing the quality, freshness and diversity of food and drink across the island as a key driver of destination choice, particularly among European visitors.

Deputy Paula Butterly: It is great that 34% of tourism funding is directed towards food and drink, but that also highlights the scope we have to develop it even further. As a result, I welcome this strategy. However, a strategy is only as good as its implementation. As the Minister saw last Monday when he came to launch the Louth tourism strategy, we in County Louth have so much to offer. People can have oysters in Carlingford. They can go to The Glyde Inn in Annagassan and have all the fish delicacies we have to offer in County Louth. The best fish and chips are up in Clogherhead, while the best steak is over at the Monasterboice Inn, formerly known as Donegan's. We have all of that. We need to build the food strategy, along with the culture and heritage of the county, as do many towns and villages across the country at a regional level. How will the Minister develop that in practical terms?

Deputy Peter Burke: Critically, as the Deputy pointed out, the Louth strategy for tourism up to 2031 has key performance indicators, KPIs, to measure exactly the performance and ensure our objectives are realised. I took the view in our tourism plan that if it cannot be measured, it cannot be managed. That is why we have 71 objectives with clear KPIs attached to each. That is why Tourism Ireland has approximately €71 million for 2026 for marketing, and the culinary industry is key to that. We will develop our culinary strategy over this year. It will have a job of work in advancing the proposition that so many of our businesses have.

As the Deputy rightly pointed out, there is a vineyard in Louth. There are oysters. There is an incredible offering from the distillery. There are so many attractions to bring people to County Louth. It will be front and centre and will absorb huge resources. We will put in €400 million over the next five years. The culinary industry is unique, genuine and authentic food production that will put us in a good space to attract visitors.

Deputy Paula Butterly: The Minister is exactly right. We have food and drink of the highest quality produced at a local level by great producers in County Louth. The core element to producing this food and drink is our farmers. Our farmers are struggling at the moment, particularly those in the tillage sector. I call on the Minister to co-ordinate and co-operate with the Minister for agriculture to ensure that from beginning to end, the chain is able to sustain a long-term food tourism strategy in County Louth and across the country. Without a good, strong agricultural sector, we will not be in a position to continue to produce the high-quality food and drink that we can offer tourists in Ireland. They then go home to America, France, Italy, Japan or South Africa and talk about the wonders of Irish food and drink. As a result, we have a strong export sector.

Deputy Peter Burke: I could not agree more with the Deputy and the proposals she is bringing forward. I look forward to working with her to grow our tourism sector. I particularly look forward to working with our businesses. There are 46,000 businesses across the country that provide a genuine, authentic céad míle fáilte. We will come forward in September or October with a number of supports, capital grants, for attractions and businesses to help them with digitalisation to ensure they can grasp the opportunity that is ahead. Many of our visitors now use generative AI to plan out their itineraries, book and research online.

I am working closely with the Minister for agriculture, Deputy Heydon, to ensure that farmers are supported. Right now, for every 200 litre fill of diesel, farmers get €55 to support them in the production of food. That is reducing the price of groceries on tables and reducing the cost of production, critically, for businesses. In budget 2027, we will provide further supports. We had the national economic dialogue, which included a breakout session on agriculture, as well as one on tourism, to discuss the challenges for all the sectoral interests.

Export Controls

148. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the reason his Department sanctioned the export of €20 million worth of dual-use technology to the Israel Defense Forces, IDF, and Israeli Ministry of Defense in 2024; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45653/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: There may have been other questions earlier on this topic. I am looking forward to hearing the Minister's answer. It is difficult to comprehend how during a genocide, licences were approved, in particular for 2024, for dual-use goods for which the end user was the IDF and the department of defence in Israel. The value was €20 million. It is quite extraordinary. It is difficult to understand how such applications could have been approved in the context of such appalling crimes against humanity.

They should not have been approved. I welcome that has now stopped, but we need answers about why they were approved.

Deputy Peter Burke: First, there is no policy change in this area. My Department's responsibilities centre around the control of exports of dual-use and military items under EU and national legislation. Controls on the export of dual-use items are administered by my Department in accordance with EU Regulation 2021/821 of the European Parliament and the

Council setting up an EU regime for the control of exports, brokering, technical assistance, transit and transfer of dual-use items. The bulk of dual-use exports from Ireland, including those to end users in Israel, are mainstream business ICT products, both hardware and software. They are categorised as dual-use items as a consequence of the fact that they incorporate strong encryption for ICT security purposes. The primary purpose of export controls is not to block trade or exports, but to enable the free movement of legitimate goods, while ensuring that certain sensitive categories are subject to appropriate regulation.

All export licence applications are considered by my officials in accordance with criteria set out in the relevant dual-use and military EU and national regulations and Ireland's international obligations and responsibilities as members of non-proliferation regimes and export control arrangements. Each application is assessed individually by considering the nature of the items, the destination country, the identity of the end user and the intended use. Ireland's decisions are guided by the EU position and its eight criteria, which include respect for human rights, international obligations, regional stability and risk of diversion to another end user or end use.

The risk profile of an application is impacted by current geopolitical factors, the end user, the items in question and their ability to be misused. This risk profile can change on a case-by-case basis. If an application is deemed high risk and the exporter is unable to provide strong assurances to mitigate the risks identified, the application will be denied. As each application is treated on a case-by case basis, the available verifiable information at the time and associated risk assessments can change from application to application.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Minister said there is no change in policy. I find that hard to gather when for five years in a row licences were approved for significant sums of money and in the past two years, they have not been. I welcome that. The Minister said there has not been a policy change. I would say there has been and I welcome it. It is the right thing to do.

However, drilling into what the Minister said, the policy of the EU broadly speaking - appropriately - is that goods primarily used for civilian uses that could potentially be used for military uses, require a double check. They come back to the relevant agency in the state. That state then decides whether it is appropriate and whether the state is confident the end user will be civilian and will use it for a civilian purpose or for a military purpose. The end user here was the Israel Defense Forces, IDF, and the Israel Ministry of Defense in the context of tens of thousands of people, including tens of thousands of children, being killed. The Department was asked to sign off on this licence and it did. It did so three times to a value of €20 million in 2024. Why did it do so?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: It had all the information, unless the Minister can tell me otherwise and the Department did not have the information that it would end up in that place.

Deputy Peter Burke: As I said, there has been no policy change. The law is clear in the Control of Exports Act 2023, as set out by these Houses of which the Deputy is a Member, and

in our European obligations under the framework and the eight criteria that have been established.

Ireland has been firm and strong in recognising the State of Palestine. We have supported the people of Gaza through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, UNRWA, the competent authority which provides aid. We strongly supported it when Commissioner Várhelyi tried to unilaterally withdraw key supports to vulnerable citizens. We joined the ICJ case with South Africa and have called out the genocide in Gaza. That is where we are clear. It is all about where the end user is and what the purpose is.

There has been no significant increase or decrease in applications being denied. The number of applications went down. That is not a change in policy by the Department. We do not control who comes to the Department seeking a licence. When the number of applications goes down, the value goes down. I assure the House there has been no change in policy whatsoever and no review has taken place either.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: There has to be a review. We are talking about millions of euro worth of goods ending up in the hands of the IDF and the Ministry of Defense in Israel, while they kill tens of thousands of civilians. There should be a review. There absolutely should.

The Minister has talked around it. The Government has done things in relation to Palestine that we have welcomed and other things that did not go far enough compared with other European countries. The standard in Europe is undoubtedly low and Ireland is perhaps above that but looking beyond that internationally, it is not anything to shout about.

However, the fundamental point, which the Minister has not answered, is that the Department was given the opportunity to refuse those licences. These landed in the Department. The framework the European Union created ensures the decision comes back to the Department, which makes a determination about whether there is a risk of the goods ending up in military situations beyond civilian use. The Department seems to have been satisfied there was no problem. Surely, it would have had information about where it was going to end up.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach Deputy Sorca Clarke: Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Why was it signed off? That is the key question, which the Minister has not answered.

Deputy Peter Burke: Very clearly, it is because it is in compliance with the law and with the criteria set down by the EU. We do not assess applications on the basis of made-up criteria. The criteria are grounded in the EU framework, which has eight clear measures, and the Control of Exports Act set down by this House in 2023. As I said in my substantive response, we have to satisfy ourselves that the end user will not bring any unintended consequences and that citizens are not being harmed by its actions. That is what we have to do. The criteria are clear. The robust procedures we have in the Department for doing that are crystal clear.

Ireland has been at the forefront of the European Union in standing with the people of Gaza, in calling for the EU-Israel Association Agreement to be suspended - we were at the forefront of doing that - and supporting the people of Gaza financially. No country has called out as much as Ireland has and the Palestinian Authority recognises that clearly in all our meetings with it.

Question No. 149 taken with Question No. 146.

Artificial Intelligence

150. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment to provide an update on assessments being carried out by his Department on the impact of AI on graduate-level and entry-level employment with emerging data of reduced hiring in certain sectors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45645/26]

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: AI is not simply about technological change. It is about whether Ireland continues to offer a fair and functioning pathway from education to employment or whether AI will risk closing the door on the next generation before it even gets a chance to start. Will the Minister outline what his Department's latest assessments show about AI impacts on employment, in particular on graduate and entry-level jobs?

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank Deputy Moynihan for his question. My Department is continually monitoring the labour market and the impact of artificial intelligence. We have a number of relevant pieces of research I can cite, including research from the expert group on future skills needs published last year, *How AI is transforming the Irish Labour Market*. This work highlights the speed at which Ireland is moving in relation to AI, noting the strong demand for AI jobs but also the robust supply pipeline in relation to AI. Ireland has a track record of producing very skilled workers and this is also happening with AI, as work in my Department has shown. Ireland has seen a doubling in AI jobs and usage since 2023. While this is a fast-changing field, it shows the inherent dynamism and resilience of the Irish labour market. This work is currently being updated, which is important given the fluid situation that exists.

Furthermore, work published in conjunction with the Department of Finance highlights that the labour market here is highly exposed to AI, given the composition of employment, specifically in relation to ICT, financial and professional services. The work also noted that AI may already be affecting employment patterns, with sectors more exposed to AI, such as ICT and financial services, recording significantly weaker employment growth in recent years.

In terms of graduate or entry-level jobs, we are monitoring developments closely and working closely with the Department of Finance. Its latest annual progress report from April 2026 is informative in this regard. It notes that employment growth among 15- to 29-year-olds in sectors at risk to AI declined by 2.5% between 2023 and 2025, despite overall employment increasing. This was particularly pronounced in the ICT sector.

More broadly in respect of the labour market, activity levels remain strong, despite a difficult international environment. The latest figures from the Central Statistics Office show that employment growth was effectively flat in quarter 1 of 2026. However, the overall employment levels remains exceptionally high at 2.8 million people.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: The data suggests it is not a collapse in opportunities, but more a fundamental restructuring of how graduates enter the workforce. Research indicates that almost half of employers are reducing their entry-level roles, directly linked to AI adoption, and 83% of recruiters say that hiring is now more selective and strategic. While almost 40% of employers increased recruitment earlier this year, that growth was concentrated in specialist roles.

Even in sectors like IT and telecommunications, where 56% of employers are increasing hiring, those roles are increasingly focused on experienced and highly specialised candidates and over a quarter of firms are recruiting specifically in AI and machine learning. The challenge is clear. The opportunities are not disappearing but the channel into them is narrowing. Will the Minister set out what targeted interventions are being developed to ensure graduates and entry-level workers are not choked out of the labour market as that transition accelerates?

Deputy Peter Burke: We are working very closely with all our skills partners and enterprise agencies to ensure training is being delivered in the key sectors that are at risk, namely, graduates, as well as particular cohorts of the employment market like ICT, professional services and legal and financial services. We have a huge amount of skills upgrading to do in those areas. Take the IDA for example. We set out an ambition to train 40,000 people over the four-year strategy and in year one we have hit 33,000. That demonstrates the capacity and training we are doing. There is also a huge amount of opportunity. It is not a period of decline for the labour market but a period of transition in which old functions will change and new opportunities will emerge. Take, for example, our high-performance growth unit in Enterprise Ireland. Of 196 new businesses this year, half of them are grounded in AI. That shows the opportunity there. We are working with the expert group on future skills. Our new national skills observatory, which will be profiling and matching the skills and work our skills partners will be doing, has been established. We will have our AI office up and running from 1 August and it will be building capacity and ensuring our citizens are fully trained to grasp the opportunities that are presented.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: Ireland has strong growth in AI and high demand for skills but those entry-level roles are reducing and graduates are going to struggle to gain the experience required in that growth and to be ready to take part in that growth. A whole cohort of new graduates finished their exams a few weeks ago and are waiting on results and preparing to enter the labour market. Ireland's economy, as the Minister says, is especially exposed to AI with about 63% of employment estimated to be affected to some degree or another. That reflects our concentration in knowledge-intensive sectors. It makes Ireland both a leader in AI adoption but also very exposed to labour market disruption. Employers are increasingly optimising for productivity and they are doing that by hiring experienced workers. That is going to threaten the pipeline of future talent. What targeted interventions are being considered to sustain graduates with clear pathways? These could be internships or incentives for entry-level hiring. Crucially, how is the Government going to ensure Ireland's AI success does not come at the expense of opportunities for younger people?

Deputy Peter Burke: We have updated our digital and AI strategy, which has 80 deliverables, while working right across our skill partners to ensure our citizens are getting that transformational training that makes those jobs sticky. We also have done a huge amount of work on establishing our national skills observatory with the Minister, Deputy Lawless, and his Department of further and higher education to profile those skills and to ensure we are having the output from our tertiary education partners that really reflects a changing labour force. It is going to be a big challenge for someone who started a course in third level two or three years ago as the labour market has changed significantly, particularly at entry level. We have a huge amount of training and skills profiling in relation to that. I mentioned what our colleagues in the IDA are doing in making a database of 300,000 employees and making those jobs more sticky and targeting them before they come under pressure. The key thing we are trying to do is predict the cohorts that are under pressure and get that training in, get in with our employers and offer them the training so employees can benefit from it and ultimately secure the jobs rather than leaving them exposed to artificial intelligence.

Small and Medium Enterprises

151. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment the way in which the SME test is helping small businesses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45641/26]

Deputy Tony McCormack: Last year we brought in the SME test. It is a great way of checking all legislation before it comes in to see how it will affect SMEs. In what ways does the Minister think the test has helped small businesses in that time?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputy very much for the question. The SME test encourages policymakers across Government to apply the principle of thinking small first, to consider the impact any measures may have on SMEs and to mitigate any impacts where possible. This approach helps small businesses by ensuring new policies are designed in a way that supports SMEs and reduces unnecessary burdens on them.

In May 2024, the Government committed to ensuring an enhanced SME test would be applied to all major new measures. In October 2024 the Government formally approved the enhanced SME test and guidelines. Under the current programme for Government we have committed to rigorously implementing the SME test to scrutinise every piece of legislation and regulation for its impact on SMEs. In addition, the Action Plan on Competitiveness and Productivity commits that all Departments will apply the SME test to all measures and in particular to policy initiatives where it is proposed to increase costs on small business and include the SME test in the Government handbook.

As for impact, we are seeing a growing and more consistent use of the SME test. In 2025, 33 SME tests were applied by ten Departments. This compares with 26 SME tests applied by eight Departments in 2024. The year-on-year growth of almost 27% in the number of tests applied in 2025 is a good indication the enhancements, implementation groups and Government commitments are having an impact. The SME test is influencing outcomes and helping small businesses in a practical way. For example, in the development of additional powers for the Agri-Food Regulator, engagement identified a potential burden on smaller firms,

thereby resulting in small businesses with up to 50 full-time equivalent staff being excluded from the scope of the legislation. In our Department, its application to the employment permits Bill identified options to mitigate impacts on SMEs.

Deputy Tony McCormack: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. The principle, as he said, behind the SME test is to think small first to reduce unnecessary administrative burdens on businesses. However, many small business owners would say they are still spending too much time dealing with paperwork and compliance requirements rather than running their businesses. For example, a constituent who operates a petrol station informed me he requires 14 separate licences, permits and registrations to operate his business. While each requirement may have a valid purpose, the cumulative burden can be significant. A lot of these requirements were there before we brought in the SME test but what can the Minister of State and his colleagues do to reduce this burden going forward? Will he outline specific examples where the SME test has resulted in reduced reporting obligations, streamlined processes or simplified compliance requirements for small businesses?

Deputy Alan Dillon: I again thank the Deputy. The Minister, Deputy Burke, and I are looking at how we streamline the application processes for a lot of businesses and SMEs that take the opportunity to apply for grants. We have undertaken a simplification process to do with the LEOs. We are also looking at more systemic reform within the LEOs to make them more accessible to small businesses across the 31 local authorities. We will ensure that we engage with businesses to make sure their feedback feeds in to the enhancement process. That is really important. Overall, the SME test and the consistency of its application is really important. The Minister, Deputy Burke, has been very vocal in ensuring it is in the Cabinet handbook that all Departments that are bringing memos to Government on new legislation or initiatives undertake the SME test to look at any untoward cost impact on businesses. It has been effective in its implementation so far.

Deputy Tony McCormack: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. Another key objective of the SME test is to identify circumstances where exemption thresholds or more proportionate requirements may be appropriate for smaller businesses. Can the Minister of State provide examples where the SME test has resulted in exemptions or thresholds being introduced for smaller businesses? Furthermore, does he believe there is scope to expand the use of such measures in future, especially where the cost of compliance falls disproportionately on small businesses with limited staff and resources?

Deputy Alan Dillon: As I said in my earlier contribution we have seen real, practical outcomes in regard to its implementation, such as with the Agri-Food Regulator legislation. SMEs employing fewer than 50 staff were excluded from the initial analysis in the employment permit system. Processes were simplified and digitalised and fees were made more flexible. As for regulatory thresholds, we have looked at turnover limits, which were introduced to protect small businesses from compliance costs. These are really practical and meaningful changes that directly benefit small businesses.

Through the enhanced framework, every memorandum for Government must include a completed SME test or explicitly explain why one is not required. That is a fundamental shift in how we protect small businesses from undue cost burdens and regulatory impact.

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Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 39 and the name of the Member in each case:

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss Kilmurry National School's SNA allocation and the summer programme.

Deputy Pat Buckley - To discuss an application for an interim ancillary grant by Ballygiblin National School, Mitchelstown.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin - To discuss wheelchair access on Irish Rail and Bus Éireann services.

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

Deputy Barry Heneghan - To discuss the proposed relocation of Harmonstown An Post sorting office.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the development of Bunclody Community College, County Wexford.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss the introduction of financial literacy to the school curriculum.

Deputy Michael Murphy - To discuss the ongoing failure to recruit a consultant ophthalmologist in south Tipperary.

Deputy Joanna Byrne - To discuss the need for the Drogheda north train station.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss the proposed reforms to the criminal legal aid system.

Deputy Paul Murphy - To discuss the decision of South Dublin County Council to increase council, HAP and homeless HAP rents from July.

Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss delays in reimbursement under the cross-border healthcare directive.

Deputies Máire Devine, Aengus Ó Snodaigh - To discuss matters relating to Kilmainham Gaol.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan - To discuss funding for the roll-out of BusConnects in Limerick city.

Deputy John Connolly - To discuss the urgent need for a speech and language class in Connemara.

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss the need for adult day service placement, respite and outreach for adults transitioning from schools to adult services in Kerry.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss progress of the Cork southern distributor link multimodal route.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss appropriate school places for children with challenging needs in County Louth.

The matters raised by Deputies Connolly, Dolan, Daly, Devine and Ó Snodaigh, and Byrne have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Special Educational Needs

Deputy John Connolly: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Richmond, for being here to take this Topical Issue. It is one of particular importance to the people of my constituency, particularly young families in the west part of the constituency, Connemara. I will elaborate on that as I go on.

One has to recognise in raising this topic the significant investment and expansion in the provision of classes for children with additional needs, this year in particular, but also in the previous academic year - since this Government came into office. It is one thing in the work of this Government we can reflect on with great pride. There have been in the region of 1,000 additional classes for children with additional needs in our mainstream schools since the Government came into office; that is 1,000 additional teachers and potentially 2,000 extra special needs assistants in the system, allowing children with additional needs to attend their local mainstream national school with their peers, as it should be. The Taoiseach said at the outset of this Government that he wanted to provide a step change in the provision of education and services for children and for people with additional needs.

The other great measure the Government has taken is in the area of providing therapeutic intervention in special schools, that is, providing special schools with speech and language therapists and occupational therapists. Hopefully, we will see that expanded to the mainstream setting in years to come. For now, unfortunately, that provision is not there, particularly in the area of speech and language. When reflecting on the additional classes provided this year, it would have to be said that we are meeting a significant demand for children with autism. However, in the list of over 500 classes that we provided this year - and I could be wrong - there is one class for children with delayed language disorder. Fortunately enough, it happens to be in my hometown and in my constituency. I know the school involved well. The school management are very appreciative of the effort and have already filled that class.

Connemara is in the west of my constituency. It is a significant geographic area. Even if going beyond the county border into west Mayo, there is no class for children with delayed language disorder. That is something we need to look at. A report from 2021 outlined that

across the country there were in the region of 60 classes for children with delayed language disorder. They are dispersed and a significant number of them are in urban areas. We need to look beyond that to provision of classes elsewhere.

I have a unique request. My interest has been instigated by a family from west Connemara who came to see me. It is not practical for them to bring a child into Galway city to attend the delayed language disorder class. The Department of Education and Youth needs to look at the area between Moycullen and Clifden to see whether it can find a school where it can provide a class for children with delayed language disorder.

I have another request, which cannot be neglected either. In south Connemara, which is the Connemara Gaeltacht, Irish is the first language of the community. Delayed language disorder affects children irrespective of the language they speak. I have also been petitioned by parents in south Connemara. They are seeking a class for their children with additional need in the area of language disorder.

I appreciate the Minister of State being here. I acknowledge the great investment and expansion the Government is doing in the area of education of children with additional needs but I ask that this request get a fair hearing in the Department.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I am very grateful to the Deputy for raising this issue. I awkwardly have my back to him but we will do our best with the dynamics of the Chamber. I am taking this on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan.

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

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

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

There are four schools dedicated to supporting students with specific learning disability, SLD. There are also fourteen SLD classes in eleven mainstream primary schools located across

the country, in counties Dublin, Clare, Louth, Galway, Kerry and Wexford. These settings have a student-teacher ratio of 1:9 and are normally attended by students aged between eight and 12 years old for a maximum of two years. Students will have a diagnosis of dyslexia and score at the second percentile or lower on literacy standardised tests. They will also have an average or above average level of intelligence.

In May 2021, the inspectorate was requested by the Department of education's special education section to evaluate provision in special classes for children and young people with an SLD, as referred to by the Deputy. The purpose of the evaluations was to examine the quality of provision for children and young people with an SLD, with particular reference to understanding the placement of children and young people in these classes and to identifying the strengths and areas for improvement in learning and teaching in these classes. The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, has discussed this issue with the inspectorate, and will be engaging with it further, as well as with officials in the Department and with several organisations and advocacy groups.

The Deputy has raised the cases of just two families but I have no doubt there is an abundance in all our constituencies, particularly in his constituency of Galway West. The Minister of State stands ready to take a deputation meeting, if required. I encourage the Deputy to pursue that where possible.

Deputy John Connolly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit. I welcome the Minister of State's final comments. I would welcome very much that we would provide the opportunity for the families who are making this very genuine case. He is correct. I have met two families in these circumstances but no doubt there are many more who would benefit from the provision of a class for children who have a challenge with speech and language.

I noted in my previous contribution the distance parents will travel to meet the needs of their children. In this review done by the Department's inspectorate in 2021, it was found children travelled up to 45 km to attend a class for children with additional needs. It is difficult for them to maintain contact with their local school during placement. Placement would be generally for two academic years. For a child in national school between the ages of five and 11 or 12, a journey of 45 km every day from Monday to Friday is arduous. They should be able to access adequate education provision much closer to home. I understand we cannot, unfortunately, have such a class in each mainstream school but we need to look at the map and at where in the country there are gaps in the provision of such classes. Can the class be placed appropriately in an area that makes it difficult for nobody and where everybody has a suitable opportunity to attend?

The other crucial aspect, and we all know this because the data and the study from the inspectorate show this, is the importance of early intervention and how the outcomes can be enhanced by earlier intervention. This review, undertaken by the Department's inspectorate, highlights that many of the children attending have very positive outcomes and find they can in many instances overcome the language delay.

I appreciate the answer. I particularly appreciate the opportunity to bring a delegation to meet the Minister and I certainly will take him up on that.

Deputy Neale Richmond: It is important to remember that the vast majority of students with special educational needs are supported to attend school in mainstream classes with their peers. This goes to the crucial point raised eloquently by the Deputy about the hardships that a long commute would put on certain families, especially in a constituency such as his own or that of the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, Deputy Ó Murchú, or Deputy Daly, with such vast spaces. The notion of having to travel up to 45 km may be not something I or Deputy Devine would know in our constituencies but it is certainly something that would have a colossal impact and requires a level of attention. Central to providing that care and education, as I stated, are not only the 15,000 special education teachers but also, crucially, the 12,500 special need assistants. That is, obviously, always the optimum and the ideal, but there are always situations where children will need to go to specialist classes, even if it is not for the full duration of the two years.

I am extremely grateful to the Deputy for raising this. The Minister of State, Deputy Moynihan, stands ready to engage with him further on the point.

Educational Reform

Deputy Albert Dolan: This is something that I am very passionate about. It is something that affects us all. It is about financial literacy: understanding how a mortgage works, understanding how contributions to a pension can compound, understanding how people can better manage their own financial situations individually and, ultimately, understanding how people can make the best possible lives for themselves. That comes back to financial literacy and financial awareness.

In secondary school, there are courses on accounting, which teaches you the specifics and the technicalities of accounting - your debits and credits. There is economics that teaches you how an economy functions, and there is macroeconomics and microeconomics. There is also business studies, that looks at marketing, HR, European affairs and all such matters. However, the key is that there is no real personal financial education in our schooling system. Nobody is teaching young people: how to go about applying for a mortgage, what the qualifying criteria are, how you ensure you are maximising the potential of your pension, and how you ensure you are working towards an initiative for the future that will be beneficial to both yourself and your family into the future. Essentially, I am calling for consideration of an element of financial literacy to be brought into our education system. I do not know any education system where it has been brought in but there are so many people online who claim to be financial experts or who portray financial advice and they might not necessarily have the credentials or qualifications. I am not saying teachers should do a qualification to be financial adviser or become an expert in insurance products, rather question whether we as a society would not benefit significantly more financially if everyone had a base level of financial literacy. I see it across my constituency clinics and in dealings I have with people, that sometimes people do not understand how the system functions, how banking works, how they can best protect themselves in the event of something going wrong or how they can plan for a future.

I welcome the proposal to bring in the State saving scheme. That will be a huge opportunity but, like that, it is an investment and people need to know what are they investing in. From the start of this year, there are now thousands of people in auto-enrolment. Those are people who were not already in a pension, who were working hard and earning money but who were not

contributing to their future retirement and now they are auto-enrolled into a pension. You would have to ask if they know what they are a part of. Do they know the potential of it? There are probably pamphlets and leaflets and everything online to explain it, but that education needs to come from the ground up. It was Warren Buffett and Albert Einstein who said the eighth wonder of the world was compound interest, because the power of it is significant. I believe that if financial literacy were in our schools, it would greatly help our young people as they go throughout life in managing their personal financial situations.

Money is still a taboo topic in Irish society and people do not want to talk about their money situations. It would greatly benefit our country going forward for everyone to have a base level understanding of financial literacy.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am genuinely grateful to Deputy Dolan for raising this. It is even fortuitous that I get to give the response, albeit on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Naughton. The response I have been given is a constructive one, and while I will give it, I might add to it.

It is clear to the Department of education that financial literacy and opportunities to develop it are embedded throughout the Irish school curriculum from primary to junior cycle and into senior cycle. This commitment is reflected in the National Financial Literacy Strategy 2025-2029, as well as in Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033, which emphasise the importance of supporting financial literacy across all stages of learning.

At primary level, the primary curriculum framework of 2023 identifies seven key competencies, including being mathematical, which encourages children to apply mathematical thinking in real-world situations such as those the Deputy referred to. The redeveloped primary mathematics curriculum of 2023 strengthens this further by including money as a stand-alone strand unit. This allows children to gradually build their understanding of money, its value, its uses and how to work confidently with notes and coins in meaningful contexts. I was doing this with my own six-year-old just the other night, although I do not know if she will be using notes and coins in the way that I was when getting pocket money. However, that is a different story.

In the junior cycle, financial literacy is explicitly highlighted in statement of learning 14 of the framework for junior cycle, which focuses on students making informed financial decisions and developing strong consumer skills. The eight key skills of junior cycle, including being numerate, being literate, setting personal goals and making considered decisions, also contribute directly to financial literacy. Subjects, including mathematics, business studies, home economics as well as the ones mentioned by the Deputy, and the level 1 and level 2 learning programmes for students with general learning disabilities, provide structured opportunities for students to deepen their financial knowledge and skills.

The redeveloped senior cycle, places a strong emphasis on key student competencies, including those linked to financial literacy. A transition year micro-module on financial literacy, developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA, supports students in exploring their financial habits and understanding the importance of being financially informed.

Within leaving certificate subjects, financial literacy continues to be strengthened. The revised leaving certificate business specification helps students understand how business connects to their own lives while building financial and business literacy. The draft specification for leaving certificate home economics includes family resource management, where students learn about consumer empowerment, decision-making and managing household finances. The redevelopment of the mathematics and accounting specifications will further enhance students' numeracy and financial literacy skills.

The new specification for life, community and work, formerly the leaving certificate vocational programme, LCVP, supports students in preparing for life beyond school. Through its two modules, me and my future and community and work, students learn how to make informed decisions as they plan for their future pathways.

Beyond the formal curriculum, informal education also plays a significant role in developing students' financial literacy. The Department continues to work closely with a range of Departments, agencies and partners to support this work. Initiatives, such as maths week, money week, our money, our future and opportunities for students to connect with financial services providers in classroom learning help students build confidence in managing financial responsibilities both inside and outside school.

I have rushed through that because I want to use my remaining time to focus on one aspect that is not directly used but one we might be able to lean into and one I would have had great experience of as Minister of State in the Department of Finance when working with the credit union movement, which is the heartbeat and the most trusted brand of so many communities. This is something that needs to be taken on a cross-departmental basis, and not only the Departments of education and finance, which is looking at the credit unions, in particular, as anchors. So many of the credit unions are active at transition year in secondary schools. It is they who are talking about saving for college, what sort of money might be needed for tools for an apprenticeship and those sorts of practical things. However, as we all know, not every credit union has the resources to do that, not every school has a transition year and not every school with a transition year has that relationship with a credit union.

10 o'clock

An informal pilot scheme is ongoing that addresses a lot of the issues the Deputy has raised. My question to him, which would also be asked by the Minister, Deputy Naughton, the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, and probably the Tánaiste as well, is how we can mainstream that quasi-pilot scheme to address the very important issues we face.

Deputy Albert Dolan: I really appreciate the Minister of State's engagement on this issue. I welcome the response from the Minister, Deputy Naughton, and the financial literacy framework and directive that are in place. I know about that because I experienced it when I was in secondary school. I was really interested in commerce, economics and accounting and I went on to study accounting. I took those three subjects and did not do any science subjects. I was exposed to all those different elements and received a well-rounded learning in them. However, students who do not choose those subjects might only get exposed to those lessons in higher level mathematics if they do compound interest or the repayment calculation for their leaving certificate.

There is a focus on money in secondary school but it is very fragmented. We need a whole-of-life approach to how this is taught to young people for the benefit of their future. I could not agree more regarding credit unions. The role they can play is absolutely transformative in educating young people on how saving can benefit them in the future, whether for college, learning a trade, as mentioned, or otherwise. It is really important to educate students on how money functions specifically in an Irish context, including how different Government schemes and grant opportunities function. That aspect of the functioning of money can be very effective in terms of its impact on people's personal lives. This is an area where there is more work to be done. It is also about bringing all the elements together in one holistic approach to educating people about financial literacy and making them aware of how to manage their money and how they can take control of their own circumstances. As I said, there are a lot of people in the autumn enrolment who might not fully understand how money functions and how having knowledge of it will benefit them in the future.

Deputy Neale Richmond: The Minister, Deputy Naughton, would like me to reaffirm very strongly that financial literacy is present throughout the school curriculum. I say that while also taking the Deputy's point about how we can look to bring the different aspects together in a more tangible and practical manner. There is the question of whether that should be done through a stand-alone subject of financial literacy or a stand-alone stream within the CSPE subject, for example, that is taken by all students in the junior cycle. How do we bring it into the national school curriculum without overburdening teachers while also making sure it is accessible? There is an element of it already there, largely through the mathematics provision. It is a question of how to bring all of it together in terms of preparing students for the general life cycle and providing the life skills with which we would like to equip our young people to make decisions for themselves.

Unfortunately, there is a very paternalistic attitude in this State that when students go through school, they should look to their parents for these types of supports, including when they are making financial decisions in relation to a SUSI grant, a loan for college or to get a car to do an apprenticeship. That is not the situation for everyone. Not everybody in school has a mum and dad. Not every student has a mum, dad or guardian who is able to contribute in that way. How can the State play a proactive and benevolent role at that basic level? There are countless examples of people who find themselves at 17, 18 or 19 years of age having to make very real decisions based on a very structured formal education situation in a way that the Deputy highlights as a real concern.

There is a job of work to do both within the curriculum of existing subjects, acknowledging there is a lot of good stuff there on financial literacy, and seeing how that can be complemented to ensure it is accessible for everyone, whether they are studying the subjects laid out by the Deputy, doing the leaving certificate applied or will not stay in formal education after the age of 16. What we have is good, and we should not lose sight of that, but it absolutely needs to be complemented. The Deputy's suggestion could be the basis for feeding into an overall review as opposed to a specific measure.

Disability Services

Deputy Pa Daly: I am grateful to the Ceann Comhairle's office for the opportunity to raise this issue at short notice. Most Deputies have received correspondence from the Before We Die campaign. There is a notable lack of planning for the situation of adults requiring residential care as their parents approach their later years. There is huge stress, anxiety and worry for those parents as to what will happen to their children. There seems to be a huge lack of planning. We have moved away from decongregated settings but it seems there has to date been a lack of communication and planning between the various agencies, including the HSE and local authorities. I hope that will change.

I recently received correspondence from a couple who live in County Kerry asking for help with their son, who is 18 years old and will be leaving school in two weeks' time. He has autism and an intellectual disability and he has been treated very well at his school. However, two weeks from his finishing education, there is no confirmed adult day service for him. This boy has a PPSN and services have been aware of him for the past 18 years. It has been a cause of huge upset for his parents that there does not seem to be any pathway or plan for their son. I am hoping that will change.

However, I am not here to discuss his individual case but, rather, the options available in County Kerry. I remember meeting a group of parents when Áras na Féile was closed by HIQA. There were no respite services then available in the north of the county. In the south of the county, in Cahersiveen, there are weekend respite services for adults with an intellectual disability but they are only available on 34 weekends of the year. The facility is there but the funding has not been provided to make it available any more frequently than that. When children with intellectual disabilities become adults, they need a daytime service, confirmation of placement and, as much as anyone else, they need opportunities for social interaction and community participation.

I ask that a plan be put in place for day service placements, interim supports, outreach services and an increase in approved respite facilities. More funding is required for all of that, as well as more accountability and transparency in respect of the transition of children to adult services. One parent told me there are very good facilities provided by the Kerry Parents and Friends Association and St. John of God, which provide a busy day structure. A lot of parents feel isolated and experience a huge struggle to access services, whether respite or housing. Housing should be provided by every local authority. Adults should have a place where they can go, backed up by services, and where their parents can be confident they will be looked after, rather than having to wait until the parents pass away. The elements of the overall scheme seem to be very unconnected to each other. I am calling for more adult day service placements, respite and outreach.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am very grateful to the Deputy for raising this important issue, which I am responding to on behalf of the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins. Day services are a vital support for adults with disabilities to participate in the life of their community and to realise their own ambitions and desires. The majority of young people due to leave school in a given year who require a HSE-funded day service have been profiled by the end of the previous year to establish their support needs. Once needs are identified, referrals are made to the service provider of choice, funding is committed and negotiations are concluded with providers by the end of May to confirm placements to young people and their families. In many instances, young people due to leave school at the end of June are introduced to their day

services for trialling purposes during April, May and June to ensure a natural transition into day services in September.

To support a young person's transition into adulthood, the HSE day opportunities team will work with the school, HSE services such as the children's disability network teams, CDNTs, the parent and the young person to explore options based on needs and the person's preferences. Once he or she reaches 18 years of age, the young person will transition into adult services. Discussions about this transition, including future living, activities and support needs, will often begin well in advance, in line with the goal setting for their individual family support plan, IFSP, as the focus shifts to preparing the young person for adulthood and accessing relevant adult services. The focus is on individualised planning and considering the young person's needs, preferences and goals for the future.

I will very briefly go through some of the budgetary matters because it is important, but I am not going to dwell on them because I realise we are talking about individuals and people here, not numbers. As the Deputy is aware, budget 2026 provides funding for an additional 1,400 placements for a new cohort of school leavers from September 2026, as well as supporting the costs of those that started in September 2025. For the first time, budget 2026 also provides funding for new day service placements for the order of 50 older adults, providing support and choice for people later in life as their circumstances and wishes change. This might include, for example, people who acquire a disability later in life. Budget 2026 provides €25 million in new development funding for respite services, which has afforded the HSE the opportunity to plan for the expansion of services.

The HSE national service plan 2026 targets the delivery of 10,000 additional respite overnight sessions and 25,000 additional respite day sessions this year. There will be particular focus on strengthening provision in areas that currently have a lower level of supports. The HSE anticipates that in the region of 500 more children and adults with a disability will receive respite sessions, both centre-based and alternative, within their community in 2026. Summer respite initiatives will also be supported, providing a diverse, flexible and person-centred and meaningful respite approach for individuals, children, families and carers throughout the country, including in Kerry. There are approximately 860 adults who avail of day services in Kerry, with services being delivered by 12 agencies across 51 locations. HSE South West disability services continues to invest in respite services, proactively seeking alternative respite models and utilising all available funding to provide respite services for adults who require them. HSE South West disability services are working with service providers to create new additional residential respite and alternative respite supports for adults in 2025-26.

I have also corresponded with the Before We Die group, which I am due to meet in my own constituency late next week, based on the timetables available to the group. I appreciate the very difficult situation the Deputy has raised regarding the individual family. It is not unique but obviously, it is accentuated in a county as large as Kerry. Quite a lot has been done but we can all agree, without being partisan, not enough has been done. In many regards, not enough will ever be done. However, the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, is more than happy to engage with the Deputy directly on the individual case he has raised to see where opportunities may be available in that regard. More broadly, she remains absolutely committed to improving services continually and will happily work with all Deputies from all parties and none to achieve that across the country.

Deputy Pa Daly: I thank the Minister of State for that reply. He clearly has a fair idea as to the extra challenges there are in a county like Kerry. It is not realistic to go from the very north of the county to mid-Kerry, which is at least an hour each way and would be very tiring for adults and children. Speaking to people working within the services, there are 80 plus school leavers in Kerry who will require these services. I note the Minister of State said at the start of the response that systems should be put in place by the end of May. From what I am hearing, this is not always the case but it should be.

The anxieties of the Before We Die group could be alleviated by proper planning earlier in their lives. I know of another couple who were so disheartened by the paucity of services available in the Kerry area that they sold their house and moved to Dublin where other members of their family reside because they could not be guaranteed the services. These people have grown up in the county, so it was huge for them to have to move away when they retired to try to access better services for their child. People in the HSE are telling me we need continued investment in day services because there is rising complexity and demand for complex disabilities seems to be increasing. We need multi-annual funding so that they can put the proper plans in place to invest in the services required for the best part of 1,000 people accessing the day services, as well as the 80 plus per year. The HSE needs to forward plan for the day service, housing and respite but it also needs to be co-ordinated at a Government level so that all the various agencies tie in together.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am very grateful to the Deputy for raising these individual cases and making very relevant points on which there is no disagreement. The majority of families and individuals are catered for but unfortunately, there are far too many who are falling through the gaps and are not getting that discussion or peace of mind at an early enough stage. That is something the Government and the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, are absolutely committed to working through. That is why we see that 20% increase in the disability budget that will be allocated for this year to the order of €3.9 billion. Included in that is €150 million to fund service expansion in residential and respite services.

Beyond the individual care, and the Deputy has given very real examples, the real world examples can only be fed into what is required. As I stated, the Minister of State, Deputy Higgins, is more than happy to work with the Deputy, the HSE and other partners, or any Deputy, to see where those outstanding issues could be solved. However, the Deputy has called rightly for an increased level of investment. That is why, with the five-year horizon out to 2030, the national development plan provides for an investment of €278 million, particularly in specialist disability services. Capital funding will also enable the refurbishment and development of modern respite centres and day service hubs. This focus will be through both the HSE and section 38 and 39 providers. We very much hope this offers a real opportunity for substantial growth in services and makes sure that fewer, and in due course hopefully no families, find themselves in the situation of the two families the Deputy has mentioned in County Kerry.

In conclusion, the Minister is of course happy to continue working with the Deputy on an individual basis. She also wanted to express her real thanks to the Deputy for raising this issue on the floor of the Chamber.

Heritage Sites

Deputy Máire Devine: I thank the Minister of State for the opportunity. This matter is obviously about Kilmainham Gaol and the board of visitors. I am not sure if the Minister of State knows the back story to all this, but Kilmainham Gaol itself has witnessed so much of modern Irish politics and history. It has covered everything from the United Irishmen to the Fenians, the Invincibles, the Famine and the Land League. It has a place in all our hearts and in hearts abroad.

A committee of trustees and voluntary workers, including my uncle Charlie, aka the suicide roofer, broke down the gates in 1960 and restored the prison from a state of complete ruin between the years 1960 and 1986. At that time, the then Minister of State, Brian Hayes, set up a board of visitors to take over from the trustees. There were a lot of politics going on at the time but he decided to establish it to represent the interests of the trustees and voluntary workers who had restored the prison.

As a member of the board, having been appointed for two consecutive terms - it is a five-year term - I and the board have approached the Minister of State, Deputy Boxer Moran, and the OPW for an event, which is what we are tasked with and is in our terms of reference, to honour those volunteers and their families. We reprinted the book, *Ghosts of Kilmainham*, which details the activities from 1963 onwards - and the prisoners - within the walls of that at-times fairly scary place.

However, I feel we have been treated quite disrespectfully. We have had no communication from either party. This has gone on for almost over two years, and we are trying to gather the families. As the Minister of State can imagine, there are very few volunteers left. There is only one I can think of, who is the chair, and that is Damien Cassidy.

I ask the Minister of State to please give a nudge to the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, and the OPW.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I am here to support Deputy Devine's call.

Her uncle was one of those who was involved directly in the restoration project, a huge undertaking by a voluntary committee which did what the State had promised to do from the thirties, forties and fifties. They said that they would do it at no cost to the State. A group of men mainly - there are women in some of photographs - helped to clear the prison which had been abandoned from 1929 onwards despite requests in the thirties for it to be handed over to be a museum or a memorial of prisons and a memorial of the patriotic struggle. It was agreed even though not every party at the time agreed with it. The Labour Party in particular in the fifties thought this was a madcap scheme. We know now that it was not. It is one of the most, if not the most, sought-after tourist attractions. Those men in the early 1960s and before had a vision that people would come to look at this and would respect our history. It is not just the history of the patriotic struggle; it is the history of imprisonment. That can be seen in the way it was used as a film location because it is reflective of prisons of an era.

There were a lot of hangings there, including hangings of women. There were executions of republican soldiers by the British but also by the new State. They are remembered in the museum that is attached to it now. Anybody who has gone on a tour appreciates the work done.

The problem at the moment is that the OPW does not seem to appreciate that when it was handed over to it in 1986 it agreed there would be a board of visitors which would be reflective of the families who did this restoration. That was one of the conditions.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am very grateful to Deputies Devine and Ó Snodaigh for raising this important matter and for their continued personal and political interest in Kilmainham Gaol and its remarkable history. I did enjoy some of the interventions this evening. I was not aware of Labour Party's opposition in the 1950s. That is a slight on me and our former coalition friends. The Minister of State, Deputy Moran, has asked me to read a couple things into the record, which is not for the Deputies' benefit, as they can understand, but it is for the Chamber's benefit as a whole. I know what I am about to read contains information they both know, having been intimately involved in it for a long time.

For the benefit of the House, Kilmainham Gaol occupies a unique place in Ireland's national story. The Office of Public Works recognises not only the significance of the gaol itself, but also the extraordinary contribution made by the members of the Kilmainham Gaol Restoration Society and the many volunteers whose commitment and dedication helped to rescue the building from dereliction and secure its future for generations to come.

As alluded to by Deputy Devine, following the transfer of the gaol to State care in 1986, a board of visitors was established to maintain a connection with those individuals and to provide an independent forum through which observations and recommendations relating to the gaol could be conveyed to the Minister. The board operates on a non-statutory basis and has no formal executive, management or governance role in the operation of the site. Rather, its purpose has been advisory in nature, providing an independent perspective on the condition, use and interpretation of Kilmainham Gaol.

The most recent board of visitors was appointed in late 2019 for a five-year term. Throughout its existence, the board has operated on a voluntary basis and has provided an important link to those involved in the restoration and preservation of the gaol. The contribution of its members over many years is acknowledged and appreciated by the OPW and the Minister of State, Deputy Moran. It will continue to receive the support that is required.

In relation to the publication of *Ghosts of Kilmainham*, the Minister of State wishes to acknowledge the significance of the work and the valuable record it provides of the restoration of Kilmainham Gaol and the people who made that achievement possible. The publication continues to be available to visitors and remains an important part of the historical record of the site. Proposals regarding an OPW-sponsored relaunch event for the publication have been considered. However, as the publication has been available for a number of years and continues to be available, it has been decided that an OPW-sponsored relaunch event will not proceed.

The OPW remains committed to ensuring that the role of the restoration society and the many volunteers associated with the restoration of Kilmainham Gaol is appropriately recognised through the interpretation and presentation of the site and through ongoing engagement with interested stakeholders.

I assure the Deputies that the Minister of State and the OPW greatly value the contribution made by those who helped to save Kilmainham Gaol and remain committed to preserving and presenting this important national monument to the highest standards. In the last month I had

the good fortune to bring my children there for the first time. I know I join everyone in the House who is absolutely spellbound by the story that it tells, the importance of that story to our history and the importance of making sure that story is fully accessible to all, particularly our younger generation. I will do anything I can do to assist the Deputies, through the OPW or otherwise, to make sure that it is preserved.

Deputy Máire Devine: As the Minister of State can imagine, I am gobsmacked and very disappointed. I find the response very disrespectful to me as a family member of an individual who spent over 700 hours doing the roof of Kilmainham Gaol. It is extremely disrespectful to us, the families and the volunteers who are still around. The late Garret FitzGerald at the time said that the trustees were to provide advice, and to organise events and commemorative ceremonies to honour those who suffered and died in the prison. That is what the board of visitors are trying to do. We are being given the flipping finger by the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, the OPW or whoever has made that disgraceful decision. Surely they would be honoured to actually be part of what is our history and to pass it down to the next generation and the generation after. It is absolutely outrageous and I cannot think I would let that rest.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I am also gobsmacked. It is very strange because it would not cost anything to facilitate the board of visitors. The venue is there to launch the book which has been republished as a new issue. There have been private launches of books and other events in the gaol. It is a great venue to have anything. Even though it is for sale in the museum shop in the old courthouse, it still deserves to be pushed again so that the public outside, those who do not get one of the golden tickets to attend Kilmainham Gaol, can be encouraged.

So much can be said. In fairness, the Labour Party view in 1954 was that this is all nonsense, that these schemes are nonsense. There is a very interesting list of the work the volunteers carried out, down to the hours. As Máire said, her uncle spent 720 hours and that was in the first two years. They thought it would take five years and it took six or seven. The history is absolutely fantastic. I cannot find the quote now, but there is a quote from somebody early on that this was one of the best practical restorations they had seen and that we could do a lot more to encourage them. However, being rejected afterwards is the problem.

There is no mention in the response as to when the new board will be put in place. It is out of office at this stage.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I completely understand the frustration and indeed anger of the Deputies and I do not contest it in any way. As a young history undergraduate student, I spent hours and hours - not quite 700 hours - in the gaol itself carrying out my own primary research and it was invaluable. I have a well-thumbed copy of *Ghosts of Kilmainham*. It was not actually mine originally; it was my sister's. She also studied history, albeit she was smarter than me and got into Trinity College.

Regarding the points made by the Deputies, while there are no plans to proceed with an OPW-sponsored relaunch event, the importance of the publication and the historical record contained in it is fully acknowledged. The publication continues and will continue to be available and remains an important account of the restoration story of Kilmainham Gaol.

We are not going to resolve this situation this evening. I do not believe the Deputies expect me to resolve it. Unfortunately, I am just in the firing line of their ire. That is the lot I have drawn this evening. However, I will write to the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, asking to arrange an urgent deputation meeting, involving him, the Deputies and the other interested party. That is the best I can do in the position I have. I give them my absolute commitment to do that. I have absolute sympathy for the case they have raised.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 10.29 p.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 17 Meitheamh 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 10.29 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 17 June 2026.