



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions.....	159
An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business.....	168
Anti-Shrinkflation Bill 2026: First Stage.....	184
Data Protection Act 2018 under (Section 60(6)) and (Section 51(3)) Regulations 2026: Motion	185
Dublin Airport (Passenger Capacity) Bill 2026: Second Stage	185
Dublin Airport (Passenger Capacity) Bill 2026: Referral to Select Committee.....	231
Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad	231
Offences against the State (Amendment) Act 1998 and Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009: Motions	232
Dental and Orthodontic Services: Motion [Private Members]	249
Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions	280
Disabilities Assessments	280
Childcare Services.....	282
Childcare Services.....	284
Childcare Services.....	287
Children in Care	289
Disability Services	291
Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions	293
Childcare Services.....	293
Childcare Services.....	295
Early Childhood Care and Education	297
Disability Services	299
Childcare Services.....	301
Childcare Services.....	303
Guardians Ad Litem	305
Disabilities Assessments	307
Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters.....	310
Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate.....	311

Third Level Education.....	311
School Enrolments	314
Defence Forces.....	317
State Bodies.....	319

DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Máirt, 23 Meitheamh 2026

Tuesday, 23 June 2026

Chuaigh an Leas-Cheann Comhairle i gceannas ar 2 p.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: "Táim ag iarraidh go nglacfaidh an Rialtas lena fhreagracht agus, ar a laghad, go dtabharfaidh siad síocháin dúinn ag deireadh ár ré." Is iad seo na focail ó bhean amháin de chuid mhná Dhún Darú. Is marthanóirí iad a bhí tar éis mí-úsáid ghnéasach uafásach a fhulaingt i Scoil Náisiúnta Dhún Darú i gCorcaigh sna seascaidí agus sna seachtóidí. An inseoidh an Taoiseach dóibh inniu go ndéanfaidh sé an rud ceart agus go gcuirfidh sé cúiteamh ar fáil sa dóigh atá ceart agus gan tuilleadh moille?

The following are the words of one of the Dunderrow women:

I want the Government to take responsibility and to at least give us peace at the end of our time. I'm here suffering along with fellow victims who went to a school that was run by the State, and this was done to innocent children. It's totally wrong, totally unfair. I want justice.

These women are survivors of horrific sexual abuse inflicted on children by teacher Leo Hickey at Dunderrow National School in Cork in the sixties and seventies. They have now broken their silence in their quest for justice and for compensation for the State's failure to protect them.

The Taoiseach will recall how Louise O'Keeffe, one of Hickey's victims, spent years courageously battling for the State to take responsibility and provide redress. In fact, the Taoiseach was the Minister for education who fought Louise through the Irish courts back in 1998. She was forced to take her case all the way to the European Court of Human Rights and she won that case in 2014. The court found that the State had an obligation to protect children from sexual abuse in State-run schools and to provide redress to survivors.

The judgment meant the State had to pay compensation to Louise O'Keeffe but the Irish courts found it was not just her who was abused in that school. We are talking about women whose children were abused by the same person in the same school during the same period but, 12 and a half years on from the European Court of Human Rights judgment, these women are

still waiting, still being ignored and still having to fight the State to own up to its responsibilities.

These women are told that they cannot access compensation because they have not previously taken a legal case against the State. Seriously, is the Taoiseach not going to do the right thing for these women who were abused because of some technicality? The State, true to form, wants to drag these women through the courts and wants to force them to take on expensive legal proceedings to get compensation. We have seen this all before, and we know it is cruel. These are women who are now in their 60s and 70s who suffered appalling sexual abuse at the time and whose children were catastrophically failed by the State. It is shameful what is happening to them. The women have suffered enough. They are being retraumatised and being forced into a position where they must sue the State to get what they are entitled to by law, and that is wrong and we all know that.

Louise O'Keeffe summed up the injustice perfectly when she said, "I was abused by Leo Hickey in Dunderrow school. The Dunderrow women were also abused by Leo Hickey in Dunderrow school. It is time to give these women the redress that is theirs. It is time to do what is right." I am asking the Taoiseach today to bring this to an end. I asking him to tell them today that he will do what is right. I asking him to tell them that he will provide redress without any further delay.

The Taoiseach: The abuse carried out by Leo Hickey was evil, horrific and deeply harmful to many people who were children at the time that he was in Dunderrow National School in the 1960s. I do appreciate and I am fully conscious of the enormous trauma experienced by the survivors of sexual abuse in that school and abuse carried out by Leo Hickey. It is important that their voices are heard and listened to. In 2014, the European Court of Human Rights found that in respect of day schools the State failed in its obligation in specific circumstances to protect Louise O'Keeffe from sexual abuse by Leo Hickey. This was not the Irish courts but the European Court of Human Rights.

The key issue was the absence of any safeguarding advices or Children First guidelines. All of that was not in place at the time. That was not advised to what was a diocesan school at the time. That was the key underlying reason for the decision of the European Court of Human Rights. Since then, a number of measures have been put in place to implement the judgment, including an *ex gratia* payment scheme. That said, in 2015 the then Government established an *ex gratia* scheme of payments for victims of abuse by teachers and other school employees that was designed to ensure the implementation of the judgment. However, that scheme was not adequate at all, and it was reviewed in 2019 by an independent assessor, Mr. Justice Iarfhlaith O'Neill. This involves some who were in Dunderrow but others who were not in Dunderrow. The scope of the scheme was expanded following Mr. Justice O'Neill's conclusions and there was a more straightforward process. Some 193 applications were made to the revised *ex gratia* scheme and a total of €10.75 million has issued to about 128 approved applicants. The scheme closed to applications in July 2023.

Meanwhile, as Members know, the scoping inquiry into historical sexual abuse in day and boarding schools more generally run by religious orders published in 2024 recognised the significance of the issues for survivors and their expressed wish that those running those schools where sexual abuse occurred should be held accountable financially. An

interdepartmental group was then established in the aftermath of the scoping report to work on each of the recommendations, particularly in the context of redress. The interdepartmental group recognised that consideration of a redress payment scheme, more generally, has far-reaching implications and it is doing further detailed work in respect of that.

The survivors of the abuse by Leo Hickey from Dunderrow, through their legal representatives, have sought mediation. As I have said, legal advice is that we would enter into mediation. We will enter into a mediation in good faith and we will engage constructively.

I said that earlier this morning. Admhaím gur fhulaing na mná agus na daltaí go han-mhór ar fad as ucht an méid a rinne an múinteoir Leo Hickey. Bhí sé uafásach agus go hainnis. Admhaím go bhfuil tráma faoi leith ann do na daoine atá fós ag fulaingt as ucht an méid a rinne sé.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The plea from the survivors of the abuse at Dunderrow is: give us peace at the end of our days; we want justice. They are asking how long do they have to wait? This goes right back to 1998 when the Taoiseach was the Minister at the time. That is nearly 30 years ago. It is twelve and a half years since the European court made a judgment that the State was liable and we are hearing words from Ministers and taoisigh about mediation and about listening when the survivors are asking for peace at the end of their days and for justice. I am asking the Taoiseach a very simple question because he knows. Louise O'Keeffe had to win her case and fight her battles in the European court and have compensation paid to her but the Taoiseach knows that the Irish courts have made it very clear that other women were abused in that school by the same teacher at the same time. Will the Taoiseach say to these women that, yes, compensation will be paid to them, that we hear them and we see them and that we are going to set this right?

The Taoiseach: To set the record straight, back in 1998 and 1999 the issue was industrial schools. I created a commission into abuse that happened in industrial schools.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The first proceedings were lodged in 1998.

The Taoiseach: I want to put that on the record. It was the first time ever any Irish Government established a commission of inquiry into abuse in schools and that was in the context of industrial schools.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Taoiseach was named in the Louise O'Keeffe case, in fairness.

The Taoiseach: I want to make that point. It was many years later when this particular case came to the Irish courts and then it went on to the European Court of Human Rights. That said, various *ex gratia* payment schemes were developed in respect of Dunderrow and others who were party to the case at the European court. As I said earlier, about 193 applications were made. About 128 were approved under the *ex gratia* payment scheme. We are going to enter into remediation at this stage in good faith. We have a wider issue which the interdepartmental group is examining in terms of both redress and the implications of all that for the State, for

survivors and for religious orders in terms of their culpability and accountability in respect of contributing to redress.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I want to read into the record the testimonies of two women who were sexually abused by Leo Hickey, their principal in Dunderrow National School in Kinsale. One said:

Sometimes while abusing me with his right hand, I would see him put his left hand inside the clothes on the lower part of the body of the girl beside me. Again, this could last for the duration of the class.

Another said:

I remember feeling something hard pressed against the small of my back and I remember wondering what this hard object was. I thought it was something in his pocket. This seemed to happen for a long time, but it probably lasted about ten minutes. I remember wanting to get out to play before the break would be over ...

These women and 17 of their schoolmates are, rightly, seeking redress for what was done to them as children. They were failed by every system that was supposed to protect them and they are still being failed today.

Leo Hickey was eventually convicted while the State managed to evade all responsibility. I spoke to Louise O'Keeffe today, who spent 16 years fighting to change that. The State fought her, in her words, "tooth and nail" every step of the way, pursuing her through the courts and aggressively seeking legal costs against her. In 2014, she finally won at the European Court of Human Rights, which found the State had failed in its duty to protect children.

That judgment should have been a turning point. Instead, in a textbook Irish Government approach to how it treats survivors of abuse, the redress scheme excluded the very people it was supposed to help. Incredibly, 19 victims of Leo Hickey - women whose evidence helped secure his conviction - have been denied redress. Their testimony was good enough for the criminal court but somehow is not good enough for the State. It is unbelievable.

In 2019, the Taoiseach stood on this side of the House and said that the O'Keeffe judgment demands that every child who experienced sexual abuse in a defective child protection framework in schools be compensated for that abuse. He also said that redress should not wait for the results of any commission of investigation. Survivors do not need another review, report or excuse. They need a Government willing to do what the Taoiseach himself called for.

I have two questions. Does the Taoiseach recognise the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights and if so, will he commit to providing fair redress to all survivors without arbitrary barriers?

The Taoiseach: First of all, I thank the Deputy for again raising this issue. As I have said, the abuse committed by Leo Hickey was horrific and unconscionable. The suffering and trauma people went through because of him has been life lasting. The Deputy is correct that in 2019, I advocated very strongly that the original redress scheme of 2015 was far too limited. That led to the appointment of Mr. Justice Iarfhlaith O'Neill to recommend an expansion of the *ex gratia* payment scheme. That is what I have already referenced; that opened it up to some

degree back then to 128 people. Obviously, not all were in Dunderrow but I did not have the identities of all of them. I represented one or two people myself from outside of Dunderrow, who had come to me as a TD at the time because I was not in Government then. That person would have received compensation at the time but even that is at a modest level, if I am honest.

The legal representatives wrote to the Attorney General last week. As I said, we are going to engage in a constructive way and I do want to see a resolution of this. There are also wider implications in the context of what emerged in the last number of years in some religious-run secondary schools, which led to the scoping inquiry that recommended a full inquiry - which we have established - into abuse in primary schools and all schools across the country. There is also the issue of redress and how that would be handled. An interdepartmental group was established to deal with that, which will have far-reaching implications all round but also with regard to accountability and responsibility.

The established mechanism was that where schools were run by the diocesan authorities or by religious orders, it was those that were primarily culpable in terms of abuse that happened. In the context of Dunderrow, of course, in the 1960s, this was pre any official guidelines from the State or Government to these patron bodies in respect of safeguarding children and guidelines that we have today, like Children First. We have a far greater framework of laws and guidelines to try and protect children, which did not exist then. That is the area where the European court found the State culpable in respect of adequate safeguarding not being provided to schools at that particular time. We will take this forward and revert to the House in due course.

Deputy Holly Cairns: What the Taoiseach has highlighted is the well-established practice of the State. At the hands of the State, people are seriously and systematically abused. They try to seek justice. There is delay after delay, an interdepartmental group, a commission of investigation, and a redress scheme that is blatantly cruel and excludes the people who need it, then the State does it all again with another redress scheme that also does not work.

It is delay, delay and consult. The Taoiseach said today he should positively engage and listen to these people. I spoke to Louise O'Keeffe this morning. She said she met the Taoiseach in March 2025 and he said he would get back to her in a month. She has not heard from the Taoiseach since. This is not engaging positively.

She went to the European Court of Human Rights after fighting the State for over a decade. She won. Eighteen other people were abused in the same school by the same man. Their testimony was used in the criminal court to convict him but the Taoiseach will not take that as good enough to provide the redress these people have been waiting over a decade for. The Taoiseach will delay more with another interdepartmental group and another redress scheme. Why will he not commit to giving these people what they are entitled to now and end this despicable practice of disregarding survivors and delaying, delaying and delaying?

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Taoiseach: It is not delay, delay, delay in respect of the mediation that has been sought by the representatives of the survivors of the abuse by Leo Hickey. We will engage in that mediation. There is a wider redress issue that has to be examined in the context of schools in

general across the nation over the last number of decades. That is the point I am making. This has been in a legal framework for quite some time as well. I have no issue meeting with people but the Government has to resolve this as well and come to conclusions in respect of it. I am clear on what we need to do, specifically in terms of these survivors of this particular abuse but there will be others as well. There will be other schools and a need for further responses in different contexts. That was the idea of the overall comprehensive inquiry and the idea of the interdepartmental group to examine how we deal with all of these issues, not just in one or two schools but the generality of where abuse has taken place.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Over recent days, we have once again been confronted with some of the darkest chapters in the history of this island. Yesterday saw the conviction of former DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson for horrific sex offences against children. Today, survivors of systematic sexual abuse, perpetrated upon them by Leo Hickey at Dunderrow National School, have come forward to share their harrowing ordeal. Still excluded from existing State redress schemes, they are calling for an effective route to recognition for the horrific campaign of abuse they suffered as children. Last night, we heard the final episode of RTÉ's "Pirate Predator" documentary, with renewed calls from survivors for an inquiry into the State's failures to apprehend the prolific and violent sex offender Eamon Cooke. Last week, we learned of the death of paedophile Bill Kenneally, whose crimes destroyed numerous young lives and many of whose victims are still seeking justice. I want to begin by paying tribute to every survivor of child sexual abuse. Survivors have shown extraordinary courage in coming forward. As they tell us, many are still fighting for justice and to be heard.

A common theme runs through these appalling cases of child sexual abuse: power and silence; abuse of power by monstrous predators; and silence from the institutions of both State and church that should have been protecting children. The church and the State have a duty to make amends for decades of their failures towards victims. We know the commission of investigation into abuse in schools is under way and that an interdepartmental group is examining options for future redress. That report is due in May next year. Its recommendations must be survivor-led. These may require significant legislative and policy reform, but there are things we can do now to deliver justice for survivors.

The first is in respect of the Dunderrow survivors. I spoke again today with a representative from the group of women. They want to see action. They heard what the Taoiseach said about listening to them but they want action and they want redress. Second, the Tánaiste has said that religious orders must pay their fair share of redress - I agree with him and I welcome his comments. The Taoiseach will know that the Labour Party has a Bill before this House on Thursday in my name. It is a Bill to enable survivors of institutional child sexual abuse to pursue redress from religious orders, which have substantial assets. An analysis of finances from a sample group of congregations showed that collectively they had about €1.3 billion in cash and other assets. Yet, they owe the State €750 million in unpaid redress in respect of those who were abused in schools and institutions that were run by religious orders. Our Bill would end an indefensible practice from religious orders that purport to show moral leadership, yet are refusing to pay redress and are shifting assets to put them out of reach of survivors.

All institutions in both State and church that facilitated or enabled abuse of children should pay redress. We want to hear from the Taoiseach about justice and redress for Dunderrow survivors, and about what the Government attitude will be to our Bill on Thursday. Will it

facilitate the Bill's passage? We have spoken before about it. The Taoiseach said he would refer it to the Attorney General and I know his interdepartmental group is looking at mechanisms to pursue religious orders for redress, but survivors cannot wait. The commission of investigation is not due to report for three or four years and the interdepartmental group in a year's time. There are things we can be doing now for survivors.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. If we look back over the last three decades, we have had numerous episodes or revelations pertaining to institutions both public and private in respect of child sexual abuse. It has been quite horrific. I refer to governments from about the late 1990s onwards and the 1999 period onwards when we first initiated the inquiry into industrial schools. I recall the anger when the State paid up close to €1 billion in redress. Everybody attacked the government of the day, of which I was a member, because the accusation was we left the religious off. I never accepted this fully by the way because I felt the State had culpability there too, in terms of inspectorial reports and so on. The State always had culpability in respect of its involvement in the industrial schools. As to the capacity to get money at the time, we did not want to put victims and survivors at that time through years and years of courts. Then, we had the swimming abuse inquiry. We had a series of diocesan inquiries, which the government initiated against Cloyne and against Dublin. I remember the Ferns inquiry, for example, and further abuses and revelations right up to the present day in respect of the Spiritans and of schools more generally.

We are now in a situation where we have a comprehensive commission of inquiry into schools, which we did not have before. The situation has evolved. There was a time prior to the nineties when the State did not habitually establish commissions of inquiry into abuse, but from the late 1990s onwards Irish society was opened up in many respects. It was not opened up completely, not comprehensively, but in many respects. A torrent of abuse has emerged in all aspects of life, it seems to me. We can look at the SAVI report going back along and the context in which it reported in respect of its estimations of the nature of abuse.

That said, on religious orders, the Government's position on the Labour Party's legislation will be a six-month timed amendment. We believe it aligns with Government policy. We are not in disagreement with the intent or purpose of what the Labour Party is proposing legislatively. We will support that. We are entering into mediation in respect of Dunderrow. We will try to progress that as quickly and as effectively as we can, while also knowing we have a broader issue to deal with, as the Deputy has said, in respect of the interdepartmental group.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I certainly do not need a lecture on the vile history of child sexual abuse and State and church cover-up in this country. I represented survivors of abuse in the 1990s before the Residential Institutions Redress Board. I recall the flaws in that scheme, which I have spoken about before. I also recall the 2002 agreement, the shameful Michael Woods agreement, which capped the contribution of religious orders at a fraction of that €1.5 billion cost the Taoiseach rightly pointed out. Of course, religious orders should pay more, but given opportunities multiple times since 2002 they have failed to do so. That is why the Labour Party is proposing this constructive Bill. I welcome the Taoiseach's indication that the Government will support that Bill on Thursday and will look to see it brought into law as it aligns - as it absolutely should - with Government policy.

Over the decades since the Ryan report, with all of the revelations and all the bravery and courage of survivors, we have learned so much about church and State cover-ups. The practical steps we take now are what is important. I welcome the Taoiseach's comments on our redress Bill. It does offer a way forward. It gives the State leverage to pursue religious orders for unpaid redress. Second, I ask precisely what the Taoiseach means by mediation for the Dunderrow victims.

This group of 19 women are absolutely right to seek redress now in respect of the abuse they suffered at the hands of Leo Hickey. What does the Taoiseach mean by "mediation"? What is the timeline? Can these women secure redress before we see the very welcome further developments at a broader level through the interdepartmental group?

The Taoiseach: The legal representatives of the Dunderrow survivors have written to the Government and to the Minister inviting the Government to enter mediation with their clients with a view to resolving their claim against the State. That is what I said this morning. We will respond positively to that invitation. Those are the specifics of the request. This correspondence arrived in the past week or ten days. That is the factual and specific response to that point. On the broader issue, the interdepartmental group is due to report next year. We will see if we can bring that forward.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: In April of this year, 46% of our country's electricity came from wind and a further 7% came from solar. That 53% of our electricity or 1,300 GWh of clean renewable electricity in a single month. A key problem with the electricity system in Ireland is that we do not have the energy storage capacity to take full advantage of renewable energy when those conditions are right. At times, renewable producers are directed to create less energy than they have capacity to generate. The system uses technical language like "curtailment" or "dispatch down" for this but there is a simpler word, "waste". In the middle of a worldwide energy crisis, when Irish households' electricity bills are shooting up, renewable energy is being wasted at scale. According to EirGrid, in April 2026, 18% of wind energy was wasted.

This is why we need more energy storage in Ireland. The concept is simple. Battery storage captures renewable electricity when wind and solar production is high and releases it back onto our grid when demand is high. A significant number of battery storage systems have been granted planning permission here in Ireland. However, when Energy Storage Ireland presented to us in audiovisual room recently, the key barrier it set out was a lack of routes to market access. The last Government published the electricity storage policy framework in July 2024, almost two years ago. This included ten actions. Action 7 required the Taoiseach's Government to set a long-term target for the amount of battery storage needed in order to give an indication to the industry of how much battery storage is anticipated. Action 9 requires the creation of a market framework to incentivise energy storage technologies. Wind and solar electricity have the renewable energy support scheme. Energy storage needs similar financial certainty to incentivise development.

Two years after the publication of that framework, these two actions have not been achieved. As a result, millions of euro worth of renewable energy, renewable electricity, is being squandered. The problem here is not judicial reviews, gold-plated environmental regulations or the climate action Act. The problem is the failure of the Government to prioritise the detailed

policy work that is needed to ensure that this technology can work for Irish consumers and for the Irish economy. Will the Taoiseach commit to his Government setting a clear target for long-term energy storage needs in Ireland by the end of this year? Will he also commit to putting in place a renewable energy support scheme for battery storage by the middle of 2027 so that this waste of renewable electricity will come to an end?

The Taoiseach: What the Deputy said at the beginning is true. We are making very significant progress on renewable energy in this country. We have reached a record of circa 8 GW of renewable energy generation capacity, which is up from 4.8 GW in 2020. Onshore wind now provides very significant levels of power. Last year, we hit the important milestone of 5 GW of installed onshore wind capacity. We also reached the milestone of 2GW of installed solar capacity last November.

In terms of solar generated electricity, in April we reached a peak of 1 GW on the grid. That is enough power for around 500,000 people. Solar generation went from zero to replace coal as the third highest source of indigenous generation in less than a decade. This is the progress we are making. There is about 1.91 GW of electricity storage systems with planning permission and connection contracts pending fulfilment with EirGrid as of last December. As the Deputy knows, we are pursuing offshore wind capacity. Particularly in terms of the auctions that were concluded over the past two years, if we can get those developed, then we will be in a very significant position in terms of renewables powering the majority of electricity.

On the storage issue more generally, we will commit to setting a target. In terms of an incentive scheme or grants, as the Deputy has outlined, I will revert to the Minister in respect of that. Again, that is something that will be assessed. More broadly, the technology is improving all the time. There is a significant degree of private sector investment in the storage area, also. I have witnessed some of this at some of the openings we have been at. For example, in the midlands in particular, we will see further developments in that regard. However, we have made a lot of progress. We can make more progress. When the Deputy said it is wasted and so on, it is an issue of technology and technology catching up in terms of that storage area. That has been an evolving story for the past number of years. It is not quite there yet but it is making huge progress. We will do everything that we can to support it.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: With respect, while the Taoiseach is right that it is an issue of technology, the solution is there. The solution is there in terms of battery storage and we do not have enough of it. What representatives of the industry told all Members of the Oireachtas from the Opposition to the Government when they were in with us is that the two key barriers to them are the lack of a national target for how much the Government thinks in terms of energy support that is needed and that support system to help them to deliver it. The Taoiseach is right that planning permission has been granted for plenty of battery storage units around the country but they will not get the financing if they do not see that there is a clear route to market access. The companies that are looking to set up here are mobile. They can support it in Germany or other European countries - the countries that actually have put in the work to put in those support frameworks to make it financially viable. What is needed is here is focus on getting through the policy blockages that exist and that can actually ensure that this technology that is available can deliver lower price energy for Irish consumers.

The Taoiseach: The Minister is pursuing these issues across the board. We certainly we engage in respect of a support system. When any industry comes looking for a support system, it is reasonable that the Government approaches that in terms of value for money, representing the taxpayer and to make sure that we do it properly and right. I will engage with Minister in respect of the issues the Deputy has raised now and revert to him.

An tOrd Gnó - Order of Business

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

I move:

Tuesday's business shall be:

- Motion re Proposed approval by Dáil Éireann of the Data Protection Act 2018 (Section 51(3)) and (Section 60(6)) (Commission of Investigation into the Handling of Historical Child Sexual Abuse in Day and Boarding Schools) Regulations 2026 (without debate and any division claimed to be taken immediately)

- Dublin Airport (Passenger Capacity) Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (to conclude after the first round, not to exceed 3 hours and 34 minutes)

- Motion re Offences Against the State (Amendment) Act 1998

- Motion re Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009

Tuesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re Dental and Orthodontic Services, selected by Sinn Féin.

Wednesday's business shall be:

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

- Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Bill 2026 (Second Stage) (to conclude after the first round, not to exceed 3 hours and 34 minutes)

- Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) (Amendment) Bill 2026 (Report and Final Stages) (to commence no earlier than 8 p.m. and to conclude within 30 minutes)

- National Treasury Management Agency (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 (Report and Final Stages) (to conclude within 1 hour)

Wednesday's private members' business shall be the Motion re State Responsibility for Risk in Defective Concrete Homes, selected by Independent and Parties Technical Group.

Thursday's business shall be:

- Development (Strategic Gas Reserve) 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 Tuesday, 30th June, 2026)

Thursday evening business shall be the Second Stage of the Civil Liability (Child Sexual Abuse Proceedings Against Unincorporated Bodies of Persons) Bill 2025, sponsored by Deputy Ivana Bacik.

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 allotted for Government Business shall be extended in accordance with the arrangements for that business, and the Dáil may sit later than 10.48 p.m.;

(b) Parliamentary Questions to the Taoiseach pursuant to Standing Order 47(1) shall not be taken, and Government business shall commence at the time when Parliamentary Questions to the Taoiseach would normally be taken; and

(c) private members' business may be taken later than 6.12 p.m. and shall in any event be taken on the conclusion of proceedings on Motion re Offences Against the State (Amendment) Act 1998 and Motion re Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009, with consequential effect on the commencement time 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 (Section 51(3)) and (Section 60(6)) (Commission of Investigation into the Handling of Historical Child Sexual Abuse in Day and Boarding Schools) Regulations 2026 shall be taken without debate and any division claimed thereon shall be taken immediately;

3. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Dublin Airport (Passenger Capacity) 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 thereto:

(a) the first-round speeches shall be in accordance with the table below (to be read across);

(b) on the 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, whereupon proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion; 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

4. the proceedings on the Motion re Offences Against the State (Amendment) Act and Motion re Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009 shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 80 minutes and the following arrangements shall apply thereto:

(a) the two motions shall be debated together, with separate questions put on proceedings thereon;

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

— opening speech by a Minister or Minister of State – 15 minutes;

— speeches by representatives of Sinn Féin - 12 minutes

— speeches by representatives of the Social Democrats, the Labour Party, Independent and Parties Technical Group, and Independent Technical Group – 9 minutes per party or group;

— speeches by non-party/group members – 9 minutes in total; and

(c) speech in response by the Minister – 8 minutes; and

(d) members may share time.

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 SOS pursuant to Standing Order 25(1) shall be taken immediately following Taoiseach's Oral Parliamentary Questions pursuant to Standing Order 47(1), which shall be taken at the time when the SOS would normally be taken; and

(c) in the event proceedings on the Second Stage of the Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Bill 2026 conclude before 8 p.m., the sitting shall stand suspended until 8 p.m. when the order of business shall resume with the Public Health (Tobacco and Nicotine Inhaling Products) Bill 2026;

2. the Statements on Pride 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

3. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Regulation of Artificial Intelligence 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, whereupon proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion; and

(c) members may share time;

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

4. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) (Amendment) Bill 2026 shall commence no earlier than 8 p.m. and shall, if not previously concluded, be brought to a conclusion after 30 minutes 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 Health; and

5. the proceedings on Report and Final Stages of the National Treasury Management Agency (Miscellaneous Provisions) 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 Finance.

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 Second Stage of the Civil Liability (Child Sexual Abuse Proceedings Against Unincorporated Bodies of Persons) Bill 2025, and on the time for the adjournment of the Dáil;

2. the proceedings on the Second Stage of the Development (Strategic Gas Reserve) 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 thereto:

(a) the first-round speeches shall be in accordance with the table below (to be read across);

(b) on the 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, whereupon proceedings shall be brought to a conclusion; Provided that any division claimed on the Second Stage proceedings shall be taken immediately prior to Committee Stage on Tuesday, 30th June 2026; and

(c) members may share time.

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

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Are the proposed arrangements for the week's business agreed to?

Deputy Matt Carthy: Not agreed.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Carthy.

Deputy Matt Carthy: There is chaos reigning in our courts as thousands of cases are being adjourned due to the withdrawal of services by legal aid solicitors. The Government and the Minister are responsible for further backlogging the legal system and for creating havoc for many of the people involved in these cases, including victims. There should be a Dáil debate this week on the proposed changes to the criminal legal aid scheme. Most importantly, the Government and the Minister need to immediately engage with stakeholders and then bring forward viable, workable proposals that deliver the value for money and that reduce the court adjournments but also ensures there is access to justice for everyone who needs it.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Hear, hear.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Collins.

Deputy Michael Collins: I wish to address the devastating case of 19 women who were sexually abused by the former school principal in Dunderrow National School and who are now being forced to take legal action against the State to seek redress. Given that Louise O'Keeffe successfully established before the European Court of Human Rights that the State failed in its duty to protect children, how can the Government justify a situation where other victims of the same abuser in the same school continue to be excluded from redress?

We need statements in the Dáil this week in relation to that.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: The proposed public inquiry into Children's Health Ireland is in a state of crisis. At the weekend, two of the advocacy groups representing 900 families pulled out of the scoping inquiry. They did this because they have not been provided with information they need to meaningfully engage with the terms of reference. We called on the Minister to provide this information in March; she has not done so. We need statements in the Dáil this week from the Minister on what steps she will take to get this important public inquiry back on track.

Deputy Duncan Smith: We are debating Committee Stage amendments to the occupied territories Bill this evening. There could also be another committee meeting on Thursday morning to continue discussion on the Bill. However, the deadline for Report Stage amendments is tomorrow, Wednesday. I ask that the deadline for Report Stage amendments be moved to late Thursday or Friday if Committee Stage goes to Thursday, so that everything is in order and we are not rushing this Bill any more than it is already being rushed.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I also ask for statements on the issue of historical abuse in schools. The Taoiseach said he will listen to the women from Cork who suffered the most terrible abuse. I raised the case of a man some time ago in the Chamber. He is in 70s and was abused terribly. His whole life has been impacted as a consequence. Coincidentally, he was in with me yesterday. He asked where the redress scheme is, if he is going to be included in it and if he will still be alive when it happens. It is just not acceptable that people who are victims of this abuse and whose lives were damaged permanently do not know the answers to those questions. We need an urgent discussion to answer questions for many people who were victims of this kind of abuse in our schools and about the State's responsibility.

Deputy Mary Butler: In relation to Report Stage amendments, I will have a word with the Minister after this session and we will look at that to see about the timelines. In relation to everything else that was raised, we can discuss it at the Business Committee on Thursday. We had a very solid Business Committee meeting last week. We have a lot of legislation to get through this week so the Order of Business stands.

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

Deputy Matt Carthy: They are not.

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

The Dáil divided: Tá, 82; Níl, 70; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Boland, Grace.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Brian.	Brady, John.	
Brennan, Shay.	Buckley, Pat.	
Brophy, Colm.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Browne, James.	Cairns, Holly.	
Burke, Colm.	Carthy, Matt.	
Butler, Mary.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Butterly, Paula.	Collins, Michael.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Cronin, Réada.	
Cahill, Michael.	Crowe, Seán.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Cullinane, David.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cummins, Jen.	
Canney, Seán.	Daly, Pa.	
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	Devine, Máire.	
Chambers, Jack.	Doherty, Pearse.	
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	Donnelly, Paul.	
Clendennen, John.	Ellis, Dessie.	
Connolly, John.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Cooney, Joe.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Crowe, Cathal.	Farrell, Mairéad.	
Cummins, John.	Gannon, Gary.	
Currie, Emer.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Daly, Martin.	Graves, Ann.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dolan, Albert.	Healy-Rae, Danny.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Healy, Seamus.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Hearne, Rory.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Foley, Norma.	Kerrane, Claire.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Lawless, Paul.	
Geoghegan, James.	Lawlor, George.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Healy-Rae, Michael.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Higgins, Emer.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Keogh, Keira.	Murphy, Paul.	
Kyne, Seán.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lahart, John.	Nash, Ged.	
Lawless, James.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Lowry, Michael.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
Martin, Micheál.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	

Maxwell, David.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Gorman, Roderic.	
McEntee, Helen.	O'Hara, Louis.	
McGrath, Séamus.	O'Reilly, Louise.	
McGreehan, Erin.	O'Rourke, Darren.	
Moran, Kevin Boxer.	Ó Broin, Eoin.	
Moynihan, Aindrias.	Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	
Moynihan, Michael.	Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	
Moynihan, Shane.	Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	
Murphy, Michael.	Quaide, Liam.	
Naughton, Hildegarde.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Neville, Joe.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Brien, Darragh.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Callaghan, Jim.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Smith, Duncan.	
O'Connor, James.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	Whitmore, Jennifer.	
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Smyth, Niamh.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Ward, Barry.		

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

Question declared carried.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before we take questions on policy or legislation, on behalf of the Government Whip, the Minister of State, Mary Butler, I welcome the Dolmen active retirement group from Waterford to the Public Gallery. I hope you all enjoy your day in Leinster House. You are very welcome.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Families of children with additional needs are once again being let down by the Taoiseach's Government's disastrous mishandling of the summer programme, also known as July provision. Parents are still waiting for home tuition and hours to be sanctioned just days before the schools close. Schools are reporting reduced teacher and SNA allocations despite growing demand, while late decisions have made it really hard for people to recruit staff, putting programmes at risk. For children with autism and additional needs, this programme provides vital continuity and support over the summer months. Instead, families now face uncertainty and needless stress because of the Government's failures. This follows the utter chaos in relation to this year's application process.

The Taoiseach really needs to explain to parents, teachers and SNAs across the State why this has happened and what the Government will do to ensure that the summer programme supports children with additional needs and that it will be delivered on time and with the staffing and resources children and families need.

3 o'clock

There is a programme in my own county and if they do not get the SNA it is not going ahead. These kids need this support. The programme is supposed to start on Monday. It is not acceptable.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy paints a picture of a scheme that is growing and growing year on year but he does not articulate that in his presentation. Funding has grown from about €12 million back in 2016 to about €62 million this year, with over 70,000 students participating across 2,000 schools. We have gone from 8,000 students participating to 70,000. That is an enormous, exponential increase in students participating in the summer scheme. The funding has increased by €42 million. I am told here that no eligible child is being precluded from taking part in the summer programme this year, that all sanction letters to schools that applied to run a programme have issued, and that officials in the Department of education are engaging with schools on an individual basis in relation to the running of their summer programme and staffing allocations. Particularly for complex special educational needs, again, there is provision for SNAs and for teachers. In 2025, there were about 11,500 special needs assistants participating in the programme and similar numbers are expected to participate in this year's programme. For any specifics, I can revert to the Minister.

I would like to welcome the Dolmen group from Butlerstown and Portlaw. They are very welcome.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: In the run-up to the by-election, I knocked on close to 40,000 doors and the same issue came up time and time again, affecting constituents in every corner of the constituency: the cost of living. A new report from Barnardos today outlines just how much pressure families are under. It is absolutely shocking. Up to 80% of parents believe their children have been negatively impacted by the cost-of-living crisis. They are parents in every corner of the country, in all our communities, who are struggling and whose children are struggling. Thirty per cent of people said they did not have enough food to feed their children at some point over the last year. It is absolutely shocking. It also shows that more than one third of families went into arrears in their energy bills at some point over the last 12 months. Ireland is one of the richest countries in Europe and we are seeing record levels of homelessness

and child poverty, all under the Taoiseach's watch. It is absolutely shameful. This is an emergency and it requires an emergency response. We need a targeted energy credit for low- and middle-income households to give them some relief. Will the Taoiseach commit to that?

The Taoiseach: Actually, I would disagree with the Deputy's solution. What we did in the budget was child support payments for the lowest income, not the middle but the lowest income. We dramatically increased it and have done for the last two budgets. That is how you tackle poverty. It did reduce in the budget by any yardstick and objective. Over the last number of years, we brought in free primary school books and post-primary school books for children, which is a huge help to families. We have expanded and extended the free hot school meals. There is a universal childcare subsidy. There is a €280 new baby grant. Hospital inpatient charges were abolished. We have expanded free GP care and free contraception and we have done much more than that. In the forthcoming budget, we are going to focus very much on the child poverty question, as we did in the last budget. It is recognised that increasing child support payments and domiciliary care allowance is a very targeted way of helping those most in need, and that is what we intend to do.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I commend the makers of the RTÉ Documentary on One, "Pirate Predator", for their chilling investigation into the prolific and powerful Dublin sexual predator and paedophile, Eamon Cooke, the owner of the pirate radio station, Radio Dublin. Cooke has been compared with Jimmy Savile, whom he knew and met on many occasions. The true number of children abused by Cooke is now thought to run potentially to hundreds. I pay tribute to the extraordinary bravery of the women who did come forward, two of whose testimony at last secured Cooke's conviction in 2007 after years of failed attempts to bring him to justice. We owe them gratitude but there is a glaring question outstanding about Cooke: how did he get away with this for so long? In recent days I have had the privilege of speaking directly with a number of the women whom Cooke abused. They have asked me to ask the Taoiseach that question. They are seeking answers as to how Cooke continued to perpetrate abuse for decades, and how he was able to use his position as owner of Radio Dublin and his influence to escape justice. It took more than 20 years after a complaint was first made to the Garda about his abuse before he was finally convicted. Survivors believe his malign influence extended into the Garda and the Church, as well as other powerful networks.

I commend Gerry Kelly in particular and other gardaí who did investigate and enabled him to be brought to justice. Does the Taoiseach support survivors' calls for an inquiry to investigate the State's role in why justice took so long?

The Taoiseach: I have not seen the programme. I appreciate that the work that went into the making of that programme. Again, it is another story of horrific abuse as we discussed earlier in terms of the wide-scale prevalence of child sexual abuse in our society and by institutions as well. We have had a number of inquiries and a number of them are being contemplated again in respect of these issues. To a certain extent, the system is being fairly widely stretched in terms of the number of inquiries. I will ask the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to examine this in greater detail and I will revert to the Deputy.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Last week, we had a presentation on stroke awareness and recovery. The session was led by Martin Quinn, a constituent of mine from Bansha in County Tipperary. He is a stroke survivor himself, a national stroke advocate and a lifelong community and voluntary activist at local and national levels. He is a former national president of Muintir na Tíre, chair of the Citizens Information Service Network of Companies and an organiser of the Tipperary Peace Convention. At that stroke presentation, he acknowledged the improvement in treatment and rehabilitation in recent years but went on to say that more needs to be done, particularly in the area of additional specialist stroke units, rehabilitation services and support services. He is also the co-ordinator of the South Tipperary Stroke Communication Group, which supports stroke survivors and families and organises national conferences. There is a pressing need for support groups like this throughout the country and for financial support for these groups and I am asking the Government to include in the 2027 budget funding for groups like the South Tipperary Stroke Communication Group and other such stroke groups.

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I am so glad the Deputy referenced the improvement in stroke care rising from the stroke strategy. We need to continue to drive on with that. It is also important to note the number of step-down beds that are necessary to help stroke patients step out of acute hospitals. I was recently in Blarney with Deputy Colm Burke and others where there is a step-down facility for neurorehabilitation and stroke in particular out of Mercy Hospital. There needs to be more of those community supports for people with stroke to enable their longer-term rehabilitation. The Deputy is correct. The stroke strategy has had very good impacts and I am grateful to the clinicians for that.

Deputy Michael Collins: I want to raise the deeply distressing case of the 19 women abused by a former school principal at Dunderrow National School in west Cork. These women suffered unimaginable abuse as children. One survivor described how you were not safe anywhere in that school - not in the classroom, not in the bathroom, not even the school grounds - yet decades later, many of these women remain excluded from redress despite the fact that Louise O'Keeffe successfully proved before the European Court of Human Rights that the Irish State failed in its duty to protect children from abuse. Today, these women are being forced to consider legal action simply to obtain recognition and justice. This cannot be right. They are now being told to wait for further reviews and an interdepartmental process when many of these women with whom I have spoken to have already spent decades seeking acknowledgement and justice. Does the Taoiseach accept that forcing survivors into lengthy legal proceedings risks further traumatising them? Will he commit to engaging directly with the women involved to seek resolution without the need for court action and if he engages, how soon these innocent women can be included in redress?

The Taoiseach: As I said earlier to a series of questions on this issue, we will be responding in a positive way to correspondence from representatives of the survivors of Dunderrow National School in regard to mediation. The abuse was horrific - of that there can be no question - and the trauma experienced was equally life-enduring but there were earlier *ex gratia* payment schemes so mediation will be entered into in respect of the correspondence we received.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: The Government prioritised critical infrastructure in the last budget and we are seeing the benefits of that in Kildare with water infrastructure. However, the management of the projects by Uisce Éireann is extremely poor from traffic to water outages. There have been particular issues in Celbridge, Maynooth, Leixlip and north east Kildare. The difficulty I and communities face involves holding Uisce Éireann accountable around timelines and particularly around traffic and water outages. What can we do in relation to Uisce Éireann because its responses take weeks and if we are fortunate, days.

There needs to be more accountability from Irish Water, particularly on these specific projects.

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. There is a unit now within Uisce Éireann that is meant to be responding to public representatives in respect of issues. I do not have the specifics but I clearly can detect from the nature of the Deputy's contribution that he is irate at what has transpired in respect of a project in his area. I will talk to the Minister about it.

Deputy Colm Burke: Will the Taoiseach outline when funding will be provided for the construction of the new paediatric unit at Cork University Hospital, CUH, given that planning permission was granted in 2022 and also taking into account that eight senior medical consultants have signed a letter expressing concern in respect of the current situation in the paediatric unit and stating there is a risk to patients? Can clarification be given as regards the emergency work that is required to be put in place immediately to deal with their concerns?

The Taoiseach: My understanding is that under the current programme, the development is on track to go to tender for the main building works this year and to appoint a main contractor in quarter 1 of 2027, subject to the necessary approvals. As the Deputy knows, there was a phase 1 back in 2017. Phase 2 is the paediatric inpatient accommodation, which will deliver 82 much-needed inpatient beds, both new and replacement. It has taken time but, in parallel with all this, a substantial package of enabling works has been under way since 2024 to support both the paediatric unit and the wider redevelopment of the CUH campus. The paediatric unit forms part of the first phase of major CUH campus developments, which are significant in scale, cost and complexity. We will keep a weather eye on the project.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Today's announcement regarding the empty GPO and the row-back from the wholesale commercialisation of the site is welcome. Maybe now the Taoiseach can row back on his endorsement of the Hammerson plan to destroy the nearby battlefield site on Moore Street, not just because that plan would lay waste to one of Dublin's most important historical heritage sites but also because of Hammerson's continued partnership with Allianz, which has been cited in a UN report as an enabler of Israel's genocide in Palestine with its €1 billion purchase of Israeli war bonds and more. Will the Taoiseach end his association with and support for Hammerson and Allianz and their plans for Moore Street?

The Taoiseach: First, there was no reversal in respect of the GPO. You guys in Sinn Féin created a false controversy and made false assertions that we were turning the GPO into a retail outlet.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: They were your words.

The Taoiseach: Then your party ran a great campaign. It is the normal kind of behaviour you go on with.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Your words.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Allow the Taoiseach to answer, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: It is terribly cynical politics of the worst kind but it is a great old technique to create an issue and send a hare up the field when actually there is no issue in the first place. Of course the GPO will be an iconic building by the time we are finished with it but, as the Deputy knows, there is a huge complex behind it. We are looking at the major iconic cultural aspect. There will be a post office there and there will be other elements there as well to create footfall. We hope to have either a State agency or a public service there also. It will take a lot of work.

Likewise, there is some very good work being done on Moore Street by the State but that has been attacked as well by your good selves.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: There is no work happening on Moore Street.

The Taoiseach: It seems to me you want to keep the campaign going on forever.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: You are telling lies again.

The Taoiseach: Deputy McDonald told the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, she was against it.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: When is it opening?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Ó Snodaigh, please. I have called Deputy Cummins.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: The Taoiseach should not mislead the Dáil.

Deputy Jen Cummins: In my constituency, there are a number of children at risk of deportation. They are too young to have known anywhere else and they are going to be ripped from the communities in which they have friends, classmates and all the people who care for and love them. This time last year, a number of children from my constituency were deported before the end of the school year, which was very traumatic for everybody. This year, I do not know whether the deportations will happen during the school year. I asked last year that they not happen during the school year. What work has been done since last year by Tusla and the Department of justice to make sure children who are being deported are treated with the utmost respect and dignity and that both their human rights and their rights as children are protected?

The Taoiseach: Everything will be done to uphold the rights of children and human rights. There also has to be a fair and firm migration system. The key to it is to have timely processing of applications so that children or families are not here an inordinate length of time, during which they put down roots and so on, before then, as a result of the application process, being found not to have proper status. Huge progress has been made in accelerating the timelines for the first phase of applications. Work is also under way on the next phase in terms of the appeals process. I think ensuring children are not deported during school time is a reasonable position.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: The recent severe storms have dramatically accelerated erosion around our coastline. The coastal erosion at Rosslare Strand has reached a critical level that is endangering the entire community in the area, no more so than at the well-known and well-established tourist destination of Kelly's Resort Hotel, which is a family business that was built up over decades. This is a thriving community that services the entire country. It is a natural beauty spot with easy access to beautiful white beaches. The Coast Protection Act 1963 includes a specific reference to a requirement that Rosslare Strand be maintained "in proper repair and effective condition". Under the Act, once coastal erosion is identified, as is the case right now, the State has a duty to act to protect the coastline. Will the Taoiseach ask the relevant Departments to consider prioritising the delivery of the coastal protection scheme for Rosslare Strand? Cosmetic repairs will not save this coastal community and its most valuable national tourist attraction.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy has raised the specific case of Rosslare. More generally, we will have to put more resources to one side for the costs of adaptation to climate change. That change is here now. I understand the temperature in London, for example, will be 40 °C by the end of the week. That is an extraordinarily high temperature across the water. There has been too much complacency about climate change being something in the distant future. The impacts of climate change are here and now. We need stronger budget lines for the costs of those impacts.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Tá go leor cainte faoi chúrsaí infreastruchtúir faoi láthair. D'ardaigh mé cheana leis an Taoiseach na fadhbanna sa bhuninfreastruchtúr i gConamara. Ciallaíonn sé sin an cineál infreastruchtúr simplí atá ag teastáil ionas go mbeadh daoine in ann a bheith ina gcónaí in áit agus go mbeadh siad in ann obair ann freisin. Ceann de na rudaí bunúsacha sin ná cúrsaí leathanbhanda. Tá áiteanna ar fud fad Conamara nach bhfuil leathanbhanda iontu, ach tá ceantair freisin atá sách gar don chathair áit nach bhfuil leathanbhanda ach in áiteanna áirithe sna bailte sin. Cén uair a cheapann an Taoiseach go mbeidh an buninfreastruchtúr sin ann do mhuintir Chonamara, go háirithe nuair atáimid ag caint ar chúrsaí leathanbhanda dóibh siúd a bhfuil gnólachtaí acu, mar shampla?

The Taoiseach: Aontaím leis an Teachta gur cheart go mbeadh muid in ann an buninfreastruchtúr sin a chur i bhfeidhm. Tá deacracht ann go háirithe in áiteanna iargúlta. Bhí sé soiléir le linn Stoirm Éowyn, mar shampla, nach raibh an córas chomh láidir is a cheap gach éinne go raibh sé. Cailleadh an córas go han-tapa ar fad. Beidh mé ag caint leis an Aire, an Teachta Calleary, le féachaint an féidir linn níos mó a dhéanamh ó thaobh áiteanna iargúlta agus b'fhéidir níos mó tacaíochta a thabhairt don pobal nó do na comhlachtaí chun plean a chur i bhfeidhm ionas go mbeidh broadband ann don phobal.

Deputy Edward Timmins: The 132 bus service is the only bus to Dublin for most of west Wicklow. A year ago, I was told by the National Transport Authority, NTA, that the frequency of the service would be doubling. Nothing has happened since then. How do different Departments and Government bodies talk to one other? The NTA made that announcement without even having a timetable from Bus Éireann. How will communication be improved between Departments and different bodies? Second, the much-needed 199 bus service promised for last September from Glendalough to Bray was all ready to go before being canned at the last minute. How can we ensure Departments and State bodies talk and work better together? There seems to be a complete breakdown in communication. They are telling us different stories.

The Taoiseach: There will be songs written about the 132 bus yet. It has been raised here on numerous occasions and I will talk to the Minister in respect of it.

There could be a few PhD theses written about Government agencies and Government Departments talking to each other. There is a human tendency to try to live in silos. We work extremely hard to break all of that down. The integrated approach of people working together is key. I will follow up with the Minister for Transport in respect of bus transport. There has been a significant expansion of bus services over the last number of years. There was some degree of consolidation this year, to be frank, and in terms of other expenditure items.

Deputy John Clendennen: Earlier this year I received confirmation that an additional 12 therapists would be appointed to the midlands integrated healthcare area. This would benefit my own constituency with occupational therapy, physiotherapy and children's disability services. I fully understand the challenges around recruitment right now but this week another barrier was brought to my attention via a response to a parliamentary question. This is the whole area of Garda vetting, with the HSE referring to significant delays in the process in relation to recruitment. I have no issue with strict Garda vetting. It is necessary but when it becomes an additional barrier to recruitment we have to address it. There are too many families waiting on these services, on the likes of physiotherapy and disability services. Any delays that we can rule out, we should be addressing them. I ask the Government to engage with the Garda National Vetting Bureau and the HSE to ensure that we reduce these barriers as soon as possible.

The Taoiseach: That is a reasonable point. I will talk to the Minister for justice on this to see if there are ways we can streamline vetting, particularly when someone has already been through a vetting procedure and process. If they apply for another job in parallel or some time afterwards, in a different area, apparently they have to go through the process again. Recruitment has been a considerable issue for us in the health service, particularly in the area of therapy. Anything we can do to speed that up is something we should do.

Deputy Paul Lawless: The July provision summer programme exists for the most vulnerable children in this country. This year the government has made a complete shambles of it. First, the Government opened and closed the application window before many schools and families even knew it was open. Second, the Government significantly cut some of the teachers and SNAs allocated to schools. Third, effectively the late allocations arriving at the eleventh hour

means that many schools do not know whether or not they can open on Monday morning. For example, Claremorris National School last year ran the programme with 15 staff members. This year, this allocation has been cut to just five. The fact that this allocation only arrived last week, days before the summer programme is due to commence, has left this programme under significant jeopardy. This is not just an isolated issue. It is happening right across the country. Children with disabilities are the most vulnerable. This July provision, in terms of the reduced allocation to schools, and the fact that the late allocations have arrived, means that many principals do not know whether or not they can open the door on Monday morning. Will the Taoiseach instruct the Department to review? Will he give schools the authority and the confidence to open on Monday morning with an appropriate staffing ratio?

The Taoiseach: I am mindful of language but in ten years we have gone from about 8,700 students availing of the summer scheme to 70,000 students availing of it. How does the Deputy call that a shambles? That is nonsense.

Deputy Paul Lawless: The application window opened and closed.

The Taoiseach: That is across 2,000 schools and funding has increased by €42 million. The scheme has grown out of all proportion. In fact, it was a scheme that originally was meant to target children with additional needs or children in certain circumstances of disadvantage. Any review would need to keep a focus. It has grown exponentially. There has been a lot of interaction between the Department and the schools. We have a lot of SNAs appointed. About 11,500 SNAs participated last year, with a similar number expected this year. That is now a very significant resource, so let us have some balance and perspective.

Deputy Paul Lawless: What about the late applications?

Deputy William Aird: I want to raise the issue of Leprino Foods Company in Portlaoise. This was a joint venture between Glanbia and the Leprino family which is known worldwide for its mozzarella cheese. The company came to Portlaoise in a joint venture to manufacture stringy mozzarella cheese. The Leprino family bought Glanbia out of the project, so we now have a situation where Leprino Foods is exiting this country and moving to the North of Ireland and Wales. This factory is three minutes from junction 17. It is in our enterprise park, which I am delighted to say is completely full now. This factory cost €130 million to build. Roughly €7 million of taxpayers' money went into it and it is now for sale, as I speak here today, for €12 million. I ask the Taoiseach to use his good offices at this critical time and sit down with relevant Ministers to ensure that we get somebody in there because it is such a new factory. It is there available with all new equipment and is open, from my point of view, to many industries in the food sector. We have to compliment the likes of Tirlán and Kerry Group that have invested huge money in this. I am asking the Taoiseach to please take a personal interest in it for the people of Portlaoise and County Laois.

The Taoiseach: I am conscious of the fact that Laois needs investment in the industrial context. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Peter Burke, to engage with Enterprise Ireland and the IDA to see what their views on this are. It may sell private sector to private sector and another

enterprise could come in there. From what the Deputy is saying it seems to be a modern factory, so it is a facility that potentially another company could utilise. I would have concerns that Leprino Foods is moving to Northern Ireland or to Wales. We need to understand the reasons behind that because that would be a concern. Maybe those areas are offering more supports but we need to have a full understanding as to why the move happened. I will talk the Minister to see if something can be done with the agencies in respect of that facility.

Anti-Shrinkflation Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Holly Cairns: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to provide price transparency for consumers by preventing hidden price increases by way of quantity reduction, allowing consumers to make informed purchasing decisions.

When people go to the supermarket they deserve to know what they are paying for. They deserve to know if the product they bought last week has become smaller this week and if the quantity has been reduced while the price has stayed the same, or worse, gone up. Everyone deserves to be able to make informed choices about how they spend their money but, right now, too many people feel like they are being caught out. The weekly shop costs more than ever, and people know they are getting less for their money, but it is not often very clear why. That is because of a practice known as shrinkflation. This happens when a product is reduced in size or quantity while the price stays the same. It is a tactic used by manufacturers and retailers to maintain profit while giving the impression that nothing has changed. It is a hidden price increase and it can be very difficult to spot. We have all seen examples of chocolate bars getting smaller, cereal boxes with fewer grammes inside and fewer items in a multipack.

Consumer reports show everyday household essentials are shrinking while prices continue to rise. It is happening across every major supermarket chain in the country. The changes might seem minor - fewer biscuits in a pack or sheets on a toilet roll - but there is a reason these price increases are hidden. Increasing the label price by 20% would be noticed and would make people think twice about buying a product and go for something else. Shrinking the contents means people notice the change a little later, after they have made the purchase, opened the packet and finished the product and realise it did not last as long as it used to. People realise that they will now have to buy more earlier than they thought they would. It is part of the reason people often feel like their money just is not stretching as far as it used to even when, on paper, their shopping lists and shopping bills have stayed the same. We are in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis that is putting enormous pressure on households across the country. Pensioners are making difficult choices every week. Families are stretching every single euro. Workers are watching their wages disappear into rent, childcare, energy bills and, more and more, into food costs.

When every euro counts, transparency matters. That is what this Bill seeks to address.

This legislation would require large retailers to provide clear labelling on a product or a notice nearby to inform consumers when shrinkflation has occurred. Consumers would be clearly informed that the product costs more than it used to and contains less. It does not ban reducing quantity, impose price controls or tell businesses what they can charge. What it does

is say consumers have a right to know if a product has become smaller and more expensive. This is a very simple proposal. The exact same regulations have been introduced in France and Austria. Both countries recognised something important, namely, that transparency builds trust and allows people to make informed choices.

The cost-of-living crisis is out of control and people often feel that the system is stacked against ordinary consumers. This Bill is just one small, practical step we can take to address that. Consumers should not need a magnifying glass, a spreadsheet or a photographic memory to work out whether they are getting value for their money. The information should be available to them clearly and openly at the point of purchase. Transparency should be the norm, not the exception. That is very simply what this legislation seeks to achieve.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

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

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

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

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I move:

That Dáil Éireann approves the following Regulations in draft:

Data Protection Act 2018 (Section 60(6)) and (Section 51(3)) (Commission of Investigation into the Handling of Historical Child Sexual Abuse in Day and Boarding Schools) Regulations 2026;

a copy of which was laid in draft before Dáil Éireann on the 16th June, 2026.

Question put and agreed to.

Dublin Airport (Passenger Capacity) Bill 2026: Second Stage

Minister for Transport (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am pleased to introduce the Dublin Airport (Passenger Capacity) Bill 2026 for the consideration of the House. The main purpose of this Bill is to address the passenger cap planning condition at Dublin Airport. The importance of addressing the passenger cap and its

effects on Dublin Airport is recognised clearly in the programme for Government, which includes a clear commitment to work with stakeholders to achieve the objective of lifting the passenger cap at Dublin Airport as soon as possible.

I have met with a wide variety of stakeholders over the past 18 months, including local residents, airlines, business groups and industry regulators in relation to the passenger cap planning condition. The general scheme of the Bill has also been scrutinised by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport, which received a considerable number of submissions from a wide range of stakeholders. The committee held several hearings to ensure that the views of all interested parties were heard, and I have taken on board the recommendations of the committee insofar as possible in finalising the text of the Bill.

In drafting this legislative intervention, I have taken the views of all of these stakeholders into account. I have also obtained extensive legal advice throughout the drafting of the legislation, and I am satisfied that what I am presenting will allow for the continued sustainable development of Dublin Airport, while balancing the rights of local residents with the objectives of Ireland's national aviation policy and the needs of business and tourism.

I think we can all agree that, as an island nation, Dublin Airport is of strategic importance to this country. Over 36 million passengers travelled through Dublin Airport in 2025. As such, there are a number of recognised risks around the passenger cap planning condition remaining in place. First, if enforced, it would result in an immediate cut of over 4 million passengers per annum, impacting on existing connectivity and employment at the airport and in the wider aviation sector. Second, it would stifle continued growth, undermine our ambitious hub strategy for the airport and negatively impact on our economy in terms of business, trade and tourism. It will also very negatively impact on the jobs the airport underpins. There are about 130,000 direct and indirect jobs in Dublin Airport. Airlines need certainty to plan future schedules and the continued existence of the cap creates only uncertainty, which can be expected to continue to affect the choices that airlines will make about serving the Dublin Airport. Finally, the reputational damage for Ireland could be impacted if capacity is restricted at our main international gateway.

The 32 million passenger cap is a planning condition that was imposed by An Coimisiún Pleanála, then known as An Bord Pleanála, when granting permission for terminal 2 in 2007 and extension works at terminal 1 in 2008. The condition was put in place primarily to address surface access constraints at the time. However, there have been significant upgrades of local road access and public transport offerings to and from the airport since then. It is also very significant, as Members will know, that we have a full, clean planning permission for MetroLink, on which construction will start next year.

DAA has statutory responsibility for the management, operation and development of Dublin Airport and it is its responsibility to engage with the relevant planning authorities to ensure that planning permission is in place to facilitate the development of the airport. DAA submitted its infrastructure application to the relevant planning authority, Fingal County Council, in December 2023, seeking to increase the passenger cap to 40 million passengers per annum and seeking permission, importantly, for the development of a suite of infrastructure projects at the airport to facilitate growth.

This planning application is currently under consideration by Fingal County Council. As part of the process in place for development at the airport since the enactment of the Aircraft Noise (Dublin Airport) Regulation Act 2019, a draft noise-related regulatory decision was published by the Aircraft Noise Competent Authority, ANCA, last month and is currently subject to a public consultation for a period of 14 weeks. A final regulatory decision in relation to the noise aspect of this planning application is expected after that period ends. This decision will be incorporated in the planning decision by Fingal County Council, which is expected shortly thereafter. It is, however, likely that any planning decision by Fingal County Council may then be appealed to An Coimisiún Pleanála and may also be subject to judicial review. This further highlights the need to address the passenger cap by way of a legislative solution to ensure clarity for all stakeholders and to ensure that connectivity to and from our country is not undermined.

I will now take colleagues through the main provisions of the Bill that will empower me, as the Minister for Transport, to make an order to amend or revoke the passenger cap planning condition. In Part 1, the first thing I draw attention to is the definition of "passenger capacity condition" under section 2 of the Bill. This definition makes it clear that the power to make an order relates solely to a planning condition that limits the number of passengers who use Dublin Airport for the purpose of travelling by air to or from another airport in any period. I know there were concerns raised during pre-legislative scrutiny that the power being provided to amend any planning condition in the general scheme was too broad, and that has been addressed. Under section 6 of this Part, I have a general power of direction to DAA for any purpose related to this Bill. I may use this power to procure information from DAA in relation to an application, ensure the preparation and submission of appropriate reports relating to the environmental assessments or initiate the application process, which is a very important provision. In such directions, I may specify the period and form in which information should be provided. DAA has a legal obligation to comply with such a direction.

Part 2 provides that DAA may make an application for the making of an order under the legislation. That application from DAA will propose the manner in which the passenger cap is to be amended or revoked, reasons for the application and a summary of the environmental impacts. I will consider the application and consult any person I consider appropriate. If I am satisfied there is justification to make an order, I will notify DAA of my intention to do so and direct it to prepare an environmental impact assessment report and a Natura impact statement. I have the power to accept, vary or refuse an application from DAA.

Part 3, covering sections 8 to 23, inclusive, provides for the environmental impact assessment and appropriate assessment that will be undertaken independently of me, as Minister. An Coimisiún Pleanála will carry out the assessments under the habitats directive and the environmental impact assessment directive, which will include consideration of compliance with the water framework directive.

As part of these assessments, the commission will publish the material for the assessments and undertake a public consultation for a period of no longer than 30 days. There is provision, though, for a further 30-day public consultation should the commission seek and receive further information that is substantial in nature. I have included strict timelines within the legislation, and the commission will have 20 weeks to carry out the assessments and come to a reasoned conclusion in relation to the environmental impacts of making an order and a determination as

to whether there will be an impact on the surrounding habitats. There is the ability to pause this timeline for a period of four weeks to allow for any requests for further information to be dealt with. The commission is encouraged, insofar as possible, to carry out these assessments jointly and to take all necessary steps to work in an expeditious manner, avoid any undue delays and ensure that appropriate resources are allocated to carry out its functions under the legislation within the timeframe provided. The commission will notify me of its findings arising from the environmental assessments and publish its reasoned conclusion and determination.

Part 4 sets out the parameters around the making of the order by me and that an order will be superseded by a planning decision on the DAA's infrastructure application. Under section 24, I am prohibited from making an order until the environmental assessments have been carried out. I believe that provision addresses some concerns raised during pre-legislative scrutiny about the public being excluded from the process. This is not the case. At least one period of public consultation in relation to the environmental impacts of making an order will take place.

Under section 25, I am empowered to make an order to amend or revoke the passenger cap, where I am of the opinion that the passenger cap is causing harm to the economy of the State, international connectivity and Ireland's reputation in respect of air transport. In making an order, I will consider and take account of the outcomes of the environmental assessments undertaken by the commission, and I have the power to include any conditions in an order that I deem appropriate to mitigate any impact on the environment.

In consultation with the Minister for housing, where appropriate, I can deem the conditions attached to an order as exempted development but only where they are not separately subject to environmental assessments under EU law. I will publish an order on my Department's website and in *Iris Oifigiúil* and inform Fingal County Council, which is the relevant planning authority.

While it is critical that we deal with the passenger cap planning condition, it would be meaningless to do so if we did not have the infrastructure to accommodate that future growth. Therefore, in the preparation of this legislation, one of the key objectives was to protect DAA's live planning application. As such, the legislation I bring before the House today was crafted to allow that application to proceed through the planning process, notwithstanding the making of an order. Section 26 sets out the effect of an order as it relates to that planning application given that both deal with the same planning condition, namely, the 32 million passenger cap.

In short, once a final decision is made in relation to DAA's infrastructure application, that decision will supersede any order made under this legislation in this particular application. However, an order will remain in place through any appeal or judicial review, JR, of that planning decision and if that planning application is refused, then the order will also remain in effect. This will ensure consistency and certainty for all stakeholders while DAA's planning application proceeds to a final planning decision. I believe this also addresses a recommendation, which, again, arose from the committee, for a sunset clause to be introduced.

Part 5, which covers sections 27 to 35, inclusive, sets out the judicial review procedures. The validity of an order made under the legislation, or an alleged failure to carry out a function under the legislation, may only be challenged by way of judicial review. An application for

leave to apply for a JR must be taken within eight weeks and the applicant must have sufficient interest in the matter.

Part 6 provides for amendments to the Planning and Developments Acts. Under these amendments, Fingal County Council and An Coimisiún Pleanála are prevented from imposing a passenger cap as a condition in future planning decisions related to Dublin Airport. However, this does not apply in the case of the condition being imposed following a noise assessment by the noise regulator, ANCA, under the balanced approach and it does not apply, in this instance specifically, to the DAA's live infrastructure application.

This Part also provides for amendments to the Aircraft Noise (Dublin Airport) Regulation Act 2019. The definition of operating restriction has been amended to align with EU regulations on the establishment of rules and procedures with regard to the introduction of noise-related operating restrictions at European Union airports within the balanced approach. Two transitional provisions that are no longer relevant have been deleted and a provision has been inserted to clarify that the 32 million passenger cap is not an operating restriction within the meaning of the 2019 Act.

Section 39 provides a derogation from section 15(1) of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015. I want to explain a couple of reasons this is the case. First, the passenger cap was not a targeted climate measure and, second, international aviation emissions are excluded from the climate action plan. As such, this provides clarity as to the application of that Act to the actions that are under this specific legislation.

As I mentioned, we are an island nation and we cannot ignore the strategic importance of Dublin Airport to our economy and the serious harm that would be caused to the economy, our people, our international connectivity and the international reputation of the State by failing to be in a position to facilitate not only future growth, but the current level of passengers and cargo at our main international gateway.

The legislation I am proposing will not only allow us to ensure the sustainable development of the airport, but will also ensure that any environmental impacts will be independently assessed and the views of the public will be heard as part of that process. As such, it is my view that the approach set out in the legislation represents the most balanced and reasonable way forward.

We are dealing here with a legacy issue. The Dublin Airport passenger cap does not serve this State or the people of the region well. I want the airport to grow on a sustainable basis and to operate as a good neighbour. I grew up beside the airport and have lived in the area my whole life. I know that tens of thousands of people derive income and good salaries from Dublin Airport. It is a critical part of infrastructure in this country and critical to our international connectivity. We have tens of thousands of people working there who not only derive an income there, as I said, but are at the leading edge of aviation, not just in Ireland but across Europe and the globe.

This legislation is critical to ensuring we can grow Dublin Airport in a sustainable manner. It ensures and enshrines public consultation within it but sets strict timelines in that regard. We have also ensured that the existing planning application that is with Fingal County Council is fully protected. There is a process within this as well, in that the Bill gives the Minister of the

day the power to preclude the imposition of further caps but also to seek applications from the Dublin Airport authority in this instance to raise the cap further in that regard.

I am looking forward to the debate and the input from Members from across the House. I thank the members of the joint committee under the chairpersonship of Deputy Michael Murphy for the work they have done in this regard. We have reflected many of the recommendations from the pre-legislative scrutiny and the committee's report in the Bill. This Bill is of strategic importance. It is urgent that it be passed. For this reason, I thank the House for its consideration of Second Stage today. I look forward to moving the legislation to its conclusion next week.

Deputy Pa Daly: As an island nation, our connectivity is obviously not optional. Our economy, tourism sector, diaspora connections and ability to attract investment all depend on Ireland's connectivity. It is the lynchpin for hundreds of thousands of jobs. There can, therefore, be no question than an ambitious, forward-looking aviation strategy is essential. As Ireland's primary international gateway and a critical piece of infrastructure, Dublin Airport is fundamental.

Right now, the passenger cap is being constrained by a rule that no longer makes sense. The cap is outdated and out of step with reality. Some 36 million passengers passed through Dublin Airport despite the cap being set at 32 million. A difference of 4 million between the two is not a rounding error; it is proof that something has not been working.

We in Sinn Féin believe the Dublin Airport passenger cap should be lifted but we are not here just to rubberstamp the legislation. While the cap must be lifted in order that we allow for progress, that does not mean the Government's approach should be given *carte blanche*. First, the aviation strategy must move beyond the city and county of Dublin.

Rather than being treated as an afterthought, the Government must recognise that regional airports are key to unlocking Ireland's potential and to delivering balanced regional development. Therefore, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael must move beyond their current narrow focus on Dublin and expand their horizons, supported by whatever Independent TDs are still currently supporting Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

From Kerry to Cork, Shannon, Knock, Waterford, Donegal, Belfast, Derry and beyond, Ireland's regional airports are awash with unlocked potential. The Bill must engage with the fact that local communities have felt ignored and overlooked for years. Proper community consultation does not mean preventing progress. When it is done properly, it can enhance it. The Bill presents an opportunity to make the Minister and DAA do a better job. There are amendments that Sinn Féin will be proposing because the outdated airport cap is holding Ireland back. The original 32 million cap, as the Minister said, was introduced as a planning condition at the time of the planning permission for terminal 2. As he said, it was primarily to address the surface access constraints at the time. It was rooted in very specific concerns about traffic congestion and local impacts but the world has moved on.

Passenger demand has outgrown the cap and the cap itself has become blunt and outdated. The infrastructure around the airport has changed since 2007. It is now creating uncertainty, not only for the airport authority but for airlines, workers, the wider economy and the stakeholders the Minister mentioned in his opening speech. There are ongoing legal challenges

and looming regulatory decisions at European level that could force stricter enforcement of the cap if it remained in place and we could potentially see reduced flight slots or curtailed capacity and possible damage to tourism, trade and jobs. Legal and regulatory chaos could result from it. That is not a risk we should take.

Industry stakeholders have been quite clear that the cap was limiting growth and restricting connectivity, particularly on key transatlantic routes, and creating uncertainty that could undermine Ireland's competitiveness. Nowhere is this more true than the tourism sector, which is so important in my county of Kerry. Tourism supports almost 230,000 jobs across the country which is nearly one in ten jobs. These are jobs in every county, in rural communities as well as cities. Many of them are in sectors where workers are already under pressure. The sector is facing real challenges. In 2025, international trips declined and visitor spending fell. That is a warning sign we cannot ignore.

Connectivity is also critical to reversing that trend. Without sufficient capacity at Dublin Airport, we risk losing visitors to other destinations. However, growth and tourism must also be fair and balanced. Sinn Féin has consistently argued for a tourism strategy that delivers shared prosperity and supports communities right across the island, not just the stakeholders who are involved here. That means linking aviation policy to regional development, sustainability and decent working conditions for those who are employed in the sector. The Government cannot claim to support workers while failing to ensure the benefits reach them by delaying the living wage and leaving low-paid workers carrying the burden. It is about more than just lifting the cap. It is about ensuring that lifting the barrier to Dublin Airport's capacity means Ireland's true aviation potential is achieved in a fair and regionally balanced way. It is not just about lifting the cap and the problem is solved as nothing could be further from the truth. Lifting Dublin Airport's cap while continuing to ignore the potential of the regional airports will never produce the answer that Ireland needs and will continue to leave large parts of our island behind. Despite what the Government thinks, not all runways lead to Dublin.

This Bill presents us with an opportunity to address one of the significant failings of the Government; its lack of ambition when it comes to regional aviation. At present, Dublin Airport handles the overwhelming majority of passenger traffic at about 88%. By contrast, Cork Airport accounts for about 6% and others even less. That imbalance is not inevitable. It is the result of policy choices. The over-concentration is not strategy and it is holding back certain parts of the country. Regional airports have enormous potential to drive economic growth, support tourism and create jobs but they are not being given the tools or investment they need. Funding for regional airports remains limited, fragmented and overly focused on maintaining basic operations, rather than enabling growth and expansion.

Spread over years and across multiple airports, the sums allocated are not sufficient to transform connectivity or attract new routes. The result is a system that underperforms and leaves regional economies and airports, such as Kerry Airport, at a disadvantage. We need a fundamentally different approach that recognises the role of regional airports as engines of development and not afterthoughts. We need strategic investment and infrastructure, support for route development and airline partnerships, integration with wider transport networks and a clear, long-term vision for balanced aviation growth. We cannot continue with the model where Dublin expands without a strategy for the rest of the country. Ultimately, there has been an incoherent aviation strategy, no long-term plan for Dublin Airport, no serious roadmap for

regional airports and, importantly, no all-island approach to connectivity. That is not good enough for a modern economy.

As part of its focus on regional airports, the Government needs to see beyond the partitionist approach. Ireland is a small island economy and our connectivity challenges do not stop at the border. An all-island approach to aviation offers real opportunities for tourism, trade and regional balance. We saw how fragile our transport links were when disruptions hit key routes and yet the Government refuses to think holistically about how people and goods move on and off this island. There is a clear need for resilience and co-ordination across the island. The Bill should be seen in that broader context; not just as a measure for Dublin Airport but as a wider strategy for connectivity across the island. Lifting the cap also requires the addressing of the very real concerns of communities that live around Dublin Airport. For too long, local voices have not been heard in a meaningful way. Residents have raised serious issues but they continue to be rebuffed and ignored. We will be bringing forward amendments that should give the Government the opportunity to take the concerns of the residents into consideration, which have not been heard in a meaningful way. There are also outstanding issues around flight paths, planning compliance and infrastructure commitments that were originally tied to the passenger cap. Many of these commitments, including road improvements, have not been fully delivered. We are now being asked to support legislation that will override planning conditions that exist without adequately addressing the failures. If we are to lift the cap, we must also strengthen protections for local communities.

The final key issue I will address is the scope of ministerial powers. The legislation gives the Minister significant authority to amend or revoke the passenger cap. While that may be necessary, it must be clearly defined, transparent and limited in scope. I see what the Minister has said about the power to make the order relating solely to a planning condition limiting the number of passengers who use Dublin Airport. That needs to be stated clearly. There is also concern and it must not extend beyond the passenger cap to other planning conditions. There are questions about oversight, accountability and the role of existing regulatory bodies. We need to ensure the powers granted are proportionate, clearly defined and subject to appropriate safeguards. The cap must go. We know it is outdated. We know it is damaging. However, lifting that is not alone a solution. If the Government thinks it can bulldoze this legislation through without fixing other underlying issues, it is mistaken because it is about protecting communities, supporting workers, delivering regional development and building a real aviation strategy for the future of island. Get that right and this Bill can work. If we get it wrong, we will be back here again dealing with the consequences of short-term thinking and missed opportunities. We will engage and we will propose solutions to work with.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: This legislation on the passenger cap must strike the right balance between ensuring our island's connectivity while also acknowledging the experiences and voices of local residents who live close to the airport. The €32 million annual passenger cap has been in place for many years now. However, in this time, passenger demand has far outgrown this limit and the cap has caused significant regulatory uncertainty for the aviation sector. Sinn Féin supports the abolition of the cap but we believe this should be done in a measured way which provides the opportunity for local residents to meaningfully engage in the future of the airport, especially in terms of the regulation of noise levels and flight paths. As Deputy Daly outlined, we have significant concerns surrounding the powers this Bill

proposes to give to the Minister. We will be submitting a number of amendments across the many sections of this Bill.

While lifting the passenger cap for Dublin Airport is critical to our island's connectivity, the Government must place just as much energy into developing our regional airports.

4 o'clock

Airports such as those at Shannon and Knock provide a fantastic service, especially for people who live in the west of Ireland, and are key economic and tourism drivers for our region. These airports have seen passenger growth over the last number of years but the reality is that the lion's share of traffic continues to be processed through Dublin, with well over 80% of the State's air-passenger traffic being processed there. Increasing the use of airports like Shannon and Knock would reduce the level of traffic at Dublin Airport while also supporting greater growth opportunities across the west. Developing and promoting the use of our regional airports is an essential tool to deliver economic growth to every corner of this island and to promote balanced regional development. However, investment from Government must be there to deliver on this. This includes investment in the likes of reliable public transport links, both bus and rail, to airports like Shannon and Knock, which is a recommendation from the all-island rail review, so that people can make the switch to using these airports. In particular, the full reopening of the western rail corridor would provide a significant opportunity to improve connectivity to Knock Airport.

I also raise that it has been over ten years since the national aviation policy was published. From parliamentary questions I have submitted, there is still no sign of when the much-promised updated policy will be delivered. Without an overarching national aviation policy that reflects the developments in aviation, how can we have confidence in the Government's approach to aviation development, especially for our regional airports, which I have outlined?

We have waited quite a while for this legislation but there are still significant gaps and shortfalls that need to be addressed. This legislation must be used as an opportunity to ensure the residents who live near Dublin Airport are engaged with in a meaningful way and to ensure the DAA is not given *carte blanche* to do what it wants. The work surrounding this legislation must also be used as an opportunity to encourage the use of our regional airports. We need to see an updated national aviation policy delivered as a matter of urgency, and we will be submitting a number of amendments to this legislation. These amendments will be an opportunity for the Minister and Government to ensure this legislation is fit for the transport needs of the whole island.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I welcome the opportunity to make a contribution this afternoon. I thank Deputies Daly and O'Hara for their work on this legislation and for their continued work in this area. I also commend the residents' groups, including the St. Margaret's The Ward group and other groups that represent the people who are living in the environs of Dublin Airport.

I wish to address two issues the Minister raised in his remarks and I hope he will be able to come back to them in his concluding remarks. I will try to get back in if I can to hear these, but I will look back on the recording in any event. The Minister referenced the programme for Government including "a clear commitment to work with stakeholders to achieve the objective

of lifting the passenger cap". Will he outline, in terms of the residents, how that commitment will be achieved? He also told us that what he is presenting here today will allow for the continued sustainable development of Dublin Airport while balancing the rights of local residents. Will the Minister outline for me what the rights of local residents are exactly and how that balance will be achieved? The Minister will know, having represented this area for a long time - I have represented them for ten years myself - that sometimes the residents who live in the environs of the airport do not feel like they have been listened to or that their concerns have been taken on board. As the Minister will know, all they want is for the airport to be a good neighbour. They feel that they are good neighbours and they want the airport to be a good neighbour. However, when your neighbour is as big and noisy as Dublin Airport is, it is sometimes very difficult to see and feel that it is being a good neighbour.

The residents want to be treated fairly, which is not unreasonable. Many of the people who live in the environs of the airport do not want to relocate but, if they have to do so, they want to be able to get a settlement from the voluntary dwelling purchase scheme that will enable them to move on with their lives while maintaining as much as possible what they have in terms of their family, etc. There are people who live near the airport who are there for generations. The airport grew up around them. They were there first. The Minister will know these people well. If they are forced to relocate and cannot remain where they are, they want a decent settlement so that they can rebuild their lives elsewhere.

I am also conscious of those people who are employed in the airport. Again, many of them are constituents of mine. I know how important the airport is as an employer and also as a driver of business. More can be done in terms of regional balance.

There is also a real need for an independent review and an assessment of the flight paths. The changes to the flight paths that took place recently were shrouded in mystery. People who never had a plane go over their house before found themselves in flight paths and they found it very hard to get answers or to get to the bottom of it. They will say themselves that they felt like they were gaslit by the Government and the airport.

We will be bringing forward amendments, as has been outlined. Those amendments are intended to be constructive but also to ensure the voices of the residents will be heard.

Deputy Mark Ward: As the Minister knows, Ireland is an island and, therefore, its connectivity to the rest of the world is essential. The passenger cap at Dublin Airport is simply not working. In 2025, the cap was exceeded by around 4 million. Not only is it not working, it is not being adhered to. The Government must be mindful that any increase in the passenger cap at Dublin Airport will put pressure on existing services.

As was said already, Dublin Airport is an important employer. I was contacted recently by a pilot from my area about car parking issues for staff at Dublin Airport. His employer is unable to provide staff parking due to limited DAA parking capacity, which means many airport workers are being pushed into paid DAA parking or private airport parking options that require pre-booking. He told me that pilots are regularly rostered for standby duties, which leaves them in a really difficult position. Either they pay in advance for expensive parking that they may not ultimately need or they risk having no parking available if they are called off standby and have only an hour to report for duty. As can be imagined, this is really far from practical. During the summer months, public parking is often fully booked, which adds further

uncertainty. It does not take a rocket scientist to work out that lifting the passenger cap will mean more staff. More staff will mean more driving and more driving will mean that we will need more parking. I am calling on the Government to plan for this certain outcome when lifting any passenger cap.

Public transport is not a viable option for that pilot and many other people in Dublin Mid-West. I have raised many times with the Minister that there is no practical way to travel from Dublin Mid-West to the airport using public transport. The Airport Hopper was the most economical way for people in the area to get to the airport. People in Clondalkin, Lucan and Tallaght have been impacted by the decision to close this route. People in these areas have been left without a dedicated bus service to the airport for over a year. As the Minister knows, I asked him and the NTA to step in because when a privately run service stops, the State can take it over through a public service obligation agreement. My pleas have fallen on deaf ears so far. In light of removal of the passenger cap, I ask that any public service obligations are revisited and reconsidered because of the impact that will have on people in Dublin Mid-West.

I have a final point which I have raised numerous times as well. It is a national embarrassment that Dublin Airport does not have a current rail or metro link. MetroLink was spoken about in 2005. Fianna Fáil crashed the economy. It basically crashed MetroLink at the time. Twenty years later, it was announced. Will the Minister fill us in on any update on MetroLink? Will we see it any time this decade?

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: We start building next year.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: It is my first opportunity to speak with the Minister since becoming the Social Democrats spokesperson on transport and I put on record that I am looking forward to working with him for the duration of this term.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Me too.

Deputy Aidan Farrelly: The Minister does not need me to inform him just how important Dublin Airport is to this island. Directly, thousands of people work between both terminals every day and indirectly we have seen very impressive figures of the impact of the airport on hundreds of thousands of jobs. In 2025 alone, 36 million passengers went through Dublin Airport, a 5% increase year on year and a 46% increase since 2015. There were 215 days last year with more than 100,000 passengers. That equates to real, essential figures regarding tourism and employment opportunities. The 1.7 million transfers show us that Dublin can be and is a gateway to Europe and the rest of the world.

As the Minister will know, aviation accounts for 2.5% of global carbon emissions and close to 14% of transport emissions.

It is the second-largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in the transport sector. While we can see a rapid pace in decarbonisation in road transport due to alternative fuel sources, as Hannah Ritchie and Pablo Rosado suggest, the outlook for aviation is less clear. Some 1% of biofuel produced globally is used for air travel and less than 1% of aviation fuel is made up of biofuel. Globally, we do not have the infrastructure to supply the aviation fleet, even in the

most optimistic of scenarios. As the Minister has said, the impact of aviation on climate and biodiversity should always be central to any discussion about expanding our aviation strategy.

I am very aware that this cap was first introduced largely as the result of local infrastructure deficits and legitimate concerns regarding congestion, noise and impediments to those who live in the area or under the flight paths. It is worth putting on the record of this House that these issues have not gone away. If you couple the significant population increases in many of these areas with the significant increases in the number of passengers since 2007, if anything, the local infrastructure is less capable than ever of dealing with the consequences of the proposed legislation. As a Minister in the constituency, I accept Deputy O'Brien's bona fides in telling us of the support he is receiving on the ground from many who say this cap should be lifted for the sake of employment opportunities. That is also a very important point to make.

If we are going to have a serious conversation about the future capacity of our national airport, it should not be based solely on the capacity of nearby roads to cope with passenger numbers. However, I must ask if there is appetite across government to deliver meaningfully for the communities most affected by this legislation. I remind the Minister that, during preparation of the pre-legislative scrutiny report, we heard that 8,000 homes were affected by the north runway under the current flight paths, compared with the 538 homes that would have been affected under the original permitted route. That is a 15-fold increase. Recommendation 5 of the pre-legislative scrutiny report is "that meaningful engagement is undertaken by the daa with local communities to mitigate the impact of noise from the north runway." These are tangible actions that could be progressed alongside this legislation as it moves through the House.

We all know that Dublin Airport is not the only international airport on this island. Cork Airport has a capacity of 5 million passengers annually. Last year, 3.4 million people travelled through that airport. Shannon Airport welcomed 2.3 million passengers. That airport is also operating well below capacity. Ireland West Airport's passenger numbers exceeded 950,000 last year when it has capacity for 1.5 million. As the Minister is well aware, other airports exist in Kerry and Donegal. I am really not suggesting that they can collectively address the capacity issues that are before the Minister with regard to Dublin Airport but it is important that any aviation strategy include them as part of the conversation. It is this Government's obligation to ensure that legislation is evidence-based. What preparatory or exploratory work has been undertaken to see whether we are maximising the use of all airports on the island, while also addressing the capacity constraints at Dublin Airport?

On the pre-legislative scrutiny undertaken by the Oireachtas committee, I heard the Minister on the radio last week and I join him in commending those committee members who did such a thorough pre-legislative scrutiny report on this Bill. Those recommendations paint a very thorough picture for the Minister and his officials as to how they should proceed in terms of Government amendments. If the Minister did not know before, he now knows about the potential health outcomes associated with this legislation and its impact on people, particularly children. Their voices must always be more important than sectoral interests. What mitigations are in place now that we know more?

I will particularly highlight recommendation 12, which is:

The Government should commission a comprehensive economic assessment of Dublin Airport on the model of the Schiphol assessment conducted by CE Delft, which examined the full climate, health, congestion and community costs of different capacity scenarios.

This would be a very positive and worthwhile exercise. I ask the Minister to include all airports on the island in this exercise.

I will finish with one final recommendation, which is, "Head 5 should be amended to ensure that the Minister's power to revoke or amend planning conditions is limited solely to the passenger cap condition." As the Minister will be very aware from his former role as Minister for housing and local government, we need a wider discussion within Cabinet about the role of local authorities. I understand how we got here on this issue but seeking to bring such comprehensive powers into the office of the Minister of the day potentially undermines the role of local authorities even further.

We will be proposing a number of amendments over the coming days. They will be tabled in a very constructive manner. I look forward to debate on the next stage with regard to the role of local authorities and the very important issues of climate and biodiversity. Again, I am grateful for the opportunity to debate this.

Deputy Gillian Toole: I had not expected to speak yet but I will take the opportunity. Things have moved very quickly. The benefit of Dublin Airport to Meath East is unquestionable. The opportunities for employment, the increase in the number of residents or constituents in the area and the opportunities for travel are all to our advantage. However, in recent times, the residents of Meath East have, without consultation, been affected by the increased number of flights to and from Dublin Airport.

I will speak in particular about the north runway. My comments will be no surprise to the Minister, his officials or the Taoiseach as I have raised these issues previously. As I have said before, I try to focus on solutions. In that vein, I will read solutions into the Dáil record, some of which were conveyed to the Committee on Transport. I am not a member of that committee. I am grateful to Deputy Michael Murphy for his indulgence in letting me speak there. As we know, there are many affected residents in Meath East. There are people who bought homes in the constituency who never anticipated being overflown. The impact of the noise preferential route on these communities was never measured. Consultation with Meath County Council was never considered. Consultation was not extended to that council. I welcome the consideration within the Bill regarding public consultation in respect of environmental impact assessments being extended to Meath County Council.

I will read something into the record. I hope it will come in under time. Parts of it have previously been read into the record. As I have said before, I am a solutions-focused person. This is a solution to the issues facing the St. Margaret's residents and the Meath East residents. It is provided by the North Runway Technical Group, a voluntary group comprising residents and pilots with technical expertise. There is a way out. It reverses a change rather than making a change. The 28R departure routes flown since 2023 have turned aircraft off the straight-ahead procedures for air navigation services-aircraft operations, PANS-OPS, default without the safety assessment that change required. Returning these routes to the default removes the unassessed change. Most of it can start this month with no loss to the capacity Dublin Airport operates today. Indeed, there is a possible opportunity for increased capacity. We currently

have DAA and AirNav flying 28R departures straight ahead on the omnidirectional departure route DAA already publishes, operated using the dependent mode. That is the mode Dublin Airport already operates whenever there is a missed approach on the parallel runway. Given that the straight-ahead path follows the corridor the original assessment reserved for departures, every population count falls under this approach. The number directly overflowed drops by nearly 80% and the number in the wider affected swathe falls by more than 40%.

This fix reduces the impact rather than moving it onto anyone else. That has been cited repeatedly. It stops the steep low-altitude turn and only needs procedures and a mode that already exist. It is a permanent and independently designed solution.

In this instance, the Government can commission a qualified procedure designer independent of AirNav and DAA with a proper published brief to design the durable solution, turning the 28L missed approach - the south runway missed approach - rather than the departure and run it through a full four pillar balanced approach. Everyone wins - the DAA keeps its capacity and growth, the residents come out from under the routes and AirNav and the IAA get a defensible design. We are solving the problem ourselves and then moving forward with the Bill in the intended mode.

However, the affected residents are my primary concern. The Minister knows from the committee that there have been presentations on the health impacts to residents in the area, which is estimated at a cost of €800 million per annum. Again, this reverses a change rather than making a change.

I wish to raise the overflight of Meath. The current situation that we have is the 30-degree separation from the missed approach path of the parallel runway, 28L. That separation is a requirement of independent, segregated, parallel operations. It does not apply when the two runways operate in dependent mode. Dublin already operates in a dependent mode in this respect. The north runway already holds whenever there is a missed approach on the south runway. The dependent operation is not something that AirNav would have to create. It is already there. It operates in constrained conditions, such as strong winds. It is the co-ordination process. Operating in dependent mode and releasing the north runway departures straight ahead on the omnidirectional procedure changes nothing except the direction of the turn. I repeat that it does not reduce the capacity that Dublin already operates.

I hate to sound repetitious but the solution is here in reversing a change and the impact on the 30,000 people. Without referring directly to challenges that exist, we are aware that there are legal challenges take place. In the spirit of offering a solution, it is to reinforce this. I apologise for my repetition but there is a solution to this, which then it allows moving forward without opposition.

Reversing the change reduces both the overflowed and the affected population. The interim arrangement will deliver that reduction immediately. The North Runway Technical Group has published geographic information system, GIS, analysis. It has been measured on the published departure centre lines against the convention of an overflowed swathe within 1.5 km based on the UK's department of transport track keeping norms and an affected swathe within 3 km of the track flown. It gives the total population within each corridor. Regarding the statistics in relation to Fingal and east Meath and the routes flown since February 2023, 13,923 residents have been overflowed, and 30,540 residents are in the affected swathe. On the straight-

ahead design based on the 2004 to 2005 environmental impact statement, EIS, for the 2007 application, the figures here are stark. This is where the solution focus is. A total of 2,888 residents are overflown and 17,481 residents are in the affected area. This is a reduction in the total impact, not a redistribution of it, which I can understand is a fear. I am somebody who would be living in the affected swathe where the straight-ahead mode be complied with.

In the spirit of being solution focused, I seriously ask for this consideration to be acted on. However, first of all, I wish for it to be analysed. I have requested the safety reports that relate to the current 30-degree departure, and the subsequent 56-degree turn on departure from 28R. I await those. This is something that can be implemented within a very short timeframe. In the spirit of being the good neighbour as per the Dublin Airport Authority's website, a good neighbour in this instance is about reducing the health impacts, recognising the benefits of the airport and recognising our island status but trying to factor in, plan and implement for a win-win situation for our residents.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: The Minister knows my views on this whole matter. Like Deputy Toole, I would like to think that I am coming at this from a sound and sensible perspective, not like the motion we had here last week where we had people who were against economic activity, building roads and everything we are trying to do from a common-sense point of view. We need roads and houses. A term used in the motion last week was "unsustainable housing". I would love to know what an unsustainable house is. I would love to know how any politician could deem what the Government is doing with Dublin Airport is wrong from an economic point of view, from a bringing people into this country point of view and from a strategic point of view. When we look at people like Michael O'Leary, I am very glad to use Michael O'Leary's name in the Dáil in a positive way. Usually, people like him are demeaned and downgraded in here because of their success, usually by a certain group of politicians who absolutely despise and hold a grudge against anybody who seems to create wealth, growth and employment. They seem to have a set against them.

I wish to remind people about County Kerry's airport, Farranfore, which is strategically very important to us. Michael O'Leary has continuously told us that it is money that he makes in places like Dublin Airport that allows him to provide us with the service we have and are very thankful for. While I am at it, I would like to put in a spoke for more flights in and out of County Kerry provided by good people, such as Michael O'Leary and Ryanair. If we could have an earlier service in the morning, and if it is deemed financially viable to do so, we certainly would welcome it with open arms because Farranfore is one of the most unusual places in Ireland. It has an excellent road service and train service. That is a great advantage to us in the heart of County Kerry.

Coming back to the whole idea of what the Government is trying to achieve in Dublin, it is very welcome. We need to remove this cap because, quite simply, we need to allow more business to come into this country. We need connectivity to the airport. There is no point in being retrospective about it but it is surprising that we do not a rail service to and from the airport after all of these years. Again, Rome was not built in a day. I refer to the way the Government is going and the removal of the cap. I have met with residents who outlined their concerns. Of course, there will always be concerns. One of the things that it always reminds of, and I would like the Minister to take this on board, is the person who applies for planning permission to build a house near another person's farmyard. When they are living in their

house, they then complain about the farmyard. In other words, what was there first? Many of the estates-----

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

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Is my time up?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Yes.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Sorry. Regarding many of the estates that are built there, the airport was there before the houses, and they knew where they were going to live.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Danny Healy-Rae.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Who is next?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle very much.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy has three minutes.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to get the opportunity to talk on this Bill.

There has been a lot of talk about Dublin Airport and the cap. I know residents are concerned about it but Ireland has to move on. We need to open it up a bit anyway, give some relief there and give the operators like Michael O'Leary, who has been making a lot of sense about it, a chance to keep their flights and their business going. Until Ryanair came along, it was very expensive to travel in and out of this country.

At the same time, I ask that Shannon and the regional airports not be forgotten, starting with Kerry Airport. It is very important to us. The more flights we can get in and out of Kerry, it would be a great help to people in Kerry who need to travel for work and many different things. For both Kerry and Shannon, which is a regional airport with a long and great tradition, more needs to be done to help the mid-west. Many of my uncles and aunts travelled through Shannon coming and going to America. Four of them made their lives over there - my father's brothers and sisters. It was through Shannon they had to go when they were coming and going to America. Likewise, we are very close to Cork Airport but Kerry is the one we support and we ask the best for it all the time.

There is an issue this weekend. Kerry people may be disenfranchised if the Minister does not do something about the trains to ensure - I hope he is listening to me-----

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: I am.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----that Kerry people can travel to this match. We are playing Tyrone on Saturday at 6.15 p.m. It is not a great time for Kerry people who will be trying to get home, maybe leaving Croke Park as late as 9 p.m. I ask that enough trains be put on for that event to make sure the people of Kerry can get up there and get back home again. I have to say to the Minister it is unfortunate Kerry people and elderly people cannot watch this massive game on TV when RTÉ got millions of euro - it got €725 million - to keep it floating, the very same amount the people of Ireland got-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Keep it relevant to the Bill.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----to help them with the cost of diesel. Do not forget us, Minister-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): I told you to keep it relevant to the Bill, Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----it is very important the people of Kerry can see the game, come up and get home again.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am happy to speak on the Dublin Airport (Passenger Capacity) Bill 2026 this evening. The cap must be lifted but there are fundamental questions. There are other issues besides Dublin; it cannot all be about Dublin. That is what it has been. There is huge investment in Dublin. We do not begrudge it one bit but we need a more balanced regional approach. While I support the lifting of the cap, for years policy and investment have been overwhelmingly focused on the capital while our regional airports at Cork, Shannon, Knock - Deputy Healy-Rae mentioned Kerry - and now Waterford. We welcome the investment there. There is great potential for people in the south east. They have all remained under-utilised despite being efficient, modern and easy to get to, and easy to grow as well. I compliment the staff there.

Passengers across the south and mid-west are paying the price. They face long journeys to Dublin, traffic gridlock on the M50, which I just came through in the past hour and a half myself, excessive costs for car parking at Dublin Airport, longer queues, bigger crowds and more stressful journeys. That is for sure - they are more stressful. Cork and Shannon airports serve vast regions, including County Tipperary, yet they are not supported in a balanced way. We must have more balanced regional development. It is imperative - we cannot not have it. The community wants to fly locally, and visitors to the south and south west do not want to face a two- to four-hour journey from the airport to wherever they are visiting in Ireland, yet they are given little choice with limited flights in these other airports. We must look at a better timetable for those airports and Waterford when it is completed. I compliment the private investor there and all who worked on it. My former colleague, Matt Shanahan, was a daily lobbyist here for Waterford Airport.

Instead of continuing to overload Dublin, we should invest in and promote regional airports as available alternatives. Everything in this country appears to revolve around Dublin, while the people in Dublin do not want an increase in passenger numbers. You cannot blame them - they have issues and problems. The DAA must answer a simple question: how can it justify

seeking ever higher passenger numbers in Dublin while Cork and Shannon remain significantly underused? It is an obvious question. Any of us in business would look at that and see what we could do about it. A fair and balanced aviation strategy is essential for regional development as far the travelling public is concerned. I recall a debate here with former Minister Shane Ross who I met today at his book signing Clonmel. I wish him well. He was here for a debate so it is a while ago now. It is an ongoing issue. The Minister has grasped the nettle; it is no bother to him. He is a good man to take on issues. This has to be sorted out. Long term, we must be understanding of the regions of Ireland, the south east with Waterford and the south and south west with Shannon and Cork. Cork and Shannon airports are a doddle to go through. The staff are very helpful. You are in and out. You are not stuck in queues for hours or in traffic. You have to be there three hours in advance for transatlantic flights; it is way too much and it is frustrating. It is not a pleasant journey. That is for us to think about. If we expect investors to come here, we need seamless travel to get to the regions where we want industry without undue delay and being held up at airports and in traffic.

Deputy Grace Boland: As trains have been mentioned, I might take the opportunity to ask the Minister to engage with Irish Rail to make sure the 5.48 p.m. train from Drogheda Pearse to Malahide on Saturday evenings is a full eight-carriage train as the last two Saturdays with the gigs on-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): You might stick to the Bill.

Deputy Grace Boland: -----in Malahide Castle have been half trains. They have left people behind in Donabate. I am sure the Minister will be concerned about that.

I welcome the steps being taken to remove the passenger cap at Dublin Airport. We are an island nation. We depend on connectivity. A cap on our capital city's airport, as the Minister said himself, is a cap on our growth. Dublin Airport is not only an employer of approximately 130,000 people; it is also a gateway through which Ireland does business, attracts foreign direct investment and connects to Europe and beyond. As a TD for Dublin Fingal West, or north County Dublin, it is a constituency I know to be the best in the country in which to live and work. It is also the constituency where the airport is located. I must raise a number of issues with the Minister.

The DAA has repeatedly said it is acting as a good neighbour to residents, community groups and sports and outdoor organisations affected by being close to the airport, in particular in relation to noise and traffic, but the Minister and I both know from our direct engagement with constituents that this is simply not the lived reality for many people. I urge the Minister to instruct the DAA to act fairly and genuinely invest in surrounding communities. That means widening the voluntary dwelling purchase scheme, offering fair and appropriate buy-outs to families most impacted and significantly expanding the noise insulation scheme so that homes receive high-quality, modern insulation that actually works. These measures already exist in principle but are too narrow and too limited in their application. They must be strengthened if we are serious about maintaining community trust.

The second issue is flight paths.

Following multiple engagements with the DAA, the IAA, Department officials and local residents, I have to say that I am none the wiser on flight paths. What I do know, however, is that something has changed in the last few years. That is obvious to anybody living in north County Dublin, to people working or playing outdoors, to families who were not previously impacted by noise, despite living beside the airport, but now are, and to anyone sitting on a plane departing Dublin Airport where aircraft frequently bank sharply after take-off. Adherence to safe flight paths that genuinely minimise the number of people impacted is absolutely essential. I am tired of hearing explanations that do not align with the lived experience of residents. I simply do not understand how this issue has not been resolved by now.

The third issue is traffic. A credible and detailed traffic mitigation plan is not optional; it is absolutely essential. Increased airport capacity will place additional pressure on the already strained M50 and M1 corridor. At the same time, as the Minister knows, Fingal is delivering much-needed housing at pace. That will further increase traffic volumes. We also have to factor in the disruption that will arise from the construction of MetroLink and the DAA's infrastructure development plans. The delivery of a western access road from the M2 is critical. We also need a fit-for-purpose and fully integrated transport hub at the airport, with practical measures such as sufficient ticketing infrastructure, including Leap card facilities, until such time as we have contactless payments.

I also raise a concern in relation to how the Bill is drafted. As it stands, it allows the DAA to apply to amend or revoke the passenger cap but it does not require that application to include concrete proposals on traffic mitigation, noise reduction, insulation, buyouts or any meaningful engagement with affected communities. Nor does it require those protections to be in place before the order is made. In effect, it creates a pathway for expansion without ensuring from the outset that robust and forceful protections are in place for those of us living close by the airport. I ask the Minister to look at that again and at what is included in the onus on the DAA in making this application.

Finally, I raise the question of the national aviation policy. When will we see it? If we are serious about balanced regional development, we must ensure that regional airports are also supported to grow and reach their potential. Dublin Airport cannot and should not carry the entire burden of national connectivity. I welcome progress on this important legislation but I urge the Minister to ensure the DAA genuinely acts as a good neighbour to those of us living and working in north County Dublin and to strengthen the legislation to make sure the DAA must demonstrate it is a good neighbour in any application to the Minister.

Deputy James Geoghegan: This is serious legislation. The complexity involved in it is there for all to see. By virtue of the Minister's opening address and on any examination of the Bill, we can see just how complex this law has been in bringing it to the floor of the House. Understandably, there has been a lot of frustration among the sector owing to the delays in bringing a Bill like this to the House.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: There was no delay.

Deputy James Geoghegan: Now the Bill is before the House. I am not criticising the Minister. I am talking about the past when the Bill was not brought to the Houses, and how long it has taken for a Government, that is, this one rather than the previous one, to legislate to address this issue. I compliment the Minister on bringing the Bill to the House and bringing us to this position.

As a small, open economy, we face intense competition for the foreign direct investment that has been the bedrock of our prosperity. We do not compete for this investment for the sake of it. Investment and growth are required to fund better public services, the construction of housing and a more just society. For too long, Dublin Airport, which is the gateway to this country for investors and tourists, has been constrained by a planning condition that no longer reflects the reality we face in today's world. Passenger demand has already exceeded the cap for consecutive years, but this outdated restriction has been used to undermine our broader economic objective and limit our national potential. In my view, the Bill addresses this problem. At its core, this legislation changes something very simple. It changes who should decide the future of a piece of infrastructure that is of national importance. Dublin Airport is not a local facility; it is the gateway to Ireland for tourists, investors and people bringing jobs to this country. It is a gateway to Europe and the world for our people, students and exporters. Ultimately, the airport is the critical node underpinning the trade, tourism and investment that are the foundations of Ireland's economic success.

Given that reality, it is entirely appropriate that the Minister for Transport have the power to amend or remove a constraint that is choking the airport's and the country's potential. There is nothing progressive about supporting a measure that constrains Dublin Airport's growth. Independent research shows that over 100,000 jobs are linked to the airport and that it contributes €9.6 billion in gross value added to the Irish economy. These figures show that the benefits of allowing the airport to grow are not abstract. It will create more jobs and investment in Ireland. That is what allows us to build more housing, improve public services and invest in transport, healthcare and education.

I accept fully that this Bill involves difficult choices. It removes some planning powers from the local authority and moves them towards the centre, but that choice is justified in this instance. The airport's growth is an issue of national importance and requires considerations beyond that level.

Environmental concerns have also been raised. It is clear that the Bill takes those concerns seriously. Too often, environmental-type arguments are used as a blocking tactic by those who fundamentally do not want to see Ireland grow, develop or attract investment. Again, that is not a progressive position to take and it is certainly not in the national interest. The Bill does not disregard environmental concerns. It provides for full environmental impact assessments, appropriate assessments under EU law, public consultation and independent scrutiny. These are robust and structured safeguards, so the notion that these changes represent a free-for-all is completely unfounded. The appropriate balance, in my view, has been struck by this Bill.

The important and notable issue of noise, which Deputy Boland, as a local representative, outlined, is clearly a sensitive one in respect of Dublin Airport. Nobody can dismiss the concerns of people living near or adjacent to the airport. Equally, in order to be proportionate, using the small number of concerns people have as a justification for a veto over the growth of critical infrastructure cannot be countenanced. Importantly, in this Bill the assessments

indicate that noise impacts are limited and manageable. Aircraft technology is continuously improving and the noise levels will continue to reduce over time. A blanket constraint on growth is neither proportionate nor sustainable.

Overall, this Bill is a welcome and necessary measure. It recognises the central role that Dublin Airport plays in our economy. By providing the Government with the powers necessary to act in the national interest, it will allow Ireland to remain competitive in attracting the investment that funds social progress in this country, and it does this in a way that maintains robust environmental oversight. If we are serious about building a more prosperous Ireland for everyone, we must be serious about building the infrastructure that makes this possible. This Bill does that.

I compliment the Minister on the work he has done in bringing the Bill to the House and all the work underpinning that work. I look forward to its enactment. I also look forward to the benefits that signalling the enactment of this Bill will bring to this country. The more routes that come to this country, the more investment we will see. I welcome the Bill's introduction.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill. Dublin Airport is incredibly important strategic infrastructure for the island of Ireland. Sinn Féin does not oppose the lifting of the passenger cap in and of itself. We acknowledge the existing cap is no longer fit for purpose and we committed in our 2024 general election manifesto to address that. However, the Bill before us risks rushing headlong into expansion without a proper assessment or plan for the consequences. It fails to meet the basic test of sustainability and, very disappointingly, it seems to ignore many of the substantial recommendations from pre-legislative scrutiny. As a result, Sinn Féin will table amendments on Committee Stage. I will now outline three of these.

First, the Minister must ensure that the commencement of this Bill is contingent upon a comprehensive and independent assessment of the economic implications of lifting the cap, modelled on CE Delft analysis for Schiphol Airport. The model is there.

The assessment must look beyond balance sheets. It must consider the impacts on health, housing, education, water, transport and the social fabric of our communities. It must also look at the impact of lifting the cap on other airports and regional and local economies on the island, and aviation policy more generally. As the UN special rapporteur on the right to help the environment noted during her visit to Ireland, "urgency cannot justify bypassing our obligation to undertake comprehensive ... assessments". The Minister should not ignore that advice.

Second, the Minister should take the opportunity to improve aviation sector governance in the Bill. Sinn Féin will push for a review of the structure and operation of the Aircraft Noise Competent Authority to be completed within 12 months. If the airport is to grow, we need a regulator that is truly independent and robust enough to perform its duties and protect local residents. Currently, the body being regulated, the DAA, is responsible for collecting and collating data, including complaints data. This is an anomaly that has eroded public trust and it must be changed.

Third, and crucially, we need an independent evaluation of the airport's flight paths. This evaluation must be completed within nine months and present proposals for alternative routes. An essential goal of this evaluation must be to minimise noise impact on existing neighbours

and nearby residents. Communities in places like Ratoath, Ashbourne and St. Margaret's and the Ward are being ignored and left in the dark. They are facing unauthorised flight paths, sleepless nights and, in some cases, worse. There is a better way to do things. Local experts have gone a long way towards spelling that out. The Minister must insist on action in this regard. That is what our amendment will seek to achieve.

Everyone can recognise that Dublin Airport is a vital national asset, but it cannot be treated as a law unto itself. Growth must be planned, transparent and mindful of the families who live in the airport's shadow. Sinn Féin will work constructively with the Government to ensure this happens and hold the Minister to account on these fundamental points.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Ag bogadh ar aghaidh go dtí Páirtí an Lucht Oibre, glaoim ar an Teachta Ahern.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I will share my time with Deputy Smith. This is an aggressively anti-climate Bill. This Government is making it clear to us that climate, environment or biodiversity considerations have absolutely no place when it comes to our aviation policy. It is ironic that we are debating this proposal to add potentially limitless additional carbon into our atmosphere on the same day that we are suffering with record temperatures, with hot weather warnings across Europe. We have heard that 40 people have drowned in France over the past few days due to the heat. Children are dying in cars, Europe is heating at twice the rate of the rest of the world and this is where our Government's priorities lie. This is the third Bill produced this term that seeks to disapply the climate Act. We have seen it with the infrastructure Bill, we are seeing it with this Bill and we will see it later again this week with the liquified natural gas, or LNG, reserve Bill.

Section 39 provides that section 15 of the climate Act will not apply, having regard to the likely consequences for the economy of the State and international connectivity if an order is not made. This effectively amounts to a legislative predetermination that economic interests and connectivity, whatever the hell that means, completely override climate considerations. Even our birds and natural habitats regulations are in the crossfire. The Minister will point to section 15 and assure us all that environmental impact assessments will be carried out and so on, but those provisions are rendered essentially meaningless by section 25, which states that, in effect, the Minister can just ignore or override an environmental condition from An Coimisiún Pleanála following an EIA. Basically, the whole environmental assessment process in the Bill is advisory, at best.

Moreover, in cases where the commission determines there are likely to be adverse affects on habitats from a proposal to increase the cap, the Minister can unilaterally decide there are "imperative reasons of overriding public interest" in the proposal going ahead. There is no requirement on the Minister to engage in any sort of consultation in coming to that decision. He might opt to consult the housing Minister, An Coimisiún Pleanála, the DAA and other Ministers, but only where the Minister is already of the opinion that the public interest provision already exists. There is no obligation to consult any dedicated climate and environmental bodies, such as the Climate Change Advisory Council, the EPA or, indeed, the climate Minister at any stage in this process. For the record, not once is the climate and environment Minister mentioned in this Bill. References to the housing Minister appear repeatedly. Given that section 39 explicitly disapplies section 15 of the climate Act for both

the Minister and An Coimisiún Pleanála, the absence of any consultation with the climate Minister is beyond concerning.

It is becoming increasingly clear that there has been a significant amount of corporate capture of this Government, whether it is this Bill, which could have been written by Michael O'Leary himself, the data centre drive or the LNG Bill, which is being brought through to ensure continuity of its ever-increasing gas demands. We will keep hearing an economic argument from the Government on removing the passenger cap, and I will come back to that, but we need to be honest about what this Bill will do. Scrapping the passenger cap at Dublin Airport means more flights, more pollution and higher emissions at a time when Ireland is already dangerously off track on climate action. Any hypothetical economic gains from removing the cap, and those are debatable, could be wiped out by the €26 billion in fines we might be facing from failing to meet our climate targets.

This Bill does not just raise the current cap of 32 million passengers, which, for the record, Dublin Airport has consistently broken in recent years, to some higher figure. It allows the Minister to scrap the cap altogether. There is no alternative ceiling proposed. The Minister has floated a figure of 60 million passengers a year, almost doubling the current limit. As per anything one might expect on climate from this Government, there is a clause exempting the Minister from having regard to section 15 of the climate Act when making this decision. If this expansion is sustainable, as the Minister says, why is the Government running scared of the climate action Act under environmental legislation?

The Minister and this Government are intent on compounding our already abysmal record on climate and are abandoning any pretence of caring or wanting to at least try to catch up on what we have legally committed to. Against the backdrop of our failure in achieving our climate and emission reductions targets, the Government is now proposing a policy change that independent analysis suggests will see flight emissions increase by 24% if passenger numbers rise to 40 million. That is almost 581,000 tonnes of additional CO₂ by 2034, and 40 million passengers is a conservative scenario. As I said, the Minister suggested 60 million passengers, in time. However, it is fine according to the Government because international aviation emissions are not counted towards our national emission figures. Our emissions obviously impact globally, and in a world where only 5% of our global population has ever taken a flight, to suggest that because we do not count international aviation emissions means it is okay to expand exponentially betrays a total disregard for any semblance of global climate justice.

This Government is rapidly losing any credibility internationally and here at home when it comes to the climate crisis. That has consequences. It cannot, on the one hand, tell our workers, farmers, hauliers and households that they must bear the cost of our decarbonisation efforts and, on the other, wave through unlimited aviation growth with a legislative shield against its own climate Act. People will understandably start to question why they should bother when those at the top are not only allowed to continue to pollute on a massive scale, but are actually being facilitated to increase their emissions.

This is a bowing down to corporate interests and greed dressed up in the language of connectivity and competitiveness. This is not just a moral failing; it is a legal one too. Notwithstanding the disapplication of our own climate laws, under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, the State has a positive obligation to protect its citizens from the foreseeable harms of the climate crisis. I do not mean that in an abstract sense. The

European Court of Human Rights found exactly this in the recent *KlimaSeniorinnen Schweiz* case against Switzerland. The Dutch Supreme Court found likewise in the Urgenda Foundation case and the International Court of Justice, in its advisory opinion last year, confirmed that states must use all means at their disposal to prevent harm from greenhouse gas emissions, including, expressly, emissions from fossil fuel consumption, which includes aviation fuel.

A legal analysis of the passenger cap removal commissioned by Opportunity Green and prepared by barrister Tim Johnston of Brick Court Chambers sets out plainly that Ireland, already behind in our own targets and comparable countries and already in breach of climate commitments, is exposed to a credible claim that lifting this cap, while simultaneously excepting the decision from climate scrutiny, constitutes a breach of Article 8 of the ECHR. I am sure a copy of that report has been shared with the Minister. Not only are we risking our climate, but the Government is also actively risking public funds in litigation that this analysis tells us is entirely foreseeable.

The Minister has relied on the environmental impact assessment provisions as a way of getting around the climate argument.

5 o'clock

He knows well that this is a wholly inadequate framework for assessing the climate impact of this decision. As section 15 of the 2015 Act will not apply, any environmental impact assessment carried out under this Bill cannot properly account for the national transition objective or our greenhouse gas mitigation obligations. In any case, are we really to believe that an environmental impact assessment will throw up something that will make the Minister reverse course on this? It is literally written into the Bill that he can simply ignore such assessments. It is a *fait accompli*. However, we have clear jurisprudence from several different courts, including the ECHR and the UK Supreme Court, that environmental impact assessments for high-emitting projects must comprehensively assess downstream combustion emissions, must look at scopes 1, 2 and 3 emissions and must be grounded in the best available science. The cases in the rulings of these courts involve fossil fuel extraction but the logic applies equally to a project that will materially increase aviation emissions into the future. If this Government proceeds with an assessment framework that does not capture the full climate footprint of additional flights, arrivals and departures, carbon dioxide and non-carbon dioxide effects alike, it is inviting a legal challenge that, on the weight of recent European jurisprudence, it stands a real chance of losing. Exempting the Minister from section 15 of the climate Act does not make the climate consequences disappear; it defers them and it leaves even less room to manoeuvre for every future Minister, planning authority and local councillor, who will all have to find emissions reductions elsewhere to compensate for the growth this Bill will unleash. We are still waiting to hear from the Minister on where the equivalent emissions reductions will come from. Will it be farmers who are asked to pick up the slack, those in the transport sector or regular households, many of whom are already doing their best to be environmentally conscious? It is households in the Minister's own constituency who will feel the impact of this move most immediately by virtue of the fact that they live under the flight paths.

The consequences here are being pushed further downstream to the local planning authority, which can fiddle with planning conditions but cannot touch the one lever that actually matters: the number of aircraft flying overhead. We have seen where this can lead us. A ruling in the

Hague District Court in 2024 stated that the Dutch Government had acted unlawfully in failing to protect residents near Schiphol Airport from noise pollution, breaching Article 8 of the ECHR, and ordered the Government to provide practical and effective protections to those affected. The same protections under Article 8 apply to residents here, and further protections apply under Article 40.3 of our own Constitution, which obliges the State to protect the property rights of every citizen. The assessment provisions in this Bill are unlikely to meet even the basic common law obligations to consult those whose rights are affected.

I referred earlier to the Minister making decisions on this cap based on economic interests and international connectivity. Can the Minister please define "international connectivity"? There is no definition in this Bill. Does it mean routes to specific destinations, frequency of services, the number of carriers or some other aggregate measures? We know we live on an island and we know we do not want to be stranded here but how much connectivity is enough? This approach to connectivity is just like the Government's approach to the unmitigated expansion of data centres. How much is enough? If the Minister is basing his decision on international connectivity, it would be helpful to know what the actual metric is.

On the economic case, I point the Minister to a study commissioned by the social council for Schiphol Airport. It examined what would happen to broad welfare under three different scenarios for the size of the airport in terms of flight numbers. Broad welfare, for the benefit of this House, is a framework that goes beyond GDP to capture economic output. It looks at employment, health, housing, noise, nature and climate all together, precisely the kind of holistic accounting that this Government has failed to apply to its own decision on Dublin Airport. The findings are instructive, and I seriously encourage the Minister to examine the report. The study found that even a substantially smaller Schiphol, with 250,000 flights, barely half of today's traffic, could still preserve a large majority of the connectivity that Dutch travellers actually use because the destinations that disappear are disproportionately sustained by transfer passengers rather than Dutch residents. The extra journey time imposed on the average traveller was measured in minutes, not hours. The most salient finding of this report, however, is that the aviation sector losses are dwarfed by the climate gains. In other words, restraint on flight numbers does not just reduce harm: on the Dutch evidence, it produces a net welfare gain once climate costs are properly priced in, even after aviation sector losses are accounted for. This study also acknowledges that capacity caps are not the only option. It refers to a cost-benefit analysis of the options available to Schiphol, tellingly titled "Shrink or become sustainable?". The analysis found that environmental and noise measures, including a higher distance-based flight tax, delivered considerably greater broad welfare benefits than a blunt capacity restriction does, precisely because pricing instruments let you target the noisiest, most polluting, longest haul flights rather than cutting capacity indiscriminately.

The lesson, then, is not that caps are the only available tool; it is that doing nothing and simply lifting the cap with no replacement mechanism, as the Government is doing here, is the worst of all options. Reducing flights or pricing their environmental cost properly can deliver a net gain for society. Unlimited expansion, on this evidence, risks a net loss.

What is more is that we have a persistent travel deficit in this country. Irish people spend more abroad than tourists spend here, so more flights actually takes more money out of the country than it brings in. Research shows this and it undermines the Government's claim that aviation expansion is an unqualified economic benefit. The serious international evidence

shows that the relationship between airport size and national prosperity is far weaker than that assumption and that the environmental and health costs of unrestrained growth are not some marginal externality to be waved away. They are large enough, on a comparable European analysis, to turn an apparently pro-growth decision into a net loss for the country as a whole.

Finally - and this is frankly pathetic - this Bill provides an open invitation for airlines to bully the Government and talk down Ireland if they perceive that there is some inhibitor to their commercial interests in Dublin. Section 25 gives licence to the Minister to change planning conditions where they are perceived to be potentially damaging to "the international reputation of the State in respect of air transport". This is extremely open ended and essentially unfalsifiable. There is no objective standard for reputational damage, no evidence threshold, no definition. The provision could be invoked on the basis of adverse commentary from Michael O'Leary, a familiar noise to all of us. What do we think will happen here? We will have an airline lobby that is never happy and we will have incessant calls to expand and expand, with the airlines knowing that if they paint Ireland in an unsavoury light, they will get their way. We are enshrining corporate bullying of the State in our law. That is embarrassing and it is the cherry on top of what is fundamentally a regressive and bad policy.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Last week the Minister accused the Labour Party and, by implication, myself of being anti-Dublin Airport and anti-growth. He knows me and the Labour Party better than that. This is a far more complex issue than he purports or presents it to be. I know where I stand on the airport, and my record stands up in terms of representing airport workers at all grades and all levels through the Covid pandemic and all the other difficulties. I want the airport to thrive but not at any cost. The values of the Labour Party, in terms of this Bill, are based on good planning and standing up for a good planning system. The implication of this Bill is that Fingal County Council, the local planning authority, is in some way unable to deal with the complexities, the needs, the desires and the implications of Dublin Airport in a planning capacity, that this has to be taken out of the airport's control because it does not have the expertise or the professionalism to deal with it, that this has to be taken in centrally and that only the Minister can determine what is right for Dublin Airport.

Nothing could be further from the truth. DAA, under previous leadership, has actively polluted its relationship with Fingal County Council. The planning application DAA put in in 2023 to raise the passenger cap was one of the largest planning applications ever submitted to Fingal County Council. The application was declared invalid by Fingal County Council, which said it failed to comply with various planning and development regulations and was misleading, inadequate and non-compliant with relevant regulations. In addition, DAA failed to ask for a series of pre-planning meetings with Fingal County Council. That is absolutely incredible for a planning application of that size and that import. By the way, it was not just about raising the cap; this was about 11 huge buildings, with tunnels under the aprons. It was a massive planning application. DAA put it in designed to fail because, ultimately, it wanted to get this matter here. It wanted to get its desires in the ear of the Minister on some amorphous definition of growth, which, as my colleague outlined, is difficult, almost impossible, to define. It is, however, a great weapon to throw at Opposition Members who have issues with this Bill: "You are anti-growth." We are not anti-growth. We are pro-climate, yes, but we are also pro-good planning.

This passenger cap was brought in as a condition of the north runway through the planning system and it should have been dealt with and tackled through the planning system.

The fact that it was not is not the fault of the planning authority or the planning system; the fault is squarely on the DAA. This semi-State organisation rented trucks with loudhailers to drive up and down Swords Main Street in front of Fingal County Council's office, saying, "Get rid of the passenger cap". They sent them down to Croke Park when Dublin were playing in the all-Ireland last year, the loudhailers going, "Get rid of the passenger cap". This was childish, ridiculous behaviour, totally unbecoming of any organisation, never mind a State agency with such strategic importance as Dublin Airport Authority.

As for this whole thing that opposition to this is down to some NIMBYs in north County Dublin, we have to put that to bed as well. Deputy Michael Healy-Rae earlier was saying the airport was there before the residents. That is an absolute fallacy in terms of the reality of the situation. When it comes to aircraft noise, residents on an east-west trajectory were given insulation - some were - and the day the north runway opened, the planes took off and deviated 30% north and flew over Rolestown, Ballyboughal and other villages in north County Dublin which had seen big growth in housing and were not covered by noise insulation. They had done their due diligence when they bought their homes. They were told they were not going to be under flight paths. It turns out the wool was pulled over their eyes by the DAA and now they are being flown over every day and have no recourse.

These residents are airport people. They understand aviation and the airport better than the vast majority of people in this House. They do not want the airport to fail or aviation to fail, but they want a bit of fairness. They want the DAA to act professionally. I am not even going to get into the point about good neighbours and bad neighbours because that has been well made. They want the DAA to act professionally but how the DAA has acted over the last number of years and under the previous leadership has been an absolute disgrace.

We now have a Bill which is going to have untold consequences in terms of the planning system. It is a template for when a Government is unhappy with a planning condition or decision of any local authority; it will just bring in some primary legislation. My colleague, Deputy Ahern, has articulated incredibly well the setting aside of the climate action Act. It is a huge concern. The DAA has brought us here, the squeaky wheel is getting the oil and it is going to have huge impacts on our planning system and on our climate.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Dublin Airport (Passenger Capacity) Bill 2026. Last year, the airport saw 36.4 million passengers travel through it. It was the busiest year in the airport's history, up more than 5% on the year before. Passenger numbers there have grown by 46% in the last decade. The cap is set at 32 million, so last year the airport carried more than 4 million people above the limit that was imposed on it. The demand is real and the growth is real. The cap is the one thing standing against both. This is the heart of the matter.

We are not debating whether people want to fly to and from Ireland; they already are, in record numbers. We are debating whether the law should keep pretending they cannot. Dublin Airport is not just a transport hub; it is one of the largest pieces of critical economic infrastructure in the State. An independent study commissioned by DAA found that the airport contributes €9.6 billion in gross value added to the Irish economy. This is the equivalent of

2.3% of the entire national economy. It supports or facilitates over 116,000 jobs across the Republic. This is not a Dublin story alone. The same study found that 28% of the airport's economic contribution lands outside Dublin and the rest of Leinster, and that 31% of the jobs it sustains are across the rest of the country. When Dublin Airport grows, Wexford, Donegal and Kerry grow. The gateway is in Dublin and the benefit is of national importance. That is the figure that should focus minds.

The same independent analysis found that holding the cap at 32 million would cost Ireland an additional 17,800 jobs and €1.5 billion in economic value by 2030. This is the price of inaction, not a saving. It is a loss for the country. As an island nation with an open economy, connectivity is not a convenience for us; it is the condition of trade, tourism and investment. Research consistently shows that well-connected economies export far more than poorly connected ones. The cap works against every one of those elements, and it does so at our own expense. If a route cannot land in Dublin, it lands in another European capital instead. The connectivity goes elsewhere and so do the jobs. The cap does not protect Ireland, it penalises Ireland.

This Bill does not ignore the people who live around the airport. Their concerns, which were raised earlier, about noise and flight movements are legitimate, and they are taken seriously in this legislation. Before the Minister can make any order, An Coimisiún Pleanála must carry out a full environmental impact assessment and an appropriate assessment, in line with EU law, with public consultation built in. The Minister must take account of the outcome. That is the right sequence: lift the cap, but do it lawfully, transparently, and with the environment properly assessed.

The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport did serious work in this regard. It received 136 submissions, held six public hearings, and made 16 recommendations. The Bill reflects that scrutiny. The Minister's power is confined to the passenger cap alone, an order falls away once a planning decision replaces it and the assessments are built into the process rather than bolted on after it. Some will ask why we cannot simply wait for the planning system. The honest answer is time. A planning decision on DAA's application to raise the cap to 40 million is expected later this year or early next. It is likely to be appealed, if not judicially reviewed. That could add another year of uncertainty. Airlines plan their networks years in advance. They cannot plan against a moving target. This Bill provides a lawful interim solution that addresses the cap while the planning process runs its course, and it protects that live application so nothing here delays it.

I welcome the Bill. It is a measure for jobs, connectivity and the economy. It is balanced and, on the evidence, it is needed now. I ask the Minister to confirm that the stakeholder forum planned for July will give the communities around the airport a clear and meaningful voice, alongside the airlines and the airport itself.

Deputy Barry Ward: I broadly welcome this Bill. It is, however, correctly contentious and controversial in circumstances where we as a country and as a planet face an extraordinary challenge in terms of reducing emissions and dealing with the consequences of climate change, which we see today as we all schlep around here in suits, sweating. I do have reservations about the *de facto* setting aside of the climate action legislation in the context of this removal of the cap, and also later this week in the context of the gas reserve Bill. It is problematic to

entirely throw out responsibility in that regard. I would like to hear from the Minister what safeguards he has put in place to deal with that. Creating an open-ended situation is not the right answer, either.

I say that, however, conscious of the fact that Dublin Airport is the primary route to get people and goods in and out of this country, particularly from further afield. We are an island country and we do rely on air transport to get people on and off the island and to get goods in and out. I recognise the reality of the situation and the fact that steps have to be taken. Reference has been made by many speakers in this debate to the growth of over 40% in terms of passenger accommodation in the airport, and of over 36.4 million people in the airport last year. That is entirely predictable in circumstances where our population has grown by over a million in the past less than ten years. We know the country is growing. It makes sense, therefore, that the cap would also grow. You cannot have a situation where the population is getting bigger and bigger and, by extension, the demand for air transport is growing, and not reflect that in terms of the changes that are being made to the cap. I accept the necessity for this. When we look at air transport in other European countries, there is not the same restriction on airports in other European capitals as there might be in Dublin. It does not mean we throw the baby out with the bathwater or say that there should be no limit or control. I know the Bill does not say there is no control and there are procedures for orders by Minister and all the rest. I am just sounding a note of caution in relation to the complete removal of the restriction. I wonder about where the trade-off is. It does not remove our obligations in terms of meeting climate targets or emissions reduction targets. Where is the counterpoint?

Where is the point where we are going to enhance our emissions reduction if we are now *de facto* going to increase emissions from the airport? We know that emissions from the airport have increased with the increased air transport in and out. Again, I recognise it might be a necessity that comes with that but I also recognise that we have a necessity to act in terms of climate change and the level of emissions being produced here in Ireland, so what sector is going to have enhanced work to reduce emissions? Where are we going to counterbalance the effect of removing this cap to ensure that we do not let the situation with emissions completely run away with itself and leave ourselves and, by extension, everybody else on the planet in a very difficult position? I would love to hear a comprehensive answer to that question. I am not sure it is an easy question to answer, in fairness to the Minister of State, but I do think that we need to keep a check on our progression towards emissions targets and how we are going to manage that.

I do not have a difficulty with increasing air traffic in and out of the airport; I think it is a necessity. It is a reflection of the reality but, therefore, we must look at some other sector where we can reduce them. The Minister of State will be aware that there are other sectors where we are not reaching targets or making the emissions reductions we need to make. Let us have that grown-up conversation, recognising the reality, and decide what we are going to do in the other areas to ensure that we do not just let the whole thing get away from us, which is a real danger now. We can see the effects of climate change in real terms, not just with hot weather but also with stormy weather and the effects that global warming generally has on weather systems and the risk we face as a country and as a world in terms of what those emissions are going to do. That is my primary concern. In principle, I do not have a problem with this but I do have a problem with the notion that we just scrap a realistic attempt to meet our climate ambitions and our emissions reductions.

It is a very well put-together Bill but I do have some issues with it. The first is the use of "daa" in lower-case letters. That is a branding function of Dublin Airport. It has created it and trades as daa. In statutory terms, my understanding from looking at section 2 of the State Airports Act 2004 is that it is DAA - Dublin Airport Authority with a capital "D", capital "A" and capital "A". I do not see where that has changed anywhere in legislation - I am open to correction in that regard - but the use of lower-case letters, which is a branding function by Dublin Airport, is replete throughout this Bill. It is like what happened when the Child and Family Agency suddenly became Tusla. Nobody actually authorised that in statute. It is the Child and Family agency but is routinely referred to by its marketing name, which is Tusla. That is all very well but I just wonder about that in the context of a statutory piece of legislation going through these Houses. The reference to daa is defined in the Bill as the Dublin Airport Authority - the company, that is - but I do not think it is appropriate to refer to it using lower-case letters in the marketing term.

I will now turn to provisions later on in the Bill that relate to judicial review. Section 29 changes the test for bringing judicial review against any order or any decision made and requires the applicant in judicial review proceedings to establish substantial grounds, which is a much higher bar than is usually required for judicial review. Similarly, section 30(2) removes permission for the applicant to amend the grounds on which leave was granted, which is done as a matter of course in judicial review proceedings. Sometimes circumstances will change or information will become available that will require the change of the grounds on which leave is being granted. This is part of a broader Government attitude to judicial review. I understand that judicial review is a pain and that it obstructs things and can delay things but it is also a constitutional right of the citizens of this State to go to the courts to review the administrative decisions of the Government, Departments and other agencies. It is an important right and I do not know about the constitutionality of curtailing that right in the way that it is being curtailed in sections 29 and 30, for example. If we are concerned about the length of time it takes to bring judicial reviews, it would be much better to invest in speeding up the process of the courts, investing in something akin to what was done in the Commercial Court over 20 years ago. It would involve investing in more judges and more resources for the Courts Service so that people could still have their opportunity to challenge decisions and do so in a real and meaningful way under the Constitution, but it would be done in a faster and more efficient way. I recognise it is a problem but the answer is not to curtail the rights of citizens to challenge the administrative decisions of Departments and agencies. The answer is actually to facilitate it to a much greater extent and I wonder if the constitutionality of those specific provisions has been really thought through from the point of view that they curtail citizens' rights.

Deputy Ann Graves: As a an island economy, Ireland's connectivity is essential and, to maximise the benefits to our economy, we need an ambitious aviation strategy. That does not mean that all roads lead to Dublin Airport, which is just as well considering the traffic mayhem there at the moment and the lack of a sustainable transport system. A successful strategy demands balanced, connected infrastructure that leads to sustainable rural and regional development.

There is an all-Ireland dimension that also needs to be addressed. Brexit demonstrated how important trade into and out of this island is. Dublin Airport has long been operating over capacity. The passenger cap is not fit for purpose and was never adhered to. In 2019, 2023,

2024 and 2025, the DAA knowingly ignored and exceeded the cap. Last year alone, the cap was exceeded by over four million passengers.

As this Bill is very light on detail, Sinn Féin will be tabling amendments to address this. We will propose amendments to mandate the Government to update our national aviation policy, ensure balanced regional development and set out a long-term strategy for Dublin Airport that includes an all-Ireland dimension. The lifting of the passenger cap must be done in an organised fashion that benefits not just airlines and big business but also the wider community. To ensure this happens, our proposed amendments to the Bill would ensure that residents, community groups and other stakeholders are fully consulted with. Despite what the Minister says, residents feel that they are being ignored. The lifting of the cap will also require that adequate and well-resourced infrastructure is put in place to meet the extra demands from increased passenger numbers. This was one of the reasons for the cap in the first place. It was a condition of planning for the north runway development. This means a better public transport system that includes delivering the long overdue metro north project.

The lifting of the cap cannot be allowed to contribute to worsening the traffic chaos that already exists in Swords and Dublin Fingal East. We will also be seeking wider investment in insulation, better buy-out deals, agreed flight paths and overall better protection for residents. I understand why local residents are frustrated and angry. The DAA's engagement with residents has been consistently poor. It is not a good neighbour. Residents have been forced to take court action to ensure that their voices are heard. The cap is now subject to legal challenge under EU law. If the cap is not lifted before the forthcoming European court ruling, this could force the IAA to enforce the cap more strictly. This would have a very negative impact on Ireland's economy, particularly on our tourism sector. Regardless of the court ruling, local residents must be heard and included in a meaningful way by both the DAA and Fingal County Council.

There are a number of important unresolved matters that must be addressed, including night flights, flight paths, noise and kerosene fumes from planes waiting to take off. Night-time flights are of particular concern, with flights permitted at the airport increasing from an average of 65 a night to 95 between 11 p.m. and 7 a.m. Long before I was elected to local or central government, I stood with the residents in St. Margaret's The Ward and the people of Swords who have sought a better life and I have continued to engage with the wider community in Fingal east. I live in Swords and I represent the people in Donabate, Portmarnock, Malahide, Portrane and Kinsealy - all of the areas that are worst affected by noise at varying degrees. When I was on the council, I had a motion unanimously agreed for the Fingal development plan that highlighted the need to tackle the serious health and safety issue of noise pollution for the local community. Unfortunately this motion was ruled out of order under the direction of the then Minister.

The proposed legislation does not effectively deal with residents' concerns, including in respect of health and well-being. I can assure residents of Fingal east that I have heard their concerns and we will work tirelessly to ensure they are addressed. Our priority will be to mandate the DAA to engage meaningfully with residents; to enhance community compensation, including for voluntary relocation, improved insulation and mitigation measures; and to address the variations in flight paths while protecting residents and staff.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: If there is anything we do not need during a climate emergency when we are literally having a heatwave right now - we had one two weeks ago and we will probably have many more over the rest of the summer - and when the world is literally burning, it is the Minister is coming in today to lift the passenger cap on flights at Dublin Airport. People are saying that we need this for growth. We need to do something about the climate emergency and we should actually be reducing flights rather than aiming to increase them in any way, shape or form.

It has been amusing to listen to the contributions of some people who normally jump up and down about Dublin being the fount of all evil. This proposal is really against balanced regional development. I am shocked that some of those who complain about Dublin getting everything are okay with lifting the passenger cap on Dublin Airport. Currently, Dublin gets ten times more passengers than Cork. Dublin is the capital city but it does not have ten times the population of Cork. After this measure, it is estimated that passenger numbers will increase by 22% by 2031.

Aviation accounts for approximately 6% of our carbon emissions, with Dublin Airport making up some 85% of that. What we have seen from the Government is that the environment just does not matter. Whether it is data centres or flights, the message is that we are open for business no matter what. A Fine Gael Deputy asked how this measure will be made up for elsewhere in the economy. No answer has been given but it seems that Deputy will line up to vote for the Bill. The other issue is that the Bill comes at the request of Ryanair and the American airlines. Ryanair's carbon emissions are now 50% higher than they were in 2019, which is the largest increase among the top 20 most polluting airlines worldwide.

There are real environmental issues associated with lifting the passenger cap. When so much is already going through Dublin, there are implications for balanced regional development. Is there any other airport without a rail line that would lift its passenger cap? It is absolutely farcical that people walking out of Dublin Airport have to get a bus or taxi. I do not know of any other capital where there is talk of enlarging its airport in that situation. There will be increased car traffic as a result. A metro line from the airport to the city is in the dim and distant future.

Deputy Darragh O'Brien: Construction starts next year.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: There are issues for residents. An earlier speaker said that everyone living in a house near the airport knew this would happen. In fact, people did not know. There are lots of much older communities in the area that predate the airport. People certainly did not know there would be relentless growth of the airport. The impact of airport noise on people's sleep is being studied worldwide, including by Dr. John Garvey, director of the sleep laboratory at St. Vincent's hospital. His evidence shows that airport noise leads to more cardiovascular issues in affected areas and those statistics are backed up internationally. We do not know what impact the lifting of the cap will have specifically on night flights but it will mean many more flights and much more noise for those impacted. In 2024, 6,700 more people were affected by airport noise, which was a big increase on the previous year.

Another issue is the lack of democracy. Fingal County Council will have any controls in relation to the airport taken from it, and the Minister is happy with that. It is being done because

elected councillors are much closer to communities and residents. It is anti-democratic. As I said, airport noise in the Fingal area leads to a huge number of health issues and the lifting of the passenger cap will make that situation worse.

The Minister is from one of the impacted areas. The lifting of a passenger cap in any airport during a climate emergency would have to be queried. Will he answer the question asked by a Fine Gael Deputy before he came into the Chamber as to how the increase in carbon emissions will be made up for elsewhere in the economy and in society? We should know that before we vote on this Bill.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Ireland is an island nation and we all recognise the necessity of airport connectivity for our people and our economy. We already have good air links and they will continue. The question before us today is whether this legislation is a proportionate and appropriate way to balance our commitment to a connected island with our obligations to meet climate targets, protect local communities and care for our environment. My concern is that the Bill does not even make an attempt at balancing those competing needs. Instead, we have legislation that is one-sided in its focus, was constructed entirely with the desires of one set of stakeholders in mind, ignoring all others, and creates a set of real risks.

The first and probably most glaring issue with the Bill is its direct effort to undermine the signature climate action legislation that is intended to keep Ireland on track to meet its climate obligations. Last month, the Environmental Protection Agency reported that Ireland is on track to significantly exceed its 2030 climate limits. With less than four years until we are supposed to reduce our 2018 emissions level by 50%, the Minister has already announced that we are far off track. Raising the passenger cap by just 8 million is likely to increase flight emissions by about 24%. Yet, the Minister has indicated in remarks he has made over the past year that he wants to double the numbers currently going through Dublin Airport. This is not about saying people should not fly. It is inevitable that people will fly out of and into Ireland. The question is whether it makes sense to have absolutely no upper limit on flight numbers going through Dublin Airport, with all the connected climate, environmental and community impacts of that approach.

Just as significant is the message the Bill is sending on national climate commitments. In recent years, the Government has tried to undermine the climate Acts in numerous ways, particularly by way of legislative mechanisms. The Critical Infrastructure Bill, the Development (Strategic Gas Reserve) Bill and this Bill each contain specific carve-outs to exempt the particular issue they deal with from scrutiny under section 15 of the 2015 Act. There is a sense almost of pre-emptive guilt on the part of the Government. The exemptions are an admission that it knows these legislative measures will not stand up to scrutiny from a climate perspective. It is seeking to forestall any opposition before it even starts. In essence, the Government is seeking to remove even any monitoring of some of the most carbon-intensive industries in our country at a time when we are significantly failing in our climate commitments.

This is not an abstract issue. It exposes us to serious environmental, social and financial risks. We know there is a cost to non-compliance that is in a range somewhere between €8 billion and €26 billion. The removal of the obligation to adhere to section 15 of the climate action Act in relation to the passenger cap does not remove the Government's wider obligations

under national law, international law or, indeed, under the European Convention on Human Rights. A legal opinion that was sought on the Bill found the lifting of the cap without introducing any other protections will expose the Government to a credible claim that it is in breach of Article 8 of the convention, which concerns the right to protection of private and family life, by failing to shield its citizens from the health impacts of the climate crisis. The same opinion also found the State had a procedural obligation to conduct an environmental impact assessment, EIA, including of all CO₂ and non-CO₂ emissions from arriving and departing flights, or face significant risk of being challenged in the courts.

The Bill will not make our climate commitments go away but it does leave significantly less room for manoeuvre for all sectors of our economy that are not insulated from scrutiny in the way the Bill insulates the aviation sector. In effect, one sector will have no upward cap on its emissions, while others will have to constrain themselves even further to allow that to happen. The legal opinion I mentioned makes that point quite starkly: "The disapplication of section 15 of the 2015 Act ... directly impacts Ireland's climate targets, as the significant emissions associated with the Cap Repeal will significantly constrain the margin of discretion of public authorities to make strategic decisions about future infrastructure."

In short, this Bill is robbing Peter to pay Paul. Any disapplication will push climate costs away from aviation onto other sections of the economy and other sections of our society. Future infrastructure projects will be increasingly jeopardised and constrained to mitigate the consequences of what I would say is the reckless deregulation proposed in this legislation. The justification for all this that we have heard from the Minister this evening is that this Bill is critical for economic growth for our country, when no cost-benefit analysis has been carried out and we know current activity levels at the airport are incurring health-related costs, as outlined by other Deputies. A recent report by the UK Department for Transport on the economic implications from the expansion of Heathrow Airport found that the positive gains were outweighed by the social and environmental impact, which for that airport was estimated at between £58 billion and £82 billion. An independent cost-benefit analysis of the impact of this expansion is necessary, and that should have been conducted in advance of legislation being moved forward.

Compounding the Government's unbalanced approach to the legislation is the attitude that has been taken to stakeholder engagement. In preparation for this debate, I asked the Minister via a parliamentary question to provide information about the companies and the lobbyists he had met to discuss this Bill. The result is quite stark. The Minister and the Taoiseach were very willing to engage with the airlines and their representatives and that is absolutely fine; they are lobbyists. However, no efforts were made to engage with the environmental organisations to get alternative perspectives on this particular area. I note in particular that a number of environmental organisations actively sought engagement with the Minister, including Children's Rights Over Flights and Friends of the Earth, and these meetings were not granted on this issue. This is not a balanced approach. It appears that in the drafting of this legislation that perspective about the environment was entirely absent from considerations.

Deputy O'Brien is the Minister for Transport but he is also the Minister with responsibility for the environment and climate. Yet, he seems allergic to meeting organisations representing those particular interests. This lack of consultation feeds into the way in which this legislation is likely to impact on local communities. It does not appear the key concerns that local

communities have voiced throughout this process and in detail at the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport, when we heard on this issue, have been taken into account in a meaningful way in this Bill. Since the north runway entered operation, local residents living close to Dublin Airport have already highlighted significant concerns around a range of issues, particularly the issue of noise. I know the Minister has constituents in his constituency who have undoubtedly brought this issue to his attention. Deputy Coppinger and I have heard from people in places like Hollystown, Hollywoodrath and Tyrrelstown, where the impact of noise is a regular issue and particularly the change in flight paths from what people were told to what actually was eventually permitted. Of course, all of this is taking place with the current restriction and current cap in place.

I understand the Minister met residents of St. Margaret's and The Ward last month. I think they provided the Minister with an economic analysis they have done of the costs to health, particularly from noise generated from the airport. Local residents are already being severely impacted by the current levels of activity at Dublin Airport but, again, instead of engaging meaningfully with those concerns, this proposal is to introduce potentially limitless increases in the number of flights on top of the existing problematic patterns. I know from FOI requests that there has been more correspondence between the Minister and Airlines for America than with local groups. In advertising this Bill on social media over the last week, the Minister said that people's concerns would be addressed in a substantive way that is respectful of local communities. I do not believe this adds up when I look at this draft right now. The Bill does not in any way anticipate an assessment-of-noise impact and it again pushes responsibility for noise mitigation back onto the planning authority.

The need for air connectivity in an island nation like Ireland is unavoidable. Again, nobody disputes that. What is of concern here is the ill-considered way in which this legislation has been brought forward, without any recognition of a balancing or any recognition that other considerations need to be taken account of in bringing a change like this forward. The hallmark of good legislation is a balanced approach between competing needs within our society. This legislation makes no efforts to do that. It is single-minded in its approach and offers no idea as to what a proportional approach to passenger numbers at Dublin Airport might look like. To achieve this, it undermines the climate action Act and ignores those key concerns of local communities that have been voiced to us all on many occasions. This is a reflection of the way that the legislation was prepared in close consultation with the aviation industry but with the concerns of those key environmental groups entirely excluded. Ultimately, it will be ordinary people who bear the consequences of this approach in the costs of complying with missed climate targets and in the impacts from increased noise for those living in the vicinity of the airport. Again, and it is unfortunate to say, the approach being adopted to this legislation is more and more replicated across the Government's approach to all issues to do with climate and the environment.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: I join my colleagues today in emphasising the importance of Dublin Airport as a key international hub and the crucial role it plays in driving economic growth, strengthening connectivity and supporting jobs across the country. As an island nation, our connectivity depends on aviation and seafaring. Irish residents travel more frequently and over longer distances than their European counterparts, with air travel *per capita* almost double the European average. For that reason, the passenger cap constrained our ability in this country

to meet clear and growing demand and its removal is a welcome and necessary step. Dublin Airport is central to our economic success. In 2025, more than 36 million passengers came through the airport making it the busiest year on record. Those numbers have grown strongly in recent years reflecting Ireland's openness and international reach. That connectivity is a huge strength, with more than 190 destinations, over 2,600 weekly departures and connections to 130 cities across Europe. Dublin Airport anchors Ireland in the global economy. That is the economic reality the Minister and I live in.

As the only EU member state with English as a primary official language, this connectivity gives us a unique advantage in attracting investment and building strong commercial ties with countries and like-minded individuals abroad. The economic contribution is substantial. A 2023 study estimated that Dublin Airport supports over 116,000 jobs across the State, makes a €4.9 billion contribution in wages and contributes €9.6 billion in gross value added. That is 2.3% of the national economy, give or take. Each job created can be linked back to Dublin Airport and the role it plays.

Tourism is another major beneficiary. In 2024, over 4 million tourists visited Dublin. On Dublin's contribution to regional development, many of those tourists came through Dublin Airport but went on from the city to visit many corners of Ireland. Dublin Airport was again at the heart of that success. As visitors numbers go up, so do pressures on local services and I reiterate my support that we look at that tourism levy again as a Government. If we are to get greater numbers in through the airport coming to Dublin and beyond, the tourism levy is a key element of making sure that Dublin has a good offering and is well maintained, open and welcoming to our visitors.

This expansion also presents an opportunity to lead in the area of sustainable aviation fuel, SAF. Whether through advanced biofuels or synthetic fuels, we are well positioned to develop expertise in this area. There are very limited quantities of SAF currently available on the market and development and deployment will need to quickly ramp up, as by 2050 it is mandated that at least 70% of the fuel supplied to many EU airports will be SAF blended with conventional aviation fuel. This is a gap in an area that Dublin Airport can inhabit. As the sustainable aviation fuel policy roadmap published last year highlights, there is a real commercial opportunity for advanced biofuel production in Ireland in the medium term.

In this respect, the roadmap identifies the national biomethane strategy as an important policy interlinked with SAF policy development. There is a big opportunity in Dublin Airport to lead out in Europe on this area. There is also a broader benefit. That same expertise developed in low-carbon aviation fuels could help address a major domestic challenge, namely, the 750,000-odd homes that still rely on kerosene for home heating. Developing alternative low-carbon and liquid fuels could support households where electrification is not yet viable, providing a practical pathway to reduce emissions. Aviation sustainability is not just a challenge, but a real opportunity for Ireland to lead, innovate and reshape how we connect with the world. In an area defined by environmental responsibility let us lead out. Let us become a European centre for sustainable aviation fuel.

The expansion of Dublin Airport is a positive for the entire country. However, it must proceed in a way that respects local communities. I ask that the Minister urges the DAA to continue expanding its residential noise insulation schemes so nearby residents are protected and insulated from noise as the airport grows.

Deputy Maurice Quinlivan: As an island with a dispersed population, connectivity is crucial to our continued economic development. To continue this development it is necessary to lift the passenger cap in Dublin Airport while also focusing on delivering balanced regional aviation growth. That is something I suggest this Government and its predecessor have failed to do. Last year, Dublin Airport exceeded the passenger cap by more than 4 million passengers. The 32 million passenger cap must now be removed. If not, and due to legal challenges, there is a danger that the Irish Aviation Authority could be forced into enforcing this cap more strictly, which will negatively impact our wider economy particularly our foreign direct investment jobs and tourism economy.

While we in Sinn Féin are supportive of the Bill, we are not uncritical of it. We will be introducing amendments to address gaps regarding regional development and an absence of an all-Ireland aspect to the Bill. The very fact that Dublin Airport is exceeding the cap by 12.5% shows there is great potential to expand capacity at our regional airports, specifically at Shannon Airport. Balanced regional development is essential to ensuring prosperity across Ireland and, as such, we need to see more ambition when it comes to the development of Ireland's regional airports. With 88% of all passenger traffic coming through Dublin, there is huge opportunity to expand the performance of our regional airports. Simply put, there has been insufficient capital funding to our regional airports, with only €82.3 million assigned for the whole decade to 2030. This level of funding spread across airports and across years is far short of what is needed if we are serious about improving connectivity, expanding routes and developing sustainable regional economic growth.

Shannon Airport has been performing very well. In quarter 1 of this year, 427,655 passengers used the airport, which is an increase of 11% on the 385,000 who used the airport in the same period in 2025. Comparing these periods, there was an even greater increase in the transport of cargo through the airport, with 5,443 tonnes passing through in quarter 1 this year, which is a 53% increase on quarter 1 of 2025. Increasing the use of Shannon Airport is crucial to improve the regional balance. A 2023 report noted that operations by Shannon Airport Group contributed €4 billion to the Irish economy. The potential is there to deliver much more. Shannon Airport has been performing well but has the capacity to grow its numbers easily enough. Its terminal has the capacity to handle up to 5,000 passengers. The year 2025 was the airport's most successful in 16 years, with 2.3 million passengers using the airport. Today, while we talk about the necessity of lifting the cap at Dublin Airport, we must also give consideration to enhancing capacity at Shannon Airport, an enhancement that should coincide with improved public transport services to the airport.

The mid-west, where Shannon Airport is situated, is uniquely positioned to drive regional balanced development. Shannon Airport has been the fulcrum around which the economy of the mid-west has been built. Within Shannon we have an industrial estate not too far away and in my city of Limerick we have several large international companies across numerous industrial estates that would benefit greatly from increased capacity and an increase in destinations serviced by Shannon Airport. Further to this, the airport serves as a gateway to the Wild Atlantic Way and some of the best golf courses in the world.

Having worked in the travel and tourism industry for nearly 20 years, I understand the challenge of attracting additional routes and new airlines to airports outside of Dublin. The Shannon Airport Oireachtas group, of which I am a member, is a cross-party group of mid-west

TDs and has met many times with the Shannon Airport Group. From those discussions there is absolutely no doubt that they are ready and willing to see an increase in the use of the airport for traffic.

The lifting of the cap at Dublin Airport is undoubtedly necessary but this Bill stands as a missed opportunity to deliver meaningful regional development. The level of support provided to regional airports has, so far, been insufficient. Quite simply, ambition is not matched by support. An opportunity exists to enhance the performance of Shannon Airport and this must be seized at the moment.

Deputy Michael Collins: I welcome the opportunity to contribute on what is without question a significant, far-reaching piece of legislation. Independent Ireland recognises the critical importance of Dublin Airport to this country. It is our main gateway to the world. It underpins tourism, supports our exporters, connects families and plays a vital role in attracting international investment. There is no point in pretending otherwise. If connectivity suffers, the national economy suffers and we are where we are. The current passenger cap of 32 million put in place under very different circumstances is now widely seen as a constraint. Businesses are saying it. The tourism sector is saying it. The workers whose livelihoods depend on those sectors are saying it so, yes, action is needed.

However, the question before us today is not whether something should be done; it is how it will be done. This Bill proposes to give the Minister sweeping powers to override existing planning conditions, effectively allowing a single political officeholder to amend or remove the passenger cap even while the processes are ongoing elsewhere. That is a very serious step. It represents a significant shift away from our established planning framework and towards a model where central government can step in and bypass the usual checks and balances.

I understand the frustration with delays. We all do. Communities across Ireland are waiting years and sometimes decades for critical infrastructure. Planning has become, at times, painfully slow and overly complex but we must be careful that in trying to fix one problem we do not create another. Once a precedent like this is set, where a Minister can effectively overwrite planning conditions in the name of economic interest, it raises the simple question, where does it stop? Today it is Dublin Airport. Tomorrow it could be another major project and the risk is that local voices and communities who live with the consequences are gradually pushed further to the margins. That is not a road we should go down lightly.

Independent Ireland believes in balance. We believe in supporting growth but not at any cost. We believe in infrastructure but also in fairness, and we believe that communities, whether in Dublin, Cork, Kerry or anywhere else, deserve to have their concerns heard and respected. That brings me to the communities around Dublin Airport. For many years, residents have raised legitimate concerns about noise traffic congestion and the day-to-day impact of airport operations. I have met a lot of those residents. Those concerns cannot simply be brushed aside. They must remain central to any decision. The Bill provides for environmental assessment and that is welcome, but it also allows the Minister to proceed even where the impacts are identified, provided the mitigation measures are put in place. That will raise concerns and rightly so. We have to ensure that mitigation is not simply a box-ticking exercise but something really enforceable that actually protects people's quality of life.

At the same time, we must look beyond Dublin if we are serious about balanced regional development, which this Government says it is. We cannot put all our focus on expanding capacity in one location. Airports in Cork, Shannon and Knock are vital regional assets. They are engines of employment, tourism and economic activity in their own areas but they need support. They need investment and they need to be part of a coherent national aviation strategy, not an afterthought. There is a real risk here that continued expansion of Dublin Airport could further concentrate activity in the capital, drawing routes and resources away from regional airports. That would be the wrong approach. We should be growing capacity in Dublin Airport but alongside meaningful development in the regions, not instead of it.

Another concern in this Bill are the restrictions on further passenger caps throughout the planning system. That is a profound change. Planning authorities exist for reasons. They provide a level of oversight and accountability that is essential in a democratic system. Removing their ability to impose such conditions in future essentially rewrites the rules and we need to be very clear about the implications of that.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: In 2021, the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act was introduced by the Government. It was supported by Sinn Féin and introduced the carbon tax. Today, yesterday and the day before Sinn Féin were saying they are against carbon tax. Yet, they voted for it in the climate action Bill.

Deputy Pa Daly: You must not have been here last week, with the amendment.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: They are now coming out saying they are against these things. Every week they jump up and down here saying they are against it but last week they decided they were going to fight for it. Deputy Daly is right; I was not here last week for one reason-----

6 o'clock

Deputy Pa Daly: The Deputy must not have been paying attention for a few years now.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: We were wondering.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I was the first person to come to the Dáil in a truck protesting against carbon tax. The Deputies must not have been here that time because they never came out to the truckers.

Deputy Pa Daly: Keep clapping yourself on the back there, Deputy.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: They never came out to the people on the protest but they came out the last day to support them. That is what they did.

Now, getting back to this-----

Deputy Cathy Bennett: It is better to fight with us than with the Government, is it not? We are recommending-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The Deputies love talking about other people but they cannot talk about themselves.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Can we have some order, please?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Exactly. There is no order.

Deputy Pa Daly: Where were the Deputy's amendments?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: This is what Sinn Féin tries to do to the Government. It will not silence me because I know what I am talking about.

Deputy Pa Daly: Put in the work and bring in amendments.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: What way is the wind blowing today for Sinn Féin? Hold on, I must check. Here they are; the wind is over here.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The Deputy is getting good laughs. The Minister is having a good laugh at him.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Good.

Deputy Pa Daly: Do the work on the amendments, Deputy. You are sitting back.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The Deputies are still talking. Look at this, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Go ahead, Deputy.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Thank you very much. To get back to Dublin Airport, I am delighted the airport is doing well but as regards climate emissions, the climate action Bill was supported by the Deputies on my right. They brought in that Bill. Where are most of the people who are landing here going? They are not staying around Dublin, are they? They are travelling throughout the country. Where are the carbon emissions when the Government is talking about that? What about the cost of fuel, which it wants to increase by 32 cent per litre? Where is the Government going with this? On the one hand, it talks about carbon emissions, while, on the other, it wants to expand Dublin Airport, which is 6 million passengers over quota. Why did it not look at Shannon Airport, which could add another 2.5 million passengers without any infrastructural change? Why did it not look at Cork Airport? Why do people have to travel from all different parts of the country to come to Dublin? It is because they cannot get connecting flights due to the monopoly in Dublin.

The people who live around Dublin Airport are all complaining about noise pollution and traffic congestion caused by people trying to get to the airport. What do the Dublin TDs say? Let us make Dublin more congested, they say, and stop any person coming home to Dublin to live with their parents or grandparents. Let us stop them because we are going to make sure we have all our eggs in one basket. Ireland should be the basket where everything is shared, rather than just looking to Dublin. I have brought this issue up more times, even in the convention centre. When I was in the Central Bank today, I said we were in the convention centre for a year. I brought the issue up that time when the former Minister, Eamon Ryan, was talking out of both sides of his mouth about carbon tax. What is the Government doing? It is stopping people coming home by overdeveloping Dublin and not looking after the rest of the country.

This all comes back to carbon tax. The Government will take more and more carbon tax and stop families from looking after their young ones and building their own houses. It will stop infrastructure in this country because of inflation, all of which has been brought on by the carbon tax, but it has no problem in letting buses and trucks travel from the port in Dublin. Of the passengers coming into this country, 83% travel down the country. I would welcome them to Limerick but they could have landed in Shannon Airport and come into Limerick or gone to Kerry, Cork or Galway. They could land anywhere in the country and we would divide up the carbon emissions, but, no, the Government just wants to extend one place. It wants to put suffering on the people of Dublin, whose families cannot come home, and build houses in this area because it is overpopulated. The rest of the country is crying out for business, including the other airports. The Government could expand Knock airport or Kerry airport, which would lower emissions. As for most of the targets, we see all the buses travelling down west on day trips before heading back up to Dublin again. All of it is down to carbon emissions, which the Government says it is trying to reduce, but, at the same time, it is trying to accelerate them. Where is the Minister's explanation for that?

I am all for working together but I am also for equality for the other airports, which should expand at the same time. How can they go against a monopoly that has all the connecting flights? There are only a certain number of flights out of Shannon Airport because the connecting flights leave from Dublin. That is a problem. If the Government wants to do the right thing, it should connect all of Ireland and let all the airports develop together. Then it should look at increasing the cap if the quota is too low. It should look at the issue that way. Increasing the cap in one airport while not helping the other airports and people around the country is wrong. It is not forward planning; it is Dublin planning. The Government is destroying the future of the next generation who want to come back and live in Dublin. It is destroying the lives of people who live around the airport with the extra flights that are going out.

Aeroplanes taking off at Dublin Airport are supposed to bank at a certain time. Now the airport is asking how it is going to organise that. The planes are supposed to go out 3 km before they bank. Now, because there are so many flights coming in, they are banking at 1.5 km out. That means they are going over more residential areas, yet the Government wants to approve more residential building and allow more people to live there. The Government should look in the mirror when it is introducing laws because it is breaking the law.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: There are serious spatial development problems in this country. The Minister is long enough around these Houses to recognise that, and he should recognise it. A demographic change that has accelerated in recent years has been one of population moving from the west coast to the east coast. Currently, 40% of the population lives in the greater Dublin area.

The GAA did a very good report recently on the demographic problem we are hitting. Two thirds of the population of the country, North and South, live in a very narrow band along the east coast. Most university-level jobs are being located in Dublin. Young people have to move to Dublin to work in those jobs but, obviously, Dublin is too expensive. They cannot afford to live in the city, so they end up living 40 km, 50 km and 60 km away in a commuter hell as they try to hold down those jobs. That commuter hell is obviously bad for their lives. Spending two or three hours daily in a car is bad for mental and physical health. For people with a young family, it hurts the children they do not get to see and creates anxiety for them. It hurts the community because those people do not get home until 8 o'clock in the evening, which means it is too late for them to be able to volunteer in their football, soccer and rugby clubs. People are commuting from Ulster, Connacht and Munster into Dublin on a daily basis. Disastrous, lopsided, city-state spatial development is happening under this Government, with absolutely nothing being done to mitigate it or push against it.

While this is happening, it is not good for Dublin. Dublin is becoming more congested, with people having less access to housing and education. Transport facilities are becoming harder to access while, at the same time, schools are being closed in rural and regional Ireland, which is emptying out its young people. The average age of the population in Killarney is now ten years higher than the average age of the population in Balbriggan. That is a self-fulfilling prophecy because the energy of development usually happens with the youth and because regional and rural Ireland is missing its youth, it is also missing that development.

Some 50% of the State's total income tax revenue is spent in the Dublin area. The vast majority of foreign direct investment is going to the greater Dublin area. There are significant problems. Ireland is an outlier here. Many people will say that London is too big for the rest of the economy, but 40% of the Irish population live in Dublin whereas about 20% of the British population live in London. We are an outlier, in European terms, with regard to how horrendously lopsided we are as a country. What is the Government's response to that? Its response to the water pressures in Dublin is to spend billions of euro to take water out of the Parteen Basin and bring it up to Dublin. Most logical and spatially aware Governments would say we should develop the Limerick region and get the population into the region where that natural resource is located.

The same is happening in regard to airports. Today, tens of thousands of people will have left areas right next door to another airport to travel three or four hours to Dublin Airport. Some 40% of the people who land in Dublin daily travel west, where there are other airports. Shannon Airport can take 5 million passengers. The current number is not even half that. Cork Airport could take another 2 million passengers and Knock Airport could take another 500,000 passengers. There is massive spare capacity in these airports, and using it would cause no difficulty at all.

Putting all your eggs in one basket is dangerous in terms of exposure for transport.

All of us can remember the images of the fuel protests when the M50 was blocked. We saw people having to walk, pulling their travel bags behind them, up a motorway to try to get to the airport. Making sure all of the growth happens in Dublin at the expense of the regional airports also creates a problem. There is no contingency plan for Dublin as a result of this.

I will touch briefly on the issue of noise, which is having a massive impact on the towns and villages in north Dublin and south-east Meath that surround Dublin Airport. The airport is currently in breach of planning permissions that were put in place to protect people. That is wrong. The guidelines on this are not being implemented. The DAA has been given eight warning letters and two enforcement notices and is still not responding to this. There are 65 flights at night-time. Places like St. Margaret's are dying. The IAA is not doing the necessary assessment on the two runways working in unison. We want to be accessible to the rest of the world. As an island nation, we need accessibility but I plead with the Minister to start to inject proper spatial development into his plans.

There is then the issue of carbon emissions. Telling people to make sure there is less water in the kettle before boiling it and turn off the lights, while, at the same time, pushing up this cap and putting so many data centres in the country makes a mockery of the Government's ask that people cut back their own emissions.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Knock Airport has been one of modern Ireland's biggest success stories. Monsignor Horan built Knock Airport on a hill. Everyone said it could not be done. When the Government cut funding, he went to America and Australia and raised the shortfall himself. Over the past 40 years, Knock Airport has been a lifeline. It has helped hundreds of thousands of families see their loved ones. It has been so important to Mayo and the broader region.

The focus on Dublin and the Dublin-centric nature of the Government is crippling Dublin. It is incredible to think of this conversation on the passenger cap and all of the difficulties that are arising as a result, while regional airports are crying out for funding and have the capacity to grow, with minimal investment.

In the region of 40 buses a day leave Galway city and travel to Dublin Airport. That is one operator, Citylink, which runs 40 buses. It is incredible. Galway city is actually in the catchment of Knock Airport. In many instances, it is easier for a person from Galway using public transport to access Dublin city and Dublin Airport than it is to access Knock Airport. That is a fundamental gap and fundamental issue. It is one of the reasons the full potential of Knock Airport is not being realised or utilised. In the region of 40% of people using Dublin Airport land at the airport and then travel west. The Minister's answer to that is to increase the passenger cap. Would it not make more sense for spatial development and to people's lives if we were to alleviate the difficulties in regional airports and address those issues? On so many issues, including infrastructure, traffic, housing and employment, the focus on Dublin has not only been detrimental to Dublin, the east and the next generation of families who want to build and live in Dublin, but it has cost the west and regional Ireland the sons and daughters of all of the families who had to leave to seek employment in Dublin. It has cost the people of Dublin and their children the ability to purchase homes in Dublin. We see this focus on Dublin and an instinct to put Dublin first playing out in this policy.

I urge the Minister to take the opportunities presented by Knock Airport and the other regional airports. They are there to be grasped. Knock Airport serves a catchment of 1.1 million people. How can those people access the airport? They do so with tremendous difficulty. That is the answer. We do not have rail to Knock Airport. The Minister for Transport has an opportunity to drive the western rail corridor, not just from Galway to Claremorris but on to Sligo and connecting to the airport via a shuttle bus. He should make Knock Airport the first airport connected by rail. These types of measures will help the people of Dublin but they will also help the people of the west.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: I will not take lectures from Independent Ireland which recently said sport should not become a tool about Israel playing Ireland. The Minister should have taken a stronger stance on that, but Independent Ireland should not accuse Sinn Féin of anything when we are only trying to help the public.

I welcome the legislation, which will encourage tourism on the island of Ireland. However, it is a blunt tool which is not fit for purpose and may well be legally unsound. That said, there is an absolute need for the Government and the DAA to recognise the outstanding issues that local residents have. It is disappointing that the Bill does not provide that recognition. I appeal to him to work constructively with the Opposition as we seek to address these issues. In particular, he should mandate the DAA to engage meaningfully with residents.

I am also deeply concerned about the impact maintaining the cap could have on our tourism sector, which supports well over 200,000 jobs, often in parts of the country that have otherwise suffered from a dearth of inward investment. The tourism sector, as the Minister knows, has not had enough attention from the Government in particular areas where it is needed. This is especially case with regard to the many workers in the sector on the minimum wage and the Government's decision to delay the implementation of the national living wage until the end of the decade. Crucially, the tourism sector has immense potential in terms of geographical spread and even greater again in terms of its ability to contribute to economic regional balance. I contend that has yet to be realised. Our regional airports are necessary components of balance, which has been lacking.

Galway and Sligo airports are closed to commercial traffic. Kerry, Knock and Waterford airports need far greater consideration, Waterford Airport in particular where positive development is being seen almost in spite of the Government. It is a positive thing that we can look to Dublin Airport as having even greater potential, but with 88% of passenger traffic passing through that airport, it would be wrong to think our regional airports do not have more to offer. We need to encourage more tourists to visit the untapped parts of the country beyond Dublin and the larger and more traditional destinations. There is not a county in Ireland that lacks the potential to draw great numbers of tourists. I was a member of the Sliabh Beagh Partnership Committee when I was a councillor. I was delighted to see the allocation of funding last year to develop the Sliabh Beagh area as an eco-tourism destination. I know that every county has similar potential. Investment is needed but so too is greater encouragement for tourists to travel to all destinations. All of our regional airports have a role to play in this.

Derry and Belfast also need particular consideration in the context of cross-Border tourism. It should be recognised that to maximise tourism potential on the island of Ireland, all airports on our island need to be considered. We should seek to remove the hurdles and recognise that

Ireland is a single destination, one that has a diverse range of offerings in every corner of the country and the space in-between. In that context, I appeal to the Government to progress this legislation, but to do so in the context of a wider, considered aviation strategy in which balanced regional development, including tourism, are to the fore.

Ireland, as the Minister knows, has 32 counties. We need to encourage tourism to all counties and to increase flight caps nationwide, not just in Dublin.

Minister for Transport (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I thank all Deputies for the contributions they have made. I thank them for the constructive contributions that were made by most. It is unfortunate that the Members who were some of the most vociferous opponents and made the most impassioned pleas have not remained in the Chamber to get an answer to the questions or the points they have raised. I hope that will be what Committee Stage is for.

I will deal with regional growth and regional airports in a moment, but first, this Bill provides us an opportunity to deal with a legacy issue that is there and, frankly, to deal with some issues that DAA under previous management did not deal with. This condition was on two planning applications going back to 2007 and 2008. It should have been dealt with before this. It is unsustainable that it remains in place. This cap will be lifted through this legislation in a sustainable and respectful way to adjacent communities. To complement that is the draft decision of the Aircraft Noise Competent Authority, ANCA, which it just issued last month in relation to noise. There are real noise issues with some communities. I listened to Deputy Copping and Deputy Ahern of Labour, whose points I may speak to in a moment, but as I said earlier on in the debate, the reality of it is I live beside the airport. I represent an airport community. We know how important that airport is. We know that in some incidences that relationship between the airport and some local communities has not been as it should be and needs to improve further. The draft regulatory decision by ANCA will be a very important one. I have written directly to the airport in relation to expansion of the noise insulation scheme. We want to see that happen. The ANCA decision will allow that happen. We want to see improvement to the voluntary purchase scheme for those directly impacted. I talk about residents who I have met in St. Margaret's, the Ward and the wider area, but also residents in parts of Portmarnock for whom noise insulation needs to be addressed.

Deputy Toole and some others mentioned flight paths, which was valid. I am committing here that we will carry out an independent assessment of flight paths. There have been issues for residents where flight paths and planning permissions have been granted and they have not seen those flight paths operate as they were approved. That is not acceptable. A retention application went in on that. That is something I am committing to the House that we will have an independent assessment of the flight paths operated out of Dublin Airport.

Dublin Airport does need to continue to grow, and it is growing. It underpins jobs, as Deputy Daly said on behalf of Sinn Féin. It is recognised, as other Deputies said, how many thousands of jobs, livelihoods and families are sustained by the airport. I also refer to the international connectivity we derive from the airport as an island nation within Europe. I was surprised that the Labour Party spokesperson on transport needed a definition to try to understand what international connectivity is about.

I broadly welcome the input to the debate. Residents are to the forefront of my mind; as are those residents' jobs and people's jobs. That has been rightly raised here because some, like

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue, have tried to paint it as some Dublin instead of any other airport thing. That is just not true. We are in the middle of a €200 million investment in Cork Airport at the moment. Let us look at the regional airports. Cork Airport is up 13% from 2024 to 2025 with 3.46 million passengers. Deputy Quinlivan mentioned Shannon Airport; I have been there on a number of occasions. It is up 9% in passenger growth on a full year basis to 2.3 million, with capacity to do more and a very good capital plan. We have now brought Shannon Airport into the regional airports programme. We have changed the regional airports programme to enable us to assist and fund Shannon. I want Shannon Airport to grow. It is growing. I want Cork Airport to continue to grow. It is also growing, thankfully. I want Ireland West Airport at Knock to continue to grow. Its numbers are up 13.5% year on year. I was at the 40th anniversary of the airport at Knock. It is a wonderful facility and it is touching on a million passenger journeys through there. Kerry Airport is at 440,000 passengers, up about 5.5% year on year. As regards Donegal Airport, also critical to the northwest region, we have made sure we are supporting the PSO service and the schedule there. That is really important. On an all-island basis, we are funding through the Taoiseach's shared island initiative, the PSO that will enable us to start the Dublin to Derry route again. That will also be great for connectivity in that area. We do have Belfast International Airport on the island as well. We have to look at this on an island basis.

Some have asked about a national aviation policy. We have committed to doing that. We will be bringing forward an issues paper later this year and will seek public consultation into a new national aviation policy. We are world leaders in aviation. Some people want to ignore that. We have the largest airline in Europe. Some of the CEOs of the top companies all the way across the world are actually Irish. We have great expertise and a great track record in this sector too. If we look at the area of leasing, over 50% of the aircraft that fly across the world are leased in this country. Aircraft engines are leased in this country. There is also the expertise that our MRO sector has, underpinning tens of thousands of other jobs. There is a new facility open in Knock airport where aircraft engines are being repurposed. Lots of really good things are happening here. We cannot have a situation whereby, through a legacy planning condition, the main international airport - I say the main, not the only - and an airport that is also an international hub is stifled in its growth. If we do not address this we may not only be looking at stifling its growth. Deputy O'Gorman seems to want that we go back to the 32 million cap. Some 34.6 million passengers went through the airport last year. If you cut those numbers you are cutting jobs, connectivity and routes. I do not think anyone can say with any degree of honesty that this is something the general public across Ireland would want. Even among many of my constituents, the vast majority of them support the move to remove the cap in a sustainable way. There are others who do not - let us be straight about that too - and I respect where they are coming from. A lot of that has been down to the way they feel and the way they have been treated over ten, 15 and 20 years. I want that to improve. The airport has to operate under a good neighbour policy. I can assure the House that the board that is there, the interim chief executive, the management team and the new chairperson who is coming in, are really clear about that and they want to that to happen. In many incidences they do. This is not just through community benefit funds and others. We need to see expansion of the noise insulation schemes and the other things I have mentioned. The new national aviation policy will be important in that regard to underpin this. I can assure Members that we will work on a constructive basis through Committee and Remaining Stages on this Bill. It is a very important

piece of legislation. I am committing to the House on the independent assessment of flight paths that we will carry out.

To those who came into the House and said there is no environmental considerations in this Bill, that is not true. It is absolutely not true. It is clear throughout the Bill. Those assessments will be assessed by An Coimisiún Pleanála; not by the Department or by me as Minister, and rightly so. I am just surprised the leader of the Green Party is not very clear on our obligations under the climate Act or our international obligations under climate agreements. The emissions of the aviation sector are not counted in that sector. As a small island nation, we do not have large industrials here. We are moving in the right direction in relation to emissions reductions. We also have to see how we connect with the rest of the world, how we continue to drive growth in that sector, continue to ensure technological advances in aviation continue where we are reducing emissions and fuel use, and that we look at alternative fuels. We have to do more than look at it but also look at how we can improve the blend, as Deputy Ó Muirí was mentioning earlier in relation to the work we have done on SAF. We are one of the first European countries to come out with a SAF roadmap.

This legislation is urgent. It is priority and it is needed. I welcome the support from most of the House, though not from all, to look very clearly at what we are intending to do. We are not intending to rip up the planning Act in any way, shape or form. We are dealing with the legacy issue here in a way that is fully respectful of our environmental considerations. We are also ensuring that the airport operates under a good neighbour policy and improving the situation for the small number of residents who are very directly impacted. We want to operate and move this legislation through in an efficient way but in a fair and balanced way, which we will also do. I thank the Deputies for their contribution. I thank my own team from the Department who have been here assiduously taking notes of contributions, as have I. That will inform us as we go into the Committee, Report and Final Stages of the debate, which I understand we intend to have next week in the Dáil. Then from there it will go to the Seanad.

I very much appreciate people's time here today and their input into this important legislation. Let us move on and get this done for the good of our country, of the Dublin region and of all of us by virtue of the jobs and economic growth it underpins.

Question put and agreed to.

Dublin Airport (Passenger Capacity) Bill 2026: Referral to Select Committee

Minister for Transport (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I move:

That the Bill be referred to the Select Committee on Transport pursuant to Standing Orders 103 and 188.

Question put and agreed to.

Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Seanad Éireann has passed the Údarás na Gaeltachta Bill 2024, without amendment.

Offences against the State (Amendment) Act 1998 and Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009: Motions

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): I move:

That Dáil Éireann resolves that sections 2 to 4, 6 to 12, 14 and 17 of the Offences against the State (Amendment) Act 1998 (No. 39 of 1998) shall continue in operation for the period beginning on 30th June, 2026 and ending on 29th June, 2027.

The two motions before the House seek the approval of Dáil Éireann to continue in force provisions in the Offences Against the State (Amendment) Act 1998 and the Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009 aimed at combating terrorism and organised crime. Given the nature of these important provisions, the Houses of the Oireachtas have decided that they should be periodically reviewed. The Minister for Justice, Home Affairs, and Migration is required to lay reports before the Oireachtas on the use of the relevant provisions in the two Acts. Reports covering the 12 months up to 31 May 2026 were placed in the Oireachtas Library on 19 June.

Deputies will be aware that the Offences Against the State (Amendment) Act 1998 was enacted in the aftermath of the Omagh bombing in August 1998. This was a necessary and proportionate response to an atrocious and barbaric act and the murder of 29 innocent people by the Real IRA. These provisions of the criminal law provide strong legislative powers to ensure that An Garda Síochána and the courts are in a position to meet the challenge laid down by those opponents of peace. Section 18 of the 1998 Act provides that sections 2 to 4, inclusive, 6 to 12, inclusive, 14 and 17 must be renewed by the Oireachtas at least annually if they are to remain in force.

The report laid before the House includes information provided by the Garda Commissioner on the use of the provisions in question over the past 12 months and a table setting out usage figures for each of the years since the Act came into operation. It is notable that six of the 12 provisions to be renewed, those in sections 3, 4, 6, 8, 12, and 17, have not been utilised during the reporting period. Of course, the fact that a provision is not used in a particular year does not mean that it is redundant or unnecessary as the usage of different sections can vary from year to year.

It is clear that so-called dissident republicans, who have their origins in the Provisional IRA and INLA, continue to represent a threat. Despite the progress towards peace made over the years, they continue to seek to return to the fruitless violence of the past, as evidenced by two recent attempted attacks on police stations in Lurgan, County Armagh, and Dunmurry, just outside Belfast. We must continue to do all we can to deal with this threat. Let no one be under any illusion that these groups do not represent a threat, although we can be thankful that threat is lesser than in the past. These groups have remained resolute in their opposition to democracy, the rule of law and all that the Good Friday Agreement stands for. They remain wedded to brutality and criminality. It is also well established that these groups have links to, and operate hand in hand with, organised criminals.

North-South co-operation in this area is crucial and co-operation between gardaí and their counterparts in Northern Ireland is strong. Indeed, it is automatic when needed most. In recent years, the benefits of that co-operation have been apparent from successful joint operations between An Garda Síochána and the PSNI. There is a long shared history between the two jurisdictions in counteracting terrorism on the island. It is essential that we continue to build on this strong co-operation in the post-Brexit period. The joint Cross Border Policing Strategy 2025-2027 provides a platform for An Garda Síochána and the PSNI to build on existing strategic and operational collaboration and to strengthen policing capacity and capability.

I pay tribute to the gardaí and PSNI officers who continue to co-operate closely and work tirelessly together to keep their communities safe and to counter all threats from terrorism. It is our duty to ensure that those tasked with protecting us from this threat have at their disposal the appropriate measures to meet it. In that regard, I am firmly of the view that the provisions whose renewal I am seeking today are necessary to support An Garda Síochána in investigating, disrupting and dismantling the activities of terrorists.

In addition to providing information on the use of the provisions in question over the past year, the report laid before this House notes the clear view of the Garda Commissioner that the Act continues to be an important tool in ongoing efforts to combat terrorism. While the 1998 Act was a response to a domestic threat arising from dissident republican terrorism, as an open democracy, it is very important that we do not lose sight of the threat from violent extremism and international terrorism. There has been a general deterioration in the international security landscape in recent times, in part due to terrible wars in Ukraine and in the Middle East. In its most recent terrorism situation and trend report, published in 2025, Europol sets out the threat situation at EU level. The report confirms that terrorism, particularly jihadist and lone actor attacks, remains a key threat to the EU's internal security.

Last year, the EU published its internal security strategy, ProtectEU. The strategy notes the changed security environment and evolving geopolitical landscape, where the links between the EU's internal and external security require more action against the range of threats faced, including: hybrid threats by hostile foreign states and state-sponsored actors; powerful organised crime networks; the ongoing threat faced from terrorism; technological advancements and more. In response to these threats, the strategy sets out a work plan involving a stronger legal framework, better information sharing and closer co-operation. Ireland is not immune from the threats arising in this changed security environment and we must have the capability to deal with the threats arising. Building on ProtectEU, in February 2026, the EU published its agenda to prevent and counter terrorism and online extremism, which reinforces Europe's collective response to evolving terrorist and violent extremist threats.

As I have said, the views of An Garda Síochána are clearly set out in the report. That view is that the continued operation of these provisions is required. It is my strong view, and the strong view of the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, that the relevant sections should be continued in operation for a further 12 months.

Section 8 of the Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009 is also the subject of a motion before the House. It refers to a small number of serious organised crime offences that are set out in Part 7 of the Criminal Justice Act 2006. Section 8 of the 2009 Act makes these offences scheduled offences for the purposes of Part V of the Offences Against the State Act 1939, which

is to say that trials for these offences are to be heard in the Special Criminal Court, subject to the power of the Director of Public Prosecutions to direct that the offences be tried in the ordinary courts.

The purpose of this provision is to guard against the possibility of interference with jury trial by ruthless criminal groups that seek to behave as though they are beyond the law. It was enacted as a response to a number of difficulties where the justice system was considered to be under serious threat from organised crime. Organised crime groups had shown a particular ruthlessness in their activities, including attacks on witnesses and intimidation of jurors. It was imperative that the criminal justice system was robust enough to withstand the assault launched upon it through intimidation and violence. I believe most Deputies will agree that imperative remains. The House will be aware of the threat that society and the criminal justice system face from groups that will stop at nothing in pursuit of their criminal activities. There is no disputing the damage they have inflicted upon communities throughout the country. Their willingness to resort to extreme violence and their flagrant disregard for communities is apparent.

Supporting the efforts of An Garda Síochána to combat organised crime and to bring to justice those involved remains a priority for the Government. This is reflected in the record allocation of over €2.59 billion in budget 2026, which allows for sustained investment in recruitment, equipment, technology and vehicles. An Garda Síochána is working intensively to bear down on the criminals involved and deserves praise for its considerable successes in disrupting their activities, in making significant seizures of drugs, cash, and weapons, in bringing criminals to justice, and, most importantly, in preventing further loss of life.

I draw attention to a joint task force operation in April between An Garda Síochána and the PSNI, resulting in €5.2 million of drugs seized in Larne Harbour, and a joint An Garda Síochána operation with Revenue which seized €10.5 million in cocaine at Rosslare Harbour in October 2025. Deputies will also be aware of significant cases in which individuals have been convicted and sentenced in the Special Criminal Court in recent weeks. I acknowledge this important work and the brave gardaí who persevere with it, day in, day out.

The report that the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, has laid before the House in accordance with section 8 covers the period from 1 June 2025 to 31 May 2026. It includes information provided by the Garda Commissioner on the use over the past 12 months of the provisions in question and details the relevant offences. It is clear from the report that An Garda Síochána made a significant number of arrests in respect of the offences relevant to section 8 of the Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009, with 33 charges laid before the courts. One of these was laid before the Special Criminal Court and three convictions were recorded during the reporting period. The view of An Garda Síochána is clearly set out in the report and it is that the continued operation of this provision is required. It is my strong view, and the strong view of the Minister, that section 8 should be continued in operation for a further 12 months.

The House will be aware that the majority and minority reports of the independent review group were published in June 2023. The majority recommended the repeal of the Acts and their replacement with modern bespoke legislation. As part of this, the assessment of the majority of the review group was that there is, and will continue to be, an ongoing need for a non-jury court as permitted by the Constitution to try serious criminal offences in certain

limited and exceptional circumstances. I take seriously that assessment in the context of safeguarding the security of the State and our citizens. The majority also devised a suite of proposals in relation to how the court might operate to uphold the rights of accused persons and to support transparency and maintain public confidence.

I and the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration are firmly of the view that the Offences Against the State Acts have served our country well in combating both subversives and organised crime and have fulfilled a vital role in our criminal justice system. The Special Criminal Court was established to respond to the threat to the State and its people from republican terrorism over the decades and it continues to deal with the threat posed by terrorism and the most serious organised crime cases. It serves to eliminate the very real risk to jurors and potential jurors by subversives and ruthless crime groups who place no value on human life. While it is, of course, my firm view that trial by jury should be preserved to the greatest extent possible, I have a responsibility not to ignore the threat posed by such groups.

I highlight the fact that, in accordance with that principle, the Special Criminal Court is only used in very limited circumstances. I am informed that there were 18 defendants brought before the Special Criminal Court last year on 104 charges. Indeed, the vast majority of scheduled offences continue to be dealt with in the ordinary courts and the DPP on her website has set out very clearly the decision-making process involved where An Garda Síochána recommends that a case be tried in the Special Criminal Court. Last year, the Minister informed the Government that he accepted, in principle, the recommendations of the majority report. Accepting the recommendations of the majority report sets a clear direction for reform. Proposals for new legislation are currently under development and the Minister will return to the Government in due course with these.

In the meantime, and in conclusion, as set out in the two reports laid before the House, it is the clear view of An Garda Síochána that the provisions in the 1998 Act and the 2009 Act continue to be necessary and effective in ongoing efforts in the fight against terrorism and serious organised crime. On the basis of the information set out in those reports, and on the advice of the Garda authorities, I propose that the House should approve the continued operation of the relevant provisions of the 1998 Act and the 2009 Act for a further 12 months, commencing on 30 June 2026.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I move amendment No. 1:

To insert the following after "ending on 29th June, 2027":

"; and

— calls on the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration to bring forward legislation to give effect to the recommendations of the Independent Review Group without further delay."

Tá díomá orm go bhfuil muid ag filleadh ar ais arís anseo ag athnuachan cumhachtaí éigeandála agus reachtaíochta atá as dáta. Ba cheart go ndéileálfadh an Rialtas leis seo roimhe seo. It is disappointing that we are back here once again renewing emergency powers and outdated legislation. Promised proposals on this matter have not been delivered and it seems that Government is either incapable or unwilling to deliver them. Not only has there not been

any progress, the prospect of movement to implement the proposals of the independent review seems further away than ever.

When the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, who, for the second year in a row, is not here to discuss this motion, first came into office we were told to expect some proposals to be brought forward by the end of last year. When I asked again recently by way of parliamentary question, no indicative timetable could be given. In the Minister of State's speech, she left it until the very end and, within that, there were just two paragraphs where there was any reference to the independent report that was commissioned by the Government at a large expense to the taxpayer. Now, she is saying that the Minister will return in due course. It is as clear as absolute mud. I am beginning to wonder if the Minister has any intention of dealing with this issue during his term of office. That is why it is disappointing that we are back here once again renewing provisions in an Act which we know, because the expert committee we established told us so, should have been replaced a long time ago.

Last year, the Government belatedly acknowledged that the offences against the State legislation had to be overhauled, but it is three years now since the publication of the independent review on the Offences Against the State Acts that was chaired by Mr. Justice Michael Peart. There has been absolutely no progress in the time since. In fact, we have probably moved backwards over the past 12 months. To remind the House, the independent review group publication in 2023 recommended that the Offences Against the State Act be abolished in its entirety, with a majority recommending that a new non-jury court replace the Special Criminal Court to try serious criminal offences for which a threshold has been reached. Sinn Féin has repeatedly called for the proposals of this report to be implemented and for legislation to be brought forward. As the Government has not acted and shows no sign that it is going to act, I wish to inform the House that I, along with my colleague, Deputy Mark Ward, will be introducing a Bill compiled in conjunction with the OPLA to compel the Government to act on the independent review. That the Offences Against the State Acts are outdated is undisputed. That emergency legislation should not be used on an ongoing basis is without question. Just think about what we do here. On an annual basis, we renew emergency legislation. We have been doing that for decades. We need a modern legal framework to effectively address organised crime and to properly protect jurors.

There are serious issues in relation to organised crime that our courts and gardaí must be empowered to tackle. We are all in agreement on that. Recently, we have seen activities in respect of the Kinahan gang. We saw the recent incident involving a Swedish contract killer who died in Limerick. We need a sophisticated modern legal system to deal with organised crime, not outdated legislation that needs to be renewed on an annual basis. These are circumstances and situations that bear no relation to the situation when the legislation was first introduced. We are approaching 90 years since the Offences Against the State Act was initially introduced. The legislation has moved significantly from its original intention.

These emergency power legislations were expanded with the creation of the Special Criminal Court in 1972 and then further expansions of the Act in 1998 following the Omagh bomb. The Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009 was enacted to put in place certain additional legislative measures to tackle organised crime. What we have had is successive Governments repeatedly dragging their feet on dealing with this issue, despite that there is widespread criticism, both domestically and internationally, of the continuation of the Offences

Against the State Acts. Logically, the time to deal with this would have been in the immediate aftermath of the Good Friday Agreement. Many would have expected it to be the case.

To remind Members of the House what the Good Friday Agreement said, specifically referencing the use of emergency legislation, it said that the Irish Government will "initiate a wide-ranging review of the Offences against the State Acts with a view to both reform and dispensing with those elements no longer required as circumstances permit". Following the Good Friday Agreement, the Hederman committee chaired by a former Supreme Court justice conducted a review of the Offences Against the State Act published in August 2002. Its recommendations included new legislation and the repeal of existing legislation. Does that sound familiar? That was in 2002; here we are in 2026 and of course those recommendations were never implemented. That is the crux of the problem. There is little confidence based on the track record and on the Minister of State's statement today that the Government will actually deal with this issue. There is a real concern with the level of delay and inaction we have seen that the independent review will similarly end up on a shelf somewhere to be cited in 20 years' time by whoever replaces us in these Houses if there is a continuation of the go-slow Governments we have had to date.

In our submission to the independent review of the Offences Against the State Act, Sinn Féin called for a number of things, specifically, an end to the Offences Against the State Act, an end to emergency legislation and the replacement of the current Special Criminal Court with a new, non-jury human rights-compliant system. The independent review group recommended that the Offences Against the State Act be abolished in its entirety with a majority recommending a new non-jury trial replace the Special Criminal Court to trial serious offences for which a threshold has been reached. It is unacceptable we are not seeing any movement on the implementation of these proposals. I have said, and I will repeat, I want to work constructively with the Minister on this but we can only do that if we get some movement or real clarity of intention on the part of the Minister.

We in Sinn Féin have argued that the legislation should stipulate that the courts be provided with the power to decide on whether a non-jury trial should take place rather than the DPP as proposed in the majority report. The Special Criminal Court was criticised by the United Nations Human Rights Committee in 2001. Central to that criticism was the failure of the Irish Government to demonstrate that the decision of the DPP to certify that the applicant be tried by the Special Criminal Court was based on reasonable and objective grounds. The UN committee also pointed to the fact that the DPP was under no obligation to provide reasons for its decision. It is my view and Sinn Féin's that the legislation to give effect to the independent review should also include a higher bar than what was recommended in the majority report for a non-jury trial. The legislation should include a requirement of evidence of real and present danger that jury tampering would take place. Jury tampering is often cited as the reason for special courts. While it is a real concern, the argument is a little hollow if no action is taken to protect juries. The right to a trial by jury should be protected except in exceptional circumstances. To protect that fundamental right, we need to protect jurors.

The Law Reform Commission in 2013 recommended a number of steps that could be taken to give greater protection to juries, including the creation of a stand-alone offence of jury tampering. In our submission to the independent review group, Sinn Féin called for the recommendations of the Law Reform Commission in relation to the protection of jurors to be

implemented and the practices of other jurisdictions to be examined with a view to adopting the best practice in line with international standards to protect juries. The independent review group on the Offences Against the State Act also called for this to be done. There is no reason for ongoing delays in doing so. I would like to see the Minister bring forward proposals on this issue in line with what the Law Reform Commission and the independent review group proposed.

The debate on the motions before the Dáil today do not take place in a vacuum. While robust legislation is required to deal with the threat of modern, sophisticated organised crime, as I said earlier, the battle against such criminals starts in the community and on our streets. The criminal justice system must be adequately resourced and equipped to tackle organised crime. In addition to the failure to deal with the issue of the Offences Against the State Act since taking office, the Minister has done very little to deal with the recruitment and retention crisis in the Garda. The failure to tackle this crisis means we simply do not have enough gardaí for crucial tasks which are the bedrock of crime prevention such as community policing. Interventions to prevent young people being dragged into crime, investing in communities and diversion and putting enough community gardaí on our streets are all equally important. We know young people who get involved in organised crime are often groomed to be involved at a very young age. Preventable intervention at this age is crucial. We also need to ensure we have proper garda visibility in all communities.

What we have seen since the Minister, Deputy Jim' O'Callaghan, took office can give us very little confidence that the long-overdue overhaul of the Offences Against the State Act will be acted upon. If we are to take the Minister of State's speech today, this Government has no intention of moving on this area. The Government should be held to account to ensure the recommendations of the independent review group are implemented without further delay. That is why I tabled an amendment to the motions. I urge all Members of this House to support the Sinn Féin amendment. In time, Sinn Féin will introduce legislation to force the Government to act. When talking about the Special Criminal Court and Offences Against the State Act, it is noteworthy that this year marks the 50th anniversary of the Sallins case. It is way beyond time the people involved in that case received the truth and justice for which they have been campaigning for the past five decades.

Deputy Gary Gannon: This is the seventh year I have showed up to vote for something which I profoundly disagree with. I believe fully in a trial by jury. Ordinary citizens should be able to sit in judgment. When the State accuses somebody of a serious crime, one of the strongest protections we possess is the right to be judged by our peers. Yet, seven years in a row I have voted for something I disagree with. This year and last year, I have also been very conscious that if I was to take a stand and say I will not vote for it this time, I do not believe this Government and this State have the capacity to project jurors. That is a sad indictment of the system and a continuity of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments which have left us showing up and reaffirming a collective belief that the ordinary courts of this State are inadequate. That is not hyperbole; it is provided for in Article 38.3.1 of the Constitution which allows for juryless courts in the scenario that "ordinary courts are inadequate to secure the effective administration of justice, and the preservation of public peace and order." That is effectively what we do every single year. We show up and say our ordinary courts are inadequate for the administration of justice. That should shame us all. As we talk about the

various reforms and reviews such as the Hederman review in 2002 and the Peart minority and majority review, we describe the belief that our courts are not good enough to try the people who appear before the Special Criminal Court. That should be something we all take stock of. It is not a form of strength or a tough-on-crime position to try the worst of the worst in the Special Criminal Court. It is actually a concession; it concedes ground to these people who try to actively instil fear in communities like mine and yours that we do not believe the ordinary courts of this State are adequate or the State has a monopoly on violence for which we protect jurors within the State. That is a sad indictment on all of us.

Every year this House renews these powers, we acknowledge inadequacy. This is no longer 1972 or the darkest year of the Troubles; it is 2026. The people who have been responsible for our judicial system the entire time are solely Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil. The report laid before the House today tells us how many cases were tried in Special Criminal Courts last year and the year before.

7 o'clock

One of the things it does not tell us is why the Special Criminal Court was deemed the appropriate court to try these individuals. I do not doubt for a second that some of the people who come before the court, recently and potentially in the future, are vicious criminals who would try to undermine our Judiciary and try to intimidate jurors and their families. All of that is absolutely true but nobody stops and tells me why we do not have the capacity within the State to prescribe the types of protections there are in other jurisdictions. We are an outlier. The Irish State is an outlier in the sense that we do not provide safety for our jurors. In Italy they have dealt with this with the Mafia. Lots of other jurisdictions have dealt with this. Ireland is really only comparable to Denmark at the moment. Everywhere else seems to make allowances in exceptional cases but we are saying that this exception is now becoming the norm.

Last year, the Minister said that he believed in the Peart majority report. I would disagree but where are we in terms of the actual legislation? There is an element of basic cowardice here that we continue to renew the Special Criminal Court without justifying the inadequacies of the Government and State as to why we cannot protect ourselves, or what we are bringing in with regard to reform. I would like to see that soon.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: It is sad that we find ourselves once again standing up and making statements about the Special Criminal Court without any of the issues that it raises having been advanced by this Government. My colleague, Deputy Gary Gannon, has just mentioned the Peart review. As a party, many of our positions would align more closely with the minority report of the Peart review. Essentially, what we have here is a parallel system within our criminal justice system where people can, technically, be tried for the same crime in different courts that have vastly different conviction rates, one of which is not a jury court. If we want to experience equality before the law, one of the principles we should be upholding is that it is absolutely reasonable for people to expect to be tried by a jury of their peers. This for me is one of the huge issues, but besides that I believe the principle of presumption of innocence is undermined by the continuation of this parallel system.

Even if we park all of the principles around it, one of the biggest issues is the actual practical development. As long as we hive off the issue of jury intimidation and remove juries from

certain courts so that we do not have to deal with jury intimidation from what we anticipate would happen, and rightly so, we will never actually deal with jury intimidation in our main courts. That is something this Government has to deal with. The Government has to lock horns with it and tackle it. There are a lot of ways in which juries need support in the existing system, never mind getting into intimidation, but right now we cannot get the data around it. We do not really know the grounds on which the decision is made to deal with jury intimidation by creating an entirely separate system for trying those offences. I need to see from this Government the research, the data and the consultation. Consultation was supposed to follow from the Peart review but this Government has not even dealt with the Hederman review, which was in the early 2000s. There is so much work that needs to be done to ensure we do not find ourselves year after year up on our feet talking about the lack of balance between human rights and what is absolutely and rightly preventing gangland crime.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I have very deep concerns about the operation of the Special Criminal Court. The right to a fair trial is a fundamental human right. The lack of juries and the operating provisions of this court are undermining that right to a fair trial. The Minister of State, Deputy Ardagh, and her Government are undermining people's human rights here. The Special Criminal Court was set up in 1972 as an emergency provision. Over 50 years later are we still saying that we are in a state of emergency in the State? There are clear examples in this court of mission creep and they should concern the Minister of State. They should concern us all. I urge the Minister of State to read the book *Prophet Song* by Paul Lynch. It will show the Minister of State how emergency powers are used against ordinary people. It should concern us all that these sit on our Statue Book.

In 2022, the co-leader of the Social Democrats, Catherine Murphy, called on the Government to implement reforms over the three-year period up to 2025. The Government absolutely failed to act on those recommendations and it failed to advance any of the reforms. Jury intimidation is not a uniquely Irish issue. Other countries deal with this. They have provisions and they have ways of doing it. The Government needs to look at ways other countries are doing it and implement them here. The Minister of State and the Government have absolutely failed to heed those warnings. They failed to heed the warnings from the UN, from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, IHREC, from the Irish Council for Civil Liberties, ICCL, from Amnesty International, and from all of the human rights bodies who say they have deep concerns about this court. The Government's failure to change this has backed us into a corner and left us with no choice but to vote for these provisions. I think it is a disgrace. Our call is that in advance of next year's vote the Government would advance reforms to please give us other options here. My vote is not a vote for this court: it is a vote and an urgent call for the Minister of State and the Government to progress reforms. These emergency powers cannot stay on the Statute Book. Citizens in the State deserve a right to a fair trial and the Government is undermining that right.

Deputy Alan Kelly: As this is my first engagement with the Minister of State, I wish her the best of luck in her new role.

We will be supporting Deputy Carthy's motion again this year. It is just a few weeks since we debated the Bill to allow the State to support and participate in the work of the Omagh Bombing Inquiry. As we debate these motions again this year, it is vital to remember why we

have these annual reauthorisations. We remember the victims of the Omagh atrocity and we think of their families, their friends and all those who suffered through the violence of the Troubles. We all know too well the impact of the sale of illegal drugs and the violence that creates and brings to so many communities around Ireland. As the State closes in on individuals hiding away in the Middle East, an issue I raised here in the Dáil fairly directly with then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar on 11 June 2020, this legal framework while outdated and flawed in places provides vital tools to take on organised international crime.

While we in the Labour Party will still vote for the final motions, the Minister of State will know that the Labour Party has long argued for and supported the need for comprehensive reform of the law in this area. Others have spoken before about how jurisdictions in other countries deal with jury intimidation. It is long beyond time that we as a country dealt with this issue. That the State is not able to provide safeguards around jury intimidation is, frankly, unacceptable in modern times. To have this legislation on that basis is unacceptable and a failure of the State. Threats from crime and terrorism are constantly evolving and our legal framework must do so too. We said it last year, and no doubt we will end up repeating it next year given the way things are going, that there is no need for an annual vote on some of the provisions we will vote on in relation to this. These should be part of the permanent criminal code. Withholding information about the commission of a crime should be a permanent offence, and directing an unlawful criminal organisation should also be a crime rather than regarded as an emergency provision.

In the past, the Labour Party has also raised the absence of sufficient information to support an informed finding as to the adequacy or otherwise of the ordinary courts to secure the effective administration of justice and the preservation of public peace and order in relation to offences under the Act. Every year the Dáil and Seanad are asked to declare that the ordinary criminal courts are inadequate and that a jury trial is somewhat not fit to deal with particular offences. This decision should be based on more evidence than we have ever seen provided when asked to make this declaration. We are never given any information as to the adequacy of the criminal courts or on the risk of intimidation of jurors. It is three years since the publication of the independent review of the offences against the State Acts. Last year, the Minister set out the direction he was going and that he broadly accepted the majority report recommendations to repeal and replace the Offences against the State Act. He indicated that new legislation would not be ready by now but failed to clearly set out what timeframe he would adopt for reform. Maybe in her reply the Minister of State might be able to give us some indication of same.

We have had the Hederman report in 2002, the Peart majority and minority reports, various other reports, reviews and recommendations, and the Law Reform Commission report on jury service in 2013. I could go on and on. The Oireachtas was called upon to repeal the existing Acts and replace them with a single consolidated Act containing significant reforms. The Peart review minority report went further and recommended the abolition of the Special Criminal Court. The majority report supported its retention but also recommended that there should be no blanket referral of offences to a non-jury court.

Instead, the DPP should use the power it already has to decide on a case-by-case basis whether there is sufficient threat to the administration of justice to justify sending a particular trial to a non-jury court.

Page 12 of the report states:

the current system of schedule offences under which certain offences are automatically or presumptively tried by a non-jury court should be abolished. Instead, the decision as to whether a non-jury court is used should, in every instance, be based on an assessment of the circumstances pertaining to the particular case.

The offence would remain in place and be triable in the ordinary way and the DPP would retain its discretion to transfer any particular trial to the Special Criminal Court. Looking to the minority recommendations, however, in a scenario where there is a permanent standing special court, the Labour Party would therefore support the minority recommendation that decisions on trial venues should be made by a judge and not the DPP. This should be based on clear criteria set out in the legislation that recognises the exceptional nature of a non-jury trial. This will provide an added layer of accountability and indeed, transparency.

The review group also recommended many other reforms and safeguards, including the repeal of many outdated provisions and offences. As the Labour Party set out in our most recent manifesto, we need to ensure non-jury trials are the exception and introduce measures to address concerns about jury tampering or intimidation. Modern technology has a crucial role to play in the implementation of reforms and could be used to facilitate such things as remote juries, like Scotland used not so long ago. That is why when the Minister and his Department eventually get around to publishing the heads of a Bill or a detailed framework for reform, it is vital that they carefully consider the proposals from the minority report. Significant issues around belief, evidence, prescription, disclosure and the publication of decisions will also need to be addressed in any reforms. This time next year when we come to debate these motions yet again, it would be far more useful for us to use the time to debate the merits of such published draft proposals if they come, and what further steps or reforms are still needed, or what changes collectively we as a Chamber or Oireachtas need to put in place. I also encourage the Minister of State to ensure that when her Department does get around to formulating more concrete proposals, it seeks the technical assistance of the UN Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights to ensure the draft legislation is benchmarked against the best applicable international standards.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before I call on the other Deputies, we are very lucky to have dancers from a prestigious, world-champion school of Irish dancing visiting, the dancers of the Cabe Academy of Castleknock, who are here with Deputy Emer Currie. I ask them to stand up and let us see their uniforms. Very well done to them. They are most welcome. I congratulate them at such a young age to be representing us on a world stage. I call on Deputy Murphy.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Fair play to them.

Here we go again with another one of these annual farces we have in this place. However, this one is pretty important. It is the nodding through of abolishing the fundamental human right to a fair trial by the Government and the vast majority of the Opposition. It is incredible that we do this on a yearly basis. Shamefully, it is again going to include Sinn Féin. For years, Sinn Féin has been using the promise of a slight reform of this diplock court as an excuse for not opposing it, after decades of correctly being against it. How much longer can Sinn Féin keep that up? The Government has been saying it needs these so-called emergency powers for

54 years now, so presumably this can go on forever. Most of the rest of the Opposition, including those on the left, also engage every year in this, the lowest form of respectability politics, afraid they are going to look bad if they defend the basic right to a fair trial by a jury of one's peers, even though every domestic and international human rights organisation from the Irish Council of Civil Liberties to Amnesty International, the State's own Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and the United Nations unanimously oppose the Special Criminal Court.

The point of civil liberties is not so much to defend the rights of people we agree with, but to defend the rights of those we do not. The Minister said last year we would be here again in a year's time. Are we going to be here again next year? How much longer is this farce going to continue? The Minister of State has already told us that the only alternative to the Special Criminal Court is a slightly reformed and rebranded non-jury court. Shamefully, the vast majority of the Opposition, including Sinn Féin, is going along with that too, and supporting the idea of making non-jury courts permanent forever. The minority of the independent review group, which not surprisingly was a minority made-up of human rights experts, rightly saw no need for special, non-jury courts. The vast majority of democracies around the world see no need for them either. That is why I urge for a vote to be called on these motions every single year. People have a right to know where the Members of this House stand on fundamental questions of civil liberties. Do TDs believe that everyone has the right to a fair trial by a jury of their peers or do they support convictions in secret courts by a trio of judges based on the say-so of a senior Garda? If that had been the case with the seven Jobstown not guilty defendants, we would all still be in prison right now.

These types of draconian powers are always creeping. One day used against criminals which sounds reasonable, the next used against water charges protesters, Palestine protesters, striking workers or whoever else has been wrongly categorised as criminals or terrorists. Just look at the draconian measures imposed on peaceful protesters classified as terrorists in Britain and think that exactly the same thing could happen here and the Special Criminal Court could be used as a part of that cracking down on civil liberties.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this but it is a bit of a charade. It is my 16th year here and year after year, we come in here and it is renewed by Government. The Offences against the State Act was first introduced in 1939. There was an emergency then; there was the Second World War. The fact is that this is renewed annually now, 89 years later. That is a cause of great concern.

Numerous legal practitioners and the UN human rights committee, Amnesty International, and the Irish Council for Civil Liberties have all called for repeal or substantial reform of this legislation. The Government commission report by Justice Hederman in 2002, and more recently the Government's report of 2023, recommended changes, including the non-jury dimension. As I said, this is my 16th year for this. It should never be dealt with in this way. Emergency legislation is emergency legislation. I have stated before and I do so again, that the Offences against the State Act was at times used for political purposes. That is a fact. Refusal to answer loaded questions should never be used as a method of implying guilt, nor should the conduct of the accused during interrogation or at other times or by association. They have the potential to be abused, as has the word of a Garda superintendent.

The Minister of State's party trumpets - I was a supporter of it, maybe a reluctant supporter - the Good Friday Agreement, which referred to the Offences against the State Act. The Government stated it was committed to initiating "a wide-ranging review of the Offences against the State Acts [1939] with a view to both reform and dispensing with those elements no longer required as circumstances permit." It is a different world now than 1939 or indeed 1970 or 1980. The Minister for justice said last year that: "The main reason I believe the Act should be repealed is that the threats the State faces today...have reduced and significantly altered." I agree. Is it not time to confine this legislation to the history books or the dustbin?

While there is a problem with organised crime, there needs to be adequate legislation for that. There are suggestions around that. There is technology and methods for protecting witnesses. I understand organised crime and drugs cartels are a challenge for everybody, but all of those options should be utilised and we should confine this legislation to the history books. I hope we are not here next year. I welcome the Minister of State as a new Minister and wish her well in her job, but I hope we are not here around this date next year, renewing this outdated, draconian legislation. It has been abused in the past, I am not saying always, but it certainly has been used for political purposes and that has no place in the Ireland of 2026.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Consistently, socialists who have been elected here have come in and expressed our opposition to these powers being extended. We are in agreement with the ICCL, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, the UN human rights committee, Amnesty International, and a myriad of legal experts and civil liberties campaigners.

The Irish Government likes to portray our country as a liberal democracy, yet it has this parallel legal system where there are no juries. The ICCL highlighted six defects in its submission on this issue, including lack of a jury; the dual role of judges as judge and jury; the extensive powers of the DPP; the claiming of privilege by gardaí; and the acceptance of beliefs and inferences as actual evidence. Nowhere else accepts secret evidence from police officers as being sufficient to send somebody to jail.

I find it highly ironic that we were in here about two weeks ago talking about counselling notes and the Minister of State's colleague stood opposite me and told us there was no way in the wide earthly world their use could be outlawed because of the right to a fair trial being paramount in Ireland. One of the women made an excellent point: how come there is a Special Criminal Court then? You can now waive these rights when it suits you, but the Government could not intervene, for example, to do something that actually affects so many victims of crime. It is highly ironic.

We have seen in Britain in recent times things that we never thought would happen. Young people have been charged with terrorist acts, when the offence should have been criminal damage at most, for challenging companies that were producing weaponry to be sent to Palestine to kill people. They will be heroes in history in the future but now they are imprisoned as terrorists. This Government last year transposed an EU directive as to what constitutes terrorist acts. There is a definite movement in the direction of repressive legislation by so many governments. That EU directive includes grounds such as receiving training, travelling for the purpose of terrorism and public provocation to commit a terrorist offence - really dangerous stuff that can definitely be used against activists, including Palestine solidarity campaigners, environmental activists and many others in the future. It is time now to abolish the Special

Criminal Court, to get rid of the Offences against the State Act and to stop using this as an excuse again and again each year.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Gogarty's colleagues are not here, so he has the floor until one arrives or until the end of his speaking time

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I will not use all the time. This is a mixed bag because we want to protect the citizens of this State from the wrong kind of people but, equally, we want to allow those who are not happy with the State to protest in a meaningful way without being lumped in with them. I support the motion if it is taken in isolation, in the absence of the real reform that others have been calling for, but I want to be entirely clear. As others have said, I do not agree that dragging it on year on year is right. I am very torn - there is no harm in saying you can be torn on weighing up legislation - because there is still a major threat to public safety, whether it is the gangland cartels or lingering dissident groups, some of which could be reactivated depending on how things are going. Obviously, there are also fundamentalists of various persuasions, some of whom are individuals with a propensity to violence. If they want to raise money for their cause through getting involved in robberies or if they want to maim and kill people because of their beliefs, these are individuals the Garda has its eyes on in this country and they are also a danger. They are not just people who want to have their voice heard in a peaceful protest. They are people who have shown time and time again that they are willing to intimidate witnesses and compromise juries. An Garda Síochána is often trying to deal with these groups with one hand tied behind its back, so we do need this kind of support in terms of the types of courts and the Offences against the State Act.

Equally, however, we cannot have a legislative vacuum and questions asked about which group is a peace-loving group and which group is a terrorist organisation. This annual event basically brings a sticking plaster in, with renewal under the emergency offences against the State legislation on an ongoing basis. I do support keeping security checks going while pointing out that the current cycle of these extensions is not a sustainable way to run a modern democracy. We need a credible alternative. The independent review group provided a roadmap. If that roadmap is flawed in some way, we can add to it but we need a draconian approach to those who pose a real danger. At the same time, however, we need a system that protects ordinary citizens and their civil liberties and the right to protest.

Deputy Michael Collins: Our local gardaí are doing Trojan work and deserve the full backing of rural Ireland, including areas like west Cork. They are the backbone of community safety and they are out at all hours dealing with everything thrown at them, often with limited and stretched resources. They know their communities. That is their strength. That is how people keep safe, not just with legislation from Dublin.

Let us be honest about this motion. We are again being asked to roll over what are meant to be temporary emergency powers. Year after year it is the same thing. That is not good enough. Of course, there are real threats of organised crime, which is a serious issue, but supporting the Garda is not about giving the State a blank cheque. It is about giving gardaí the resources, the numbers and the visibility they need on the ground. Strong community policing works. People seeing their local garda, knowing they are there - that is what makes a real

difference. We will always stand up for our gardaí and the work they do, but I cannot support the ongoing extension of laws like this without proper reform and accountability.

When I talk about gardaí, I talk about the lack of garda appointments made to west Cork. I think it has been zero in the past number of years, or there have been very few if any new gardaí into west Cork. That is a very unfair situation we find ourselves in because community policing is all about the number of gardaí in the community. I am a big believer that gardaí should live in the area in which they work, or as close as they can, because they get to know the people, they get to know who is right and who is wrong and they can nip crime in the bud. I have often said that. I see in my own area Garda Jonathan McCarthy in Ballydehob. He and his family live there and there is a very protective community there and care for the community. He is a Trojan garda. He knows when to be there and when not to be there, as such.

I see also the Garda Youth Awards. I praise gardaí like Don Davis and Damian White and so many gardaí out there who are really pushing the boundaries and are there for their community and for their people. It is great for young people too to see that and to get an award at the Garda Youth Awards. I refer to Garda Brigid Hartnett and all those who are involved in that initiative. It really sends a very different type of message from that which we hear sometimes hear throughout the country that maybe the long hand of the law is the right way to deal with young people. Sometimes it is to praise them, work with them and be supportive of them, and that is what we need to do.

There is definitely a lack of gardaí in west Cork. I am worried about Drimoleague Garda station and places like that which have gone unmanned for months and months because there is a complete lack of gardaí. The Garda cannot squeeze blood out of a turnip. When the appointments are made, no matter where it is, it must be done in a fair manner throughout the country. We cannot have one county like Dublin, which is a big county, with a lot of newly appointed gardaí but west Cork left without. That is something we need to reverse. I have said that to the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, when he has been in here. That has to be looked at going forward if we are to make sure that people are living in a protected and safe area. A fair distribution of the new gardaí when they are appointed should be spun out throughout Ireland, not just the capital.

An Ceann Comhairle: As we have no further speakers, I ask the Minister of State to make her response in eight minutes.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): I am very grateful to the House for its consideration of these motions. I thank Deputies for their contributions, particularly those in support but also those who do not support the motion because their discourse is very important. Many issues have been raised. I know I have only eight minutes.

For the benefit of the House and for those watching, the independent review group carried out a comprehensive review of the law in this area and the majority and minority reports of the group were published in June 2023. The main recommendations of the majority report can be summarised as follows: repeal of the Offences against the State Act, with select elements reflective of current or potential threats being re-enacted in replacement legislation; establishing a new standing non-jury court to replace the Special Criminal Court to try serious

criminal offences where the ordinary courts are inadequate; and consideration to be given to consolidation of all legislation dealing with terrorist offences.

A lot of Deputies raised the issue of the timeline of the implementation of the majority report.

I can say that my Department has engaged in consultation on the recommendations of the review group and it has examined the reports from a variety of perspectives, including policing, governance and legislation. It was after completing and considering this extensive consultation that the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, notified the Government that he accepts in principle the recommendations of the majority report. This sets a clear direction for reform. However, given the importance of the Acts over many decades, detailed proposals for reform must be thoroughly considered and approached with the utmost of care. These considerations, as we know, take time and the Minister intends to return to Government with detailed proposals in due course.

There is, as we know, significant legislative work under way to bolster our national security, with four Bills currently in the Houses. The Criminal Justice (Terrorist Offences) (Amendment) Bill will address the foreign terrorist fighter phenomenon, which includes offences of travelling to commit a terrorist offence or organising or facilitating travel to commit a terrorist offence, and receiving training for terrorism. The Garda Síochána (Powers) Bill and the Garda Síochána (Recording Devices) (Amendment) Bill are before the Houses. The Criminal Law, Civil Law and Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill will confirm that legal authority of An Garda Síochána to deploy radio frequency jammers for counter-unmanned aircraft systems purposes, where necessary to carry out its policing functions. I refer also to other civil security-related legislation. While work on proposals to replace the Offences Against the State Act is well under way, the threat from terrorism and organised crime very much remains. The renewal of these provisions is necessary today to combat this threat.

Many Members raised the issue of lack of information, asking why the ordinary courts are not sufficient. This was raised, in particular, by the Labour Party and Deputies Gibney and Gannon from the Social Democrats. Clearly the review group recommended on the basis of the best information available to it that there is, and will continue to be, an ongoing need for a non-jury court, as permitted by the Constitution, to try serious criminal offences in certain limited and exceptional circumstances where the ordinary courts are inadequate to secure the effective administration of justice and the preservation of public peace and order. It is up to the DPP in any individual case to direct that a trial take place before the Special Criminal Court. That decision is subject to careful consideration on the facts and circumstances of the case. I am conscious of the recommendation for more transparency around the court and the procedure in particular. In that regard, I note that the DPP has placed more information into the public domain on how that decision-making process currently operates, for the purpose of transparency. The report laid also provides a brief assessment of the security situation. I should caution, however, that there are clear constraints on the detail of what is and can be reported, to ensure there is no longer a danger of prejudice to the investigation or prosecution of crime or the security of the State.

Deputy Paul Murphy raised issues in relation to fundamental human rights, as did Deputy Coppinger. Some argue that non-jury courts are contrary to fundamental rights of persons before the law and international principles of administration of justice. I respectfully disagree

with that analysis. While jury trial is commonplace here, and is our very much preferred approach, it is not at all commonplace in the criminal justice systems of many other European states, for example, Sweden and Norway. The Special Criminal Court operates without a jury for sound reasons. Trials are heard there by three judges rather than one. The issuing of a reasoned judgment, which obviously would not be available in a jury trial, is one of the benefits of the Special Criminal Court and provides a basis for analysis and for parties to appeal a ruling should they wish to do so. While those judgments have always been available to the parties to the case, I welcome the plans of the Courts Service to facilitate their publication, should a judge so decide in a given case. The rules of evidence that apply in proceedings before the Special Criminal Court are the same as those applicable in trials in the Central Criminal Court. Anyone tried before the Special Criminal Court has a full range of procedural protections available to them, including appeals to the Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court.

Deputy Coppinger raised the issue of belief evidence. I want to clarify that belief evidence, which is permissible in trials for membership of an unlawful organisation by virtue of section 3(2) of the Offences Against the State (Amendment) Act 1972, is not one of the provisions for renewal today. Rather, I am seeking the renewal of section 2 of the Offences Against the State (Amendment) Act. That section provides that in proceedings concerned with the offence of membership of an unlawful organisation, it is permitted for inferences to be drawn by an accused's failure to answer any question material to the offence. It is important to note that inferences may be treated as corroboration of any evidence in relation to the offence, but a person cannot be convicted solely on the basis of inferences. The majority recommended that this provision be re-enacted in any legislation that replaces the Offences Against the State Acts, with the additional safeguard that provision be made in legislation to the effect that an inference drawn under this section should not be capable of providing the sole corroboration for belief evidence.

Many Members, including Deputy Carthy, raised the issue of our response to organised crime. The record budgetary resources of over €2.74 billion in budget 2025 allocated to An Garda Síochána have enabled the Garda Commissioner to assign extra resources to the specialist units involved in tackling organised crime. These include the Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau, the National Bureau of Criminal Investigation, the armed support unit and the Criminal Assets Bureau.

In relation to an explanation as to why we have this temporary legislation today, first, as we know, the Special Criminal Court is provided for in our Constitution. We have to remember that. Part V of the Offences Against the State Act 1939 provides for the establishment of the Special Criminal Court, and the legislation is clear that the Government was entitled to make a proclamation providing for the establishment of the court whenever it was necessary to do so. There is no provision in statute whereby such courts can only be of a limited duration, nor is there any sunset clause providing that the court only last any particular time. The Offences Against the State Acts are not emergency laws. They are complementary to our general criminal law and apply only in the most serious of cases.

In relation to a point raised by Deputy Paul Murphy on the minority report, while not endorsing the recommendation of the majority for a standing non-jury court, the minority report did accept that recourse to a non-jury court may be warranted in the interests of justice where there is a real and present danger of jury intimidation. Many Members, including Deputies

Gannon, Gibney and Rice, raised the issues of the jury. I note the recommendations of the majority and also the minority in relation to examining the measures, short of non-jury trial, that can be taken to protect jurors. This is in both the reports.

In relation to Garda recruitment, the Government is committed to building stronger, safer communities and strengthening An Garda Síochána, and very much supporting An Garda Síochána in that regard. The overall Garda workforce increased from 15,908 in 2016 to over 18,000 as of April.

Deputy Collins and others raised Garda resources. Over the previous few years, the focus has been on ramping up funding to provide the equipment, technology and facilities and fleet personnel for An Garda Síochána so that it can keep our communities safe. The Government is committed to building stronger, safer communities.

At the heart of this debate, it is about protecting the public, supporting the rule of law and ensuring that those who seek to undermine our democracy and communities are met with a firm and effective response to the State. I commend the motions to the House. A Cheann Comhairle, could I get back to Deputy Carthy on Sallins?

An Ceann Comhairle: Go ahead. We are within time.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I know Deputy Carthy raised the issue of Sallins. The establishment of a public inquiry is something we can only proceed with in accordance with the legislation governing inquiries. The most important requirement is that the matter be of urgent public importance requiring investigation. In light of developments since 1976, the Minister is satisfied that it is not warranted.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The Minister of State need not have bothered.

Amendment put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 24 June 2026.

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): I move:

That Dáil Éireann resolves that section 8 of the Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009 (No. 32 of 2009) shall continue in operation for the period beginning on 30th June, 2026 and ending on 29th June, 2027.

Question put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 24 June 2026.

Dental and Orthodontic Services: Motion [Private Members]

Deputy David Cullinane: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- there are more than 11,000 people, mainly children, on waiting lists for dental and orthodontic treatment with the Health Service Executive (HSE), including for braces and for dental surgery under general anaesthetic, and that more than 8,000 of them are waiting over a year for an appointment;
- half of primary school children are leaving school without ever having received a screening appointment, with average waiting times of four years for an appointment, and upwards of four and a half years in some areas such as Waterford City;
- access to dental care for medical card patients through the Dental Treatment Services Scheme (DTSS) has become severely limited, with less than half of dentists signed onto the scheme; and

further notes:

- the Joint Committee on Health report entitled "Report on Dental Services in the Healthcare System" published April 2026; and
- considers that the National Oral Health Policy Smile agus Sláinte fails to prioritise the development of public dental services;

calls on the Government to:

- publish an action plan targeting an urgent reduction in years-long waiting lists for dental and orthodontic care so that children get the preventive and corrective treatment that they need, when they need it;
- invest in public dental services which will prioritise school screening and medical card holders, including the development of a public-only dentist contract;
- modernise the DTSS and integrate this with the GP Visit Card to widen access to preventative primary care services on the basis of need, and not the ability to pay;
- revise Smile agus Sláinte to include the development of public dental services and publish a timebound implementation plan;
- establish a multi-disciplinary working group on the development of a public model of dental and oral health service provision;
- develop a strategic workforce plan for dentistry, including an increase in training places across all dental care professions;
- allow direct access to dental hygienists and dental nurses for appropriate care within their scope of practice without a referral from a dentist following the development of the necessary regulatory guidelines and oversight, and engage with professional societies on this;

- introduce a new Dental Act to update the out-dated legal framework of the 1985 Act, in line with the recommendations of the Dental Council of Ireland, which should also place new entitlements to access dental care services on a statutory footing; and
- improve the collection and publication of data on special care patients, which includes patients with intellectual disabilities, to ensure transparency and accountability for waiting lists in this area and ensure timely access to care under general anaesthetic for these patients who need it.

The public dental service in this State is absolutely shocking and clearly is not working. I have dealt with this now for a long number of years. I have tabled parliamentary questions. We have raised it in the Oireachtas Committee on Health.

We have had the Irish Dental Association in along with the HSE and the Department. I have written countless letters on behalf of constituents not just in Waterford but across the State whose children are waiting years on orthodontic and dental waiting lists for braces and treatment. Some of those children are in pain and yet are waiting so long for access to a dentist and an orthodontist. The HSE and the Department went as far as apologising to parents in letters, which I have received, and indeed at the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health because they are simply not giving children the care they need. We have 11,000 children waiting for braces and tens of thousands of children waiting for access to an orthodontist. They are on an assessment list, they have not been assessed or they are waiting to see a dentist for all sorts of different reasons. The public system clearly is not working and is clearly failing patients.

To add insult to injury, despite a scheme the Government put in place, and which we should all value, encourage and support, to ensure children get proper screening in schools - the Government policy being that each primary school child would get two screenings over their journey in primary school - the majority of children are not getting those screenings. Some get one screening but very few, if any, get both. Again, it is a symptom of a system that is not working.

The public dental treatment service scheme has collapsed. Dentists have walked away from it because they do not think it is working. A number of dentists, including one from Deputy Doherty's constituency in Donegal, have contacted me to say that they get paid for extractions and can have an unlimited number of extractions under the current scheme but can only do two fillings. Yet in a lot of cases, fillings are actually the answer. If that is happening, that is, again, shocking. That scheme has collapsed for some time and only about 800 dentists out of about 2,200 private dentists are operating that scheme so, obviously, there is no confidence in it on the part of dentists.

An alternative needs to be put in place. I put forward alternative proposals and solutions to the Government on this time and again, including in a very substantial policy document I did in this area but also in similar debates in the Dáil and elsewhere. We need to train more dentists. The reality is that a significant amount of international training takes place in our training colleges and dental schools. I have no problem with an element of that but when it gets to a point where more or as many international students come to be trained and we are not training as many domestic dentists as we need, who will actually stay here, work in the public system and treat patients, that is a problem. The first thing we have to do is to make sure we have

enough dental training schools and enough training places and we clearly do not. We need to encourage more dentists and more orthodontists to come into the public system.

I have been dealing with parents for the past number of years and I have to say what they tell me when I deal with them is that their children are on waiting lists that are going nowhere. When one looks at the breakdown of how long children are waiting, one can see that there are children who are deemed to be grade four or five - the most urgent cases - waiting five, six, seven and in some cases, eight years for treatment. How is that acceptable? How has that been allowed to happen? It is worse in some parts of the country. The Minister of State comes from the south east as do I. It is one of the worst performing areas. We have been raising this time and again with the Minister, the previous Minister, the HSE and the Department but every time we raise it, we are told there will be a new strategy and an updated plan and new measures will be put in place but it is not happening and it is not working. The facts speak for themselves. A total of 11,000 children are on waiting lists for braces of which 40% are waiting over two years; some of them are waiting as long as six, seven or even eight years; children in pain are waiting for treatment; and children with disabilities, who also have additional needs for dentistry, are often waiting. We have dealt with those issues on the floor of the Dáil. The screening system has collapsed and is not working, which is not good for children.

The public system for medical card patients has not been working for some time. I have to be honest. I do not know if it is ideological coming from this Government but there is no will on the part of the Government to fix it. It has been a problem for years and public patients and medical card holders are simply told to "Go whistle somewhere, do what you like, go private, we cannot do anything for you". That is all I hear from the Government on this and it is not good enough. All of those problems need to be fixed, which is why we put forward not just this motion but the alternatives involving more training places, hiring more public orthodontists and dentists and fixing the problems with the dental treatment service scheme.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I commend Deputy Cullinane on his work and advocacy on this and the proposals he has brought forward in this Private Members' motion. There is no doubt that dental care is no longer simply under pressure. It is in crisis. That is clear for everybody to see. Across the State, there are 11,000 people - mainly children - waiting on dental and orthodontic treatment while thousands of others are waiting far too long for routine dental care. That is why we are calling for urgent action. In counties like my own county of Donegal, the issue has been felt. It is really serious there. There are 420 people in the north west - mainly children - on the HSE waiting list for dental and orthodontic treatment. This is for braces, dental surgery and other types of interventions. Nearly one quarter of these people are waiting for over a year. That is disgraceful. The number of dentists participating in the dental treatment services scheme in Donegal and elsewhere has fallen in recent years.

Over recent weeks, I have been contacted by dentists in the Irish Dental Association who outlined the growing crisis facing patients in Donegal. They have told me that there is a significant and ongoing withdrawal of dentists from the medical card scheme. Everybody living in the county can tell you that. Long-established clinics are no longer accepting new medical card patients while others have withdrawn from the scheme altogether or have had to reduce the services they provide and there has been no response from Government. In rural counties like Donegal, this means that people are travelling significant distances simply to access basic dental care and some cannot get an appointment at all. One dentist in Donegal

even told me that the system is designed to force dentists to go private. He also explained that on many occasions, dentists like him are being asked to extract teeth for free in emergencies and are constantly under pressure to provide fillings for free because people cannot get free care.

All of this exposes a system that is simply no longer working and it is having a real impact on older people, families with younger children and those living in isolated rural communities. Access to care increasingly depends not just on need but on where people live and whether they can afford to pay privately. The Government should be listening to those on the front line. Instead of allowing the system to continue to collapse and deteriorate, it needs to work with the profession to restore access and ensure that nobody is left without essential care.

Deputy Pa Daly: When one hears about the waste of Government money and about the people all around the State, but particularly the people to whom I listen in Kerry, who cannot access dental services, it makes one even angrier. Over the past couple of weeks, I have been speaking to people about this. One person told me her 19-year-old son has never been seen, another person said their children aged eight and 15 had never been seen while another told me of three children aged 17, 13 and ten who were never called. They speak of a chaotic dental service that is going backwards and that has been neglected and underfunded with no vision. Another person to whom I spoke said, and this is a common theme, their child had never been seen all the way through primary school and they were forced to pay thousands of euro for proper dental treatment.

We put down a parliamentary question on it and discovered the number of people in Kerry who are waiting because the medical card system has completely collapsed. In the Killarney and east Kerry area, 600 second class children are waiting to be seen. In Tralee in west Kerry, 912 are waiting to be seen. In sixth class, 466 in the Killarney area and 788 in the Tralee area are waiting to be seen and that is not to mention people in other parts of the county. While the Government is wasting money on one hand, there are children who are literally in agony waiting for dental services.

Across the State, we can see that there are 11,000 people on waiting lists. Half of children leave school without ever having received an appointment. In Kerry, the figure is way more than that because there is practically no chance of getting seen by a dentist if you have a medical card. Private dentists will tell you that it is not worth their while and that they actually lose money if they participate in the medical card scheme. This has been going on for years but the Government is sitting on its hands and is doing nothing about it. We need proper investment in public dental services, proper school screening, proper medical card services and a workforce plan for dentistry to get more people into the public service just to meet the needs of children who are going through the system and are not being seen. We also need direct access to hygienists and dental nurses to stop the agony of children across the county.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Sinn Féin has brought forward this motion because the Government simply refused to understand that dental care is an essential part of healthcare. Across the State, particularly in counties like Cavan and Monaghan, families are being failed by a dental service that is stretched beyond capacity. State-wide, as colleagues have outlined, thousands of people, mostly children, are waiting for dental or orthodontic treatment, with a significant proportion

waiting well over a year. Many children are leaving primary school without ever receiving the dental screening to which they are entitled.

All of these numbers represent real children and families. In my constituency, parents contact me in utter desperation and frustration because their children are waiting years for orthodontic treatment. People feel they must contact local politicians because their child needs braces or other healthcare. This is the scenario that Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have allowed to develop. Many people stretch themselves to access private treatment. A whole cohort of others just cannot afford that option and feel they are letting down their children. In fact, it is the Government that is letting them down. There are staffing issues in Monaghan, with vacancies in the local dental service for dental hygienists, general surgeons and dental nurses. All of those vacancies have been in place for a prolonged period. Then there is the situation at Dundalk hospital for the children who are referred there. We might as well tell them they will not receive the orthopaedic care they need.

This cannot stand. We need urgent action to reduce orthodontic and dental waiting lists. We need investment in public dental services, a dedicated public-only dental contract and workforce planning. We must ensure dental places in our universities are being utilised by those we can encourage to work in the domestic system, rather than being sold to international students to make up for the shortfall in Government funding for the third level sector. We need a dental treatment service that actually works for the people it is supposed to serve.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank Deputy Cullinane for bringing forward this important motion. We need action on this issue. A number of parents in my constituency of Meath East have written to me. I was told about a 12-year-old in Dunshaughlin who has never been called to the HSE dentist. One wrote: "My daughter is 11 and has not been called for any HSE dental services at all." A parent wrote about a son, who is 12 this year, who has never been called. Another parent wrote:

My son is 12, nearly 13, just about to finish in primary school and has never been called to be seen by a HSE dentist. Obviously, I have gone private and paid myself but it is a totally different experience to my daughter, who is 12 years older and got all her checks through the HSE. I called about four years ago to see why he still hasn't been called and they said that due to Covid, everything was delayed. It's an absolute joke.

A parent wrote to me: "My daughter is 13 and has never been called to see a HSE dentist and is starting secondary school in September." Another parent told me of a daughter who is 15 and had her first HSE check-up eight weeks ago. That is the pattern not just across my constituency but across the State.

The figures provided by Deputy Cullinane comparing waiting lists in quarter 1 of 2026 with quarter 1 of 2021 are absolutely stark. The number of orthodontic patients at grade 5 waiting more than 48 months, or four years, significantly increased between 2021 and this year from 180 to 250. We can only imagine the pain those children are suffering. The overall numbers waiting have more than doubled from 734 to 1,565. These are the most severe cases representing those most in need. The waiting lists are absolutely obscene. Will the Minister of State please do something about them?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I acknowledge the hard work done by my colleague Deputy Cullinane in this area. He has presented all the proposals and solutions to fix what is happening in dental services. Dental care is a critical part of the health and well-being of any human being but it is not treated as such by the Government, which has failed to address the critical shortage in this area of healthcare provision. Between 2019 and 2025, the number of dentists in Mayo providing care under the dental treatment services scheme fell from just 31 to 22. How can there be dentists available when the Government fails to invest in public services? All of those dental practices are full to capacity. The evidence is clear that we must introduce a public-only dentist contract in order to reduce waiting lists, ensure children have timely access to preventative and corrective care and prioritise school screening and medical card holders. Patients should have direct access to hygienists and dental nurses within their scope of practice to reduce the waiting lists.

A mother from Mayo contacted me about her seven-year-old son who had to attend a private dentist because he could not access public treatment. She was told he would need to be referred to Dublin because he needed two surgeries. Those surgeries would normally be done in Galway but the service was full to capacity. The treatment, she was told, would cost €4,000. That is completely unaffordable for the vast majority of parents. Another child is 12 years old and has never been seen by a dentist through school. One mother told me her child has been waiting three years for braces. Another mum described the ordeal of her autistic deaf son who needed urgent dental care. He had to be hospitalised before being sent to Oranmore Dental Care, then to the Hermitage Clinic and then to Dundrum. The whole experience was very traumatising for the child and it ended up costing €6,000. That is just nuts.

We need an action plan to improve dental care delivery and drastically reduce the waiting lists. We need a strategic workforce plan to address the skills shortages. The solutions are set out in the motion and the Minister needs to implement them. I am aware of an elderly woman for whom a dentist could not be found anywhere to provide the critical care she needed. The horrific cases that are coming forward must be dealt with. I am really tired of bringing up this subject and nothing being done.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: Week in and out, my constituency office is inundated with people trying to access dental and orthodontic services. The population in Drogheda and south Louth is growing faster now than it ever has before but vital services are not by any stretch keeping up with the population growth. In fact, they are getting worse under the Minister's watch. The number of dentists working under the dental treatment services scheme in Louth dropped between 2019 and 2025. There is huge population growth but the level of service provision is declining.

The number of children waiting for dental treatment under the primary school dental checks scheme can only be described as scandalous. One parent told me her daughter has been on the list for braces since fifth class. She is 20 now and has never received the public care she needed. That is a nine-year wait and it beggars belief. Half of primary school children are leaving school without ever having received a screening appointment. Consultant orthodontic vacancies have been unfilled since 2024 in Louth. The total number on school dental screening waiting lists in the county continues to increase year on year. A total of 2,800 children were waiting to be seen and 718 were waiting for orthodontic treatment at the end of 2025.

Although this is detrimental to the children in question, it is not just children who are affected. Miriam, a widow in her late 70s with a full medical card, needed to have her dentures replaced as they were too large for her mouth. She was in pain and could not eat properly. Facing exorbitant waiting times, she had to borrow money to the tune of thousands of euro to get the care she needed. Another constituent needed extensive dental work as a direct consequence of domestic violence. She was told that advanced restorative treatment is not provided to medical card holders and that no assistance is available to help meet the costs of private care.

Parliamentary question responses provided to me in recent months have stated that the capacity of the service is based on available resources. There are limitations to clinical capacity, we are told. Data shows ongoing service pressures, reduced staff levels and declining levels of oral health assessments. This is not news to anyone trying to access services or to those providing services. It surely cannot be news to the Government. This has not happened by accident. Rather, it is a direct result of underinvestment, failure to plan and a hands-off approach by successive Ministers. The Government's inaction on dental services leaves those languishing on waiting lists either in pain or in significant debt. Either way, they have been completely failed. The cost of the Minister's neglect of this issue will be felt for decades. Action is long overdue on the dental care crisis in this country.

8 o'clock

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank the Members for this very important motion and for giving me the opportunity to discuss dentistry services and to provide an update on the developments in the sector and the oral health action plan. The Government allocates over €240 million to the provision of public oral healthcare services every year across the Department of Health and the Department of Social Protection. This ongoing investment shows our commitment to delivering services, progressing reforms and addressing the challenges we know exist in dentistry services. We fully acknowledge that more needs to be done. The Minister for Health wants to do much more to improve oral healthcare services and to address access issues. The Minister welcomed the Joint Committee on Health's recent report on dental services and understands the frustration families and individuals are experiencing with the current services. In my own clinics I see this daily. The current position on public dental services is not good enough. Too many people cannot get timely care. We have to do two things, namely, take practical steps now to improve access and deliver lasting reform in the long term. The model of services we operate is largely from the 1990s, and it must be modernised. While that reform is progressing, we are determined to ease the pressure people are facing now. In practical terms, that means improving access through the public system, especially for children and adult medical card holders. The Department and the HSE are currently finalising a two-year action plan - and this is where a lot of work has been done - that aims to deliver meaningful impact in the short term while also making progress on the structural reforms outlined in the national oral health policy.

The salaried HSE oral healthcare service provides dental care to several groups of patients. In the January to April period this year, it provided care to over 56,000 adults and children. This includes over 16,000 emergency appointments to eligible patients, on a same-day or next-day basis. Those with additional needs who cannot receive care in a general dental practice may need special care services provided by the HSE. The HSE provides these patients with an

oral health examination and where necessary, their treatment is provided using additional supports. This service provides care to many children and adults who would not otherwise have access to oral healthcare services.

Regarding access to public oral healthcare services for children, there are access issues in respect of the current model of service provided by the HSE. This service aims to offer the first of three appointments to children while they are in second class, or seven years old. Due to capacity challenges, the HSE needed to prioritise patient groups, to ensure emergency care remains available for all eligible HSE patients. Within the three childhood appointments, the sixth-class appointment is prioritised by the HSE. This is to ensure that children receive preventative treatment on their permanent molars and, for those children who require it, a referral for an orthodontics assessment. Some €4 million in additional funding has been provided to support the HSE to complete recruitment of 15 additional whole-time equivalents across dentists and dental nurses. The public oral healthcare services provided by the State includes orthodontic treatment. I know the Deputy spoke about how many are on the waiting list. The HSE provides orthodontic treatment to those who have the greatest level of clinical need and have been assessed and referred for treatment before their 16th birthday.

It is positive to note that 5,500 grade 4 patients have been removed from orthodontic waiting lists since the introduction of the waiting list action plan in 2020. This includes 392 patients so far in 2026. A further €2.85 million has been invested this year to support continued measures to reduce orthodontics waiting lists. However, despite additional capacity provided via private contractors under the waiting list action plan, waiting lists remain high due to staffing and recruitment challenges. I know Deputies are aware of this. The action plan seeks to address this and improve the current orthodontic waiting lists.

I am aware there are challenges in the provision of dental services under general anaesthetic. I know this is not acceptable for those who are on these waiting lists. This is why the action plan will consider initiatives such as using the emerging availability of capacity that the new surgical hubs will enable. This will help reduce the current waiting times for general anaesthetic access for both children and adults. An important part of this work will be to improve the collection and availability of data, in particular for our special care patients, which includes those with intellectual disabilities. We want to ensure timely access to care under general anaesthetic for those who most need it.

I want to turn to the dental treatment services scheme, DTSS. Last year the State provided care to over 300,000 medical card holders over the age of 16 under the scheme. In order to address contractor concerns regarding the DTSS, a range of measures came into effect in May 2022 to introduce and reintroduce elements of preventative care. The Minister for Health also increased the fees paid to dentists for most treatment items by from 40% to 60%. These measures are having an impact, with access to care continuing to increase each year since they were introduced.

In 2025, over 241,000 additional treatments were provided under the DTSS, with an extra 50,000 patients treated, when compared with 2022. Activity has continued to increase further into this year. Initial data from the first half of this year indicates that more than 4,000 additional patients have been treated, compared with the same period in 2025. These are important signs of progress and improved access, however, we have much more to do and I do understand the frustration. Reform of the DTSS is one of the actions in the action plan that my

Department and the Minister have committed to. We look forward to working with relevant stakeholders in progressing this reform. A key enabler of successful reform and improvement of oral health services is ensuring that we have enough appropriately-trained oral healthcare professionals. In particular, we need to maximise the contribution of our hygienists, dental nurses and other oral healthcare professionals to provide the modernised, prevention-focused care we are developing. This requires changes to our educational and legislative frameworks which is acknowledged in the oral health action plan. We also need to consider educational models which enable students to experience providing care in a community setting, within our most vulnerable communities, equipping them with the experience and confidence needed to serve the entire population following graduation.

I am delighted to note that we currently have more dentists on the Dental Council of Ireland's register than ever before, with 3,962 as of June 2026. There has been a steady increase in the number of registered dentists. In 2019, there were 3,100 and therefore we have seen an increase of over 28% since the national oral health policy was published. There is also a need to increase the number of dental hygienists and other oral healthcare professionals. The Department of Health has commenced work on a draft strategic workforce plan for dentistry and oral health. This plan recognises and highlights the challenges in terms of data gaps in the dentistry sector. To address the gaps in data, the Department has designed an oral healthcare workforce census framework. The workforce census is intended to gather information, including the proportion of registered oral healthcare professionals who are practising in their registered profession, the services they provide, and the skills they have. The roll-out of the workforce census is expected to be a key action in the new dental action plan. The census data will provide information to support the development of the sector and to support workforce planning.

The Government is committed to ensuring our healthcare services are supported by a steady and sustainable pipeline of highly skilled graduates and one of the programme for Government commitments is to increase the number of healthcare college places, including for dentistry. We have achieved a lot in this area through collaboration with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Higher Education Authority, HEA. This work has led to the commencement of a new bachelor of dentistry degree programme in the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, RCSI, in September 2025. The RCSI model trains dental students in a community-based model of dental education. The RCSI has taken in 21 Irish and EU students in 2025 and has secured an agreement with the HEA to expand its intake of Irish and EU students to 35 places by 2027. This will significantly increase the number of dental training places available and will enhance the workforce capacity.

We know that more must be done in this area which is why we have engaged with Cork University Dental School and Hospital at University College Cork, UCC, and the Dublin Dental University Hospital at Trinity College Dublin regarding the expansion of dentistry training places. These engagements are ongoing, with a view to developing potential options to facilitate further expansions.

In terms of improving access to services and supporting reform, the Department of Health is progressing policy to introduce direct access for dental hygienists in Ireland.

This will allow dental hygienists to provide appropriate elements. I am sorry I did not have time to finish this statement.

An Ceann Comhairle: You will be back in.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I do understand the challenges that are there. I see them daily. With our new action plan, going forward, we want to make those changes. We are not opposing the motion.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I commend my colleague, an Teachta David Cullinane, for bringing forward this motion, for his work on this issue and for the well-crafted solutions he has brought to the floor of the Dáil.

I strongly encourage the Minister of State to engage with the solutions and proposals brought here this evening by Sinn Féin because it is very clear that what the Government is doing is not working. There are over 1,500 kids in north Dublin on waiting lists for orthodontic treatment having been assessed as grade 5. Grade 5 means they are already in pain. They have had the assessment and they need the treatment but they cannot get it. It is not hard to see what is needed. The Minister of State did not need ten minutes to tell us what is needed. We know what is needed. We need investment in our kids' dental health. The Government needs to treat it like healthcare because that is what it is.

I do not know if the waiting lists I deal with in my constituency office day in, day out result from indifference, incompetence or both but the parents who contact me day in, day out are at the end of their rope. Of course, because this is Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, the private sector has moved right into this space. We now see that people can go to a private provider that did not provide dental care for kids previously but does so now. There is a price list on their website. It costs €77 for a filling and €40 for an assessment. That is €120. If parents do not have it, and plenty of them do not, does the Minister of State know what they can do? Buy now and pay later. That is getting important healthcare for children on the drip, on the never-never, on the buy now, pay later. They are getting themselves into debt. The private provider has brochures and leaflets it hands out. The incompetence of this Government has opened up that space for it.

Deputy Seán Crowe: Access to timely, effective and affordable dental care is one of the most important guarantees of a good quality of life. Persistent pain from an abscess or tooth decay is one of the most unpleasant and debilitating things a child or adult can go through. A modern healthcare system should make it a top priority. Instead, the Government parties have long abandoned affordable dental services. It is almost entirely privatised now, as my colleague has said, with the number of dentists directly employed by the HSE dwindling every year.

This means more than half of children do not get a dental screening in primary school. This is just a basic check-up and we cannot even provide that. This Government does not even know how many dentists are practising in Ireland or how many dental clinics there are. It is completely detached from a vital aspect of healthcare provision in Ireland. The national oral health policy was published in 2019. We still do not have an implementation plan for that policy.

Access to dental care for people with a medical card has collapsed, as other speakers have said. More than half the dentists have withdrawn from the medical card scheme, leaving thousands of patients without the care that they need and are entitled to.

Successive Ministers for Health promised that a breakthrough to fix the scheme was imminent, but it is ordinary people in need of urgent care who are suffering. We must invest in a public dental scheme that will prioritise school screening and medical card holders, including the development of a public-only dentist contract. We must modernise the medical card scheme to guarantee access to care on the basis of need and not on the ability to pay.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: The Minister of State mentioned access issues nine individual times in her opening address. I am going to tell her what these so-called access issues really involve. A mother told me she had spent three weeks trying to contact the school-age dental team and when she finally got through this morning she was told nothing could be done, not even in an emergency, until that child's school was called, despite the case being referred to as "urgent" by a private dentist. The mother of a young girl with autism spectrum disorder, hypoplastic teeth and a severe 8.5 mm overjet was provided with documentation indicating that the girl would qualify under national criteria while simultaneously being told that she did not qualify under the modified regional criteria. Parents should not have to navigate contradictory and inconsistent rules to get dental care for their child.

The last aspect I will bring to the Minister of State's attention are medical card patients. They are really struggling. A constituent told me she had no option but to have a tooth extracted because she simply did not have the cash to stretch as far as a filling. They are what the Minister of State is calling "access issues". They are not access issues. That is an abject failure of this scheme.

The Minister of State cannot continue to ignore a shortage of dentists while failing to adequately address workforce planning. Sinn Féin has consistently called for more training places, a workforce strategy that retains graduates here and investment directly into our public dental service, rather than continuing to rely on crisis management.

It is an absolute shame that this Government stands over a system where half of primary school children leave school without ever having received a screening appointment. At the health committee we heard of children who, when they were finally called for that screening programme, drove themselves to their dental appointment. Where is that in the Government's two-year action plan? Is that going to be covered by the initiatives the Government will consider in surgical hubs that do not yet exist? That is why change is needed and needed now.

Deputy Natasha Newsome Drennan: I commend my colleague, Deputy Cullinane, for his work on this motion. The numbers speak for themselves. Over 11,000 people, the vast majority of them children, are left suffering on dental treatment waiting lists across the country. The State is failing them, plain and simple, yet what do we see from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael? The same attempt to normalise these shocking delays, just as they have done with the disastrous waiting list for the children seeking an assessment of need. These waiting lists are not just numbers; they are children left suffering. I have spoken to so many parents drowning in stress, feeling that their only option is to go private at crippling personal cost just to get adequate care for their child. All the while, those in the private sector continue to line their pockets off the back of the Government's incompetency.

This Government needs to accept a hard truth: the current system is outdated, chronically under-resourced and simply not fit for purpose. A child should be able to see a dentist when

they need one, rather than having to wait until six years down the line. A family that contacted my office were told their child would be waiting six agonising years for dental treatment. With a bit of help, they finally got a notice in March to say he was on the priority list but just last week they were told the funding had run out. His booking was cancelled. They were told the patients on the list from January and half of those from February would be seen. How the money can run out that early in the year is beyond me. This family are absolutely devastated. God knows how long he is going to be on the list. This child does not smile anymore. This is not just about his physical health; this is about children's mental health also. A child should be able to smile.

Deputy Cathy Bennett: The Government has utterly failed in terms of dental services. It has especially failed every child, with more than 11,000 children waiting years to get braces and half of all children not getting their scheduled dental check-ups through the school dental scheme. The Government is especially failing children in my county of Monaghan, where, as of October last year, not a single child in the 2024-25 cohort had received their dental checkup. Not a single child out of 832. How do Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael account for this failure? When I submit questions to the Minister for Health, the excuse provided is that it is down to staff vacancies arising from maternity leave and retirement. If the Minister and senior HSE management are unable to implement adequate workforce planning to account for women having children or people retiring, that calls into question basic competencies.

Equally, at one point last year when I asked the Minister about access to orthodontic treatment for people from Monaghan, she told me that service was under-resourced, with three vacant orthodontic posts.

This is utterly unacceptable and I commend the Sinn Féin spokesperson on health, Deputy David Cullinane, on bring forward these very detailed proposals, which outline the solutions that seem to be needed for this ever-worsening crisis. I appeal to all Members of this House to endorse this plan because this is what the children of our nation deserve - not excuses that they will not receive the healthcare that is their right simply because a dentist has retired or is off having a baby. We need a workforce plan and complete reform of our access to dental care.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I welcome this debate and thank Sinn Féin for putting forward the motion. It is a really welcome debate and it follows on from the work done by the joint Oireachtas committee and the report we published on this matter.

I sometimes wonder if I live in a different country when I hear some speeches from Ministers talking about the money they have invested and that their ongoing investment shows their commitment to delivering services, progressing reforms and addressing challenges. From what we have heard tonight, none of that is happening. The Government is not showing commitment to services, progressing reforms and addressing challenges. The evidence sadly speaks for itself and it is not the rosy picture that is presented by the Minister of State, unfortunately.

There is a long history here of dysfunction when it comes to oral health policy in the State. Successive Governments have utterly neglected public dental services. The first clear statement of the State's aims and objectives for dental services was first published in 1994. That was called the dental health action plan. That plan led to the development of the dental

treatment service scheme for medical card holders but it would take a quarter of a century for another dental policy to be published. In 2007, the then Minister for Health, the former Deputy Mary Harney, announced the development of a new oral health policy and although a draft plan was presented to the Minister in 2009, it was never published.

In the years between 2001 and 2017, aside from one mention of community water fluoridation, oral health did not feature in any of the national healthcare policy documents. That only changed with the publication of *Sláintecare*. Then, in 2019, a new oral health policy was finally published, *Smile agus Sláinte*, 25 years after Ireland's first and only dental policy plan had been published. What we see over the period and the history of the State is neglect of this area and a failure to plan and put policies in place. Even sometimes when policies are formed, there is a failure to implement, prioritise, publish and resource them. It is not just the current Government that is failing on this; there is a track record of failure from successive Governments that have led us to the state we are in today.

On *Smile agus Sláinte*, in 2019 the oral health policy did not set out a roadmap for the practical delivery of its vision. It was developed without proper consultation with dentists and allied healthcare professionals. In 2024, the former president of the Irish Dental Association, IDA, Dr. Eamon Croke, said that the 2019 policy "was launched from behind a veil of secrecy". While Dr. Croke said that the IDA may share and support many of the 2019 plans and their aspirations, the Department of Health had yet to articulate how its vision would be enacted, a situation that prevails to this day.

In January of this year, the Department of Health told the health committee that a three-year implementation plan to progress phase 1 of the 2019 plan was in development. This is now seven years after the plan was put in place that we were still waiting for the implementation plan. The implementation has been described as imminent since 2024. We are led to believe that this implementation plan will finally be published this year. However, in January, the Minister said it was at an advanced stage, while in April, she said her goal was to publish it in the coming weeks. It is now the end of June and we still do not have that implementation plan for a policy that was published seven years ago - back in 2019. If that does not tell you how much of a priority this issue is for the Government, I do not know what will. In the Minister of State's speech this evening, she said it is currently being finalised. I would ask the Minister of State, in her closing address, to give us a solid timeline. We have been told for many months that it was coming to the end. We would like to know exactly when the Minister intends to publish that. We have been waiting, as I said, since 2019 for this. I do not think it is unreasonable to give the Dáil a final date on when that implementation plan will be published.

On the Oireachtas health committee's report, which was published previously, this followed engagement with stakeholders. The health committee published its report on dental services back in April. This report included 19 recommendations, with the first three all relating to implementation of that 2019 plan. We found there had been no noticeable improvement in dental services since 2019. There was no noticeable improvement over a seven-year period. There had been no progress, according to the report produced across the parties, including Government members of the joint committee.

In fact, the situation has gotten worse and not better. Children are leaving primary school without being screened. The medical card scheme is haemorrhaging dentists. The laws governing dentistry are over 40 years old and they are putting the public at risk. The Dental

Council of Ireland has been calling for a new Act and additional powers since 2008. It urgently needs powers to investigate, enter and inspect dental practices. Here are just some examples of instances in which it has not got the powers to act. There was an unregistered person convicted of sexual assault practicing as a dentist. There was an unregistered dentist offered dental treatments, including X-rays, from the sitting room of an apartment in central Dublin. Three unregistered dentists were operating pop-up clinics in Munster and Connacht. These are the kinds of patient safety issues we have here - people convicted of sexual assault practicing as dentists; clinics in apartments across the State; and unregistered dentists. We need regulatory reform that is supported by both the regulator and the regulated.

In regard to children's dental services, children should be screened three times before leaving primary school but some children are not being seen until transition year. If that is not a failing on behalf of the State, I do not know what is. This is because of understaffing and under-resourcing of the school screening programme. Check-up targets have been missed on a massive scale. In 2023, only half of the eligible population of children were screened. Half of the children who were entitled to this completely missed the screening. This is really important screening to check on children and it just being missed. They are being completely failed and neglected and it is utterly unacceptable.

We urgently need the strategic workforce plan, as recommended by the health committee. We need to know what the capacity requirements of a school screening programme are if it is to deliver a service that actually works for people. At present, the Department simply does not know how many public dentists are needed. All we know is that we do not have enough, and that the number of public dentists delivering the dental scheme has dropped by 30 since 2012. We are seeing a fall in the number. Despite what the Minister of State may talk about, investment in services and the number of dentists working in the public dental scheme is dropping. We need to make public dentistry an attractive option for dentists. That includes the development of new and attractive public dental contracts to support the public model. Outsourcing children's dental services to the private market is not the answer. Scaling up the public service is. That should be a priority and it should be a matter of real concern to the Minister of State that we have children in the State who are entitled to these screenings who are missing them. It being half of the eligible population, it is really utterly unacceptable.

The concerns we have do not just extend to children; they also extend to adults on the medical card and medical card patients. Under the medical card scheme, private dentists are contracted by the HSE to provide services to medical card patients but this scheme is hemorrhaging dentists and medical card patients are paying the price. In 2015, there were around 1,600 dentists participating in the scheme but, by last year, that had halved to 800. The scheme is no longer fit for purpose and the health committee, in our report, called on the Minister to enter immediate talks with the Irish Dental Association to replace it with a new scheme, one that allows dentists to provide medical card patients with the best care and not just emergency care. It is unacceptable in the current scheme that the number of fillings per year is limited but the number of extractions is not. As a result, people are having teeth removed when they could have had fillings and prevention. This is not the proactive, preventative type of care that should be provided in our public dental scheme. This scheme is a relic of the 1990s. It is no longer fit for purpose. We need modernisation and mere modification will not be enough. The scheme must be completely modernised.

In the health committee's dental report, we also called for the development of a strategic workforce plan not just for dentists but for allied dental healthcare professionals. We also recommended that the roles of those dental health professionals should be expanded, allowing direct access without the need for referral. In the context of the national oral health policy's aims to move from an outdated curative care model to a prevention first model, direct access from dental hygienists is particularly important. The Minister of State has already said that work is under way to develop a policy paper on direct access for dental hygienists. This needs to be accelerated. Unnecessary barriers to direct access must be removed. Allowing direct access for dental hygienists will increase capacity, enable earlier interventions, reduce waiting times and allow dentists to focus on more complex and high-need care.

This is already in place in the UK. A 2023 UK General Dental Council evaluation paper found no evidence of patient safety concerns associated with direct access to dental hygienists and therapist practices when their defined scope and appropriate referral pathways are in place. I met with the Irish Dental Hygienists Association earlier this year and it did excellent work in putting forward a case for direct access. Patients should have the option of accessing care from dental hygienists without needing to see a dentist first. Advancing this practical and evidence-based reform should not be put on the long finger any longer. It is a key reform and it will help dentists, patients and the public at large.

The Government is not doing enough here. It is not investing enough. The issue is not being prioritised. The reforms to the dental Act that are needed have not been progressed. I say this all the time when we have statements the House; we could be progressing reforms to legislation, including the dental Act. I have real concerns about the school screening programme and the number of children who are being absolutely failed, are not getting the appointments they need and are being completely neglected. We heard at the health committee that in some cases, people are driving themselves to their first screening when they should have been screened in primary school. It is not good enough. It is utterly unacceptable. I urge the Minister of State and the Minister to get a grasp on this issue.

For our part, the health committee has set out a series of recommendations. We have laid out clearly exactly what needs to be done step by step. I urge the Minister of State to engage with that report and the recommendations and progress the reforms needed because people deserve access to good quality public dental care. The least people should get in this Republic is access to good quality healthcare, particularly children, medical card holders and others who have been failed and failed by successive governments. The time for reform is now. I urge the Minister of State to listen to what we are saying and prioritise this issue because together, by working with the health committee and the recommendations we put forward, we can make real progress on this issue. However, it needs to become more of a priority for the Minister of State, her Department, her officials and the Minister.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call Deputy Marie Sherlock, who is sharing with Deputy Kenny. Deputy Sherlock has ten minutes.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: I very much welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion and I thank Sinn Féin for introducing it this evening. The Labour Party will very much be supporting this motion. The Government has effectively watched our public community dental services collapse over the last decade. It is very clear that oral healthcare is very much the poor

relation of the health service. It is almost a year to the day since we had a debate in this Chamber last year, with a motion then sponsored by Deputy Stanley. It is clear that almost little or nothing has happened since then. We are seven years on since the *smile agus sláinte* national strategy on dental care was published, yet we have seen a deterioration and disregard for public dental services in this country.

One of the critical things we know about dental care is that prevention is as important as treatment. We know the one organisation that was set up 40 years ago to promote oral health awareness, the Dental Health Foundation, lost a massive chunk of its funding a number of years ago. We have to ask serious questions about the seriousness and intent of the Department of Health with regard to oral healthcare in this country. We know that so many people out there are now having to go abroad for cosmetic dental surgeries to make up for years of neglect by the public dental system. The size of your wallet should not determine your health, yet, in oral healthcare in particular, it absolutely is the case. People are no longer just afraid of the dentist's chair. They are terrified of the cost of visiting the dentist. We know that children in particular are not getting the dental care they need.

Along with anybody else who was contributing to the debate last year, we looked at the drop in the number of public dentists and those participating in the dental treatment scheme. It is devastating to see and was reflected in the cross-party report that Deputy Rice spoke about. It was from the Oireachtas health committee and was published a number of months ago. It very clearly set out what needs to happen. We have seen little or no response from the Department of Health since then. Earlier this year, the Irish Dental Association told our committee that more than half of dentists had withdrawn from the medical card scheme, leaving thousands of patients without the free care they are entitled to. If that were to happen within GP care, there would be absolute uproar and alarm - rightly so. Yet, we are not seeing that same level of attention or care for our public health service.

The reality is that as of April this year, there are just 232 whole-time equivalent dentists across the public health service. In 2009, there were 330. It is scandalous that we have seen such a decline. I know from talking to public dentists on the ground there are enormous challenges with regard to trying to get additional dentists recruited into the system. Business cases sit there for months on end. That is absolutely unacceptable if we are to take public dental care seriously. The reality is that those on medical cards and those who struggle to afford to see a dentist are the ones who are most disadvantaged by this. They are the ones suffering from real inequality. People are genuinely delayed for months, just to save the money needed to get basic treatment.

With regard to children, the number of children participating in targeted programmes and scheduled appointments within community dental services has significantly dropped. We know that across all CHO areas, the number of children in first and second class, or fifth and sixth class and other targeted groups, attending scheduled appointments has dropped dramatically over the past five years. Tens of thousands of children are leaving primary school without any basic checks. Last year, I relayed a story in this Chamber of a public dentist telling me that she had patients, who were no longer children because they were driving a car, driving themselves to an appointment they were supposed to get in sixth class but they were in fifth or sixth year by the time that appointment came through. That is absolutely unacceptable and the costs we are storing up for our health service further down the line because of those delays to care is

frankly outrageous. We know there was a 30% drop in the number of children attending these scheduled assessments between 2019 and 2024. The reality is there is a bit of a ticking time bomb here. If we do not put the money in early to the preventative aspect of our dental healthcare system, we will end up with a health system that has much greater costs further down the line. Surely, the ambition and aim of all of us here should be to ensure we are looking after people's health as opposed to ill-health further down the line.

I very much welcome in particular the reference to general anaesthetic services in this motion because the reality is there are hundreds of children across this country who need general anaesthetic to receive dental care. Many are waiting over a year. There are children and special care adults left in excruciating pain with simply nowhere to go. We know people have to travel very long distances. In the south west, 310 people with additional needs are waiting more than a year for general anaesthetic. In some parts of the country, like my own area of Dublin north city and west, there is no special care service for children at all. We know children have to travel to either Louth or Kildare to get general anaesthetic if that becomes available and, of course, they are in the queue with everybody else from that area.

The reality with the dental treatment services scheme, DTSS, is that we have seen a drastic reduction in the willingness of dentists to participate in it over the last number of years. We must have a serious conversation with dentists about that. It is not good enough to just wave our arms in the air and say there are dentists going into cosmetic surgery and they should stay in dentistry. We need to have a serious conversation about the number of dentists who are currently in the private system and the number who would be willing to get involved with the dental treatment services scheme if the conditions were right. This is not about a free pass for dentists. This is about a serious negotiation. The other aspect of it that is critically important is what is actually available within the DTSS. It is frankly bizarre if you have had two fillings and require a third one in a particular year, you have to wait a further year but there is no limit on the number of extractions done. That is from the dark ages and we have to change how the dental treatment services scheme is designed.

It is also critically important to say the recruitment of dentists needs to be significantly looked at. We know there has not been any significant expansion or investment into our dental schools in decades. Barely half of the 70 dentists who graduate in Ireland each year opt to practise here in the long term. We know we need to add dental nurses and hygienists to critical skills lists. The other key issue for me is that notion of an apprenticeship scheme for dentists. I remember 20 years ago, which was a time dentists were coming out of college around the same time as myself.

Dentists were able to do part-time work with the HSE and part-time with a private practice. It was excellent training for that year after they graduated. Many dentists stayed in the private system but continued to provide that public care through the DTSS. Unfortunately, that system fell away in the intervening years and we do not have that nature of apprenticeship now within our dental services in this country. That needs to be restored. The plea is that we will not be standing here again this time next year talking about the same issues. We need to make sure the right investment goes into dental services and, in particular, there needs to be an absolute focus on prevention so that we are not storing up greater issues for our health service further down the line.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: On this very important motion by Sinn Féin, I raise the significant issue of the dental treatment service scheme. Last year in the Dáil, I, along with my colleague, Deputy Sherlock, spoke about this scheme and about how it is simply not working. I refer to the number of people who come to constituency offices right across this country who tell us they are medical card holders but they cannot get access to a dentist in their locality. It is just not acceptable that a medical card holder in this country cannot get access to basic services like dentistry. The people who often take the blame for this are the dentists themselves. I spoke to a dentist practising in my home town of Mallow today who told me she saw a medical card holder, a patient of hers, last week. The cost of the dental treatment was €333. She received €109 from the HSE through the service scheme. Why, if I was a dentist, would I stay in that scheme? I would not because I am not covering the basic costs. Dentists themselves also have to live. We are failing two cohorts of people here. We are failing the very dentists we have in this country who are doing their best to provide the care needed in the country, and we are also failing those who have medical cards who very much need the dentistry care.

I worked previously for former Deputy Seán Sherlock who was a TD for 17 years, and year on year he would tell me about the significant issues being faced right across the constituencies by those who cannot access dentistry. If a constituent comes to me seeking my support in accessing a dentist who will take them on as a medical card holder, I have to ring around - and I do it because they are constituents of mine - different dentists across the county to ask them if they will take on a medical card holder. In the north Lee catchment area, which covers my constituency of Cork North-Central, 66 dentists have left the dental treatments service scheme in the past five years while just over 20 have joined the scheme. Give or take, about 40 dentists have left that scheme. That should speak wonders to those who are in charge of our health service. It should speak wonders to the HSE in relation to the system itself and the scheme being provided. It is simply not working and it is unacceptable for us, as politicians, to stand in this House and to speak about it year after year, from Dáil term to Dáil term, without actually fixing the problem.

We have a system that is not working. We must change it for the benefit of the people across this country who rely on this care and for the very dentists who provide it. It is a system that is not working and we must change it. It is as simple as that. We must provide effective dentistry care in this country for everybody. There is a socioeconomic issue here as well. People who are on medical cards may be those who are less well-off than those who can pay the all-out cost of dentistry care. There is a socioeconomic problem here as well. It is vulnerable people who are being left behind. We need to fix this dental treatment service scheme because it is not working.

Deputy Seamus Healy: Tipperary town, in my constituency, with a population of over 5,000 people and serving a further 10,000 in mid-Tipperary and east Limerick in its hinterland, has no dentist accepting public patients, medical card holders. That is absolutely and totally unacceptable. It is proof positive that the dental and oral health service in this country is totally in disarray and is failing patients very badly. In 2024, the number of dentists operating the dental treatment services scheme was 810. That was down from 1,452 in 2012; a drop of 642. Currently, the number in the scheme is believed to be less than 600. The very small number of dentists employed by the HSE in the public dental service is also reducing by 30, with 65 unfilled posts as of early this year.

The year 2019 saw the Smile agus Sláinte plan for the dental service. That was a strategy that was supposed to move the outdated curative care emphasis to a preventative care and health promotion model. However, seven years later, in 2026 there is no implementation of that plan. There is no plan; it is still apparently under consideration. The service has deteriorated since.

Of the 208,000 eligible school children, only 104,000 were screened - 50% - and that figure itself was down by 31,000 on the 2017 figure. Between 2009 and 2023, there was an €800 million cut in the funding for dental care for PRSI and medical card patients. Under that dental treatment services scheme, there was a drop of 94,000 in treatments between 2012 and 2024. That was down from 395,000 in 2012 to 301,000 in 2024.

As other speakers said, there is a two-year waiting list for patients in pain but requiring general anaesthetics. That is totally unacceptable. Of course, there is also the six-year wait for orthodontic treatment. Parents are being forced into private orthodontic treatment costing literally thousands of euro, sometimes as high as €6,000, €7,000 or €8,000, or their children must suffer on. Orthodontic treatment, as we know, is time sensitive and should be available when necessary. Middle-income and low-income families suffer most due to the lack of the public orthodontic service.

Even in the private service, dentists tell us that 25% are not accepting new adult patients and 33% are not accepting new child private patients. The ratio of dentists to patients in this country is one to 2,160, therefore we are at the lowest quartile of OECD in that regard.

The dental services is in chaos. What we need is a fully-funded resourced and staffed public dental service, and that should be established as a matter of priority. That requires a determined focused and multifaceted strategy to retain the existing dentists and to recruit additional dentists into the public dental service. To do that, a significant number of additional training places for dental professionals at third level must be put in place. Currently, there are only 70 dentists qualifying each year. That will increase in the next academic cycle to 87 due to the new dental school at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. However, because of the fact that these colleges use fees from overseas students, 44% of students in them are from overseas, so it is almost certain that up to half of the students will never practice in Ireland. We should also remove dental nurses, dental technicians and hygienists from the ineligible list for employment permits and add them to the critical skills list. That would allow recruitment from areas outside the EU. Direct access to dental nurses, hygienists and technicians should be introduced in a similar way that pharmacists can now prescribe in limited regulated circumstances.

The legislation in this area is well over 40 years old. It is absolutely outdated and requires urgent updating. I support this motion and compliment Deputy Cullinane and Sinn Féin on bringing it forward.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the fact that these proposals are before the Dáil tonight. Only a few short weeks ago, I brought similar proposals to the floor of the Dáil and to Deputy Micheál Martin and set out a lot of what is in this motion. However, it is good that we are here and that parties are getting behind this.

I have raised these issues with successive Ministers for Health: James O'Reilly, Leo Varadkar, Deputy Simon Harris, Stephen Donnelly and the current Minister. We have had four governments in that time. It is a major failure on the part of a relatively wealthy state that we

do not have a good public dental system. We have actually gone backwards. In the case of Laois, the figures show that matters have deteriorated. Students should be getting their first examination in third or fourth class in primary school, just as the Minister of State probably got in Graiguecullen and as I got in Laois. Prevention is key. However, they are now not getting that first examination until third, fourth or fifth year in secondary school. That is according to the HSE. There are 6,600 waiting for their first examination and 800 of these are overdue by six years, according to figures I recently got from the HSE. Some 1,500 are overdue by five years. If prevention is key, untold damage is being done.

I will raise the position of children and adults with special needs. This is a really serious issue. Those who can only have dental treatment under general anaesthetic are really being neglected. I have dealt with a number of cases where people have waited years for hospital access. In one case, not 100 miles from the Minister of State's own house in Laois, a boy has been waiting six years for treatment under general anaesthetic. This child is non-verbal and has serious inflammatory disease. He is in constant pain. This is medical neglect and it is not good enough. After repeated representations, he finally received dental treatment in a hospital recently. He had extractions but the teeth that remain are in very poor condition. The family tell me there is advanced decay and infection. I am informed that he will lose those teeth but the child cannot have dentures. This is very regrettable.

The school dental scheme has to be the foundation of a public dental scheme. We have to catch people when they are young. When this fails, as it is clearly failing in Laois, the whole system fails. How it is failing in other parts of the country has been outlined but the Taoiseach has agreed with me that Laois is a black spot. He also gave me a commitment to take this up with the Minister for Health. I would like to see that followed through on.

The dental treatment services scheme is 95% non-existent. There is just one dentist from Carlow providing this service in a community centre in Killeslin on the Laois-Carlow border. It is impossible for 95% of medical card patients to get treatment under the DTSS, the scheme that is supposed to cater for them. No dentist will do it. No dentist will take on new patients. The PRSI-based scheme, the dental treatment benefit scheme, only provides workers and families with a cleaning and an examination. It does not cover treatment. The Irish Dental Association estimates that we need at least 500 additional public dentists immediately because, as has been outlined here, we actually have fewer public dentists now than we had five years ago. According to the Irish Dental Association, we need an extra 500 if we are to make a start in providing dental care.

The fact is that, as a State, we have failed. Successive governments have failed to put a public dental system in place. Those with special needs have been failed, as have those with medical cards. Workers and families making use of the dental treatment benefit scheme have been failed. Crucially, there has been a failure to provide a proper school dental scheme. All of this shows that we are way behind and have a great deal of work to do. We are supposed to arrive at the full implementation of Sláintecare and a public health system within 18 months but, of course, we are nowhere near that. This should form part of that. I acknowledge that extra dental training places have been put in place but it is key that these students are recruited as public dentists and then retained.

There is work to be done. The Government needs to prioritise this with the HSE. We are putting money into the dental system. We probably need to increase that funding. I always

argue for money to go into front-line services as much as is possible and for bureaucracy and the top layers to be reduced to make sure money is not wasted before it can be used to provide services. It is time for a major shake-up of how dental services are delivered. Other countries can do it. We should do it. We clearly need action and an action plan. We need to prioritise the areas I have outlined: the public dental scheme, the schools scheme, and children and adults with special needs, particularly those who are non-verbal and need to have treatment under general anaesthetic. Other countries can do it. Other countries did it years ago. We should do it. It needs political will. It is part of Sláintecare. We should get to work on it now and waste no opportunity. As I said, I have raised this issue with five or possibly even six Ministers across four governments but we are still not there. We have ground to make up. As an Opposition TD, I would certainly support Government in this. We need to do it.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Where has the Government gone wrong on dental and orthodontic services? I was here when this was being raised seven years ago. Where has the Government gone wrong? Why has it not learned and why has it not listened? There are 11,000 on waiting lists, most of whom are children. Some 8,000 have been waiting to see a dentist for longer than two years. Where has the Government gone wrong? All my colleagues here have said the very same things. They have said it is absolutely disgusting and a disgrace that people cannot get to see a dentist. Children are supposed to have at least three visits to a dentist before they leave primary school but they do not get to see a dentist at all.

How do we fix this? As we told the Government a couple of years ago, fixing it is very simple. You build a team. You try to retain the next generation within the country. You train them and get them into practices where they have regular hours. So many people are waiting for services that the dental surgeries are staying open and people are working longer hours. Dentists coming into these practices do not want to stay there because the hours are too long and they can get better hours in other areas. They may leave the country. We have to build a team and encourage that team to stay here working in practices, even local practices, to help people. The same thing happened with SouthDoc, Shannondoc and our doctors' surgeries. The same thing is happening all the time but the Government is ignoring it. The small practices cannot keep going. You see doctors retiring and nobody taking on their surgeries. The same thing is now happening in dentistry.

The Government still has not listened. I have been here listening to this for seven years now. It is the same thing over and over again. We are promised it will be sorted this year, next year or the year after. As this goes on, children and adults are left suffering. I guarantee that if the Minister of State himself had an issue with his teeth, he would not wait. He would go private because he is in a financial position to do so. A lot of people in this country are not in that position. They are watching their children suffer because the Government did not listen and did not build a team to ensure we would have dentistry into the future.

Deputy Michael Collins: If you want to understand the true state of a nation's healthcare system, do not just look at its emergency rooms or its hospital beds. Look at its smiles. Look at the teeth of its children, the stress lines of its working class and the growing bills on the kitchen tables of ordinary families. In 2026, Ireland is celebrated globally for economic prosperity, technological innovation and a soaring population but beneath that shiny surface lies a painful systematic reality.

9 o'clock

Dental and orthodontic services in Ireland are in state of absolute crisis. There has been a 4% decline in the number of dentists employed by the HSE in the past seven years. There has been a 31% decrease in the number of dental surgeons employed by the HSE since 2005 despite population growth of 32%. There are 27% fewer whole-time equivalent dentists now compared with 2019 and 25.3% fewer dental nurse whole-time equivalents than there were in 2019, with 7.7% of those in the Cork-Kerry region. The crisis hits no one harder than our children. Our target primary school screening programme, once the jewel of preventative care, is broken.

Recent data reveals that over 100,000 eligible schoolchildren were completely denied dental screenings because the number of public HSE dentists *per capita* has steadily fallen, leaving dozens of vital roles permanently vacant. Only about half of our students are getting checked when they should. What happens when children clear that hurdle and need structural help? They enter the punishing labyrinth of HSE orthodontic waiting lists. Right now, more than 11,000 people, mostly children, are stranded on waiting lists for braces and jaw surgeries in some regions. Families face a six-year wait for public orthodontics. I ask the Minister of State to think about that. A child identified with a severe agonising bite deformity at age 11 might not see a specialist until they are nearly an adult.

The data from the Irish Dental Association also shows 979 children waiting in HSE South West, of whom 438 have been on the list for over a year, 277 waiting in the HSE Dublin and South East region, of whom 172 have been on the list for over 12 months, and 81 on the HSE Mid West list who have been waiting over 12 months for a general anaesthetic. Too many children are leaving primary school without ever having had a dental screening. In 2023, fewer than 104,000 children were screened out of an eligible cohort of 208,000. What we are witnessing today is what professional bodies, such as the Irish Dental Association, have rightly called a poor law service, a regression to an outdated, unequal system where decent, timely oral care has effectively become a luxury for those who can pay and a lottery of charity for those who cannot. The foundation of our public oral health network is crumbling for years. The dental treatment service scheme was meant to guard the most vulnerable, namely, our medical card holders. That scheme has fundamentally collapsed. Private practitioners are withdrawing from State schemes in droves because they are forced to operate under austerity era rules dating back to the financial crisis.

Deputy Paul Lawless: Families are contacting me regularly about dental care. The level of frustration and desperation is shocking. The truth is that in many parts of the country people cannot access their dentist. In parts of the country people with a medical card will not find a dentist. That is how bad the dental service scheme is.

In relation to the school screening programme, according to the Government, every child is entitled to see a dentist before they leave primary school. However, the vast majority will never see a dentist and get their teeth examined under that programme. The system is in such chaos and has such bottlenecks that thousands of students will continue to leave the school system without ever seeing a dentist. That is absolutely wrong. There are so many families in Ireland who simply cannot afford to go private. These children are suffering and that suffering will go on into adulthood because their teeth will no longer be baby teeth. That is the truth of it.

We need to look at the dental Act. At present, there are bottlenecks in the system. For example, a dental hygienist cannot be seen until a dentist refers a patient to the public system. The fact that someone cannot access a dentist means that, therefore, they cannot access a dental hygienist. That is a bottleneck that needs to be addressed.

Workplace planning is important. This Government is not planning for the future when it comes to dental care, as with many other services in this country. I submitted a parliamentary question to the Minister for further education. The data I received was alarming. It showed that 40% of students studying dentistry in Ireland are from outside of the EU. That is extraordinary. We are training so few dentists in the country, yet 40% are from outside of the EU. The remaining 60% are a combination of Irish, British and EU students. This Government is not even capturing that data. This is really important. We need to understand how many Irish students are in the system. At a time when dental care is in crisis and the Irish Dental Association has said we are currently about 500 dentists short, the solution to this problem is that the Government gives a significant number of the limited places to students from outside of the EU, the vast majority of whom will not be retained in the Irish system. This crisis is going to go on and on.

I have listened to Deputies from around the House outline how many years we are into this crisis. A crisis is temporary. This is now complete and utter gross mismanagement of the system. We need to address workplace planning in the system, expand the places and protect those places for Irish students.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I am not the first to say it, but more than 11,000 children are on HSE dental and orthodontist waiting lists. Over 8,000 have been waiting more than a year. Half of all primary school children now finish school without ever receiving even a screening appointment. In some areas, the waiting time is four and a half years. This is not acceptable. In CHO 7, which covers Lucan, Palmerstown, Clondalkin, Saggart, Rathcoole, Citywest, Newcastle, Brittas and Adamstown, it is one of the bottlenecks. The Irish Dental Association told the Committee on Health that dental services are in severe shortage, with multi-year delays for school screenings, and there are chronic vacancies that it was the HSE's job to fill, but it did not do so.

The dental treatment service scheme has collapsed in many places, including my constituency. Participation fell from 1,600 dentists to 600. Different parliamentary question replies have confirmed that some areas have had periods in which no dentists were available. At the same time, we have rapidly growing areas in my constituency, including Adamstown strategic development zone, SDZ, and Clonburris SDZ. It is one of Ireland's fastest growing urban areas, with tens of thousands of new homes and new residents. There has been no corresponding increase in public dental staff, if only to keep up with the low levels we already had.

Again, I am repeating points that others who spoke before me made. Of the children needing dental surgery under general anaesthetic, 3,500 are waiting nationally, of whom 40% have been waiting more than a year. As others noted, there are solutions. It is about training more people who are going work here. If we have to recruit internationally, we have to do it properly and effectively. HSE campaigns, for whatever reason, whether it is pay, the number of adverts or the targeting of people, have been largely unsuccessful, with many posts remaining unfilled

and some regions receiving no applicants. This does not only apply to dental services, but it is relevant to this debate. There are persistent vacancies year on year, but we have not run a serious recruitment strategy.

We need more tied scholarships that would assist people doing these courses, while getting them to work in the public sector for a period of time. We need more large-scale recruitment campaigns to beat the Australians at their own game and expanded training places. Again, we need to tie this to people who will work in this country. That is what we should be doing because we are in a crisis.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I commend Sinn Féin on bringing this motion forward. It is a shocking and alarming situation. The old saying is "Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí" - praise the young and they will come. How can they come forward? The dental service is in crisis. In my constituency of Tipperary, we now face the shocking reality that Tipperary town, one of our major county towns, no longer has a dentist providing a service to public patients. This is not acceptable. The Government has repeatedly ignored warnings and pleas for changes to the dental medical card scheme. I have raised my concerns many times in the House and repeatedly with various Ministers for Health, yet we continue to see a complete failure to act. The Government has ignored the cost of dental inflation and expects private dentists to absorb the cost. That cannot happen and it simply will not happen. Anybody in business knows that, for very good reason, it cannot happen. The dentists cannot afford to do it.

The HSE pays a maximum of €109.96 for up to three repairs.

The laboratory fees alone for that work can range between €120 and €150. It is simple maths - it will not save your business if you do that. Before a dentist even factors in their own time, staff or overheads, they are already operating at a loss. These are substantial issues, which the HSE just will not listen to or engage with. A dentist is expected to absorb that and continue to treat public patients. It cannot happen - dentists are disappearing from the system and you cannot blame them.

Dentists simply cannot continue like this. As a result, many have made the decision to withdraw from the scheme entirely. Others are limiting their services to basic pain relief only. A small minority of dentists are still trying to provide care under the scheme but they are at their wits' end. They are carrying the burden of an underfunded system without the support they need or deserve. It is just not acceptable. When you see a problem, you should try to fix it because this is getting worse year by year. Figures have been quoted on the thousands of children waiting. Children need treatment when they go into their teens or late teens. It is a big issue for them, especially young girls. We talk about mental health but these issues, when children need assistance with their teeth, should be sorted out.

I pay a full and special tribute to Dr. Daniel O'Connell, a Clonmel dentist working on the Quay. For nearly 40 years, he has served this community with professionalism and dedication. He has been sounding the alarm on this issue for years but, like so many others, his voice has not been listened to. Now, entire communities are left without public dental care. He has been warning about this but nobody was listening. I salute him and his staff, the dental technicians and receptionists. You could not find a finer practice.

The situation is untenable. The Government must urgently review reimbursement rates, engage meaningfully with the professionals and take immediate action to restore confidence in the public system. I received an email this evening from a mother about her son. It would bring tears to a stone. He was referred for attention. She asked if we can do anything. The son, whose first name is Noah, was approved by the HSE for publicly funded orthodontic treatment, his orthodontic issues being assessed as severe enough to qualify. When this was originally approved the parents were told Noah would be at least 18 before he was called for the treatment. Imagine that. Having discussed this with his orthodontist, who advised that 18 would be way too late for treatment to be effective, they made a difficult decision to begin private treatment at the end of February. On 5 March, the mother received a call from the orthodontic department of the HSE in Waterford, who informed her that the boy would move forward and receive funding beginning in November 2026. She explained that he had started treatment with a private orthodontist based in County Cork, the parents would be willing to remove him from that service and remove the wire that had been put in if Noah went back onto the public system. She was told that would not be a problem but, hey presto, it would be November 2026. On that basis, the wires were removed in anticipation of his public treatment but, sadly, on 12 June, two weeks ago, the parents received a further call informing them that the national oral health office had withdrawn the offer of funding and the boy, along with about 200 other children, would no longer be entitled to the treatment and would be placed back at the end of the waiting list. What kind of incompetence and disgraceful treatment is that to give a young boy who needs that treatment, was forced to go private, started treatment, got a call that it could be done publicly and later withdrew from that, having been told he would be get treatment in the public system-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: -----and then the money was pulled again. It is a body blow. It is disgusting and someone should be held accountable.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Sorca Clarke): Deputy, your time is up. I call Deputy Danny Healy-Rae.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I thank Sinn Féin for bringing this serious and important motion to the Chamber this evening. I have encountered many people looking for orthodontic treatment for their children as well as elderly people looking to get seen by a dentist when they only have a medical card. More than 2,000 people, mostly children, are waiting for dental and orthodontic treatment in the south-west region, Cork and Kerry. Deputy Michael Collins came at it from his side. Children are waiting for braces for more than two years. We all know if they do not get the braces when they need them, children can outgrow the possibility of the braces ever working or having the desired effect. I dealt with a number of young girls who lost confidence and would not leave their rooms. They barely go to school and after school they have no interaction with their friends. They do not go out in the evenings, at 16 or 17 years old. They felt they did not look right and they should look better. They were waiting for this treatment but they did not get it.

I do not know if the Minister of State is listening to me but he would want to listen to me about this. Maybe he will listen to other Deputies. We all have the same story. There is something wrong. Children are not getting the treatment they should get at 12, 13 or 14 years of age. When they go beyond that, they are gone beyond the time the braces and the work would have any genuine effect on their problems.

Not all parents can afford to pay for dental care. It is extremely costly and a lot of parents cannot afford it. This has life-long adverse effects on children. I cannot find any dentist in Kerry who accepts the medical card. It does not work because the medical card does not cover the cost. Is the Government giving enough to the HSE? Are we, as taxpayers, giving enough to the HSE to pay dentists properly? They cannot all be wrong. We have great dentists in Kerry, including Killarney, but they say it does not pay them and they have to put on more staff to cover public patients but the money they get to do it does not cover them. That question needs to be addressed. Does the HSE have the money? Is it going elsewhere with it like it is doing with a lot of other things? That question needs to be answered.

Many elderly people have to travel outside the county. I found two dentists - I believe they are both elderly - who would take patients and have taken the patients from Kerry. It is some distance from Kerry but I cannot say where it is because they would be overpowered with people coming to them and maybe then, they would not treat my patients. This is terrible. John Reilly, the publican across the road from us, was a great man to summarise things. Any of us know children have trouble with teeth coming but he used to say, they are trouble coming and trouble going, that is the story with teeth. People have a lot of pain. When a person is in pain and a tooth needs to be extracted, if they have a medical card and do not have the funds to pay for an extraction themselves, surely we should be able to do that for them. Any person in pain, whatever pain it is, it hurts them and drives them crazy. A toothache would drive you insane, out of your mind with pain when it goes on for days and days. I ask the Government to do something about funding the dentists properly to ensure these people can get treatment locally rather than travelling outside the county of Kerry. The Minister of State knows the effort to travel outside the county of Kerry and if you live in a place like Dingle or Cahersiveen, you have to travel two hours before you get to the county boundary to go to Limerick or Cork.

It is not right. We have great dentists in Kerry - very good, professional people - but they cannot afford to do teeth extractions, not to mind fillings, for what they are being reimbursed by the HSE. What is the HSE doing with the funding? Is the Minister giving the HSE enough funding? This is what we need to ask. If we are, then what is the HSE doing with it because it is not giving it to the dentists? There needs to be a re-evaluation. Every dentist cannot be wrong. They all have the same story - it is not paying them to do it. We are not coming in here and making this up. I am telling the Minister of State the God's gospel truth. Every day and every week, we have people in our office looking to see can they get a tooth pulled, but they cannot find a dentist who will take the medical card. That is the gospel truth. I am asking the Minister of State, for God's sake, to do something about it because it is time he did.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I thank all Deputies across the House for their contributions to the debate. I will not disagree with many of the arguments they made. While some progress has been made recently, it is absolutely fair to say that the current level of access to dental and orthodontic services is not where it needs to be. It needs to be improved. I know this from the various contributions that have been made

tonight, having taken this debate on behalf of the Government, and from my engagement with constituents. It is important to recognise the challenges that many individuals and families are facing, whether they involve delays in accessing dental care, lengthy waiting lists for orthodontic treatment or difficulties accessing general anaesthetic. These issues are simply not good enough.

As has been acknowledged, meaningful reform is needed to address these long-standing issues. Work is under way in this regard. The Department of Health is working in conjunction with the HSE to develop a focused two-year national oral health action plan to improve access to oral healthcare services, while long-term reform is under way. Completion of the action plan, which is at an advanced stage, will also be informed, insofar as possible, by the recommendations made by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health in its report on dental services. The action plan will respond to sustained service pressures, workforce constraints and growing waiting lists, particularly for children, people with additional needs and other vulnerable members of our community.

The plan contains ten key action areas for implementation, including addressing waiting lists for the child dental programme and orthodontic services; a review of the dental treatment service scheme; support for recruitment, education and training for dental service positions; and support for innovation and new models of service. In the coming weeks, the Department expects to meet with the Irish Dental Association to further consult on the plan, with a view to finalising and publishing it shortly thereafter. Engagement is critically important but the publication and implementation of this plan are a priority and cannot come quick enough. I think we can all agree on this. The implementation of the plan will be overseen by an implementation oversight group jointly chaired by the Department of Health and the HSE. The Department and the HSE will continue to engage with key stakeholders to inform the delivery of the plan.

I acknowledge that the current school-based appointment service for children in second, fourth and sixth class is inadequate. Delays in early intervention can result in children needing more extensive treatment in later life. The action plan will address this by reducing the appointment backlog, with an initial focus on children in sixth class. While this is an important step, it is not a substitute for a service that provides early preventative oral health care for all children. This reform will be essential to improving oral healthcare services and is aligned with our national oral health policy, *Smile agus Sláinte*.

The success of the action plan will be enabled through addressing workforce constraints. Without a significant number of trained oral healthcare professionals, we cannot deliver the service to the level that is required. While it is encouraging that the number of dentists has increased by over 28% since 2019, this is simply not good enough. We still need more dentists, as well as dental hygienists and dental nurses, to provide the oral healthcare services that the public needs, deserves and requires. At the same time, we must maximise the role of dental hygienists, dental nurses and other dental healthcare professionals, including through the introduction of direct access, where appropriate, to enhance the capacity of our workforce. In collaboration with the Dental Council of Ireland, the scopes of practice of oral healthcare professionals, including dental hygienists, are being examined by the Department of Health to ensure each oral healthcare professional can work to the top of their licence, which is aligned with *Sláintecare*. Workforce reform must also be supported by a modern legislative framework.

Updating the Dentists Act 1985 and introducing statutory continuous professional development are important steps in ensuring our oral healthcare services are fit for purpose and capable of meeting future demands. These reforms will help to support ongoing professional development across the dental sector.

I assure the Deputies that the Minister for Health will continue the ongoing work to address both the access issues that are affecting current healthcare services and to progress work on the implementation of the oral health action plan, which sets out a body of transformational reforms. These challenges are significant but we aim to address them across a multi-year programme of work. The first phase over the next two years will have a specific focus on short-term improvements to core services aimed at improving access and reducing waiting times. At the same time, this plan will support strategic planning and progressing the necessary structural reform required to build an oral healthcare service that provides care to people, with the right care in the right place at the right time. Along with the Minister of State at the Department of Health, Deputy Murnane O'Connor, I again thank the Deputies across the House for their contributions and reiterate the Government's commitment to improving our oral healthcare services.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Early childhood dental examinations are important because they identify problems before they become serious. Early assessments of a child's teeth, jaws and bite can detect developmental issues that can reduce the need for more extensive treatment at a later age. Early check-ups can detect other health concerns and dentists may note the signs of conditions that can affect the child's overall health, such as nutritional deficiencies, oral infections and so on. Preventative dental care and early treatment is more cost-effective and less invasive than treating advanced dental disease. Early dental examinations ensure healthy oral development and establish good dental habits into adulthood. However, children can often face years before orthodontic treatment begins. This can be a result of staff shortages as the HSE has recruitment and staff retention problems. This has impacted school dental screening programmes and caused significant delays in routine dental assessments for children.

The long waits for specialist orthodontic treatment and the fact that orthodontic treatment is not covered by a medical card have meant that parents and adults have turned to private care. The cost of private orthodontic treatment can be prohibitive and treatments can cost several thousand euro. Children requiring moderate orthodontic treatment will not qualify for free care as the HSE will only fund treatments for children with severe orthodontic problems based on strict clinical criteria.

There are significant backlogs in targeted check-ups in the school dental screening service. This is a result of the many children reaching secondary school before receiving dental assessments. There are also fewer dentists participating in State-funded schemes. Among the measures the Government plans could implement is to put in place a plan to reduce waiting times for dental care and to increase resources for the school screening programme. Our dental healthcare is a system beset by workforce shortages, underfunded State schemes and outdated legislation.

Deputy Fionntán Ó Súilleabháin: Once again there is a crisis for families and primary school children in Counties Wicklow and Wexford and across the State. From Bunclody right up to An Bhearn Dearg, from Rathdrum to Kilmuckridge, children are waiting not months but

years to have their teeth checked and attended to. My background is in primary school teaching and half of children at primary school level are not receiving dental screening appointments, something that was standard 50 years ago when this country was supposed to have been poor.

More than 11,000, mostly children, are waiting on dental treatment, with over 8,000 for more than a year. Some 40% of children are on a waiting list two years for braces. In counties Wicklow and Wexford, almost 900 young people are waiting between three and four years for orthodontic treatment. It gets worse. Following a parliamentary question I submitted last year, in 2025, the HSE admitted that the public dental service was still only targeting children who were in second or sixth class in 2019. That means many children in counties Wicklow and Wexford have simply been left behind, and could be in their leaving certificate cycle before being seen by a dentist, instead of having been seen in sixth class in primary school. This is unbelievable in a super-wealthy country in 2026. Meanwhile, the number of dentists available locally under the dental treatment services scheme has collapsed by 50% in County Wexford and 25% in County Wicklow over the past seven years. That is not an accident; it is a failure of planning, investment and political will.

Let us be clear about what needs to happen. The Minister of State needs to publish a real action plan to cut the waiting lists fast, modernise the DTSS, restart school screening immediately, integrate this with the GP visit card, invest properly in public dental services, expand access to dental nurses and hygienists and introduce a dental Act. I ask him to vote for our motion to bring about these changes.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: This motion calls for major reform of dental care in Ireland because the current system is systematically broken. The HSE dental lists are evidence of this, with 11,000 people, most of whom are children, waiting for an appointment. Some 8,000 are waiting more than a year, while 40% of children are waiting more than two years. In fact, we had a well-known and reported case in my own county of Wexford, where a pensioner, Mr. Hayes, pulled out his own teeth because he was in excruciating pain and had tried in vain to get an appointment at several dental practices. This is totally unacceptable in a wealthy, modern country.

Only one third of dentists are providing public dental treatment services, and only one tenth of dentists work for the HSE. This is causing major financial hardship for working families and people with disabilities, especially those who require an anaesthetic. This type of treatment costs a small fortune. Many families have to borrow from their local credit union for dental treatment. This is wrong. The recommendations of the Dental Council of Ireland should be implemented and a new dental Act should replace the outdated 1985 Act. A workforce plan must be implemented and more places must be made available for our young trainee dentists. Sinn Féin is also calling for a digitalisation of data for special care patients and patients with intellectual disabilities to ensure transparency and accountability.

We have an ageing population. It is not rocket science. It is a global fact that people will have problems with their teeth and oral health as they grow older. This is why we in Sinn Féin are calling for a total overhaul of our current dental system, which is completely out of date, and a legal framework for dental practices. Every man, woman and child should have access to a dentist if they need one. A major reform of our dental care system must happen because the current one is creating a two-tier operation that is only serving those who can afford it and

those who have expensive medical insurance, while the majority of citizens are left to wait for years for treatment. This is wrong and something must change.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The Minister of State has accepted that dental care, especially orthodontic care in this State, particularly that provided by the public system, is not fit-for-purpose in any way, shape or form. I do not know how many times we have all been in here talking about the DTSS. The fact is a person is incredibly lucky on a medical card if he or she can find a dentist and avail of it, but we have all seen that even in those cases, a person may be offered an extraction at times instead of a filling, on the basis of how not fit-for-purpose the system is.

I do not know how long we are going to continue talking about this. It would make an awful lot of sense if rather than saying great strides are being made, the Minister of State was saying great strides have been made and the Government has delivered a system that works for the people. It is as simple as that.

Regarding orthodontic care and Louth County Hospital, in one of my recent parliamentary questions, I asked for an update and the response was:

At this time, the Department is under-resourced, with a vacant consultant orthodontist post. There is a 1.0 whole-time equivalent for the Louth-Meath region, and 1.2 whole-time equivalent vacant specialist orthodontist post in Dundalk clinic.

The specialist orthodontist position has been vacant since January 2024. In August 2024, a recruitment campaign was halted due to the pay and numbers strategy, leaving only one valid vacancy to fill. The latest update I received on this is the post has been readvertised. It does not matter about the closing date, we need to see somebody in position. I could say the same about the specialist orthodontist 0.2 WTE post which has been vacant since March 2025 and, again, “readvertised lately.” We need to see that filled. The consultant orthodontist post has been vacant since late December 2022. This is not working at all. I also have a letter from a company saying it offers cross-Border orthodontic health care for patients. It states that the contract that was offered to it has failed miserably and it cannot even offer a private, short-term solution.

Deputy David Cullinane: I thank all of the speakers for their contributions. It has to be said, among Government and Opposition Members, including the Ministers, there is a recognition that we have a real problem, and that children and adults, but particularly children, are waiting too long. The problem is that this is not the first debate we have had on this issue. It is not the first time that issues and problems with dental and orthodontic wait times have been raised in this Dáil.

I mentioned that the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health had a number of sessions on this and published a report. I have been talking about this issue for the best part of ten years or more. I recall dealing with this issue when I was a member of Waterford City and County Council, many years ago. There is no part of the country about which it can be said a top class service is being provided but there are parts of the country where it is really bad, and the south east and Waterford is unfortunately one of the worst-performing. The Minister of State talked about the system relying on private contractors, and it is, but no public system should depend

on private contractors. The problem is that we simply do not have enough dentists and orthodontists working in the public system. That is a reality. When the Government says it cannot hire or find them or get them into the public system, that is what workforce planning is about. The Government starts a plan and examines why something is the case, deals with those challenges, overcomes them and puts in place a strategy to enable us to train more dentists and orthodontists, recruit more and have them in the public system, but it is not happening, and because it is not happening, we are not treating children in schools or doing the screening. Children with disabilities are waiting too long for treatment and the vast majority of children waiting for braces or urgent care are waiting far too long.

It is simply not good enough. We have put forward solutions in this motion. This motion is not being opposed by Government but what I want to see is not just the Government not opposing it, but actually engaging with the solutions we have put on the table. Let us improve this service so that we are not here in a year or a number of years having the same circular debate with more children unfortunately waiting for care.

Question put and declared carried.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Disabilities Assessments

1. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality to provide an update on the progress of the establishment of the new autism assessment service; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47690/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I ask the Minister of State to provide an update on the progress of the establishment of a new autism assessment service. We all know about the issue that exists. We are talking about more than 20,000 on the assessment of need waiting lists, many of them over the six months in which that should be provided legally. There are a huge number of parents out there who can get neither an assessment nor the therapies their child requires. We really need to solve this for the parents out there.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I thank the Deputy for this question. On 26 May, the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality, Deputy Foley and I, along with the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, and the HSE were pleased to launch the new autism assessment and intervention pathway protocol - the autism protocol.

The new protocol represents an important step in ensuring that children and adults have access to appropriate and timely autism assessment processes. The new protocol will, for the very first time, provide a standardised assessment process across children's disability network teams, primary care and mental health services.

Evidence tells us that some presentations of autism are easier to identify than others. Informed by this evidence, the HSE has designed a protocol that will introduce a three-tiered approach to autism assessment. It will match the intensity of assessment to the complexity of

the presentation, as decided by the assessing clinicians. It is a pathway designed specifically for autism assessment, and this includes differential assessment and diagnosis, as required, as well as the development of a formulation to provide clearer understanding of the person's lived experience and the services and supports they may require.

The autism protocol has been developed over a period of five years, with input from people with lived experience, civil society and all clinical disciplines involved in assessments as well as managers and service leaders across disability, primary care and mental health services.

To support the implementation of this, my Department secured funding in this year's budget for the development of inreach teams. These will consist of a psychologist, a speech and language therapist, an occupational therapist and a case worker. These teams will work with the health areas to support and to build capacity within community services, including mental health and primary care teams as well as our CDNTs.

Implementation planning for the protocol within the regions will commence in quarter 3 of this year and will include relative briefing and training within the regional healthcare areas. We are providing training in the meantime, until that point.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I ask the Minister of State to give the exact timelines when she gets an opportunity again-----

Deputy Emer Higgins: Sure. I understand.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: -----because, obviously, it is vital that we see this. It is also a matter of knowing how these assessments will be made. Some have said they would be worried about how the assessment officer or whoever makes the clinical determination. It is about ensuring that there would be a sufficient amount of clinical backup. We all accept that if we were starting again, we would have to look at a different system as regards assessment of need and how therapies are provided. I have always had a worry about how we will try to ensure we have enough of a workforce as regards therapists, whether we are talking about the inreach teams, CDNTs or primary care. In addition, I ask the Minister of State to give the up-to-date figure for the assessment-of-need waiting list and how she sees this impacting that.

Deputy Emer Higgins: To be clear on the timelines, since the Deputy specifically asked, this is now launched. It will be rolled out in quarter 3 of this year. Right now, we are working with teams across the country to upskill and to train them on this new system of autism protocol and pathways. It is expected that when it is fully rolled out, each of the 20 integrated health areas will have one established inreach team. This year we will recruit 11 inreach teams. The final design and respective roles of the teams are being finalised. Recruitment for those inreach teams will commence in quarter 3 and quarter 4 of this year and they will be, as the Deputy referred to them in his remarks, the backup for the system. While it is not possible to quantify the exact impact at this stage in terms of assessments, it is anticipated that the successful implementation of the autism protocol will help to reduce demand for assessment of need, which the Deputy also mentioned. It will do that through the provision of a more direct and a clearer path to autism assessment for children and their families. To be clear, however, this does not in any way impact anybody's statutory right to an assessment of need. It is just a

clearer access pathway through existing services such as primary care, our children's disability network teams and CAMHS, should people with an appropriate route to an assessment require one.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I understand that your right to an assessment of need remains, but the fact is that these are attempts to reduce the waiting list. We all know that what parents want to see is a better form or means of assessment and provision of therapies. We need to ensure we have a proper framework that works. I will ask again about an aspect of this matter that I have asked about in a further question which I imagine will not get answered tonight. At this point in time, what are the numbers for the assessment of need waiting list and, as I said, specifically the number that is above the six months that are legally required to provide that service for families? We all know the issues that exist out there. The problem is that parents and children are really suffering from the fact that we have not put a proper framework in place to provide the therapies and the constant assessment, which is the best means of doing this, to provide something that works.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I agree with much of what the Deputy says. This is an attempt to provide alternative means for assessments. There will be three tiers in this autism assessment and intervention pathway protocol. Tier 1 is for an assessment with clear presentations of autism, tier 2 is a more detailed assessment for unclear causes using structured tools and input from multiple professionals, and tier 3 is an assessment for more complex presentations involving additional specialists and further reports. I know the Deputy has a further parliamentary question. I think it is No. 19. The updated figure we have is that there are 21,782 applications overdue for completion. That was as at the end of March. The figures we have are on a quarterly basis, so that is the most up-to-date figure we have this quarter.

Childcare Services

2. **Deputy Aidan Farrelly** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality her plans to publish a detailed timeframe, including milestones and key performance indicators, for the provision of €200-per-month childcare, as set out in the commitments in the programme for Government. [47642/26]

Deputy Daniel Ennis: Affordable, accessible childcare provision is vital for the proper functioning of our society and our economy. What plans does the Minister have to publish a detailed timeframe, including milestones and key performance indicators, for the provision of €200-per-month childcare, as set out in the commitments in the programme for Government?

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): I wish Deputy Ennis well in his new position as spokesperson for his party on all matters to do with children. I acknowledge his predecessor, Deputy Farrelly, who gave 110% to his spokespersonship. I wish him well in his new appointment. I think he is in transport now, is he?

Deputy Daniel Ennis: Yes.

Deputy Norma Foley: I wish him well regardless of where he has moved to. Anyway, I welcome Deputy Ennis.

In relation to the question he has asked, I have always been clear in communicating that the €200-per-month programme for Government commitment is to be achieved over the lifetime of this Government. Shaping the Future: Early Years Action Plan, Phase 1 Report, published last December, sets out measures to achieve key programme for Government commitments on the affordability, quality and accessibility of early learning and care and school-age childcare. The action plan adopts a phased approach that enables action to be taken in 2026 while allowing adequate time for a broad public consultation and analysis on longer term actions.

The consultation process has a number of channels designed to facilitate the participation of a wide range of stakeholders. It includes an online survey which has received more than 11,000 responses; 56 local consultation events right across the country; an art-based engagement exercise with children; and a national consultation event, which is scheduled to take place later in the year. Results of this consultation, and additional analysis, will inform phase 2 of the plan. Phase 2 will set out actions to be undertaken from 2027 right through to the end of 2029.

The fee freeze and maximum fee caps required for core funding have been key to the progress in recent years in making ELC and SAC services more affordable. The 2026 actions on affordability will include further reduction in some of the highest fees paid by parents by lowering the maximum fees that core funding partner services can charge. In addition, from autumn 2026, we will reduce out-of-pocket costs for lower income families through the national childcare scheme.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: In the lead-up to the last election, the Tánaiste promised to cap childcare fees at €200 per month, and that was to do with the early stage of the Government. His words were exactly these:

I actually believe the cost bit we can deliver quite quickly. I believe it can be delivered in the early time of the government.

Not the end. Last week, on a podcast, he said that we would not get there by the next budget, that that was never the commitment - again, his words - and that the commitment was over the lifetime of the Government, as the Minister mentioned. Once again the goalposts seem to have moved. Timelines seem to have moved. The targets are moving yet again. What commitment is this Government giving such that we will not see broken promises before an election again? Not only are we so far from the €200-per-month reduction that was promised again in the programme for Government; we are yet to see a clear roadmap on how this reduction will take place. Again, the same roadmap was promised by the Tánaiste. Goalposts are being moved.

In his words again, it was to be within the Government's first 100 days. We are now 500 days into the lifetime of this Government. It is just not good enough or quick enough for families that are struggling.

Deputy Norma Foley: In the interests of clarity, we must be clear that after any election there is a negotiation with various parties to make up a Government. As part of that, a programme for Government is written down and committed to. Those are the plans which will

be committed to over the lifetime of the Government. I was involved in the writing of the programme for Government. When that was being done, the commitment was clear. This Government involves a number of parties and individuals. The programme for Government lays out that over the lifetime of the Government, the cap of €200 will be achieved. There is no deviation in that regard. There is no equivocation. It was made clear when the Government was formed.

As already stated, there has been progress in terms of a reduction in costs for low-income families. The lower income threshold for the income-assessed subsidy has been increased from €26,000 to €34,000 in order to ensure that families with incomes below the relative poverty income line receive the maximum subsidy. There has also been an increase in the upper threshold.

Deputy Daniel Ennis: I take on board what the Minister is saying. I do not hold out much hope. Time and again, the Government has treated childcare as an afterthought. As a father of two, this is something I live with every day. Childcare costs are crippling families. I knocked on close to 40,000 doors, and it came up quite a lot. We were not seeing it much in representations or emails, but it certainly came up in the one-to-one conversations. The Government has failed so many times in respect of this promise. We are talking about getting costs down. We are a long way from the €200 per month cap. The average cost of childcare is €850 per month. Ireland is an outlier in Europe. We are not moving quick enough with this. I hope to see this happening sharpish. Working with the Minister on the committee, we hope to do that. I do not hold out much hope, however. That was a promise before the election that I was hoping would be delivered for my family and many others. This problem is not just in Dublin Central, it is right across the country. Families are crippled.

Deputy Norma Foley: I look forward to working with the Deputy at the committee. Just to be clear, 25% of families are already on the €50 per week or are paying less than that. I absolutely accept that there is much more work to do. In recent weeks, we have introduced the fee caps. The full cost for families availing of just less than 50 hours' service - this is the full day service that the vast majority of parents are availing of - is €198 per week. That is when the national childcare subsidy is included. That will now be reduced to €183 per week. We are seeing progress.

I already mentioned something that has been fought very hard for by so many different people in terms of children at risk of disadvantage, namely that the thresholds have been increased from €26,000 to €34,000 and from €60,000 to €68,000 in order to maximise people's access to the national childcare subsidy. Some progress has been made. There is more progress to be made, and we will continue that through phase 2 of the action plan.

Childcare Services

3. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality to provide an update on the roll-out of State-led childcare facilities; when the eight locations for this year will be chosen; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47735/26]

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I want to begin by wishing Deputy Ennis well. I look forward to working with him both in the House and on the committee. I congratulate him on his appointment.

I want to ask the Minister about the eight locations that will be chosen this year for the State-led childcare facilities, which is something I very much welcome. I would really appreciate an update on where we are at and when we will see those locations announced, particularly as we come to the halfway point in the year.

Deputy Norma Foley: I appreciate the Deputy's interest in this matter. She has advocated very strongly in respect of it. I can confirm that €135 million is being made available between 2026 and 2030 for the State-led early learning and childcare capital programme to facilitate the provision high-quality and accessible early learning and childcare. The process begins this year, with investment in buildings in what is a groundbreaking initiative for the Department of children. Capital funding will be used to acquire and-or fit out buildings depending on requirements.

The Department will work with not-for-profit providers to design, open and operate services. These will be not-for-profit services. To assess potential sites, a forward planning model has been developed. The model seeks to identify the nature and volume of different types of early learning and childcare places across the country, and how that aligns with the number of children in the corresponding age cohorts at local level. An extensive data analysis exercise has been undertaken to map available publicly subsidised supply.

As well as a forward planning model, a suite of appraisal criteria and tools is being developed in order to assess potential adjustment and alignment of projects with Department goals of promoting equality, inclusion, accessibility and affordability. The Department is assessing project options in order to identify which are best placed to deliver on the goals of the programme. Analysis of project options is advancing well. Project proposals can be brought to the attention of the Department through completion of a preliminary appraisal form, which is available from the city and county childcare committees. When a suitable project is brought to the Department, the forward planning and delivery unit develops a preliminary business case. The preliminary business case assesses the building and the location associated with the project against the programme's appraisal criteria, as well as analysing cost, value for money and the quality of the proposed building. The preliminary business case is considered by a capital steering group comprising senior Department officials and members from the Office of Public Works and the Department of Education and Youth. It can then be submitted for approval in principle. It is important to note that this is not a guarantee of funding for a project; it is, rather, another step along the way. Following approval in principle, a final business case is developed for the project which includes selection of an eligible operator, agreement of investment or purchasing a building, and detailed building design and costing work.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I welcome this, but we all know, and it is no secret to say, that eight locations will be announced this year to provide, I understand, about 800 places. We have to look at the level of need. We know there are between 40,000 and 50,000 children on waiting lists across the State. Ahead of the budget, I want to ask the Minister again about the next phase of building blocks, given the level of need and demand that exists. I met IBEC last week

to discuss women in particular not being able to return to the workforce. They now see access to childcare as a major labour market issue. We have the impact, typically, on the mother but also on the family as a whole and the child. There there is the ability to work, pay tax, get out in the morning and have your child in a safe place where they are looked after and educated, in many cases for the entire day. I want to ask about building blocks and extending it to purchase existing buildings rather than just focusing on new builds, simply in view of the level of need.

Deputy Norma Foley: I agree entirely in terms of what we are seeking to achieve in early years. It is equality of opportunity for children in the first instance. That is probably the most important element, but it is much more as well. It is also equality of opportunity for women in many respects in order to allow them, as the Deputy outlined, to go out and take up other opportunities should they choose to do so.

I want to comment on where we are at currently. The final business case is considered by the capital steering group prior to being submitted for approval. Only once a final business case has been developed, which provides full details of a project, can final approval for funding be sought. To date, four projects have received approval in principle and are being developed. A further five projects are being prepared for submission for approval in principle. No final decisions have been made on the specific projects, but I look forward to sharing the details of the projects as they are agreed. Local city and county childcare committees are supporting the development of projects. In that context, community early learning and childcare operators, local authorities, developers and others who might have suitable premises or projects should contact their local committee.

On building blocks, everything is being considered in the context of the budget. We will see how we go with that.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I know I am like a broken record, but it would be remiss of me not to mention Boyle in north Roscommon. The needs analysis, which was very well done, showed that the national benchmark is 20 childcare places per 75 households. In the town of Boyle and in the surrounding rural area, there are 20 childcare places per 1,043 households. There is a real need in Boyle, and that has been proven through the needs analysis I shared with the Minister and the forward planning unit, which very kindly gave us an extremely helpful briefing this morning on the model.

A former childcare facility on the outskirts of Boyle has become available again. It was available and then it was not. It is now available again. The childcare committee has passed on the information in that regard. We have a unique opportunity now. It is a purpose-built facility and is ready to go. That is a project that really needs to be looked at in terms of the eight overall projects. Again, I would love to see building blocks extended. We have so many empty buildings in the State. Let us use them for childcare and for communities.

10 o'clock

Deputy Norma Foley: I acknowledge the Deputy's advocacy on an ongoing basis. I get that from Deputy Martin Daly, from councillors and from everybody across the system. They are very well situated to advocate. I get it from my Fine Gael colleagues as well. We are very

conscious of the fact that State-led is one element while Building Blocks is another. If we can pour more into both or, indeed, other initiatives, we are happy to do so.

It is a significant step forward in terms of State-led. We have never done this before and we are able to stand up eight this year. The Deputy specifically referenced buildings being made available. That is the purpose of State-led at this point, in that where buildings are readily available, we can access them quite quickly and move on to finding not-for-profit providers. Be assured that everything is in the mix for this forthcoming budget and we consider everything, including Building Blocks. We have had a scheme this year and in the previous year.

Childcare Services

4. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality if her attention has been drawn to the fact that no childcare facility has been built within the new national children's hospital, and if she has raised this with the Minister for Health. [47221/26]

Deputy Mark Wall: I wish Deputy Ennis the very best in his new role and look forward to working with him on childcare.

Deputy Norma Foley: I have raised the matter with the Minister for Health. Indeed, I have forwarded the Deputy's question to her for her attention because it is a matter that is more directly within her remit. The Department of Children, Disability and Equality does not determine the use of buildings when it is not involved in funding them. The design of buildings and the designation of space within them, including for the purposes of early learning and childcare, is a matter for the owners of the building in accordance with the wider planning legislation. Individual planning decisions are a function of planning authorities and An Coimisiún Pleanála is statutorily independent in the performance of these functions.

The 2001 planning guidelines for local authorities and childcare facilities were issued under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 by the Minister for housing. The guidelines are intended to ensure a consistent approach to the treatment of planning applications in respect of the land use planning aspects of early learning and childcare provisions. The guidelines propose appropriate locations for early learning and childcare facilities, including in the vicinity of concentrations of workplaces where significant numbers of staff are employed.

While the 2001 planning guidelines have contributed to the delivery of a substantial level of early learning and childcare infrastructure, I am also aware that there are challenges in implementing the guidelines. The Government is committed to reviewing the guidelines to ensure early learning and childcare spaces are provided and put into use. The Planning and Development Act 2024 and the revised national planning framework, along with the ongoing work on Shaping the Future, the phase 2 action plan for the development of the early learning and childcare sector, provides a strong basis from which to pursue this work.

Separately, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality has been liaising with Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage with regard to the planning process as set out in the planning and development regulations of 2001. The Department of Housing,

Local Government and Heritage has confirmed that the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality will be designated as a prescribed body to be notified by local authorities of planning applications that might give rise to a change in the demand from early learning and childcare provision. This is a really positive step forward for us in the Department.

Deputy Mark Wall: That is a very comprehensive reply. I have a couple of questions arising from it. The Minister sent my question to the Minister for Health. Has the Minister for Health come back to the Minister on this? Does the Minister, Deputy Foley, agree with us all that it beggars belief that, when we are spending so much money on the children's hospital, we are not spending any money within that hospital on childcare facilities, given what Deputies Ennis and Kerrane have said about the lack of childcare facilities right throughout the country and the fact that the Minister comes in here every month and tells us that she is doing her best? I have no doubt that she is, but we are spending up to €2 billion on the children's hospital when, as the Minister stated, we are looking at somewhere in the vicinity to have childcare facilities. Given the need for childcare facilities in such a facility and the fact that we want to ensure that consultants and all those employed in the hospital can actually get to work and increase the number of women in particular who can go back to work, does the Minister agree with us that this is a missed opportunity at the very least and somebody needs to come back to us as quickly as possible?

Deputy Norma Foley: To be fair to the Minister for Health, this has just been brought to her attention. She is going to look into it, she has a copy of the Deputy's question and I have no doubt she will revert. We would have to examine whether this the norm in hospitals across the country. Only the Minister for Health can confirm that.

I have to say that the guidelines themselves actually refer to within "the vicinity". I am not saying that these guidelines are perfect, and we have had discussions here before where we were looking for them to be updated. I have raised the matter with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and there is a piece of work ongoing on that.

I appreciate the Deputy's bona fides in raising this matter. It is outside my remit but I accept the goodwill of the Minister for Health, who has said that she will look at it.

Deputy Mark Wall: I will take up the Minister's second point, or maybe the other point that she made, about planning guidelines. Is she telling the House that she will now be consulted on all planning applications and that this is a first for the Department of Children, Disability and Equality? Has the Department never been consulted on projects such as this because if that is the case, it is worrying? It is an opportunity for us all to get involved in the planning process but, more importantly, her Department will now be involved in planning applications as we move forward, given the lack of childcare that we have all mentioned.

Will the Minister confirm that her Department was not previously involved in planning applications as one of the bodies that would be asked to comment on them and that that has changed? Obviously, that will be positive going forward. Is her Department now getting involved in such planning applications?

Deputy Norma Foley: The Deputy and anybody who has served in a local authority will be aware of prescribed bodies that are consulted in terms of what is coming before the local authority. The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage has consented and confirmed that the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality will now be one of the prescribed bodies to be notified by local authorities of a planning application that might give rise to a change in the demand for early learning and childcare provision. For example, I think we are all very aware that where permission has been granted for a childcare facility for whatever reason, a further application can be made down the line for a change of use, which is something that is granted by local authorities very frequently. This new departure will give us an opportunity to make our observations and make our case that this really should not be allowed. If it is designated as an early years and childcare facility, it should serve the community. That is what it is there for. This will be really helpful and I am appreciative of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage in this regard.

Children in Care

5. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality if she will ensure increased investment in voluntary residential care services for children in the care of the State; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47736/26]

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I wish to ask the Minister about voluntary residential care services in our State in terms of looking after some of our most vulnerable children, namely, children in the care of the State. I recently visited a voluntary residential service and was really impressed. It was literally like walking into any other family home in the country. I want to ask the Minister specifically about investment in these voluntary, not-for-profit services. Targets have been set for increased capacity by Tusla but they have not materialised.

Deputy Norma Foley: I know that the vast majority of Members will agree with me that the preferred option for children coming into the care of the State is foster care. It is the first option. This is where almost nine in every ten children in care are placed. However, Tusla operates in a very challenging and demand-led environment providing vital services to children, young people and families that often present with particularly complex issues, and foster care might not meet their needs. Tusla has acknowledged the need to increase its provision of residential placements, including those provided by community and voluntary organisations. Like the Deputy, I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the incredible work done by staff in community and voluntary organisations to provide safe and supportive placements for children in care. I was really pleased to meet with representatives of the community and voluntary sector in January of this year to discuss matters affecting them and the children for whom they provide care.

It is important to note that the State has invested significantly in community and voluntary care provision, with the sector being allocated an increase in funding of €5.2 million in 2023 to ensure its ongoing sustainability. I was also pleased to see community and voluntary workers agree to a pay increase of 9.25% last year, ensuring that voluntary workers are better paid for their very valuable work.

I am conscious that Tusla is independent in its functions and it is a matter for the agency to manage and allocate resources, including voluntary residential provision, to address areas of greatest need while managing within its allocated budget. In 2025, Tusla reported that it had provided funding for community and voluntary residential provision of just under €30 million. The Department continues to support Tusla in the provision of the funding and resources needed to carry out its functions.

It is committed to ensuring the continuity of Tusla's work in supporting vulnerable children and families, as evidenced by the year-on-year increases in funding provided to the agency. In budget 2026, an overall increase of €177 million was provided, which amounted to a 14% increase in Tusla's budget over its 2025 allocation.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: The committee on children will be writing to the Minister, if she has not already received our correspondence, asking that she seek a specific allocation for Tusla in the budget that would be used to expand residential places within the voluntary sector. I am really uncomfortable with the reality right now whereby we have voluntary residential services that have been in place for decades, are regulated to the hilt, and rightly so, have to account for every red cent they receive and return any unspent moneys, while at the same time, we see millions of euro being given at the drop of a hat for special emergency arrangements, SEAs. That is a kick in the teeth for those voluntary organisations that do everything right and have to fundraise to keep their doors open. It seems lots of money can be given to organisations that are not regulated or inspected and which do not have to do anything in respect of those regulations. Will the Minister look specifically at money for expansion solely in the voluntary sector?

Deputy Norma Foley: To reiterate, there has been a significant year-on-year increase in Tusla funding, with a 14% increase this year, or €177 million, in the context of its overall budget of €1.4 billion for 2026. That will provide Tusla with the opportunity to increase the overall provision of residential placements for children in need to more than 800. The Deputy will appreciate that as the 2027 budget process is ongoing, I cannot give a commitment at this stage in respect of future funding. She can be assured that we have seen increases for Tusla year on year.

Work is already under way on Ireland's first national policy framework for alternative care. That is really important and will be to the benefit of children in State care. The framework aims to articulate a whole-of-government vision for the future of alternative care in Ireland, thereby delivering on a programme for Government commitment in this area. We have had excellent engagement from the community and voluntary sector through the consultation process. It is really important that it have a say in shaping the future of the care system in Ireland, including the alternative care system. The framework will provide the basis for future investment in the care system. I acknowledge all the contributions that have been made to support that process in recent months.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: The issue I am raising is that while funding to Tusla has increased, the question is where that funding is going. Given the crisis that exists for any child who is in care and while acknowledging that foster care is absolutely the number one option, I ask the Minister, where fostering is not available, to look to invest within the voluntary sector. I was

really alarmed to see correspondence from America in a couple of instances recently looking to see whether people would be interested in setting up residential places in Ireland. International companies are looking to Ireland as a way to make money on the back of our care system. That is disgusting. What is more disgusting is that good, decent and proper voluntary organisations that provide homes to our most vulnerable children, and which are regulated, inspected and must account for every cent, are struggling to remain open. Some face closure and although we cannot give them the money they need to keep operating, we are looking at giving millions of euro to international investors that are not subject to regulation and inspection.

Deputy Norma Foley: To be clear, the additional funding Tusla was given this year allowed it to open an additional 38 residential care placements in 2025, with a prediction that a further 47 will be provided in 2026-27, which gives a total over the two years of 85. The overall budget increase will help Tusla to increase the overall availability of places for children in need to more than 800. Notwithstanding that, I hear the Deputy's point regarding special emergency arrangements being unregulated. I want to be clear that Tusla has done an awful lot of work to ensure all of those SEAs are now regulated. They are either directly under the remit of Tusla itself or are fully regulated themselves.

We are very conscious of the excellent work that is done by the voluntary sector. We want to ensure it continues doing that work. I will go into the budget mindful of the need to again seek the maximum funding possible for Tusla to allow it to support everything that falls within its remit, including the voluntary sector in this instance.

Disability Services

6. **Deputy Grace Boland** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality if staffing levels for speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and psychologists in the children's disability network teams, CDNTs, in Balbriggan and Swords have increased in the past two years; the current number of vacancies; the additional posts or resources being allocated in response to population growth and rising demand in the north Fingal area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47691/26]

Deputy Grace Boland: As the Minister of State knows, the Fingal area is one of the youngest areas in the country and Balbriggan is the youngest large town. However, our CDNTs are creaking. Will she give an update on whether the vacancies that have been persistent for the past couple of years have been addressed and where we are in terms of staffing levels for the CDNTs in both Balbriggan and Swords?

Deputy Emer Higgins: The Government is committed to ensuring that children with disabilities and their families who need early intervention and therapy input can access that support in a timely way. That commitment is reflected in the sizeable investment in disability services. In this year's budget alone, more than €3.8 billion has been allocated for disability services, which is an increase of €1.8 billion since 2020. As part of the budget process, funding was also secured for additional posts in children's disability network teams, with further

investment to fund 150 posts for teams across the country. That investment builds on a 28% increase in staffing levels nationwide from October 2023 to October 2025.

Services in the Dublin north county integrated healthcare area, which is the Deputy's area, are delivered through the two CDNTs she mentioned, both of which are under the Central Remedial Clinic, CRC. To support service development and respond to increasing demand, additional staffing resources have been allocated by the HSE in recent years to the CRC. In 2026, the CRC received approval for development posts across both CDNTs, comprising 1.5 posts for Balbriggan and two posts for Swords. Two of those posts been allocated to behaviour support services, with the remaining posts allocated to speech and language therapy. The CRC was also allocated two full-time assistant therapy posts last year to support therapists and enhance service delivery across both teams.

The Deputy consistently advocates for the Fingal area. It is a fast-growing and young community. To drive further improvements, not just in Fingal but across the country, a dedicated disability workforce strategy is being worked on by the HSE and will be published this year. The strategy will help to meet growing service demands and address recruitment and retention challenges across specialist disability services, including CDNTs such as those in the Deputy's area.

Deputy Grace Boland: I very much welcome the investment in disability services, funding for additional posts and the allocation for behavioural supports and speech and language therapy. However, when I look at the raw figures, I see that every single post for Balbriggan is underfunded. We are supposed to have six occupational therapists but there are only five; instead of five speech and language therapists, we only have 3.6; there are two physiotherapists rather than four; and we have two psychologists instead of four. It is a similar picture for Swords, with only one psychologist in place instead of four. As the Minister of State knows, early intervention is absolutely key to addressing the issues we are discussing and to supporting children and their families. While posts have been allocated, we do not have people in post. As I repeatedly highlight, it is absolutely essential that Fingal be prioritised for posts at CDNT level.

Deputy Emer Higgins: In Balbriggan, 81% of posts are filled but the figure for Swords is only 52%. That is why we are doing so much work on our recruitment and retention strategies. I pay tribute to the staff in both CDNTs for the huge progress they have made. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in the total number of CDNTs across the HSE Dublin and North East region, which includes north-west Dublin, north Dublin, Cavan, Monaghan and Louth. There has been a huge increase in the number of children on open caseloads, that is, the children being seen by our CDNTs. There also has been a reduction in the number of children on CDNT waiting lists. At the end of March, across the region, that number was down substantially from the previous year, from 3,672 to 1,908. The number of children waiting over 12 months on CDNT waiting lists is also reducing. We are focusing on delivering much-needed therapies to children in Fingal and across the region.

Deputy Grace Boland: I welcome the reductions. I really do not profess to know the science behind this but there is movement of children from CDNT lists to primary care and there is movement of children on CDNT lists from Balbriggan to Swords. I am not really sure why all

of that happens, but I want to make sure that the children and families who need the therapies are getting them. While numbers look like they are reducing, I am not sure that the children have actually got the therapies they have sought.

The other thing I would like to raise is the fact of the allocations generally. I know the Minister of State said that some new posts had been allocated, but given the demographics and the rapidly growing area that Fingal is, will the Minister of State tell me how often the allocations will be updated and reviewed and are they sufficient for the demographics of the area?

Deputy Emer Higgins: Now that we have a single point of access for the HSE, that will have a huge impact and it will mean that there will be no wrong door. If a child goes to primary care and should be on a CDNT list or *vice versa*, they will not be put back to the start of the list again. That is a whole-of-HSE approach. The strategy we are working on at the moment is our HSE resourcing strategy. This will be about making sure we are putting the right resources in the right places. It has been very positive for the Deputy's area in that 3.5 new roles have been created this year alone. That builds on the two new roles allocated last year. This year we have funding to deliver 150 new posts across the country in our CDNT teams and we are in discussions at the moment in terms of the Estimates for next year and we hope to be able to build on that.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Question No. 7 taken with Written Answers.

Childcare Services

8. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality if she has considered a model of childcare based on direct public provision to ensure access, affordability for families and quality pay and conditions for staff in the sector; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47544/26]

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: In 2024, parties were falling over themselves, as we know, including the Minister's, promising parents €200 a month childcare. The latest Fianna Fáil meeting was talking about €786 per month, possibly, later on this year, so it will be like €200 a week will be nearer the mark. However, the real problem we have is childcare provision. The private childcare model is simply not working for parents. With so many more providers falling out of the sector, we need a public model.

Deputy Norma Foley: Perhaps the Deputy was not in the Chamber earlier when we spoke about the progress that has been made towards the €200. As I said, we have published phase 1 of the action plan and phase 2 is under way. We have made some progress. For example, we made the announcement recently in terms of the maximum fee caps. For the vast majority of people who are availing of childcare services of less than 50 hours, and this is the cohort paying the highest fees, that payment will reduce to €183 per week.

We have also confirmed that 25% of families are already on the €200 or paying less than €200 a month, or €50 a week. We have also increased the thresholds to gain the maximum in terms of the national childcare subsidy. We are on the journey. We said it would be committed to and delivered over the lifetime of the Government in terms of €200, and we are on that journey and we are in the early stages of this Government presently.

Specifically in terms of the State-led model or, as the Deputy referred to it, the public provision, the Government is committed to undertaking a broad consultation and to publishing phase 2 of the action plan on an affordable, high-quality, accessible early childhood education and care system, with State-led facilities adding capacity for the first time, noting that the plan will enhance parental choice through ongoing support for public, private and community provision as well as childminders. Shaping the Future, the early years action plan phase 1, was published in December of 2025 and sets out measures to achieve key programme for Government commitments on the affordability, which I have already mentioned, quality and accessibility of early learning and care and school-age childcare over the course of 2026. This includes a broad-based consultation which has been under way during the first half of 2026. The consultation resulted in 11,000 responses initially to the online survey, with 56 local consultation events held across the country, engagement with children to ascertain their views and a national consultation event, which is due to take place later in the year.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The problem is that the private childcare model is being heavily subsidised by the State, but even with these subsidies it is simply not working. Discovery Montessori in Castleknock has written to TDs, for example, in my area. It is the latest childcare provider saying that the core funding model cannot work for it. The fee freezes mean that it would not be able to meet its costs in wages, utilities, insurance, etc. I do not have a way of checking out all of those claims, but what I will say is that there is no way we can provide quality childcare with decent pay under the private model. The Minister used to be Minister for education. We need preschool to be provided in the same way that primary and secondary are, underpinned by the State, with childcare workers trained by the State and given decent pay and conditions to attract them into the profession. We know it is an horrifically unstable profession and very badly paid - female-centred, as usual. I know there is a consultation but the Minister needs to look at that long-term strategy.

Deputy Norma Foley: To be fair, I agree with the Deputy in terms of issues she has raised, such as that of pay, for example. It is for that reason that €45 million was ring-fenced last year and will be this year to improve the pay for workers, notwithstanding the fact that the State is not the employer here, and the Deputy has made that point very eloquently. However, the State is stepping in. How that is divvied up is independent of the Minister and the Department and that work is under way. Over two years, €90 million being put on the table by Government is a significant amount of money in terms of wages.

On the action plan and the State led model, this is the first time the State has ever stepped in to provide a State-led model. We have said that this year, for the first time, eight different facilities will be provided for across the country to meet demand in the area and they will be not-for-profit. We will learn a huge amount from this first year as to how we might be able to move forward, but this is an important first step.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I do get that it is the first step but it is a very slow process. It needs to be a lot more ambitious and radical. It took long enough for a realisation that the State needed to lead on childcare in Ireland. In other countries, it is par for the course. Things like training schools have to be set up where people would be guaranteed decent pay and conditions. It is appalling what many childcare workers are paid. It would be good if the State was able to underwrite it in the same way it does for education, by keeping electricity and insurance costs down, because that is what is breaking an awful lot of the private childcare providers. By the way, there are a lot of excellent private childcare providers. It is not their fault. A lot of them obviously love children, while others are just doing it as a big business. I hope that they could be incorporated into the system because obviously people would not be excluded. We cannot move forward unless there is a huge increase in the number of staff and buildings available. Schools can also be used much more than they are. After school hours the premises are all there. A lot of parents have raised that, and schools are saying "No" when they are asked.

Deputy Norma Foley: The Deputy is correct when she says it is about having the staff, the premises and a sufficient number of places available at costs that are affordable to parents. There are at least three key elements here that have to be achieved. There is no point in achieving one if we are not achieving the other two. I take the Deputy's point in relation to schools and she is right. I have worked the vast majority of my life in schools. It is part of the programme for Government that we would look at, for example, where new schools are being built, that there would be opportunities for childcare facilities to be included. I agree 100% about facilities that could be made available after school hours. These are State premises so there should be opportunities there as well and all of that is being looked at.

I acknowledge, as the Deputy did, that there are excellent private providers. The purpose of what we are doing here in the first instance with the State-led model is to work alongside where there is provision, and where nobody has stepped in and additional provision is required, the State would step in. It is not an either-or.

Eight buildings are being developed this year and next year we are hoping to go a step further. Where we may do so, we will build. We will have to see how we go forward, but it is an innovative and positive step forward.

Childcare Services

9. **Deputy Eamon Scanlon** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the action being taken to reduce the cost of childcare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47437/26]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): Tá an chéad cheist eile in ainm an Teachta Eamon Scanlon ach tá sé tar éis an Teachta Aisling Dempsey a ainmniú chun í a thógáil.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: I want to ask the Minister to outline the current and future actions that are being taken to reduce the cost of childcare for parents across the country.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank Deputy Dempsey. I have always made it clear that the €200-per-month programme for Government commitment is to be achieved over the lifetime of this Government. We did discuss this earlier. *Shaping the Future: The Early Years Action Plan*, phase 1 report, was published last December and we have now moved on to phase 2 of the action plan report. That is very much focusing on consultation and drawing in the opinions, thoughts and lived experience of people who are in the sector, such as parents and others who have an interest in this area.

The consultation process has been really significant. We were really pleased that over 11,000 people engaged online with the survey. There were 56 local consultations held right across the country. They were on the ground, as it were. I want to acknowledge the work of the City and County Childcare Committees in that respect. There was also, very importantly, an engagement with children. It was done in art form but it was important that the views of children would be solicited and harnessed. There will also be a national consultation event which will take place later this year.

Results of this consultation, phase 2, and the additional analysis, will inform how we move forward from 2027 through to 2029. The fee-freeze and maximum fee caps required for core funding have been key to the progress in recent years in making early learning and care and school-age childcare services more affordable. The 2026 actions on affordability will include further reductions in some of the highest fees paid by parents by lowering the maximum fees that core funding partner services can charge. In addition, from autumn 2026 we will reduce out-of-pocket costs for lower-income families through the national childcare scheme, NCS.

The measures we are introducing include an increase to the lower base or income threshold of the income-assessed subsidy from €26,000 to €34,000, and on the upper end increasing it from €60,000 to €68,000, to extend income-assessed subsidies to more families. An increase to the multiple child deduction, MCD, component of the income-assessed subsidy is also being provided for where there are two children under the age of 15.

Deputy Aisling Dempsey: I thank the Minister for that update. I really welcome the maximum fee cap the Minister mentioned that is coming in September and will cap those fees at €183.70. That is a real tangible step for families to achieving really affordable childcare. Families that are facing those highest fees will see the money back in their pockets. Where are those services that will benefit the most from that? Are there many of those families in Meath that will see a reduction in their fees? The Minister mentioned the €200-per-month commitment in the programme for Government. Like many people, I knew it would take the lifetime of this Government to achieve that. Is the Minister confident that in the next budget there will be more of a positive and significant change that will make childcare more affordable?

Deputy Norma Foley: I want to acknowledge Deputy Dempsey's personal engagement with me specifically on the areas of early years and childcare and in particular the costs. She can be absolutely assured that we are going into this budget seeking the maximum funding we can to advance the ambition. It is a very clear ambition that is in the programme for Government around the €200-per-month cost, or the €50-per-week. Also part of that is ensuring there is sufficiency of funding that there are enough places available so parents are catered for and also

that there are core funding supports available, whether that is for staff, providers or whatever the case might be.

I want to reference the maximum fee caps. That is very significant. These are the cohort of people who are paying the most fees. Once they have the national childcare subsidies included, it will reduce from €198 per week to €183.70 per week. Other elements we have already referenced are the thresholds for the income-assessed subsidy support. Again, that is very significant. The figures specifically for County Meath I will have to find separately for the Deputy but I will make sure she gets them.

Early Childhood Care and Education

10. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality for an update on the actions being taken by her Department to support ECCE-only services that are receiving commercial rates bills; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47448/26]

Deputy Emer Currie: The early childhood care and education scheme, ECCE, is transformative for children, particularly those from low-income families and disadvantaged backgrounds. The State now offers two free years of pre-school, 15 hours per week and three hours per day. Ninety-six percent of children take it up. The Government has said it wants to get that to 100%. Why are we allowing the imposition of commercial rates on ECCE services and on ECCE-only services, which could potentially close them down?

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank Deputy Currie. She is correct when she says that 96% is regarded as a very high uptake of the ECCE services, but it is our aspiration to reach 100%. I am aware that a number of ECCE-only services have been receiving rates-payable notifications from their local authorities. The Department, and others, have previously advised the sector that ECCE-only services are exempt from paying commercial rates under paragraph 10 of Schedule 4 of the Valuation Act 2001.

Given the importance of early learning and childcare for children, families and communities across the country, I am giving this matter my full attention. I have engaged with my Cabinet colleague, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy James Browne, on a number of occasions. On foot of this engagement, the Department of children and the Department of housing have jointly sought formal advice from the Office of the Attorney General on this matter. As the Deputy is aware, this is not within the gift of the Department of children; we have no role whatsoever in relation to rates. It is a matter outside of our remit. However, I am very pleased that the Department of housing has agreed on a joint submission to the Office of the Attorney General.

The Office of the Attorney General is now looking at this particular issue and has informed the Department that it has sought advice from external counsel on this matter, very specifically. On receipt of this advice, I will continue to engage with the Attorney General and the Minister, Deputy Browne, with a view to achieving a resolution as soon as possible.

Deputy Currie is correct that it is really important we get absolute clarity on this matter. It is a concern and a worry to those who are providing the ECCE services here. We are giving this every consideration. I want to express my gratitude to the Attorney General who has sought

this external advice. Officials in the Department are also engaging with colleagues in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to explore the solutions that might be available to rectify this situation.

Deputy Emer Currie: When *Tailte Éireann* was before the housing committee a couple of weeks ago, I raised this matter with the representatives. They said they had taken legal advice via the Chief State Solicitor's Office and the Office of the Attorney General and it was unequivocal that ECCE services are rateable and are inherently operating for profit. This means that all ECCE services, including 100% Government-funded stand-alone ECCE services that receive no parental fees, are fair game for commercial rates, which in turn means that commercial rates for ECCE services are coming to every county in Ireland. Three-hour preschool services that do not charge parents any fees are going to be liable for commercial rates. I do not believe they should be treated like commercial businesses. I fear this is going to close down services. It is going to reduce childcare places. ECCE-only services, I believe, are already in decline. Some of these services have reached out to me saying they are potentially closing in June and will not reopen in September.

Deputy Norma Foley: As I previously outlined, there was a clear understanding. The Department is very clear, based on correspondence and the understanding it had received previously from its sister Department, that ECCE-only services were exempt from paying commercial rates under paragraph 10 of Schedule 4 of the Valuation Act 2001. Notwithstanding that, it is not within the gift of the Department to set commercial rates for early learning and childcare service providers. However, I want to acknowledge that there has been an absolute openness from the Minister for housing to seek a resolution here. There has been a particular willingness from the Attorney General to engage in this matter. Indeed, the Attorney General has confirmed that he is seeking external advice on this. I want to be able to furnish at the earliest possible point information to the early learning and childcare sector and, indeed, this House on the update we receive from the Attorney General at his earliest convenience.

Deputy Emer Currie: I thank the Minister. I know she is not responsible for this and it is something that has really come to light. The legal implications of the valuation tribunal and a case in the High Court have had an impact since 2024 but there is an urgency about this. Legislation seems to be required. I have worked on legislation. Will the Minister consider working with me on that to deal with this in an urgent way? Part of that legislation also includes sessional services that offer 30 minutes of care to support parents with flexibility but they are being penalised for it. As part of that legislation, I have included that if they operate those 30 minutes at ECCE rates of €4.60 per hour, they too should be exempt. This is affecting services in four counties but it is coming to more counties. I have seen bills ranging from €1,000 to €10,000 for ECCE-only services. These services are 100% Government-funded. Why would the Government give them funding to operate and be viable and then, through another arm of the State, charge them commercial rates?

Deputy Norma Foley: It is important to confirm again that we need to take this step by step. We are currently engaging with the Department of housing, the Minister for housing and the

Attorney General to see if there is any avenue to resolve this matter in the context of current legislation.

Deputy Emer Currie: Okay.

Deputy Norma Foley: That is the first step. I appreciate what the Deputy is doing; I absolutely do but I will take it step by step. I will wait for the adjudication of the Attorney General. He has given it his personal attention. He is also seeking external advice and we will see what we can do within the current legislation.

I am also aware that a number of childminding services have also received rates payable notifications from their local authorities and that has also been a huge concern. I have also stated previously that under no circumstances do I believe childminders should have their homes assessed for commercial rates. We did receive from Tailte Éireann a positive response where it confirmed our previous understanding that childminders are only likely to be charged rates if they have space dedicated solely to their childminding business and that the large majority of childminders who use the normal family homes in the home for childminding are, therefore, unlikely to be charged any rates at all.

Disability Services

11. **Deputy Grace Boland** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the extent of engagement her Department has had with the autism community, including autistic individuals, advocacy organisations and representative groups, in the development of the recently announced new autism assessment and intervention pathway protocol; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [43029/26]

Deputy Grace Boland: I welcome the new autism assessment and intervention pathway protocol. It is an effort to bring greater consistency as to how autism is assessed across services. The success of this reform will depend on whether autistic people and their families feel that it reflects their lived experience. The Minister of State might please advise us as to what engagement took place with the autism community in developing the protocol.

Deputy Emer Higgins: As the Deputy will be aware, on 26 May, the HSE launched the new autism assessment and intervention pathway protocol, or the autism protocol. Once implemented, it will apply to all HSE and HSE-funded providers, as well as private providers. I am delighted that extensive collaboration by Government underpinned the development of the autism protocol. My Department and I remain committed to ongoing engagement with autistic individuals, families and representative organisations to continue to improve access to services.

The protocol introduces a three-tiered approach to autism assessment, reflecting the evidence and lived experience that some presentations are easier to identify than others. It matches the level of assessment to the complexity of each case, as determined by clinicians. The pathway is specific to autism assessment and includes differential diagnosis where necessary, along with developing a formulation to better understand the person's lived experience and the support they require.

The autism protocol was developed over five years. It was developed with input from people with lived experience, civil society, clinicians across multiple disciplines and service leaders from the disability, primary care and mental health sectors.

The service improvement programme board for the autistic community is a national HSE governance body that provides oversight, leadership and accountability for autism assessment and intervention services, including the autism protocol. When the service improvement programme board for the autistic community was established, a national expression of interest ensured representation from individuals with lived experience, including young people, adults and family members. The board included senior operational and clinical decision-makers, academic support and representatives with lived experience as equal contributors.

As the programme progressed, two working groups were created. The assessment and pathways working group, which reports to the service improvement programme board for the autistic community, included three representatives with lived experience and clinicians from psychology, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, public health nursing and social work. It also included senior managers, family members and leaders, and they helped shape it.

Deputy Grace Boland: I thank the Minister of State. In regard to going forward and making sure that the lived experience of autistic people and their families included and that we learn from the experience they go through in this new process, can she confirm that there will be that ongoing structured engagement around any reforms, changes or tweaks made to the protocol, as may be required from the process?

Deputy Emer Higgins: Absolutely. I am completely happy to say that to the Deputy. As she said in her opening remarks, the success of this depends on people's lived experience. That is exactly what we have used to help shape it. We also had expert input from a clinical advisory group as well as that assessment and pathways working group within the service improvement programme board for the autistic community. That was to ensure there was also a clinical perspective on this.

The assessment and pathways working group produced a comprehensive report. It was over 250 pages long and it outlined the new assessment approach. There were two versions of that protocol that were shared through workshops and webinars. Two consultation sessions took place in March with civil society, advocacy groups and people with lived experience. Feedback was provided to participants.

To be really clear, our approach, that of the Minister, Deputy Foley and I, and of our Department and the HSE, is to include people with lived experience. "Nothing about us without us" is something we are very proud to stand over.

Deputy Grace Boland: I know the Minister of State touched on it earlier but my area has one of the longest waiting lists for assessments of need. What parents at home want to know is whether this protocol will help them get assessments and therapies? Will it make a difference to them? She might please help me give some comfort to families at home.

Deputy Emer Higgins: Absolutely. This process is all about families, children and ensuring that we have appropriate and faster access to the most appropriate clinical decisions. This is also in response to the fact that 40% of assessments, of children who are going through assessments of need, are being diagnosed as autistic. As a result of that, through five years of collaboration, hard work and clinical expertise, this protocol has been designed as part of the response to that. That is not just in Ireland. The OECD finds that there has been, overall, almost a 10% increase in autistic presentations. This is to support that but to clarify, it is totally different, distinct and independent from the assessments of need process and there is no change to anybody's statutory right to an assessment of need. What we are trying to do here is provide a quicker and clearer access pathway through our existing services, whether it is primary care, CDNTs or CAMHS teams, for people who are presenting as potentially autistic. We have three tiers as part of that protocol.

Question No. 12 taken with Written Answers.

Childcare Services

13. **Deputy Mark Wall** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the number of early learning and school-age childcare facilities that have been found to be non-compliant on staffing ratios, staffing qualifications, Garda vetting, and basic needs, broken down by private or community service, service size, full day care, part-time, sessional, school-age childcare and county, in 2025 and 2026. [46906/26]

Deputy Norma Foley: In line with the requirements of the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 and the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Year Services) (Registration of School Age Services) Regulations 2018, those wishing to operate an early years service or a school-age service are required to register with Tusla for the purposes of regulation.

As of the end of quarter 1 2026, there were 3,941 early years services and 3,032 school-age services registered with Tusla in line with these statutory provisions.

The Department is in the process of drafting revised regulations for school-age childcare services, building on the initial 2018 registration regulations. There is no regulatory requirement in relation to qualifications and health welfare and development of the child in the Child Care Act 1991 and the regulations 2018. Tusla currently only inspect school-age services where risks are highlighted or concerns raised.

In relation to early years services, there are important caveats regarding the data requested by the Deputy. In that context, the regulatory requirements for Garda vetting, staff qualifications and ensuring the basic needs of children in early years settings are set out in regulation 9, management and recruitment, and regulation 19, health, welfare and development of the child, of the 2016 early years services regulations. In the context of regulation 19, the health, welfare and development of the child relate to a range of practices, including basic and individual care needs, relationships between adults and children and providing an effective programme and an environment that supports learning and development. Due to the nature of the statutory instrument in which the 2016 regulations are set out, these requirements are outlined only as specific individual components of regulations 9 and 19, both of which comprise a number of additional components and regulatory elements, the number of which

Tusla is aware. On this basis, the information I will outline relates to compliance non-attainment with regulation 9(2)(c), Garda vetting, and regulation 9(4), staff qualifications, and the entirety of regulation 19, health, welfare and development of child.

Separately, as the regulatory requirements for staffing ratios comprise all components of regulation 11, staffing levels, I will outline compliance non-attainment in respect of that regulation, which addresses this element of the Deputy's query. I will get to the specifics in my next contribution.

Deputy Mark Wall: I will yield to the Minister in order to allow her to conclude.

Deputy Norma Foley: Gorgeous. For ease of reference, a full copy of the 2016 regulations is available to download from Tusla's website. The data provided by Tusla is in respect of inspections as opposed to services. This is because some services may have been inspected more than once. That is an important consideration. The figures I am about to provide relate to inspections, not services.

Over 3,500 inspections of early years services took place over the period. The level of non-compliance by regulation at the end of the inspection process, post submission of corrective action and preventive action response from the provider, was as follows. Out of the 3,500 inspections, there were five non-compliant inspections relating to Garda vetting, 60 relating to qualifications, ten relating to staffing levels and 14 relating to the health, welfare and development of the child. That refers to care needs, relationships or effective programme and environment.

On Garda vetting, immediate action notices were issued in relation to all five services, and the registered provider committed to removing them from having access to children until vetting is in place. The inspectorate records all non-adherence to Garda vetting and follows up with the relevant service.

In relation to qualifications, there are a number of factors relating to non-compliance. I will explain those in my next contribution.

Deputy Mark Wall: I tabled this question in order to find out what is going on with all of our childcare facilities and to ensure that best practice obtains right across the country. I am very happy to hear that after 3,500 inspections and in the context of the figures the Minister provided, we have a very low level of non-compliance. I am sure the Minister will agree, however, that even one instance of non-compliance is a concern. I know she will come back to me with further information on this.

When we get the figures and have time to study them, I am sure we will all have further questions. The reason for tabling this question was to ensure that there is some regulation of this important childcare sector. The fact that the number of issues identified is good in one sense. Without the detail behind them, however, we cannot comment any further. I am glad that the figures relating to the 3,500 inspections are on the low side. I again stress that one instance of non-compliance is one too many.

Deputy Norma Foley: I will add some information in order to provide flavour. In the context of qualifications, there are a number of factors relating to why people might be non-compliant. Staff may have some component modules of a level 5 completed and may be in the process of studying further. Some staff from abroad may not yet have applied to the Department for qualification recognition. They may have a qualification but are in the process of applying for recognition. Some Irish staff may not have applied to the Department for qualification equivalency. They could be coming from a different background and may be looking for equivalency.

In the case of Kildare, as I know that is of interest to the Deputy, the level of non-compliance at the end of the inspection process, post submission of corrective action and preventive action response from the provider, was zero for Garda vetting, zero for qualifications and zero issues in respect of staffing levels. There was one issue regarding the health, welfare and development of the child. That could be for a variety of different reasons. The early years inspectorate requires registered providers to submit a corrective action and a preventive action, with supporting evidence, to address all instances of non-compliance identified in the draft inspection report issued to them. If the corrective actions and-or preventive actions do not address the non-compliance, the registered provider may be subject to the escalation and-or enforcement processes.

Deputy Mark Wall: That is why we need more childcare in Kildare.

Deputy Norma Foley: There you go. I thought it was a very good report.

Deputy Mark Wall: Absolutely.

Childcare Services

14. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality when the review of the childminding regulations will take place; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47407/26]

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I also want to raise with the Minister the issue of the childminding regulations. I understand that the review of the regulations is imminent. We need to ensure that we get the regulations right. That is what we all want. It is very much what childminders want. Can the Minister provide further information on when the review will take place?

Deputy Norma Foley: The Deputy has raised this matter consistently. I am very happy to confirm that the review of the initial implementation of the childminding regulations, which will be managed by an external company, launched on Friday of last week with an open call for submissions. The review will include consultation with childminders and other stakeholders and will provide an important opportunity to learn lessons from initial experiences with the regulations. In addition to hearing from childminders who have not yet registered, it is important that the review adequately captures and benefits from the experiences of those who have registered and been through the registration process and who have operated under the new regulations. A consultation survey will follow the call for submissions, in addition to

focus groups, stakeholder interviews and case studies. This is the initial step where there is a general call for submissions. When that closes, further work that will involve stakeholder interviews, case studies, focus groups and a survey will be done.

The scope of the review is broader than initially outlined in the national action plan for childminding and will now examine the effectiveness of supports made available to assist with the registration of childminders, as well as the barriers to registration and regulatory compliance, including financial and information barriers. The National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028 set out a pathway for the extension of regulation to childminders. A key objective of the national action plan is to enable parents who use childminders to also benefit from State subsidies through the national childcare scheme.

The Childcare Support Act 2018, which provides a statutory basis for the national childcare scheme, specifies that only Tusla-registered childminders are eligible to participate in the scheme. The limitation of public funding schemes to Tusla-registered providers helps to ensure that public funding is provided where there is assurance of the quality of provision. The regulation of childminding services is critical to the safeguarding of children. Childminders acknowledge that too.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I thank the Minister. I cannot believe after all of my questions on this, the review began on Friday and I did not even realise. I thank the Minister for that important information.

Deputy Norma Foley: No worries.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: Obviously, I will follow up on that tomorrow.

It is very clear that there is an issue when you look at the number of childminders who have registered with Tusla. It should be of concern to all of us and that is why this review is so important. I do not know if the Minister has up to date figures. The most recent figure was, perhaps, 160. The Minister can correct me if I am wrong. Based on that figure, the review is important but it is really important there is some level of a communication campaign with clear information on exactly what the regulations look like and what they will mean. There is confusion and we need greater clarity, particularly clarity on the inspection. That is really what many, not all, childminders fear. Any of us would be concerned about a stranger coming into our homes. I ask for that to be looked at.

Deputy Norma Foley: I agree with the Deputy. It is a cause for concern. It is for that reason I wanted to move it to the earliest point possible, accepting the Deputy has articulated that also. We are in a three-year transitioned period up to September 2027. The numbers are low. The exact figure is fewer than 200. The Deputy is right in that there is a body of work to be done. I want this to work for childminders. They are a really important element of service provision, along with all the other elements of service that are out there.

11 o'clock

We will have a great opportunity to hear from those who have gone through the process, but also from those who have not gone through the process on why they have not and what the

issues might be. I am really encouraging them to have their say and to participate in the review, either in the open call initially or through the stakeholder engagement, the case study, the online surveys or whatever the case may be. In the interim, if there are childminders who have specific questions, I ask them to engage with the city and county childcare committees. There is a designated person in each of the city and county childcare committees charged with the responsibility of supporting childminders.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: This is certainly an issue on which we are all very much in agreement, not least because we desperately need to retain the childminders we have and we need more of them. We have heard anecdotally, particularly through the media, about childminders who have decided to end providing that much-needed service. The Minister and I know the greater level of flexibility, particularly in rural areas, it provides over an 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. or 6 p.m. formal childcare setting. That is really important, particularly in rural areas where there may not be that level of capacity or formal childcare settings and, therefore, childminders become part of the family and such a significant part of a child's life. That is why it is special and we should seek to retain these childminders in as many numbers as we can.

How wide is the open call for submissions going to be? How are we going to ensure that every single childminder in the State knows that it is happening and knows they have a way to have their say?

Deputy Norma Foley: That call has been open since last Friday and will remain so until 20 July. There will be strong communication through the city and county childcare committees and we will do all that we can. To be clear, we are going to afford a number of different opportunities for engagement. This is the first. There will be focus groups, stakeholder engagement, online surveys and lots of other opportunities. We want the maximum engagement.

To reiterate, we are really keen that parents who avail of childminders will ultimately have an opportunity to benefit from the national childcare scheme as well. That would be a huge help to parents. Therefore, we need to have the childminders registered. They have nothing to be afraid of. They are providing an excellent service. They are rooted in the community. They are much loved, as the Deputy outlined, by the children who use the service and by the families. They are a very important additional element to the offering that is out there. I ask people to engage in this process.

Guardians Ad Litem

15. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the number of practising guardians ad litem that will be part of the new national service; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47408/26]

Deputy Claire Kerrane: It is apt to raise this question on the national service now that it is under way. Does the Minister have any figures for the number of practising guardians *ad litem*, GALs, who have signed up and will now be part of the national service?

Deputy Norma Foley: The guardian *ad litem* national service has now been established following commencement of the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2022. This signifies a major step forward in delivering a high-quality, consistent service for children, grounded in children's rights. There is a 12-month transition period for existing guardians, as set out in the legislation. This means that the GALs already appointed by the courts can continue in their current roles. Of the 107 guardians currently practising, 95 guardians *ad litem* applied and were successful in their application to avail of the transitional arrangements. This means that they may continue as appointed guardians from 23 June 2026 for 12 months, as set out in the legislation. All of these continuing appointments have been subject to updated checks. This is to ensure that the best interests of all children requiring a guardian are the focus of such measures, as intended by the legislation.

The guardian *ad litem* national service has received approval from the Department of public expenditure for 92 posts, with 65 posts allocated as full-time employed guardians. Recruitment for these roles opened in December 2025 and the competition was conducted in partnership with the Public Appointments Service. There was strong interest in the role from both currently practising guardians and other appropriately qualified professionals. Thirty-five of the current practising guardians were successful in the selection process. Five employed guardians commenced employment with the national service on 22 June. A further 31 successful candidates are at contracting stage, of which 25 are current practising guardians. A further 25 candidates are going through the clearance stage with the Public Appointments Service. The objective is to have the 65 guardian posts offered in place by end of 2026.

The guardian *ad litem* national service has engaged with existing guardians *ad litem* around the management of existing court orders during the period of transition. This covered standards of conduct and reviews of cases. Newly employed guardians will benefit from training on similar material at the outset of their employment with the national service. The Child Care (Amendment) Act 2022 also provides scope for setting and revising standards and practice on the function, training, record-keeping and conduct of the guardians.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I thank the Minister. I am glad she referenced record-keeping at the end of her contribution because an issue has been brought to my attention about the records of children. The new service is not going to seek any existing records of children and is not going to hold any records moving forward, which I find very odd. There will be children who will grow up who will have GALs. They might have one or they might have a number of them throughout their time. When those children get into adulthood, they may seek their records, information or correspondence - a letter that they wrote to a judge of the day or whatever it may be. All of that information is really important to them, especially for children who, regardless of the reason they end up in the care of the State, have some level of trauma. That record-keeping by the national service is important and I do not understand why it cannot be retained and managed within the national service. That may be something the Minister will look at. It was new to me, certainly.

Deputy Norma Foley: I thank the Deputy. The Act provides scope for, in the first instance, setting and revising standards and practice as regards the function, training, record-keeping and conduct of guardians in their roles. The national service will keep these issues under consideration as it completes its work during the first 12 months from June 2026. On records,

it is my understanding that cards or any kind of correspondence of that nature would be kept by Tusla. Anything pertaining to the court case is a different matter. I can get the Deputy further clarification on that.

I acknowledge the great work of guardians. There is no doubt about it that they are advocates for the children. They speak for the children and first, last and always we want to the voice of children to be heard. This is a very positive step forward. I wish the director, the team, the guardians and everyone else working there every success with the work.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: I believe that the Minister would agree and acknowledge that legal representation has been a major issue and one that GALs themselves have brought forward. It is something that they are genuinely concerned about it and something I have raised with the Minister many times. Given that it genuinely has been an issue, will it be looked at and data kept in terms of where legal representation from a GAL is sought and either approved or not approved? I have asked many times and I still do not have an answer as to why we would remove the guaranteed legal representation for a GAL standing in a court of law in which they may never have stood before, usually against Tusla and its representation and a parent and their legal representation. A GAL who has never been in a court in their life could be standing there with no legal representation. When I put this to the head of the national service, she told me that if there was an issue one day in court, the service would look at it again. However, what are the consequences of that day in court? That child could be sent here, there or anywhere. Looking at it the next day really is not good enough, given the consequences that this can have on a child's life. Will data be held in relation to that legal representation, given that it genuinely has been an issue?

Deputy Norma Foley: I accept that queries have been raised around legal representation. I wish to confirm that I have met with the directorate and there is an in-house legal team of a number of very highly qualified individuals with the appropriate legal background who make themselves available at all times for any kind of legal advice that might be required. I have met the head of legal in that respect and she has ensured me that she and her team are available at all times.

There is also very specific legal representation available should a guardian *ad litem* be bringing a case, be party to a case or whatever the case may be. It is very reassuring that the legal team is available at all times. For the first time, there will be legal representation in each of the areas covered by the courts. That is also very important. If representation is needed at the last minute, it is available. I accept the concerns that have been raised but the directorate has worked hard to ensure those fears are allayed.

Questions Nos. 16 to 23, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Disabilities Assessments

24. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality the number of children currently waiting on assessment of needs over the statutory waiting time, in each RHA area, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [47426/26]

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Well, we actually did make it to this question. I requested information on the number of children currently waiting on assessments of need for longer than the statutory waiting time in each regional health area in tabular form. I want to get a notion of where we are. We spoke about the new autism protocol earlier but the fact is that this figure is far too big. We need to deal with this. Parents are not getting assessments and therapies for their children.

Deputy Emer Higgins: The Deputy is absolutely correct. The delivery of an effective and efficient assessment of need system is a priority for the Government. The Department and the HSE are working intensively to address delays in the provision of assessments of need to children and their families. It is important to reiterate that children do not require an assessment of need report to access health services, such as primary care, children's disability network teams or mental health services, or education supports.

Demand for assessments of need has increased significantly in recent years. This reflects both the increase in population and the increase in the number of families exploring all options to access services for their child. Over 13,000 applications for assessments of need were received last year, with over 3,800 applications made in the first three months of this year. This demand is absolutely outpacing the capacity of the system to respond. As a result, 21,782 applications were overdue for completion at the end of March. I gave the Deputy that figure earlier. To break that figure down by regional health area: the figure in HSE Dublin and North East is 6,608; in HSE Dublin and Midlands, it is 7,772; in HSE Dublin and South East, it is 3,204; in HSE South West, it is 2,004; in HSE Mid West, it is 595; and in HSE West and North West, it is 1,599. These numbers are really stark. It is really important to remember that behind every number is a child or young person. It is not acceptable that children and families have to wait so long for assessment of need applications to be processed.

This Government, the Minister, Deputy Foley, and I have made it very clear that change is needed. There has been progress in the past two years with a noticeable increase in the number of completed applications. Over 5,900 assessment of need reports were completed in 2025, which is a 43% increase on the previous year and an 85% increase on the year previous to that. This progress has been and will continue to be assisted by the assessment of need targeted waitlist initiative, which funds the procurement of clinical assessments from private providers to inform the assessment of need process.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It goes without saying that the figure of 21,782 should be shocking. Unfortunately, it is not. The figure in my own area, HSE Dublin and North East, is 6,608. As the Minister of State has said, behind each of these figures is a child and a family. None of this is good enough. We sometimes come in here and talk about CDNTs and the number of unfilled positions. I will work on the basis that the number of vacancies is still in the high 300s. Even if we had double that number, I am not sure the CDNTs would be able to deal with the need that is out there. We have had many interactions in relation to this recently. Many people have bought into the idea of putting the resources where they are needed, which is to say, in school therapies. It is going to be very difficult if we do not look at the whole gamut from assessments right through to therapies. We are constantly trying to change little bits rather than looking at the overall picture and putting in place a framework that delivers for the children and families out there.

Deputy Emer Higgins: The Deputy is right; the demand is increasing year on year. It has increased quite exponentially in the last five years. As a result, it has been difficult for us to keep up with demand. Our CDNTs around the country do absolutely incredible work not just with regard to assessments of need, but also, importantly, in the delivery of therapies. It is those interventions that parents and children want.

In response to an earlier question of the Deputy's, we spoke about the new autism intervention and pathways protocol. That is another Government investment to ensure we provide access to more timely assessments and more targeted interventions for children and young people across Ireland.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We have the figures. None of them are good enough. Unfortunately, despite all the initiatives that have been taken, we have not drastically dealt with that figure. That is the frightening part. It is the one right that parents have. It is sometimes the only right they can vindicate through the courts and there is therefore huge emphasis on it. However, as we all know, it does not provide you with the therapies, which are absolutely necessary. I am going back to the idea of putting a system in place across the board. I am worried that, even if we were to recruit all the occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, and psychologists for which there are unfilled positions in the CDNTs, in primary care and in the in-reach teams, which is probably not possible to do without a huge increase in workforce planning, we would still not be able to deliver on the need that is out there. We have to look at this in a far more comprehensive way that relates to how we deal with disabilities across the board. At the UN conference, we discussed the idea of mainstreaming, making reasonable accommodations and allowing full participation for those with disabilities. We need to stop this failure.

Deputy Emer Higgins: The Government is absolutely committed to ensuring that this is dealt with in a comprehensive way. Part of our response will be a series of improvements to the assessment of need process to make it more efficient and effective for children and families. Over time, this will lead to a reduction in the waiting time to receive an assessment of need. I thank the Deputy for his work on the Committee on Disability Matters. From that work, he will know that the general scheme of the disability (amendment) Bill has been published on the Department's website. The Deputy's committee has published a report following pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill. The Department is now considering the recommendations. I thank everybody who was involved in those committee hearings and in pulling together that report. A series of recommendations were made and we are now working on these to improve the proposed legislation. A document addressing frequently asked questions has also been published.

Legislation is only part of our response. We also need to enhance the processes, to improve training and to increase administrative support for our HSE assessment officers, who are responsible for the production of the assessment reports. The Department is working really closely with the HSE and with the working groups that are in place to ensure this happens. As the Deputy has said, we need to address the wider issues. That is exactly what was set out in this year's HSE national services plan.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Do we have any idea of the timeline for the legislation?

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

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 Pat Buckley - To discuss the lack of school transport for children with intellectual disabilities at a school in Cork,

Deputy Tom Brabazon - To discuss the loss of staff at a school in Priorswood in the context of its new DEIS plus status.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the development of Bunclody Community College, County Wexford.

Deputy Albert Dolan - To discuss the pricing of train tickets between Athenry and Galway.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon - To discuss exceptional staffing pressures at a school in County Sligo.

Deputy Michael Murphy - To discuss the failure to recruit a consultant ophthalmologist in south Tipperary.

Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss delays in reimbursement under the cross-border healthcare directive.

Deputy Mark Wall - To discuss the ongoing illegal encampments in the Curragh, County Kildare.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss data collection and sentencing guidelines relating to unprovoked one-punch fatal assaults.

Deputy Donna McGettigan - To discuss the potential loss of 87 jobs and the uncertainty facing 600 students at Carlow College.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the reimbursement of a drug (details supplied) and the implementation of the drug reimbursement system as committed to in the programme for Government,

Deputy Pa Daly - To discuss delivery of a new building for a school in County Kerry.

Deputy Colm Burke - To discuss actions to reduce the risk to children who require MRI scans under anaesthetic.

Deputy Rory Hearne - To discuss community safety and policing issues in Ballymun and Finglas in the context of the upcoming Presidency of the Council of the EU.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman - To discuss health and safety concerns in a school in Chapelizod, Dublin 20.

Deputies David Cullinane and Conor D McGuinness - To discuss the severe childcare services deficit in County Waterford.

Deputies Louis O'Hara, Mairéad Farrell and Claire Kerrane - To discuss the underfunding of Galway County Council.

Deputies Darren O'Rourke and Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the need for redress for survivor's of historical abuse at a school.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the planned industrial action at Oberstown.

The matters raised by Deputies Donna McGettigan, Eamon Scanlon, Mark Wall, Louis O'Hara, Mairéad Farrell and Claire Kerrane have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Third Level Education

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I want to talk about the job losses at Carlow College, St. Patrick's, and the severe impact on students and the regional workforce. The recent announcement of the phased wind-down and closure of Carlow College over a two-year period marks a devastating blow to higher education in Carlow.

Initially, staff and students expected that the college would merge under the South East Technology University, SETU, umbrella. I recently visited the campus and spoke directly to those affected by this decision. There is genuine shock and disbelief about the closure. There is an attempt from the Government to play down the reality that there may be 87 staff members facing redundancies with a phased termination process beginning as early as August. This decision has come as a shock to staff who were given absolutely no prior consultation or engagement.

There are many questions on this issue. On what date did the Department or SETU formally advise Carlow College's senior management that staff and programmes would not be transferring into SETU? At what point did the Minister notify Carlow College and advise that it engage with staff? Was formal notice given to the Central Applications Office that Carlow College would not be in a position to accept students for the coming academic year? Was an independent valuation conducted on Carlow College's lands and buildings? What were the terms of agreement transferring this multimillion euro asset to SETU? What exactly what the Minister's understanding of the original merger plan? Why did we have a complete pivot on that? Will there be transparency on staff layoffs in August to prevent operational disruption when the semester opens in September? Will there be ring-fenced funding for Carlow College's tailored student supports, which serve an exceptionally diverse and non-traditional student body? Will there be unnecessary duplication of expenditure involved in dismantling an established highly successful infrastructure just to recreate it at SETU? What will happen to those students who are expecting to do a four-year degree and come out with a level 8 qualification who will now only come out with a level 7 and have to do one year less?

According to replies at a meeting of the public accounts committee to Deputy Paul Murphy, there is an asset, which is the buildings, and this will be used to look after staff redundancies. What is the worth of this asset? Why can it not be used to integrate, or at least give the choice to integrate, staff into SETU? The Department claims that student welfare is paramount, yet redundancies will be announced in August - a week before the September term begins. I spoke to students who said that because of the nature and smallness of Carlow College, they were given a chance at the college. This closure is being felt by the neurodivergent community. The smaller class sizes and tight knit, friendly, personalised environment meant that many students with additional needs thrived. This small group learning meant that there was a reduction in sensory overload and academic anxiety compared with larger impersonal university settings. Where will these students find a place where they can thrive and flourish? The planned wind-down of Carlow College requires strict adherence to CORU regulations for students in the BA on applied social studies and the professional social care. This means that the degree programme remains fully accredited and recognised for statutory registration as long as the student completes it within a two-year period. Why are students not told of this sooner, so they may choose to not start in the first place? If a student is entering year two in September, this means that they face a very tight timeline because of the wind-down, which has to be done fully by 2028. A standard four-year BA track cannot be completed on the Carlow campus in its current form. What will happen to those students?

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Marian Harkin): I thank the Deputy. As she will be aware, Carlow College is and has always been, a private and autonomous institution operating outside the publicly funded higher education system. Despite this, it has received substantial State support, including over €3.1 million in student fee grants, with an annual uplift of €750,000 in place since 2022. Following repeated requests for additional assistance, an independent review in 2024 identified a deteriorating and ultimately unsustainable financial position. It became clear that without intervention the college was at serious risk of imminent closure, with significant consequences for students, staff and the wider regional education landscape. Through the support of the Minister, Deputy Lawless, and our Department to prevent a disorderly shutdown, SETU agreed in 2025 to engage with Carlow College. An independent mediator was appointed to guide Carlow College through the process. The engagement included extensive analysis and due diligence, culminating in a detailed report delivered to both institutions. The resulting framework is, therefore, a joint proposal arising from sustained and transparent engagement between both parties with Carlow College fully involved throughout and reflecting the preferred option of Carlow College to teach out the existing students and programmes over the next two academic years.

Throughout this period, particular attention has been given to the position of staff. The Minister has consistently emphasised the need for clear and proactive communication with employees. This included direct correspondence in December 2025 urging the college's president to prioritise staff engagement in early 2026. In considering the proposed pathway forward, the priority has been to safeguard the interests of the college community while enabling a fair and transparent process for staff. The agreed plan provides for an orderly wind-down of academic activity over a two-year period finishing in August 2028. What has been agreed between the two parties is a structured and phased teach-out designed to minimise disruption to students and staff. The Minister has continued to engage. Most recently

yesterday, he met both autonomous institutions and separately a staff delegation from Carlow College with their union. He is acutely aware of the impact of this announcement on Carlow College and its staff and has asked the college to support them through clear engagement in this process. All local representatives from Carlow and Kilkenny were invited to an online briefing last night to discuss these matters.

A key element of this framework is the planned acquisition and transfer of the college's land and buildings to SETU at the end of this period. In return, a significant level of State funding, based on an independent valuation, will be provided to Carlow College. This funding will be committed by Carlow College to support its teach-out and staff redundancy costs. These issues will be managed through established representative structures and trade unions.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I hear that this a private entity and the State could not step in, but the State is about to get a multimillion euro campus for free. That is my understanding of this. That does not seem to be clear in any of these discussions. Does the Minister of State even know the cost of this campus? She said there was clear talking with the staff yet conditions were laid down regarding this campus that are not being met. One of the conditions was that staff would be integrated with SETU. That does not seem to be happening. Staff were shocked to discover this, so there was no clear conversation with staff. Losing this campus will affect many students in the future who depend on a small personal environment - a place that they feel they belong and a place for them to flourish. Facility and support staff will return in September with zero clarity regarding their exact workloads, module allocations or scheduling. The sudden exit of specialist experts right at the start of an academic year ensures immediate systemic disruption to lecturing, dissertations, supervision and placement mentoring. Carlow College serves a unique, non-traditional student demographic that the university sector regularly fails to reach.

In the social care cohort, over 80% are non-leaving certificate students. I was one these in a different college, Limerick College of Further Education. I was given a second chance through that college. Carlow College has tailored supports that face the acts. Students have succeeded because of the college's hyper-tailored specialised support staff. Redundancies targeting support personnel will directly trigger high drop-out rates among students with disabilities and those from marginalised backgrounds. The Psychological Society of Ireland and the Irish Association of Social Workers have repeatedly declared a crisis due to critical backlogs in health, education and mental healthcare. Winding down these specific programmes directly starves the south-east region of professionally trained graduates. It will worsen unacceptably long waiting times for vital mental and educational care for vulnerable service users.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank the Deputy.

I believe the framework agreed by the two institutions is a prudent and measured approach that protects the educational attainment and interests of students in the region. Every current learner in Carlow College will be able to complete their studies and graduate as planned without disruption or disadvantage. That commitment of continuity and fairness has guided every step of the process. At the same time, the framework provides the autonomy and responsibilities of Carlow College as a private institution and employer with a long history. Government has

every confidence the formal discussions commenced by Carlow College with its staff and staff reps will be carried out in a transparent and forthright manner.

Of course we are concerned about the staff. Our thoughts are with all of them as they deal with the news of the closure of the college and the loss of their employment. Through future expansion and development of programmes in areas of demand, regionally and nationally, there will be opportunities for the highly qualified and experienced staff of the college to apply for job opportunities but, it is important to say, through open competition. The Deputy mentioned social care. The Minister, Deputy Lawless, and his Department are running a new expression of interest across disability therapies and social care to expand provision nationally.

In terms of opportunities for the enhancement of higher education in the Carlow region, the planned transfer of the campus to SETU creates a strong foundation for continued investment in Carlow, ensuring this historic site remains a vibrant hub of learning and opportunity. Under SETU's leadership, there is a clear pathway to strengthen provision, expand access and support regional development. SETU will preserve the use of the site for educational purposes.

School Enrolments

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: I wish to highlight an urgent and exceptional situation facing St. Patrick's National School in Calry, County Sligo, which requires immediate and practical intervention to ensure children in this community can access the education they are entitled to. St. Patrick's National School is experiencing unprecedented staffing pressures for the 2026-2027 school year. The school has already pursued the appropriate channels and submitted an appeal to the appeals board for an additional teaching post. Despite presenting a strong case, the appeal was unsuccessful. The school met three of the four criteria required for consideration. The only unmet criterion was the requirement to have enrolled more than 30 junior infants in each of the previous two years. However, this single unmet condition does not reflect the reality on the ground.

The school has submitted substantial additional information to demonstrate the exceptional circumstances it now faces which cannot be addressed within the limits of the standard criteria. For September 2026, the school has already received 45 completed applications for junior infant enrolment. This is almost double the 24 pupils enrolled in the 2025-2026 cohort. No places have yet been allocated but the scale of demand is clear. The intake is far above the national average for a single-stream junior infant class. It also represents a cohort with early intervention needs in literacy, oral language, numeracy and social development. The board of management, the school's patron and the planning and building unit of the Department of education have all approved the opening of a second junior infant stream for September. The school has the physical capacity to accommodate this class. It has a vacant classroom ready to be used. Crucially, no additional capital investment is required. The nearest alternative school, which these children would not ordinarily attend, is already oversubscribed, operating a waiting list, and has no capacity to take additional pupils. The overwhelming majority of applicants for September 2026 are siblings of existing pupils. These are families who have already entrusted their children to St. Patrick's National School. The school has a clear obligation to meet this local demand.

What are these parents supposed to do now? The school currently has seven mainstream teachers and one unused classroom. Without an additional teaching post, it is simply not possible to split classes further or to manage the projected enrolment in a way that is safe, sustainable or educationally sound. The combination of sustained enrolment growth, a significantly oversized junior infant cohort and the need for a senior split class clearly constitutes an exceptional circumstance. It is also important to note St. Patrick's National School will meet the threshold for an additional teacher in September 2027. Based on current projections the enrolment will exceed 192 pupils on 30 September 2026 with a projected enrolment of 203 children. In other words, this is not a temporary spike, it is a sustained upward trend.

Given the scale and projected enrolment, the absence of alternative school capacity and the school's readiness to accommodate an additional class without any capital expenditure, the case for immediate intervention is compelling. For these reasons, I request urgent approval for additional teaching posts for September 2026. This is a necessary and proportionate response to ensure children in Calry can access the education they deserve in their local school alongside their siblings in an environment that supports their learning development.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Naughton, who sends her apologies that she cannot be here to today. I thank Deputy Scanlon for his strong advocacy on behalf of St. Patrick's National School.

The primary staffing schedule is a long-standing feature of the primary allocation system which ensures fairness and transparency in the allocation of mainstream class teachers across our primary schools, regardless of location. The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30 September. The staffing arrangements for primary schools for the 2026-27 school year are set out in Circular 0025/2026. St. Patrick's National School has a current mainstream staffing of an administrative principal and seven mainstream class teachers based on an enrolment of 177 pupils as of 30 September 2024. The mainstream staffing of the school is due to stay the same for the 2026-27 academic year based on the returned enrolment of 182 pupils as of 30 September 2025. The staffing arrangements include an appeals mechanism for the school to submit a staffing appeal under certain published criteria. The school's staffing appeal was unsuccessful. The primary staffing appeals board operates independently of the Department and its decision is final. The staffing arrangements also include a projected enrolment process whereby schools experiencing significant increase in enrolment may apply for additional mainstream staffing.

I acknowledge what the Deputy said and commit to him that I have taken it on board. He mentioned that further information has been submitted in relation to the exceptional circumstances. There is capacity within the school with an existing free classroom that can be used, putting no additional demand for capital resources, and many of the additional students are siblings of existing pupils of the school. While I cannot commit to overturning any decision this evening, I will relay to the Minister the strong case Deputy Scanlon has made on behalf of the school and ask the Minister to reply directly to him as a matter of urgency.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: I thank the Minister of State. I acknowledge the primary staffing appeals board operates independently of the Department and I understand from the response to my representation that its decision is considered final. However, what is at stake goes far beyond the numbers or technical criteria.

The decision not to allocate an additional teacher to St. Patrick's National School is, in practical terms, short-sighted and it risks having a deeply damaging impact on children, on families and on the wider Calry community. This is not an abstract administrative issue; it is about whether 45 four and five-year-olds have a fair, safe and appropriate start to their education. We have already seen comparable situations addressed differently. In March 2025 the Department sanctioned the opening of a second junior infants class at Dunshaughlin Community National School in County Meath. This intervention demonstrated that flexibility is both possible and appropriate when exceptional pressures arise. The circumstances now facing St. Patrick's National School deserve the same level of examination and the same fair treatment. The reality is simple. The school cannot absorb over 45 incoming junior infants without an additional teacher. Current projections show that significant challenges would place unsustainable pressures on teaching, learning and deployment of special education resources. The school has a classroom ready and it requires no capital investment. Based on projected enrolment, the school will qualify for an additional teacher in September 2027. The need is clear, the space is available and the demand is already at the door. Surely it makes sense to act now to prevent disruption, distress and the educational fallout that will inevitably follow if this situation is not resolved.

The current system of allocating teachers based on the previous year's enrolment is no longer fit for purpose. We need a model that uses projected enrolment so schools are not left scrambling when large junior infant cohorts arrive. Schools across the country are experiencing rapid growth. Relying on outdated figures only creates avoidable crises like the one we are facing now. For these reasons I urge the Minister of State and the Department to intervene and approve the allocation of the additional teaching post for September 2026.

Deputy Robert Troy: Teacher numbers at primary schools have reached the highest ever level in the current school year. Currently there are over 43,000 teaching posts allocated across the primary school system. This represents an increase of just over 5,000 teachers when compared to the 2019-2020 year. This has led to a steady improvement in the pupil-teacher ratio and to average class sizes reducing in this period. The Government has significantly invested in our schools and in our teacher workforce in recent years. Deputy Scanlon will be aware that the programme for Government commits to making further progress in this area with an aim to reduce the general pupil-teacher ratio at primary level to 19:1 over the term of the Government.

That is all very well but it does not answer Deputy Scanlon's point here this evening. The Deputy makes a very strong case in relation to the enrolment for this year, the projected enrolment next year, the high number of junior infants that will be in the school, and the challenges that presents. The Deputy said there is existing capacity within the school and there is no capital requirement for putting on additional space. I am taking on board all of these points here this evening and I commit to the Deputy that I will relay them back to the Minister, Deputy Naughton. I will ask the Minister to come back to the Deputy urgently with a reply to the points he has raised on behalf of his school here this evening.

Defence Forces

Deputy Mark Wall: The Minister of State is very welcome here tonight. I have often described the Curragh Plains in County Kildare as the jewel in the crown of the whole county. It is 4,870 acres of historic and, in the main, undeveloped land. It is home to our Defence Forces, the racing industry and a large number of sheep farmers, along with a number of magnificent sports clubs. As well as being home to those organisations and entities it is also home to many unique plants and bird species. The Curragh Plains conservation plan states that there are over 200 historic sites and monuments on the Curragh, with many more yet to be discovered. I will come back to the Curragh Plains conservation plan later.

Along with other Oireachtas colleagues over the last number of weeks, months and at this stage years, I have been raising concerns about the growing number of illegal encampments on the Curragh. In 2024, for example, the Department of Defence spent €186,000 cleaning up after illegal encampments on the Curragh. This is the Curragh of Kildare where there are currently two battlefield sites with no legal protection. The last Curragh of Kildare Act was in 1969, which is 57 years ago. That Act replaced the Acts of 1868, 1870 and 1961.

The Curragh Plains conservation management plan includes engagement with a number of bodies and runs to 161 pages. Its conclusion is that we need to review the Curragh by-laws. They were last reviewed in 1969. It also states that we need to look at the Curragh of Kildare Act, and form a dedicated agency. In 2021, along with a number of colleagues, I took part in consultation and that has developed into the particular plan I mention. As I understand it, that plan has been prepared for over a year and a half now, but in a recent reply I have seen the Minister states that she is still working on the implementation of that plan. Unfortunately, over the last number of weeks we have seen, once again, a large number of caravans in an illegal encampment. At one stage the numbers rose to over 100. We also saw the imposition of circus tents on the Curragh. The Curragh is a magnificent facility that is used by many people from the towns of Newbridge, Kildare town, Kilcullen and all the surrounding areas of County Kildare, yet we are being defined by illegal encampments. We are being defined by people who come here and do not respect the Curragh and by extension the people of Kildare.

What I am asking for tonight, and I hope the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, has some answers for us, is that the Government will finally realise the importance of the Curragh of Kildare, that the Government will enact the Curragh Plains conservation management plan strategy, and that we will see an entity such as a dedicated agency taking it over. In replies I have received in the last number of weeks, the Minister for Defence has told me that her Department has been in and out of the High Court trying to get injunctions against these illegal encampments. I hope the Minister of State has some good news for all of us who value the Curragh of Kildare as the jewel in the crown of our great county.

Deputy Robert Troy: I welcome the opportunity to respond on this matter. I thank the Deputy for raising it. I pass on the apologies of the Minister for Defence that she cannot be here in the Chamber this evening. I acknowledge Deputy Wall's advocacy in this area. During his contribution the Deputy referred to the seriousness of this issue, which is demonstrated in the cross-party support for trying to get this addressed. I addressed this very issue with my colleague Senator O'Loughlin in the Seanad earlier today. Deputy Ó Feargháil has also raised

this point in the Dáil. It demonstrates the seriousness of the issue and how we are working together to try to have it addressed.

Since earlier this year the Curragh has seen several different illegal encampments, including one containing approximately 100 caravans. This has caused a great deal of disruption and anxiety to local stakeholders. The Department of Defence does not accept that those occupying the encampments have any right to reside on the Curragh Plains and it has engaged regularly with the Chief State Solicitor's Office to ensure that all legal steps are taken to promptly protect the plains. The Department initiated legal proceedings in April for relief for trespass in the High Court, and in the preceding months a number of other parties were served with notices and added to the proceedings before the court. On 5 June Mr. Justice Jordan granted an interim court order against 35 named individuals and other persons unknown in occupation on the Curragh. These orders were served on the occupants by bailiffs on the evening of Monday, 8 June with orders to vacate, and the order was served on the occupants of the large encampment on the evening of Friday, 12 June. Further notices to quit were delivered to the encampment on Saturday, 20 June.

In terms of addressing these challenges in the longer-term, the Department of Defence is working to ensure that we move to a modern and sustainable regulatory model in managing this historically important landscape. In collaboration with Kildare County Council, the Curragh consultancy project was published in 2024, as the Deputy referenced, which identified the need for a review of the Curragh bye-laws and the Curragh of Kildare Act, and potential amendments to provide effective solutions to challenges faced. The report also identified the need to consider a dedicated agency responsible for the Curragh, or to assign responsibility for the site to an existing agency with the necessary expertise to maximise the potential of the plains.

This Government is committed to the implementation of these recommendations to address both the opportunities and challenges, as can be seen by its inclusion in the programme for Government. To this end, Department officials are continuing to engage with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, which has undertaken an initial scoping of their likely requirements. I am informed that officials from the Department's property management branch met with officials from the NPWS on Wednesday last, 17 June, at the Curragh, and undertook a tour of the plains. I am informed this was a very positive engagement and that the appropriate next steps will be identified in the near future.

I thank the Deputy again for raising this matter and would like to assure him that it is the Department's intention to ensure that the Curragh Plains, as an important element of our shared heritage, are protected into the future, while also ensuring maximum benefit to the local population and to those who come to visit the area.

Deputy Mark Wall: I thank the Minister of State for that comprehensive reply. He is 100% right. All the public representatives of County Kildare, particularly those of south Kildare, have continued to raise the importance of the Curragh Plains to everybody in County Kildare. I welcome the fact that a positive meeting took place on 17 June at the Curragh, because when anybody visits the Curragh - we will have thousands of very welcome visitors to the Irish Derby Festival this weekend on Friday, Saturday and Sunday - they go away with a sense of a place that is truly unique in many ways. It is unique in the fact that we can have sporting clubs, as I

mentioned, that people can go walking, and that a person can bring pets, etc. There are sports clubs on the edge of it, and it is the home of the Defence Forces and, in the main, to the Irish racing industry. We cannot continue to see the destruction of the Curragh of Kildare and the Department of Defence paying €158,000 year on year to those who do not covet this great asset that we have in County Kildare. Imagine what we could do and what the Department could do with some of the dereliction I mentioned before, with the Curragh camp, if it could spend €158,000 a year on the Curragh rather than having to spend it on the cleanup of illegal encampment.

I hope the Minister of State will bring back my concerns, and I know he will, to the Minister for Defence. I have directly engaged with her on the Curragh, as he said, over many years, and with previous Ministers as well. All we want is to see the Curragh have its rightful place as one of the most important places in the whole country, not just in County Kildare. It is a unique place and everybody is welcome as long as they obey and leave no trace behind them.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Deputy again for his contribution. The Minister for Defence is the custodian and the guardian of the Curragh lands, pursuant to the provisions of the Curragh of Kildare Act 1961. Under that Act, the Curragh Plains are recognised as a working environment for the State's Defence Forces, as well as being a place of historical and cultural importance, as the Deputy alluded to. As I have already stated, the Minister remains fully committed to pursuing a modern and a sustainable regulatory model in managing the historically important landscape that is the Curragh. The Curragh Plains conservation management plan will provide the foundation for implementing the recommendations identified, including the progression of proposals for the future management of the plains. Any such proposals will be brought before the Cabinet to decide on a future management structure.

It is right and proper to say that the situation needs to be addressed. It is something that has been raised multiple times. As somebody who is not from the area but has heard it raised in the Order of Business both in the Seanad and Dáil, I give the Deputy a guarantee that I will impress upon the Minister, Deputy McEntee, the urgency of this situation. Plans and proposals are all very important, but what is plain to be seen now is that public representatives who represent the area want to see the implementation and delivery of the plan. This is something that has gone on for too long. I will certainly impress upon the Minister, Deputy McEntee, the urgency of bringing those plans to Cabinet and agreeing an implementation plan as quickly as ever is possible.

State Bodies

Deputy Louis O'Hara: Galway County Council has been underfunded for years, and the figures are stark. Galway County Council receives €1,051 per person, while the average across the State is €1,534. If Galway County Council was receiving that State average, its annual budget would increase from €203 million to €296 million, an increase of almost 50%.

It is undeniable that we are not receiving our fair share in County Galway. This has an enormous impact on all of the services which are provided by the council, whether roads, environment, recreation, community facilities and especially housing, where we have serious issues in maintenance, homeless services, voids and much more. This underfunding means

that key projects like Dunguaire Castle and the Craughwell wastewater upgrade are being left in limbo because the council cannot provide for them from its own resources. One of the most frustrating aspects of this is that we have never received any good reason or explanation from Government as to why Galway does not receive its fair share. I have asked parliamentary questions repeatedly, but the Department still will not disclose the formula as to how it is calculating the funding for local authorities and why Galway is losing out. That is not good enough. It is a serious lack of transparency. Why, Minister, does Galway lag so far behind other counties, and when will the Government rectify this unfairness?

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: Galway County Council continues to be underfunded to the tune of millions of euro. This is something that again shows the poor budgeting of this Government, the fact that it is unable to fund Galway County Council as is needed. This has consequences. This is something that the people of County Galway live every single day. It is seen in the state of our roads. If one looks at the state of the roads across Conamara, that is a safety issue. People do not have basic infrastructure.

If we take the health of the people of County Galway, if the Council does not have the maintenance funding to be able to conduct necessary maintenance on homes, that will have health implications for its people. Can the Minister of State tell us why the Government continues to underfund Galway County Council? Can he please give us an exact reason as to why, because this is not the first time I have raised this in this Chamber. Five years ago, myself and Deputy Kerrane raised it with the Minister at the time, and we have seen no resolution come as a result. It is high time for action.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: As my colleagues have said, the funding Galway County Council receives is below the national average, yet it is the second biggest county in the State. It makes no sense and it has a huge impact on every single person who lives in County Galway. It impacts council resources, and it has a significant impact and is really seen on the ground in terms of outdoor staff, who have been absolutely slashed across Galway County Council. I am very proud to represent east Galway, and in particular the town of Ballinasloe. It is regularly pointed out to me in relation to the maintenance of the streets, roads and homes across Ballinasloe and the towns and villages throughout County Galway. It makes no sense. When we look at the funding year on year for the second largest county in the State, it is typically second last or last in terms of the level of funding it receives.

12 o'clock

This is stifling development across the county of Galway. We also see question marks over value for money where the outdoor staff are not there. With simple basic things like the litter that has to be gathered up, the services have to be contracted out. That is not value for money. We should have the staff and resources to do it ourselves.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank the Deputies for raising this important matter and providing me an opportunity to update the House. I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy James Browne.

The funding system for local authorities is a complex one, as authorities derive their income from a variety of sources, including commercial rates, charges for goods and services and local

property tax, LPT, as well as funding from Government Departments and other bodies. Central government funding of local authorities is made up of transfers, both current and capital, coming from a wide range of Departments and offices for a variety of purposes. The Department is an important source of this funding, and it provided €99.8 million in 2023, €114 million in 2024 and €149.3 million in 2025 to Galway County Council across a number of schemes and funding sources.

The amount of funding provided under housing programmes and voluntary call schemes such as the URDF is largely determined by individual local authority ambition and activity. In 2025, a sizeable portion of funding to Galway County Council from this Department, almost €93 million, was in respect of a range of capital and current housing programmes. It is crucial to note that the Department does not provide specific funding allocations to local authorities for housing delivery, but rather recoups the relevant local authorities as projects advance and claims fall due for payment in line with the relevant scheme conditions.

With regard to the URDF calls 1 and 2, Galway County Council secured funding for the one project applied for, and under URDF call 3, Galway County Council secured €3 million. This is close to the average funding provided to all of the non-metropolitan area local authorities, of which the council still has €2.91 million available in its fund.

In respect of LPT funding, an important determinant of this allocation for Galway County Council is the baseline, which is the minimum level of funding available to each local authority from LPT. Following a review in 2023, the baselines for each local authority were adjusted in accordance with five criteria: population, area, deprivation levels, an authority's locally raised income and the achievement of national policy priorities. Galway County Council received the second largest increase of any authority. There has been a further increase in the overall baselines in 2026, in line with the expected increased yield from the revaluation. As a result of both of these changes, Galway County Council's baseline has seen a significant increase of over €7 million, or almost 50%, in a three-year period. While Galway County Council has the second largest area and the tenth largest population of any authority, on balance, this would appear to be fairly reflected by the fact that Galway County Council now has the fifth highest baseline in the country.

Apart from housing funding and LPT, in 2025, Galway County Council benefited from many other funding streams across the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, including allocations from the Local Government Fund to cover the impact of national pay agreements and the stranded costs associated with water transformation. While I appreciate the challenges faced by Galway County Council, I am confident that every effort has been made to assist the sector in recent years.

Deputy Louis O'Hara: The Minister of State's response does not address the key questions as to why Galway County Council is losing out and what specific formula is being used to calculate the funding to local authorities. It is important to say that Galway County Council has done everything that has been asked of it. It increased the local property tax - I did not support that, but it did it - on the specific promise that increased funding would be coming from central government in response to that. It also increased the rates, but the increased funding has not come. The Department threw the council a couple of million here and there previously, but we need a long-term, sustainable solution. We have lost out on an awful lot of funding over

the years. The council executive has come to the Government with a specific ask for an uplift of €15 million. I call on the Minister of State and the Government as a whole to ensure that happens.

Deputy Mairéad Farrell: One thing I have learned in this Chamber is that if the Government does not want to explain something, it will say it is complex, and that it is a little bit too complex for us to understand. It is not too complex for us to understand. We are fully and acutely aware that Galway County Council has continuously been underfunded. How do we know that? It is because Galway County Council has been clear about it. It has been raised in meetings, including county council meetings. The council has been clear that the funding is not there to deliver the services that people need. The Minister of State might not be the Minister in charge in this regard, but he is a Minister of State at the Department of Finance. He fully understands that in order for things to function, they need to be funded. That is what we are asking the Government to do here.

Deputy Claire Kerrane: It is true to say that the level of funding is not adequate. Galway County Council, even with the recent uplifts in additional funding that have come from here and there, is so far behind due to years of underinvestment and not receiving an adequate amount that it is going to take some time to catch up. That is why the specific ask from the council should be heard by the Government and made available. The nub of the issue remains. There are smaller counties with smaller land areas and smaller populations that have more outdoor staff, more council resources and receive more money from central government than Galway County Council. That is the nub of the issue, and it has not been answered again this evening. None of us is any the wiser as to why that is the case for Galway County Council.

Deputy Robert Troy: I again thank the Deputies for raising this issue. As acknowledged by the Deputies across the Chamber, I am taking this on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Browne. I will conclude by acknowledging the current financial environment in which all local authorities, including Galway County Council, are operating and the pressures facing them in respect of general inflation and higher costs. I get that from my own local authority as well. Recently, the Department has received representations from the Galway County Council executive and elected members in relation to its LPT allocation and baseline. The baseline has been increased twice in just three years, as I mentioned in my earlier contribution. The intention is that baselines will be reviewed every five years in line with the updated census data, as well as periodic reviews in line with LPT revaluation cycles. It would not be appropriate or equitable to examine the baselines of individual authorities outside these sector-wide reviews.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the LPT allocation represents just 12% of Galway County Council's revenue income in 2025. It is a finite income source, being dependent on the level of LPT collected in Galway and across the State. Therefore, the scope for significant increases is limited. With this in mind, Galway County Council must ensure that it is effectively leveraging all funding opportunities at its disposal and identify where it can increase its allocation by seeking more funding for projects that are ready to be delivered from the range of available funding calls. It is important also to focus on locally raised income sources. I know the council has made significant progress in this area in recent years.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 12.08 a.m. go dtí 9 a.m., Dé Céadaoin, an 24 Meitheamh 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 12.08 a.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 24 June 2026.