



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Dé Céadaoin, 24 Meitheamh 2026

Wednesday, 24 June 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan) i gceannas ar 9 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

1 o'clock

1 o'clock

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): 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 Sorca Clarke - To discuss access to neurology services in the Midlands Regional Hospital, Mullingar.

Deputy Shane Moynihan - To discuss delays in reimbursement under the cross-border healthcare directive.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan - To discuss the need to advance bus services for people living west of Cork city.

Deputy Joe Neville - To discuss the national semiconductor plan.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae - To discuss funding for rehabilitation repair works for bridges in Kerry.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger - To discuss the announcement by a company of the suspension of its drone delivery service.

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 David Cullinane - To discuss the severe childcare services deficit in County Waterford.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss data collection and sentencing guidelines relating to unprovoked "one punch" fatal assaults.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan - To discuss the reimbursement of a drug and implementation of the drug reimbursement system.

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 Ruairí Ó Murchú - To discuss the planned industrial action at Oberstown.

Deputies George Lawlor, Sinéad Gibney and Richard Boyd Barrett - To discuss mass redundancies at a company and other job losses associated with AI.

Deputies Darren O'Rourke and Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire - To discuss the need for redress for survivors of historical abuse at a school.

Deputy Michael Cahill - To discuss and address the concerns of advanced nurse practitioners in the pay review process.

Deputy Marie Sherlock - To discuss the status of the reception class programme.

The matters raised by Deputies Sorca Clarke, Aindrias Moynihan, Ruth Coppinger, George Lawlor, Sinéad Gibney, Richard Boyd Barrett and Marie Sherlock have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Hospital Services

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Go raibh míle maith agat. I welcome the opportunity to raise the issue of the lack of a dedicated neurological service at the Regional Hospital Mullingar. It is not that we have an under-resourced service or a service that needs expansion; we simply do not have any dedicated neurology service at all. Instead, there is a limited outreach arrangement with another hospital in another county. For perspective, it will take one of my constituents from Moyne 90 minutes, each way, to travel to Tullamore. It is 105 km.

The national model of care for neurology services, published in 2016, clearly states that all model 3 hospitals should have a dedicated neurology service. A decade later, the people of

Longford-Westmeath are still waiting for their service. The consultant neurologist in Tullamore Hospital is not on a full-time basis. The service delivers three 90-minute telephone clinics per week and one in-person clinic every second Thursday. For a catchment population of over 200,000 people across Longford, Westmeath, Offaly and surrounding counties, are we really expected to believe that this constitutes an acceptable neurology service? Does the Minister of State believe that this is safe? Does he believe it is sustainable? Does he believe it is a clinically appropriate level of care given the demand?

Neurological conditions are now the leading cause of disabilities worldwide. In Ireland, one in six people is now living with a neurological condition. People are living with Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, epilepsy, acquired brain injury, motor neurone disease and numerous other conditions that require specialist assessment, diagnosis, treatment and long-term management. The consequences of failing to provide local services are felt every day by my constituents and their families in Longford-Westmeath. People are being forced to travel to Dublin for appointments that should be available closer to home. They are being forced to travel to Tullamore for appointments that should be available closer to home. We know there are thousands of outpatient appointments in St. James's Hospital every year for people in my area, based solely on the addresses they provide to that hospital.

For many patients, particularly those with progressive neurological conditions, these journeys are not a minor inconvenience. They need time off work, suffer a loss of income, incur transport and parking costs, must arrange carers and family support and endure lengthy travel times, while dealing with what can be debilitating symptoms. There have been reports and press releases about healthcare being delivered closer to home. Neurological patients have every right to ask where that care is for them in Longford-Westmeath.

The Neurological Alliance of Ireland, NAI, has highlighted significant regional inequalities in access to neurological care. A recent report found that people living in regional and rural areas face longer waits, greater travel burdens and poorer access to specialist services than those living in major urban centres. One woman I met, a patient, summed up the problem perfectly when she said that Ireland is policy rich but implementation poor. That phrase stuck with me because, in this instance, we have policies, reports and models of care but what we do not have is delivery. The national model of care clearly states that every model 3 hospital should have a dedicated neurology service. The programme for Government commits to improving neurological care. Yet in the midlands, people are being left behind.

Added to that concern is the fact that Ireland still does not have a national brain health strategy. This is a time when neurological conditions are increasing, our population is ageing and demand is rising. The absence of that coherent national strategy is becoming increasingly difficult for the Government to justify. It is not simply about staffing numbers and waiting lists. This should and must be about equity. A person's access to neurological care should not depend on their address and their ability to travel to Dublin. People across Longford and Westmeath deserve the same access to specialist neurological services as people living elsewhere in the State.

I ask the Minister of State to first acknowledge the reality that there is no dedicated neurological service in the Regional Hospital Mullingar and to commit to delivering one because ten years after the report, my constituents deserve it.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Alan Dillon): I thank Deputy Clarke for the opportunity to address the House today on an issue that I know is of real importance to her constituents and to the midlands.

I am taking this Topical Issue debate on behalf of the Minister for Health, Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill. The HSE recognises the vital importance of timely access to neurological services for patients across the midlands and acknowledges the significant impact that delays in accessing specialist care can have on patients and their families. The HSE has advised that, currently, neurological services for patients in the midlands are provided through a combination of local services at Midland Regional Hospital Mullingar and specialist regional neurological services. While there is currently no onsite specialist neurological services at Midland Regional Hospital Mullingar, it is important to be clear that access to specialist neurological options for patients in the midlands is available through the established referral pathway to specialist services at the Mater Misericordiae University Hospital.

The HSE continues to monitor demand for neurological services in Mullingar and across the midlands and is working with clinical teams to maximise available capacity, improve patient pathways and ensure that patients are prioritised according to clinical need. Patients requiring urgent assessment continue to be seen as a priority through available referral pathways while every effort is being made to reduce waiting times for routine appointments. Indeed, the challenges facing neurological services are not unique to the midlands. The national clinical programme for neurology has acknowledged that demand for neurological services has grown significantly in recent years. To address this, the Minister for Health allocated significant investment in 2025 to expand regional neurological services. This included €4 million in funding for the recruitment of five additional consultant neurologists and six clinical nurse specialists specifically to support services in model 3 hospitals, including Mullingar.

A further 16 neurological nurse specialist posts and three health and social care professional posts were funded across a range of specialist neurological services. The HSE anticipates that these positions will be filled during 2026, helping to address some of the service gaps identified and improve access to care for patients. This service development is supporting progress on the implementation of the HSE's model of care for neurology.

The focus of the neurology initiative is aimed at improving access to appropriate neurological services; improving safety and quality in the delivery of patient-centred neurological care; and improving value for both patient and health services across neurological services. More broadly, the national clinical programme for neurology is actively working on a hub and spoke model to guide equitable neurology services across the country. This aligns with the health regions and aims to tackle the gaps in neurology services nationally. The model will include one model 4 hospital hub per health region, catering for the most complex neurological care. These sites will support model 3 spoke sites, including Mullingar, which will provide services for people with less complex needs.

Many hospitals already have well-developed neurological services, but funding received in 2025 is enabling the delivery of phase 1 of the hub and spoke model. It is expected that this proposed hub and spoke model will enable a reduction in waiting lists and timely access to diagnosis and treatment and thus improve quality of life and prognosis for people with neurological symptoms. This will cater for people with all neurological conditions and will

deliver on the Sláintecare principle of delivering care closer to the patient's home. Improving access to specialist care remains a priority for this Government and the HSE is continuing to work with the national clinical programme for neurology to strengthen neurological services.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: I want to return to the evidence, because the facts contained in the Neurological Alliance report are stark. Mullingar hospital is a model 3 hospital. The national model of care says that it should have a dedicated service. The first fact is that one in six people in Ireland are living with a neurological condition and it is now the leading cause of disability worldwide. Yet, despite the growing demand, Mullingar hospital still does not have a dedicated service. The second fact is that the Neurological Alliance report specifically highlights concerns that Mullingar remains dependent on an outreach service and does not have a dedicated service as outlined in that model of care. The third fact is that demand has outstripped capacity. The Neurological Alliance briefing note says that more than 160 people are currently on a waiting list for neurology services in Mullingar alone. The fourth fact, which we know from various other areas outside health, is that regional inequality is a national problem. People living in regions and rural areas face greater travel burdens, longer waits, and poorer access to specialist expertise than those living in centres. That is a system where access to care is being determined by geography rather than need.

The Neurological Alliance found that consultant neurology staffing remains below recommended levels nationally. Specialist nursing numbers remain significantly below recommended levels. Major gaps exist in multi-disciplinary supports and neurorehabilitation services. These are not my figures or Opposition speaking points. These are the findings of a report from a national umbrella body representing almost 40 neurological organisations and more than 860,000 people living with neurological conditions. The evidence exists, the need is highlighted and the recommendations are outlined. When will the people of Longford-Westmeath get a dedicated neurology service in Mullingar Regional Hospital, which they were promised a decade ago?

Deputy Alan Dillon: Again, I thank Deputy Clarke for raising this important issue. I fully acknowledge that too many patients are still waiting far too long for appointments and treatment. I recognise the real strain that is placing on individuals and families. As outlined, neurological services in the midlands are delivered through a combination of local supports in Mullingar and specialist regional services. Urgent patients continue to be prioritised and every effort is being made to reduce waiting lists for routine appointments. It is important to recognise that significant investment has been made to expand neurological services, which will help to address the service gaps and improve access to care for patients right across the regions.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, the implementation of the model of care for neurological services, including the hub and spoke system, is a key part of this, because this will focus on reducing waiting lists, ensure early diagnostics and also deliver timely treatment for patients. It will also improve the quality of life and outcomes for those living with neurological conditions. Regarding Mullingar itself, strengthening services, reducing delays and delivering care close to home is a key priority that the Government wants to achieve. The Minister remains fully committed to improving neurological services right across the country, including for patients in Mullingar and across the midlands, with regard to reducing waiting

times, expanding capacity and ensuring patients can access neurological care closer to home when they need to.

Bus Services

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I need to raise with the Minister of State the need to improve bus services on the western side of County Cork, from Cork city, up the Lee valley towards Ballyvourney, the upper Blackwater valley over as far as Millstreet and along the Bandon Valley too. Students need to be able to get to college on time. People need to be able to get to work on time and to use public transport to do that, and to be able to get back home again in a timely way as well. These are growing communities west of Cork city. Large numbers of houses are being built, or are already built, with construction happening in places like Millstreet, Ballyvourney, Macroom, Coachford, Cloghduff, and Ovens. They need that infrastructure to be able to get to and from work and into Cork city.

I acknowledge that progress has been made on public transport locally with the installation and building of bus shelters, and the new improvement of the No. 40 route, with the stop on the western side of Macroom, as well as the recently approved planning permission for Macroom bus station. Macroom bus station, after the bypass has been built, offers a real opportunity to act as a hub, so there will be buses coming in from the likes of Killarney, Bantry, Millstreet, Bandon and Cork, and an opportunity for people to switch services there.

One service which I want to draw particular attention to is the 256. This is coming from Bantry. Currently, two local transport initiatives operate back to back, Bantry to Ballingeary and Inchigeelagh to Macroom. The NTA has been examining this option, which is advanced, fully planned and ready to go.

It is joining the dots, putting together the two services to have one continuous service operating from Bantry through to Macroom. However, they are held up waiting for PSO funding. The new service is not a far-off concept. It is ready to go. The NTA needs to get the PSO funding up and running.

The 257 is planned to run from Millstreet to Macroom to Bandon. Half of that is done, so the next stage, from Macroom to Bandon, needs to advance. There are also plans fairly well advanced with BusConnects to serve Ovens. Things need to advance for Crossbarry and Donoughmore. Many of the projects are already under way or fairly advanced in planning, but they are stuck waiting for PSO funding. The NTA is very clear on that. Really what we need to do is bring them along to that next stage.

If the Minister looks, for example, at that 257 that I gave as an example, the council is already planning bus stops and bus shelters along part of that, including, for example, in Crookstown. The actual bus part needs to be advanced. The NTA is adamant that it has done its planning and is now waiting for PSO funding. Cork North-West needs delivery, certainty and fairness, not further delays.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Seán Canney): I thank Deputy Moynihan for giving me the opportunity to address the issue of bus services for people living west of Cork city. I want to clarify from the outset that the Minister for Transport has

responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport but that neither the Minister nor his officials are involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport services. Statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally rests with the NTA. The NTA works with the public transport operators who deliver the services and have responsibility for day-to-day operational matters.

That said, I reassure the Deputy that the Government is strongly committed to providing all citizens with reliable and realistic sustainable mobility options, and public transport plays a key role in the delivery of this goal. To support this objective, in budget 2026 the Department of Transport secured €940 million in funding for PSO and TFI Local Link services, an increase from €650 million in 2025. This will go towards funding and subsidising existing public transport services across Ireland by maintaining targeted fares, including initiatives such as the recently introduced free travel for all children up to the age of nine and the young adult card for those aged from 19 to 25 as part of the NTA's national fares strategy. The Department continues to engage with the NTA to ensure existing levels of service, resilience and driver shortages are considered, and to ensure that planning and strategic decisions are informed by both operational and resource considerations.

A sum of €31 million has been secured for continued investment in our rural transport service in 2026, a 38% increase on last year's funding. This funding ensures the continued delivery of vital transport services across rural Ireland, building on the significant increase in recent years. In County Cork in particular, funding increased by 47% between 2024 and 2025, boosting passenger numbers by 95%.

A great example of this continued investment can be seen on route 519, introduced in July 2025. This new route provides passengers travelling from Charleville to Cork with a morning service at 7.05 a.m. and a service from Cork to Charleville at 5.45 p.m., Monday to Friday. This new route is part of the Connecting Ireland rural mobility plan, a major public transport initiative. Since 2022, 185 new and enhanced services have commenced. Over 240 towns and villages are now linked into the public transport network. Thirty-six of these new and enhanced services were delivered in 2025. These services, introduced under Connecting Ireland, now provide new transport connections to 41 higher education facilities and 61 healthcare facilities, as well as offering 71 connections to rail services, allowing passengers to continue to connect to the wider TFI network.

Approximately 600,000 people now have access to these new services. Increased services have led to exponential growth in passenger numbers, with more than 8 million passenger journeys recorded across services in 2025. This represents an increase of 70% when compared with patronage in 2023.

The expansion of rural bus services has brought life back into villages and towns. Under the Connecting Ireland initiative, the NTA plans to extend the 320 service to Charleville rail station and extend the frequency of services connecting Charleville town centre to the station, as well as Limerick city, Patrickswell and Croom, subject to the availability of funding and operational readiness. I assure the Deputy that transport connectivity is very important for people who live and work in rural Ireland, including in west Cork.

Deputy Aindrias Moynihan: I thank the Minister of State for outlining the various works under way. I readily acknowledge that there is headway being made in different places. In this

regard I have referred to bus shelters, including for the No. 40 route. Time and again, I have raised here the need to advance the 233 bus service. It is a vital service that goes up and down the Lee valley, serving the area from Macroom to Cork. However, it does not serve those settlements alone as it also services a huge number of people in growing communities in between, from Kilmurry to Crookstown. Cloghduff is growing dramatically, as are Aherla, Killumney and Ovens. On the other side of the Lee, over in Carrig, there are Dripsey and Coachford. Large numbers of houses have been built in this area and people are moving in. They want to be able to get to and from college on time. They want a bus that will give them an opportunity to get to work.

The background work by the NTA is under way on these routes. Its plan is to have three strands of the 233 service, for example in the north, centre and south, to serve the various communities. Again, the NTA is coming up against the roadblock I have described. It was very clear when we raised the matter with them that, as much planning as it has done, it is held up waiting for PSO funding to be able to advance the routes. The 233 is an essential service to serve communities right down the Lee valley.

Can the Minister give an indication of when the NTA can expect to get the PSO funding to have the routes in place? Cork North-West needs delivery, certainty and fairness, not further delays.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Deputy. I reassure him again that the Department, its Minister, Deputy O'Brien, my fellow Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, and I are fully committed to delivering a more sustainable, inclusive and accessible transport system for the benefit of current and future generations. In the Programme for Government: Securing Ireland's Future, the Government committed to the continued roll-out of the Connecting Ireland rural mobility plan. Investment can be seen in the enhanced route 521 between Newcastle West and Charleville. This enhanced service now includes the addition of an early-morning service and higher frequency services from Thursday to Sunday. It operates seven daily return services from Monday to Wednesday, nine daily return services from Thursday to Saturday and four daily return services on Sunday. The route also provides late-evening and peak-time services for commuters and improved connectivity to Limerick city.

The NTA has stated a number of new routes and route enhancements under the plan have yet to be implemented. The Deputy mentioned route 256 between Bantry and Macroom. This is at an advanced stage of planning and commencement is subject to funding. Discussions are ongoing between the Department of Transport and the NTA. Currently, they do not have a definite timeframe, but I can assure the Deputy that route 256, and the 257 and 233 he mentioned, will be raised with the Department and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, and the other Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer. We will see where we can get with them.

I appreciate the Deputy's passionate plea. Coming from a rural constituency myself, I see the growth in demand for public transport. It is up to the Government to deliver on that. I thank the Deputy.

Planning Issues

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: This is not the first time I have raised the issue of commercial drone fast-food deliveries in residential areas. Last week, we had the announcement from Manna Air Delivery, which was the company operating in Dublin 15 and Cork, that it is suspending and pulling out of Ireland.

Residents who were suffering as a result of the noise and lack of privacy, and who had wildlife concerns, etc., but who particularly suffered as a result of the noise, peace and quiet in their back gardens and neighbours having been lost, are celebrating. This technology was very invasive. It was brought in without any proper consultation. The company seemed to operate without having to go for planning permission. When it was forced to do so by community action and by communities getting organised and challenging the way the company was operating, the council started to take notice. The local authority started to act.

I have a list of issues that residents have raised with me and I am directly using the words they have sent me. How is it that commercial drone delivery operations were permitted by this Government to roll out without prior public consultation and without environmental or health impact assessments being done? For two years, Manna Air Delivery was granted a licence by the Irish Aviation Authority, IAA, and was able to bypass public consultation. It provided its own statements without any objective evidence concerning noise and environmental impact. It took a year-long effort by communities, certainly in Dublin 15, including the residents' group Drone Action D15. Public meetings in Dundrum were well attended. It makes no sense. Every piece of technology that comes along does not have to be embraced. It should depend on its social usefulness. One hundred people suffer unbearable propeller noise for one person to get a cup of coffee flown over to them. Who said we needed that? As a journalist said, this was answering a question that was never asked.

We now need to look at the fact that the noise of drones in residential areas make them an unacceptable technology. There are loads of good uses for drones, and I am all for their use in topography, photography, emergency medicine and many other areas. Flying burgers, takeaways and coffees in residential areas is not a good use. We need to ensure that commercial drone deliveries are not allowed again in residential areas. The national drone policy that will be drawn up must reflect that. Commercial drone companies must be required, like everybody else, to apply for planning permission for bases they are setting up and for the impact they have.

Manna Air Delivery was operating in a regulatory vacuum. There is now a framework whereby the public are considered stakeholders and must be consulted. It seems that was something this particular company did not like. It did not like the fact that the public had to be consulted. It had strong opposition in Cork and Dublin 15. That it was mooted to go into Dundrum and Dublin city brought a huge reaction from residents. We now have a framework and we must ensure that the IAA is not lagging behind and enforces it, not just on behalf of the people it regulates, such as the drone operators, but also on behalf of the general public.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Deputy for raising this matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien. I note Manna Air Delivery's recent statement that it will for now cease deliveries by drone in Ireland. The Minister recently met with representatives of Manna Air Delivery and we welcome the company's continued commitment to operating significant research and development and manufacturing bases in Ireland, where

it will test, design and build drones. The company will continue to pursue international opportunities with the Irish bases central to that strategy.

From an aviation safety perspective, the regulation of both the recreational and commercial use of drones, or "unmanned aircraft systems", UAS, as they are technically called, is provided for under European Union regulations that are directly applicable to Ireland. Two drone-specific EU regulations ensure drone operations across Europe are safe and secure. Regulation 2019/947 sets operational rules that apply to both professional drone operators and those flying drones for leisure. Another regulation sets the common EU-wide technical requirements for drones and the features and capabilities that drones must have in order to be flown safely. This regulation also seeks to foster investment in the industry.

The Irish Aviation Authority, the civil aviation regulator, oversees the implementation of the EU regulations and standards. The drone regulations are operation-centric and focus on the risk of drone operations so regulation is lighter on low-risk operations and more demanding on high-risk operations. Under the EU regulatory regime, drone operations are classified into three broad categories, open, specific and certified, with different regulatory considerations applying to each category. Commercial drone operations may fall into any one of the categories depending on the risk associated. Low-risk commercial drone operations, such as aerial photography, which the Deputy mentioned, may fall into the open category where regulation and oversight of operations are lighter. Other commercial drone operations, such as drone delivery operations, are more closely regulated. These types of commercial drone operations may fall into the medium-risk specific category, which may require specific authorisation by the IAA. This type of operation is recognised EU member states. To obtain an operational authorisation, an operator must provide a comprehensive safety portfolio, which includes assessing and addressing both ground and air risks with appropriate mitigations. Manna Air Delivery holds such an authorisation from the IAA. In addition to complying with the drone regulation, drone operators are also subject to national laws, including environmental, planning and data protection laws.

While there is a comprehensive regulatory framework in place from an aviation perspective, there are areas where the rapid pace of expansion of UAS operations has resulted in gaps and uncertainties. The Government, aware that the impact of the growing UAS sector needed further consideration, included in the programme for Government a commitment to guide high-level strategic planning and the development of the sector in Ireland. The national policy framework for UAS, agreed by the Government, was published by the Minister in August last year. The policy framework aims to guide high-level strategic planning and development in the drone sector in Ireland through support, growth and innovation, while ensuring safe and secure operations. It seeks to identify and address any policy, regulatory or legislative gaps that may have arisen due to the pace of the expansion of the drone operations. These include areas such as planning and noise regulation where the rapid pace of expansion of drone operations have resulted in gaps and uncertainty. The policy framework proposed a number of structures and actions that aim to address concerns in relation to UAS usage and operations in balance with the realisation of the economic and societal benefits from the emerging sector.

There is also a need for clarity on areas outside aviation safety and in respect of the roles and responsibility of bodies. Since the launch of the policy, the Department of Transport has also established the national policy monitoring group and this group will support and monitor

progress on the implementation of the framework. I will continue with the rest of my response later.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I urge that the framework specifically rules out these drones operating in residential areas. They cause considerable physical and mental health damage to residents who are suffering under them. The Minister of State said in his reply that the drone companies must comply. They are "subject to national laws, including environmental, planning and data protection laws". How come Manna Air Delivery was not so subject for two years? How come it was operating in bases that had no planning permission? Its representatives came in front an Oireachtas committee and told the residents that they could have a no-fly zone over their homes. When residents wrote to the company asking for that, it was never implemented. The company has been operating with impunity. It was funded, by the way, by Enterprise Ireland.

I want to comment about jobs. Nobody wants to see any jobs lost as the result of a business closing. Manna Air Delivery has stated that 10% of its 200 employees will be affected, so 20 jobs are potentially at risk. That is the fault of an employer for establishing a company without proper planning. It is extremely antisocial. It had no consultation. There was no assent or buy-in from the community. It is estimated that the company had approximately 1,000 customers. The population of Blanchardstown is 150,000. There was not huge enthusiasm for this technology. It replaced delivery riders on e-bikes. It replaced delivery drivers, too. I would imagine that the balance in jobs will even out.

There were also environmental claims. The delivery had to be driven to the drone base from the takeaway.

Huge claims were made about the benefits of this technology to society. The game is up now because residents got organised in various communities. I see this as a victory for communities over big tech. Tech is not inevitable and we do not have to accept every single thing that is foisted on us.

Deputy Seán Canney: Implementation of the policy framework is tracked and reported on through a series of annual action plans and progress reports. An implementation action plan for 2026, which sets out actions and corresponding timelines, is available on the Government's website. It is important for the public to know that.

I am aware that the rapid pace of expansion of UAS operations has resulted in challenges and generated real concerns and uncertainty among communities, as the Deputy explained, particularly around the issues of noise, intrusion and privacy. The policy framework seeks to identify and address any policy regulatory or legislative gaps. The framework proposes a number of structures and actions to address concerns in relation to UAS usage and operations. It proposes 16 actions under three main areas: the use of airspace and planning; compliance and enforcement; and enterprise and innovation. Actions in the policy framework include the establishment of a national working group on UAS geographical zones to develop transparent processes and procedures for the designation of these zones; the safe management of the integration of UAS into our airspace; the impact on society and the environment; the establishment of a national u-space steering group to develop a national plan for the implementation of the u-space; a set of specific procedures designed to ensure safe and efficient

access to and coexistence in airspace for the high volume of UAS; and the establishment of a UAS enterprise and innovation leadership group to foster the development of a robust ongoing policy on innovation.

Implementation of the policy framework relies on cross-governmental structures, and the continuation of engagement and support from various Departments, agencies, the UAS sector and most importantly the public. I encourage the public to keep engaging on this particular matter. I again thank the Deputy for raising such an important matter.

Job Losses

Deputy George Lawlor: The issue of mass redundancies in the tech sector is very live at the minute. One of the companies we are speaking about this morning is Covalen. The actions of this company have been far from savoury in terms of the treatment of the employees it is making redundant. It has rejected calls for better severance packages and declined a request to start the process of voluntary rather than compulsory lay-offs. The tech industry faces major structural issues mainly as a result of AI. We have seen it across the board. However, the actions of Covalen are particularly sinister in the treatment of its employees. It is making bonus payments available as a gesture of goodwill, but these bonuses had already been earned by the workers.

Given the pace of change in the tech industry, what new or expanded reskilling programmes, particularly in the area of AI, cybersecurity and advanced digital skills, will be funded to help displaced workers transition quickly into high-demand roles? I know my colleagues will speak in particular about Covalen but the tech industry is under attack from AI. While AI may have many benefits, the Department needs to seriously look at redundancies in that industry.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I have been working with this particular group of Covalen staff since January when the initial threats of redundancies were mooted. Since then, we have seen much larger redundancy numbers hitting this group. It has been an inspiring experience to work with them. They are a newly mobilised part of the workers' sector where tech and data workers are realising how precarious their jobs are right now in the context of artificial intelligence.

Rather than going over what has already been discussed in the Chamber, I will pick up from an exchange last week when in response to questions from Deputy Pa Daly, the Minister of State said that Ireland has a strong robust legal framework in place to protect workers experiencing redundancy. I really want to question and interrogate that today. Although these workers have been mobilised, because we have a voluntary system they have found this new understanding of workers' rights but then they have been faced with the fact that the company does not have to meet them there. One of the workers who emailed me stated that currently a majority of impacted staff do not meet the criteria for the statutory redundancy entitlements, and that it is crucial the Department intervenes to demonstrate that AI-related job cuts of this magnitude are not allowed to have such disproportionately negative consequences for workers.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Covalen is a window into the future for hundreds of thousands of workers in this country and across the world about AI replacing their jobs and

then being made redundant by companies that have made enormous profits off the back of those workers and then leave those workers high and dry. In the case of Covalen workers, nearly 1,000 workers have lost their jobs over the last year, 720 recently, almost halving the workforce. They trained the AI to replace them and then they got left high and dry. As Meta has said they cannot work for another six months for any other company, what are they supposed to do to pay the rent?

Covalen, a wholly owned subsidiary of Cpl, an Irish company which has contracts with the Government, is refusing to even talk to the workers' trade union. These are people who protect us from the toxic disgusting content of social media as content moderators. They do an important job in our society and are being treated like dirt. Many of them will walk away with nothing or minimum statutory redundancy while Covalen has made enormous profits for Cpl and for Meta. The Government should not allow this and should use the leverage of Cpl contracts with the Government to say it will not get any more Government contracts if it treats workers like dirt like this. It is in the interest of every worker to support Cpl workers because this is the future for other workers if Covalen gets away with this.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputies for bringing this important matter to the floor the Dáil. As they are aware, on 27 April 2026 Covalen informed its employees of its intention to reduce its workforce. My understanding is that the company has been impacted by a shift in client demand, resulting in a reduction in the volume of services required and a requirement to adjust operations accordingly.

My first and most immediate concern, and that of the Government, is the potential impact on employees and their families during this uncertain time. In response, the IDA has been engaging at a senior level with the company to ensure it is aware of the full range of IDA supports available at this time and will continue to do so. IDA Ireland has established an internal process for managing potential job-loss situations with its client companies. In respect of impacted employees, the IDA is proactively engaging across its client base to identify potential redeployment opportunities where there is a skills match. The IDA has also facilitated connections between interested companies and company representatives, and this work is ongoing.

On the broader comments, I will talk to Deputy Gibney's point regarding the Government's publication of the action plan on collective bargaining, which has been welcomed by the social partners. That is currently being implemented to ensure that employees' and employers' voices are recognised. The situation also raises a broader issue which was mentioned - the impact of artificial intelligence and technology on the changing labour market and on jobs. I think we need to be clear and honest that artificial intelligence is a transformative technology with significant potential for Ireland's economy and competitiveness.

Equally, there is a challenge in that we are all trying to predict how work will evolve. We recognise the very real concerns about job displacement but the evidence suggests that AI is more likely to augment jobs than replace them. We will see some displacements, which is natural, but the nature of work will also change significantly. That is why Government policy is very much focused on preparing workers for that transition. We have published the national digital and AI strategy which is very much focused on how we can invest in upskilling and

reskilling, and how we can support workers to adapt and ensure Ireland continues to remain competitive in a changing global economy.

We must deal with the immediate impact of job losses while also preparing for the long-term transition of work.

Deputy George Lawlor: The treatment of the Covalen workers has been absolutely toxic. We have workers who have been involved in a company that has made millions as a result of their work, including moderating, as Deputy Boyd Barrett alluded to, yet this company is treating its workers with such disregard by offering two weeks statutory pay and saying they are getting bonuses as a goodwill gesture. They have already earned these bonuses, which were due to them anyway. The notion that we would allow a company to act in this manner, given the profits it makes, is absolutely disgraceful. As a Parliament, we have to do something about this.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I cannot think of a better description than "head in the sand" for the Government's response to AI and labour displacement. To tell us that labour is going to be augmented and not displaced because of AI is genuinely shocking to me. When I raise AI and labour displacement, this is what I get - we are focusing on reskilling and retraining, jobs are going to improve and we are going to have better jobs. There is no recognition of the massive transformation that is happening in society and there are no efforts to deal with it. If this is the Government's canary in the coalmine and an example of what is happening, and this is its response to what is happening to Covalen workers, then we are doomed because there is so much more of this coming down the track. To pretend that it is just going to make jobs better is so ridiculous.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: AI potentially threatens to do to hundreds of thousands of workers what is being done to Covalen workers. That is why we have to act now. AI aside, there are mass collective redundancies where companies refuse to talk to trade unions - as is happening in this case - do not consult with workers, dump workers and leave them high and dry, even though they have made big profits. We have seen that before with Debenhams and in many circumstances, yet the Government continues to allow it to happen. The Government must demand that these companies engage with workers and their trade unions, and use the Government's leverage with Cpl to tell it - an Irish company - that it cannot treat workers like this and if it does, it is getting no more Government contracts.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the Deputies for their contribution. The Government fully understands the impact jobs losses have on workers, their families and communities. In the immediate term, we are very much providing the supports, which are being mobilised. We are also engaging with the IDA, the State agency, in terms of redeployment. That is actively being pursued. Engagement with the company is ongoing.

Looking beyond the immediate situation here, we have recognised that technological change, in particular AI, will certainly reshape our labour market. We have been very clear on that. My Department continues to monitor this very closely and the impact it will have on our labour market. We have engaged with the research from the expert group on future skills needs, which very much highlights the rapid growth of AI adoption in Ireland, the strong demand for

AI-related roles and the robust pipeline we have in terms of skilled workers that are emerging. It is important to re-emphasise that notwithstanding the adaptation that will be required and the significant challenges that will present in terms of how that transition is managed, that is why we have funding for research which is very much focused on future skills needs.

We are also supporting lifelong learning in terms of reskilling and monitoring the labour market in real time. We are not being passive in this space. We are very much engaging with the Department of further and higher education and many industrial sectors. Our responsibility is twofold: to support workers affected today but also to ensure that workers are equipped for the jobs of the future. Ireland's workforce is ready to grow and thrive in an AI environment.

Early Childhood Care and Education

Deputy Marie Sherlock: My question relates to the reception class in St. Joseph's Co-Educational Primary School in East Wall in Dublin 3. A reception class has been running there since 1984. It is in its 43rd year. It is a pre-junior infants class, so effectively there is a three-year infant cycle. It was one of four pioneering schools that has run such a class. Now there is only one school in the country providing such a reception class. The fantastic thing about this reception class is that it is not like preschool or a crèche. It is about the first step in adapting to the school environment in disadvantaged communities, such as my own in Dublin Central and particularly in East Wall, which is a really diverse community that has had many decades of disadvantage. That reception class is critically important in affording children the ability to access supports for language development, school readiness and transition into junior infants.

We know that not every child going into junior infants in this country goes in as an equal. There is no level playing field. Some children, particularly in more advantaged families go into primary school with far greater social and educational skills, but it is different in other areas. In particular we know there is uneven access to literacy and numeracy for preschool-going children. The reality is that this is a very important class that has worked well for many decades in St. Joseph's Co-Educational Primary School. Earlier this year, the school was told that it was going to lose the post that allows it to continue running that class, which would have a devastating impact for many across the community.

The reality is we do not have many preschools in the East Wall area. We have two preschools, and then you have to go as far as Seán McDermott Street to access the next preschool. There is a huge gap in the area, but that alone is not a justification for holding on to the reception class. The reception class does amazing work. The Holy Child Pre-School in Rutland Street, which started as a pilot, has performed a similar and brilliant role over many decades but it has been left in limbo by the Department. There has been a reduction in the early intervention classes being run out of primary schools in recent years. I passionately believe these classes have a very important role particularly in disadvantaged communities.

Will there be ongoing certainty for St. Joseph's in East Wall with regard to the continuation of that reception class into the future? It has certainty for the coming school year but not beyond that. There is an enormous appetite and demand within the local community to ensure that the reception class, albeit that it is unique across the education system, continues long into the future to support children to adapt to the primary school environment.

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Youth (Deputy Michael Moynihan): I thank Deputy Sherlock very much for raising this matter. As she rightly said, a reception class has been in operation in St. Joseph's Co-Educational Primary School, East Wall, since 2002. This class operates as a preparatory infant year for four-year-olds. The reception class was one of a small number that operated prior to the establishment of the early childhood care and education, ECCE, scheme, to provide pre-junior infants education in certain communities. With the wide expansion of the ECCE scheme, this is now the only reception class that operates in the country. The Department has engaged with the school in respect of its teaching allocation for 2026-27 and has sanctioned a teaching post for the reception class for 2026-27. The Department will continue to engage with the school early in the 2026-27 school year with regard to the reception class. The early childhood care and education programme is a Government-funded, universal preschool programme designed to give children their first formal experience of early learning before primary school. It is funded by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality.

To cut to the chase, back in 2002, this class was sanctioned and it has been operational within St. Joseph's Co-Educational Primary School for quite some time. I have no doubt what Deputy Sherlock has articulated this morning are the facts. It has been a huge enabler for children prior to going into primary school and has given them certainty in it.

10 o'clock

Sanction was given for this year and, as it is one of the only ones operational in the country, we continue to engage with and monitor it. A lot of investment and funding has gone into the education system and we continue to do that in urban and rural Ireland. The commitment I can give the Deputy today is that there will be early engagement with the school authorities in the next school year because we understand the value of it. It has been articulated in various documentation through the Department and extremely capably by the school authorities.

As the Deputy mentioned, it targets a particular cohort in a challenged community and has been a great enabler for it. We have sanction for 2026-27 and we are serious about engaging early in the school year in the forward planning for it. When it has been in operation - if my maths are correct, it is going into its 25th year this year and it has a long-established tradition - generations of students have benefited from that year. However, we have to evaluate it because we continue to invest in trying to upskill all school communities. The school community there has done amazing work and has taken advantage of the extra year to make sure the students coming from disadvantaged areas benefit fully from it, as the Deputy articulated.

Our commitment is for this year, 2026-27, and we will engage early with the school authorities again. I will take the valid points the Deputy made strongly on board as we prepare to engage with the school authorities early in the next school year.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: My request is that the Department show ambition, particularly regarding communities where not every child goes to school equal at the age of five. The role and value of the reception class is critical, not just for the East Wall area and it should be looked at in other areas.

It is also important to say, as I understand it, this is not the first time there has been a wobble in the Department about the reception class for St. Joseph's. The class started 43 years ago. It was terminated around 1999-2000 but the Department reinstated it in 2002. That is the critical thing. This class has worked for generations of people in East Wall. It has worked for other schools as well. Unfortunately, it was taken away in other schools.

The Department needs to seriously look at and build on the work of DEIS plus and all that, by looking at particular schools and the transition into the primary school system. While the early childhood care and education, ECCE, programme is fantastic, it is a one size fits all and that is not good enough, nor should it be the height of ambition for the Department of education. Particularly in disadvantaged communities and diverse fast-growing communities like East Wall, it is critical we hear from the Department that it is willing to continue funding the post and this class long into the future. The teachers tell me they can see the results when a child goes into junior infants and that has to be recognised and broadened out in the education system.

Deputy Michael Moynihan: There has been a huge amount of investment at Department of education level in terms of disadvantage, including in DEIS and so on. We are not blind to the fact that there are massive challenges in some communities with disadvantage. We are applying the resources to make sure we give every child the best possible chance in disadvantaged areas and across the education system.

In parallel, the early childcare scheme has been hugely funded. The funding that has gone into it in the past quarter of a century to bring it up to standard has been quite amazing. There are two pieces. One is the early childcare scheme to make sure we are giving two years - it is not long ago that it was just one year - and to make sure children are as prepared as possible to go into primary school.

We are constantly looking at where patterns and initiatives have developed in communities. The Deputy is right that this goes way back, beyond the 25 years since 2002. It was to capture a particular cohort of students. We continue to invest in the DEIS programme and to monitor it. This programme has been operating in the school for quite some time. We continue to monitor it and engage with the school and the outcomes. We have to be mindful of the investment going into the education system and the most important measure of that is to make sure children have positive outcomes when they go from primary school to post-primary school and on to adulthood. We have to constantly evaluate that to see whether we are targeting the right resources at the right communities, and to make the best possible choices for children into the future.

Teachtaireacht ón Seanad - Message from Seanad

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Seanad Éireann has passed the Health (Amendment)(Home Support Providers) Bill 2025 without amendment.

**State Responsibility for Foundation Retention Risk in Defective Concrete Homes:
Motion [Private Members]**

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Aindrias Moynihan): Leanfaimid ar aghaidh leis an gcéad ábhar eile, an tairiscint maidir le freagracht an Stáit maidir le coinneáil priacail i leith bunsraithe i dtithe le coincreíd lochtach.

Deputy Charles Ward: I move:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

— thousands of homeowners affected by defective concrete have spent years living with uncertainty regarding the safety of their homes, the adequacy of available remediation options and the long-term security of their families;

— many affected families have experienced repeated changes in engineering advice, evolving scientific understanding and revisions to the redress scheme throughout that period;

— for homeowners undertaking remediation works, decisions regarding whether existing foundations should be retained or replaced are among the most significant and irreversible choices they will make;

— the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant Scheme permits the retention of existing foundations in affected dwellings in accordance with the updated National Standards Authority of Ireland I.S. (Irish Standard) 465:2026;

— research underpinning I.S. 465:2026 has identified pyrrhotite and other sulphide minerals in the concrete foundations of affected homes, with evidence of oxidation and early-stage internal sulphate attack in some cases;

— the scientific basis underpinning I.S. 465:2026 remains limited in duration, scale and longitudinal evidence, and does not conclusively establish long-term foundation performance;

— as a result, I.S. 465:2026 operates in circumstances of acknowledged material scientific uncertainty regarding long-term structural durability; and

— affected homeowners are being required to make decisions about retaining or remediating foundations in conditions of that uncertainty, with significant financial, legal and psychological consequences;

recognises that:

— the State is relying on I.S. 465:2026 as the governing technical standard for remediation decisions, despite acknowledged scientific uncertainty in its underpinning evidence;

- where the State adopts a Standard in conditions of uncertainty, it must bear responsibility for managing resulting long-term structural risk and not transfer it to individual homeowners;

- homeowners should not be exposed to future liability or repeated remediation costs arising from limitations in the scientific evidence base underpinning the Standard; and

- in circumstances where failure mechanisms may be latent, progressive and not fully observable within assessment timeframes, policy must err decisively on the side of homeowner protection; and

calls on the Government to:

- commission an independent international review of the scientific basis of I.S. 465:2026, with specific focus on sulphide-related deterioration mechanisms in foundation concrete and their long-term behaviour;

- publish in full the evidential basis, assumptions and uncertainty ranges used to justify foundation retention under I.S. 465:2026;

- amend the operation of the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant Scheme to ensure that no homeowner is required to retain foundations where there is material engineering uncertainty regarding long-term durability;

- provide an explicit entitlement for homeowners to opt for full foundation replacement where reasonable doubt exists as to future performance;

- ensure that responsibility for residual long-term structural risk arising from application of I.S. 465:2026 remains with the State and not individual homeowners; and

- report to Dáil Éireann within six months on the implementation of these measures and on any revision required to I.S. 465:2026 in light of emerging scientific evidence.

I thank all those who worked on this motion, particularly my staff and 100% Redress party councillors who work every day on the ground dealing with owners of homes with defective concrete. I thank Dr. Chris Brough and Professor Paul Dunlop for their extremely important research on this topic. I also thank all the Opposition TDs and their parties for supporting this motion.

The motion is about the State making decisions about people's homes in circumstances where its own technical standard accepts the science is not fully developed in certain foundation cases. These decisions determine remediation, housing security and the level of uncertainty families are left carrying for decades. At the centre of this is a simple question. When the science is not complete and the State must still act, who carries what remains unresolved? Is it the State or the homeowner?

I should inform the House that I am directly affected by this matter and I deal with it every day. I am living with a defective concrete crisis. I am not relying on this at this stage of the argument but I mention it because it requires me to examine engineering reports and technical matters in great detail. What these reports make clear is not a disagreement about whether the risk exists. It is how the uncertainty is defined in the system and how it is carried into decisions that affect homes, finance and long-term security. The real issue is how known limits in

technical knowledge become policy decisions. The governing standard says that the state of knowledge relating to foundations is insufficient to provide guidance for certain combinations of aggregate and active internal sulfate attack, ISA, risk factors. This is the precise limitation written into the standard. It acknowledges there are defined foundation conditions where scientific knowledge is insufficient for decision-making. The standard continues that undertaking sampling, testing and analysis of foundation concrete is expected to strengthen the knowledge base and inform future editions of the document. Therefore, the framework is not final. It is expected to evolve as more evidence becomes available.

Since tabling this motion, I hosted a scientific briefing in Leinster House attended by researchers directly involved in investigating defective concrete deterioration mechanisms across Ireland. The purpose of the briefing was not to challenge the science. It was to listen to the science, which was presented. It reinforced a point already acknowledged in IS 465, that is, that understanding continues to evolve as more testing is undertaken and long-term evidence becomes available. The research highlighted that the scale of the affected properties will continue to expand significantly as testing progresses and deterioration becomes visible on properties that may not yet exhibit symptoms.

This is precisely why this motion matters. When an evidence base is still developing, public policy must be designed to accommodate the reality, rather than assume all future outcomes are already known. It also states the purpose of foundation concrete testing is to identify, first, aggregate types, second, deleterious materials, and, third, potential future deterioration. Testing identifies risk factors but it does not resolve how these factors behave over time in every case. Importantly, foundation testing does not provide a full evaluation of a foundation's current conditions, which would necessitate more extensive sampling for inspection. Even after testing, there are recognised limits to what is known about the structure. This is a technical engineering standard and is not designed for conveyancing or property transactions but, in practice, it is now influencing mortgage assessments, insurance decisions and property values in affected areas. This is not theatrical. This is already reflected when homes are valued, financed and traded. In places like Donegal, defects and uncertainty are already visible in the housing market.

The House should reflect carefully what was presented at the scientific briefing. The research did not present an estimate for all homes in Donegal. Analysis indicated a minimum of 12,000 homes in Donegal alone may ultimately fall within the high-risk category. That does not include social homes, of which there are 2,400, or community buildings, of which there are hundreds. It does not include commercial premises or mixed-use buildings. The distinction is extremely important. When we hear a figure of 12,000 homes, we are not looking at the full housing picture. It is a baseline. We are looking at only one segment of it. For years the State has pointed at figures of approximately 10,000 affected homes nationally, yet we have scientific analysis to suggest Donegal alone will exceed that figure. If that analysis is proven correct, the scale of this crisis has been profoundly underestimated.

We must ask ourselves whether future risk has also been underestimated. The position is clear. The science is incomplete in defined areas. The standard acknowledges this directly. Decisions are still required within a framework. When that happens, uncertainty does not disappear. It is carried forward by the system and, in practice, the homeowners. The classification approach in the standard reinforces this structure. It states that foundation

concrete should be classified in accordance with samples of foundation concrete from the highest risk classification. That would be the core sample taken with the most damage. Where multiple indicators exist, the highest classification must apply. Risk is not averaged. In determining the strongest identifying factor, where uncertainty is not fully resolved, it is not eliminated at the point of decision. It is deferred. This is the issue. Deferred uncertainty returns later as further remediation works, higher public costs and increased complexity as scientific understanding develops over time. What is not resolved does not disappear; it re-emerges later on. It will be more costly.

This motion is not a criticism of the scientists, engineers or researchers who have worked on and informed IS 465 - quite the opposite. Good science identifies not only what is known but also what is not yet known. The research has been transparent about the limits of current evidence. We need ongoing testing and expectations that understanding will continue to develop. The question before the House is, therefore, whether we trust a science. The question is whether policy is responding appropriately to what the science is telling us. We have remaining uncertainty. This policy question is not a scientific one. This motion does not challenge the standard. It accepts what it states. It asks straightforward questions of policy coherence.

Where the State accepts scientific knowledge is not yet complete in certain foundation conditions, should the consequences and uncertainty be carried by the homeowner by default? If the answer is "Yes", then this is a clear policy choice. If the answer is "No", the system must adjust to reflect the reality of what is going on. This matters because the decision before us is not simply about foundations; it is about the consequences of being wrong.

The State has got this badly wrong once already. We are 14 years into this. Poor quality materials entered homes across affected counties and families are still paying the price today. We are being asked to make long-term foundation decisions in circumstances where the Government standard acknowledges limitations in current knowledge, where the evidence base continues to evolve and where there is uncertainty regarding long-term performance of retained foundations. If the scale of defective properties is significantly greater than previously understood, then potential consequences will be enormous.

Saving money today by retaining foundations where reasonable doubt remains may reduce immediate expenditure but if those assumptions are proved incorrect in the years ahead, the cost will dwarf any short-term saving. The cost will not be simply financial; it will be measured in homes requiring further remediation, families forced to go through a process for a second time and properties that become difficult to finance, insure and sell. In a housing system already struggling to meet demand, the State's first failure contributed to this crisis. It would be unforgivable if, in attempting to resolve it, we were to spend public money in a manner that risked creating an even greater housing crisis.

When uncertainty remains, caution is not an expensive option. Caution is a reasonable option. It is important to be clear what this means in practice. These are not abstract issues. They affect a home and whether a home can be sold, remortgaged or insured. They affect whether families can rely on their homes as stable, long-term assets. They affect financial security and the housing market in Donegal and all affected counties.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I thank Deputy Ward for tabling this important motion and for his diligent attention to detail on this issue. It is about making sure the Government cannot get away with just burying the issue and saying it is now dealt with - it is definitely not dealt with. This has fundamentally been the approach of the past number of Governments in terms of trying to bury this from the very start of the scandal.

The campaign started in 2011. Affected households were fobbed off for nearly ten years, forced to campaign strongly, forced to protest and forced to organise in an extremely impressive way that put huge pressure on the Government before finally getting a remediation scheme that may turn out to be based on faulty scientific evidence. I pay tribute to the campaigners who got us to this point and who continue to push. I thank them for their generosity with their time and solidarity in assisting us when we were getting the campaign of redress for those affected by apartment and duplex defects off the ground. They had plenty of things on their plate but were willing to come to big meetings and small meetings to talk about their experience and how a campaign could be built on an issue that fundamentally has the same foundations, in the sense of a lax approach to regulation by the Government and various corporate operators operating like cowboys to maximise profit at the expense of ordinary householders.

The problem is the remediation scheme we now have may be based on faulty scientific evidence. We heard from Deputy Ward how IS 465:2026 may not stand the test of time. It acknowledges that itself by admitting there is uncertainty about the scientific evidence. That uncertainty might not be anyone's fault but it is certainly not the fault of affected households. We know that for a fact. That has to be the guiding principle in this. None of this is the fault of affected households. They should not be the ones to suffer the consequences. Unfortunately, they have been the only ones to suffer any real consequences to this point. Pending the outcome of legal cases, it is not clear Donegal County Council, the National Standards Authority of Ireland or the block suppliers and quarry operators will be made to pay. Cassidy Brothers Concrete Products Limited, Cassidy Brothers Topmix Limited and Cranford Concrete Products Limited are all being taken to court by affected households. The scale of the scandal remains huge.

We heard a lot of scientific evidence and detail in the briefing organised by Deputy Charles Ward and the 100% Redress Party yesterday but I have to say the thing that stuck with me most was the evidence suggesting that we are not even at the middle of this scandal yet; we are only in the early phase of this scandal. The broad public outside the counties which have the most affected households up to this point would be shocked to realise that we are only at the start of this process. I think the Government may be shocked to realise this but the evidence presented was very strong. The latest scientific evidence is that 20,000 houses in estates in Donegal, Mayo, Clare and Limerick are affected. That does not include one-off housing, which we know there is a lot of in those counties, social housing, business premises or community buildings. We also know that defective concrete is not confined to those four counties and that it is a problem in other counties as well but we do not have sight of the sort of numbers that would be involved there. The 20,000 households is not the whole picture but only part of it.

The central problem with IS 465:2026 is that it allows the retention of concrete foundations in certain circumstances - circumstances that may turn out to be based on faulty scientific assumptions. The evidence presented yesterday was absolutely compelling. Geoscientists Professor Paul Dunlop and Dr. Chris Brough told us about sulphide oxidation, internal sulphate

attack, long-term deterioration mechanisms in defective concrete that can affect retained foundations. That is a huge problem because the foundation of your house is exactly that. It is the foundation upon which everything else rests. If the foundation is faulty then your whole house, your whole home and your whole life is insecure - you are literally resting on faulty foundations.

No matter what happens above ground, if your foundations are faulty you have a very big problem. Imagine the psychological impact of that for a moment. We have all seen the pictures and heard the stories and you can talk to Deputy Charles Ward about the reality of living in such a house. You have gone through the heartache of your home falling apart and potentially the massive stress of campaigning to fight for some sort of justice for yourself, your family and your local community, you have gone through the hassle of applying for remediation and the disruption of having the house substantially rebuilt and now it could turn out that the foundation is still faulty. In a worst-case scenario the whole thing may need to be demolished and rebuilt again. That is an unthinkable prospect for people. It is enough to drive anyone over the edge. Even if demolition is not needed in future, the fact that uncertainty remains about the long-term durability of the foundation creates massive issues for homeowners. Their remediated house is still not the same as another house. If there is still a bad smell around it for prospective buyers, banks and insurance companies, they may face difficulties remortgaging or if they need to sell for whatever reason – if they need to move somewhere else in the country or out of the country or any other reason – they simply cannot sell their house and so they are stuck with this. To add insult to injury, all this can then be passed on to their children after they die, turning what has been a nightmare for one generation into a nightmare for the next. It is an inter-generational nightmare for which responsibility fundamentally rests with the State and the various companies.

The underlying issue underpinning all this is that the State is still refusing to take full responsibility for this crisis even though it was the State that created the flawed standards and failed to police them and that came up with flawed remediation schemes which we were warned about at the time. Let us remember this is not just glorious informed hindsight but we had some of these arguments at the time. None of this is the fault of the homeowners yet they are still paying for this every single day. We would not be here debating this today if the ordinary people affected had not got organised, demonstrated and forced the Government kicking and screaming to take action but now we have to say that the action has to be appropriate and measure up to the latest scientific evidence and be adaptable to the latest scientific evidence.

In the water charges movement we had a slogan, probably the most popular slogan of the movement, which was "No way, we won't pay". That should be the guiding light here as well in terms of the cost being put on individual homeowners who bear no responsibility whatsoever. It is not their fault; they must not be forced to pay financially, emotionally, psychologically and in the massive disruption to their lives. It is not right for all this to be put on them. It is the State and the private companies who are responsible and they should pay not ordinary homeowners.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:

"notes that:

— the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant Scheme (DCB Scheme), which provides grants to help those affected by defective concrete blocks to remediate their homes, is underpinned by the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 (2022 Act);

— over 3,500 homeowners are now at various stages of the DCB Scheme, and will be supported with grants for 100 per cent of eligible expenditure up to a maximum cap of €462,000 per household, and this represents a 10 per cent increase in the maximum cap since the DCB Scheme launched in 2023;

— more than €336 million has been spent on the DCB Scheme to date, with a commitment to more than doubling the level of funding for 2026 to €175 million, and to continue higher investment levels over the entire period of the National Development Plan 2026-2030;

— the DCB Scheme is actively helping homeowners to rebuild their homes, allowing them to move on with their lives;

— over 500 homes have been fully remediated to date, with approximately 750 more currently at various stages of construction;

— additional counties continue to be added to the DCB Scheme, clearly showing the Government's commitment to help all those affected by the legacy defects caused by defective blocks;

— the legislation refers to I.S. (Irish Standard) 465:2018, the Standard which provides for the assessment, testing and categorisation of damaged buildings incorporating concrete blocks containing certain deleterious material, which was published in November 2018, and the 2018 version of the Standard did not require any testing of foundations as there has never been any evidence of damage to foundations, and the DCB Scheme and the underpinning legislation make no provision for such testing;

— in November 2021, as Ireland's official standards body, the National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI) was tasked by the Government with a special review of the concrete Standard, this review started in March 2022, and has been conducted by the TC 63 Concrete Blocks Committee of the NSAI, membership of this Committee included representatives of the concrete industry, Engineers Ireland, the Geological Survey Ireland, homeowner action groups, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Housing Agency; and

— a new revised Standard, I.S. 465:2026, was recently published by the NSAI on 2nd June, 2026, and the revised Standard is based on new research in the area, it entails quite significant changes from the previous Standard in that, under the new Standard, almost all houses with defective concrete blocks would be demolished, and furthermore, the Standard provides for the testing of the foundations of each house in case they may be found to be affected at some point in the future, notwithstanding that there are no current cases of damage to foundations; and

agrees that:

- aspects of the changes entailed by the new Standard require detailed consideration in terms of the DCB Scheme, and could entail significant financial implications for the State if adopted under the DCB Scheme;
- the 2022 Act requires that the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage shall, on the publication of the revised Standard, undertake a review of the legislation, the Act also requires that, not later than three months after the completion of the review, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage shall make a report to each House of the Oireachtas of their findings and conclusions resulting from the review, and it is intended that this formal review of the DCB Scheme will be initiated by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage shortly;
- existing DCB Scheme participants who have already received their determination under I.S. 465:2018 will have the choice to continue with their works;
- the review will focus, as per the provisions of Section 51 of the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022, on the operation of the Act in the first instance, with all matters relating to the introduction of I.S. 465:2026 and its interaction with the DCB Scheme being considered as part of the review, and this will include the matter of foundations; and
- the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage will consider all implications of the new I.S. 465:2026, and make recommendations to the Government on any proposed changes to the DCB Scheme as soon as possible."

I would like to thank the group involved in bringing this motion to the House today. The case is well made by Deputy Charles Ward, in particular. No one has lived this experience the way he has. No Member of this House can say they have lived and breathed this issue the way he has, having personally experienced it, so I completely appreciate the points and sentiments made. That is no disrespect to Deputy Murphy, in that his point is made as well but I wanted to say at the outset that Deputy Ward has lived this and can speak about it with authority.

The standards were just revised on 2 June. We have to rely on the science that we have. There are mixed messages. On the one hand Deputy Murphy is saying the science is faulty. Deputy Ward is saying he has full faith in the science and the scientists. We have to decide whether we trust the science and the evidence we have as per the revised standards or not. If I can give a shred of comfort, despite the fact we are proposing an amendment, the Minister has committed to reviewing the Act as quickly as possible. I do not have an exact timeline for that but it will be reviewed as quickly as possible because, as the Deputy said, new evidence is always emerging.

Today's motion sets out a number of matters relating to the recently released national standard. I will do my best in the time I have to address as many as I can. As the debate progresses, I am sure there will be time at the end to address further issues during the time allocated for concluding remarks.

First, I would like to emphasise the Government recognises the distress experienced by thousands of homeowners caused by the use of defective concrete blocks in their homes. My Government colleagues and I are absolutely committed to ensuring that all such homeowners

are provided with the right assistance to remediate their homes to allow them to move on with their lives.

The publication of the new standard is welcome. The Deputies will be aware that in November 2021 as Ireland's official standards body, the National Standards Authority of Ireland was tasked by the Government with a special review of the previous standard. This review started in March 2022 and has been conducted by the TC63 concrete blocks committee of the National Standards Authority of Ireland.

Membership of this committee included representatives of the concrete industry, Engineers Ireland, the Geological Survey Ireland, homeowner action groups and the Housing Agency. The Department also participated in this group during the full period of its deliberations on the revision of IS 465: 2018. The State also funded the required independent research that contributed significantly to the review of the standard. My Department remains in regular contact with those affected and we continue to work to listen to homeowners as we keep the scheme under review to identify where we can improve how it operates.

The level of commitment shown by this Government to affected homeowners is clearly shown by our actions over the past few years. Principally these relate to the funding we have provided and the way we have extended the scope of the scheme as and when needed. Finally, there is the very real and practical way in which we monitor how the scheme is working within the framework of the legislation set down by the Oireachtas and how we adapt to changing circumstances to improve the scheme for homeowner participants on a continuous basis, including making amending legislation in the Houses last year.

Over 3,500 homeowners are now at various stages of the DCB grant scheme and will be supported with grants for eligible expenditure up to a maximum cap of €462,000 per household - this represents a 10% increase in the maximum cap since the scheme launched in 2023. More than €336 million has been spent on the scheme to date and Government funding for this work continues to be provided as and when required on an annual basis, with a record €175 million allocated to fund the scheme in 2026 - that is more than double the amount allocated to the scheme last year and reflects in the increase up take in the grant scheme.

Over 500 homes have been fully remediated to date, with approximately 750 more currently at various stages of construction.

When the current grant scheme launched in 2023 it contained four designated local authority areas. In 2024 Sligo County Council was added to the scheme and this year parts of Fingal County Council and Wexford County Council were added to the scheme. Parts of Meath County Council and Carlow County Council will also shortly be added to the scheme. Following the commencement of various parts of the defective concrete block (amendment) Act 2025, the Minister, Deputy Browne, adopted regulations in February and June that provided welcome improvements to the grant scheme. The February regulations allowed homeowners who had suffered construction inflation to apply to the scheme for an increased grant, which resulted in them receiving additional funding to remediate their homes. The June regulations operationalised further improvements, including a key change to allow certain homeowners apply to the scheme to enable them to build a new property adjacent to their defective home and remain in it until the new home is completed. This has provided welcome relief for families who have homes adapted for the needs of members of the household. These

regulations also recognised that there are many affected homes that are attached to other affected homes, such as semi-detached properties. Prior to this change, if one of the two attached dwellings did not meet the scheme damage threshold, it could not proceed to obtain a determination from the Housing Agency. The regulations provide a route for this cohort of applicants and provide a pathway for them to receive a determination under the grant scheme. The point is there have been adaptations and amendments since the grant scheme was first introduced.

The current grant scheme was designed in accordance with the prevailing scientific evidence available at the time. With the publication of IS 465:2026 we have the most up-to-date science available that will help shape changes to the grant scheme following a review of the operation of the 2022 Act. This requirement is contained in section 51 of the Act. It requires the Minister for Housing must initiate a review within three months of the completion of the review of the national standard, I.S. 465:2018, and that within months of the completion of the review he shall make a report to each House of the Oireachtas with his findings and conclusions of the review. I understand the urgency of this review for homeowners. Officials in my Department have already begun preparation work that will assist the review. A request for legal advice was submitted to the Attorney General's office and it has provided initial advice on the implications of I.S. 465:2026 for the grant scheme, with further advice expected in the coming weeks. The initial advice has indicated current scheme participants can continue to proceed with their works under the determination given to them. I emphasise that the review will focus, as per the provisions of the 2022 Act, on the operation of the Act in the first instance.

All matters relating to the introduction of IS 465:2026 and its interaction with the grant scheme will be considered as part of the review of the 2022 Act. This will include the matter of foundations. I appreciate that naturally there has been significant focus on the foundations issue arising out of the publication of the revised standard. My understanding is that there were a range of views submitted to the NSAI regarding the impact or otherwise on foundations in the medium to longer term. Until this important review is complete it would be premature for me to speculate on exactly what changes may be required to the grant scheme with regard to foundations or indeed any other aspect of the scheme. I want to ensure that, as we now have the most up-to-date science, proper time and consideration is given to understanding how this new knowledge impacts the scheme and how we can best use it to assist applicants to the scheme.

I am very much aware also of the very real concern out there among homeowners who wish to have clarity and certainty about how their sometimes unique sets of circumstances will be catered for going forward. A balance will have to be struck between a robust and comprehensive review and the need to have this done in a timely manner that pays due respect to the real concerns of homeowners. My Department has been working closely over the past few weeks since the publication of IS 465:2026 with the designated local authorities, the Housing Agency and the homeowner liaison officer. A number of meetings have taken place to assess the potential immediate impact of the revised standard on scheme participants. Communications will issue shortly from my Department to update homeowners in detail, where appropriate, on where they stand following the IS 465 revision.

This Government has always committed to following the science when it comes to the defective concrete blocks scheme. The approach I have outlined in my speech is once again

clear evidence of this. I conclude by thanking the National Standards Authority of Ireland for the time and effort that went into the new standard. I specifically acknowledge the efforts of the committee members and acknowledge that this voluntary work was time-consuming and difficult. That outlines the current situation. The new standards have just been published. The potential impact is still being realised but, as has been the case since the grant scheme was introduced, we have always amended and adapted it and introduced new measures and provisions. If it is necessary to do so again, we will do that, but the Minister has committed to reviewing the Act as quickly as possible and bringing that report to the Houses.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: I have huge sympathy for the people affected by this in Donegal, Mayo, Clare, Limerick and other areas because I live in an area where we had the blight of pyrite. So many housing estates in our area were affected because the quarry was situated there. It did not regulate itself and there was a lack of Government regulation. Thousands of people were impacted by this and I campaigned on it and held public meetings on it over the years. This is slightly different but the principle is the same, namely, developers have been allowed to do whatever they want. Any time there are building defects they are not made to pay and it is often the State that pays. That is a political decision by Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and the other parties that have been in power with them.

This is quite a technical motion but the basics of it are that people are in a situation where they do not know whether what the Government is providing is going to work and whether it will be enough. They cannot be the people who are left paying for this because of a lack of government regulation of developers. We know the history of the Minister of State's party in particular, including the Galway tent and all that. The lack of regulation stems from that. Since the last motion was put on this issue I understand the number of homes affected by the defective blocks could rise to 20,000. That is up from the 9,500 mentioned at the housing committee last year. Only 435 houses built with defective concrete blocks, or 13% of the homes, have had remediation works and the State-funded scheme to address the situation has not been sufficient. At the time of the last motion the standards that were used to determine remediation under the scheme were being revised and reviewed. People are essentially being asked to make a decision on retaining or changing a foundation based on uncertain grounds and a complete absence of long-term knowledge. This motion is asking for a full independent review of the standard and in particular wants the remediation scheme to acknowledge this uncertainty. The State has a responsibility to these homeowners. It cannot be a one-and-done situation. The State must provide long-term supports for those affected and it requires a long-term commitment from this Government.

I will mention the experience of people of with pyrite in their houses in many counties. The Minister might clarify something about the Pyrite Remediation Board. It was going to finish this November. That cannot happen. As recently as yesterday I was in a home in my local area. The woman who lives there is a teacher and has owned it for 20 years. She bought an affordable home and it is still cracking. There are cracks appearing in the walls and ceilings and there are holes. There is movement of the home. The assessment she had done – this is a real problem – indicated the house had pyrite level 1, which is not enough to be fixed under the remediation scheme, whereby a house must have at least pyrite level 2. There are thousands of people in this situation where there are homes that are not going to be fixed by the scheme. What are they meant to do? Obviously they cannot sell the homes. The engineer who did the

assessment also said there were huge levels of shoddy workmanship and shoddy building practices. The company that did those homes has moved on, with a new name I believe, as they do. It is building away and profiteering from the housing shortage. I do not know the figure but I know people in my local area who have been - diagnosed is not the right word - assessed as having pyrite level 1.

They have not been able to avail of the scheme. Somebody has to fix their houses. It is the fault of the developer and the State for not having the building regulations in place that pertain in most advanced capitalist countries. They are just not in place in Ireland.

According to the reply to a parliamentary question that I asked, the pyrite remediation scheme has fixed 2,932 homes. That was due to campaigns by residents. It was not the Government waking up one morning and saying, "We should do the right thing." It was a campaign of public meetings in my own area, petitions, meetings with the council and meetings with politicians. That was the case in other areas as well. There were protests outside the Dáil before I was ever a TD. It was the residents who had to campaign. In fairness, the pyrite remediation scheme worked very well for the residents I spoke to, who were at level 2 and were able to get their whole home fixed and accommodation sorted out. Kudos for that, but it is leaving out people whose homes were said not to be sufficiently damaged. However, those homes are still heaving and there is still movement. It should not cost as much as it would to fix a house from scratch, or anything like that, but they need to be fixed.

I also want to raise the other building regulation issues that have arisen. I have been contacted by people in apartments in Ashtown who have had a levy put on their management fees in order to pay to fix fire safety defects. The residents, who probably paid hand over fist for the apartments, are being levied to pay to fix fire defects. They have applied to the Housing Agency under the statutory remediation scheme, but they had to go to TDs to ask if we can also push to see if they can get any reimbursement. What is the story? It is bad enough that they have to raise the money to get it fixed and that they are having difficulty getting reimbursed. I am sure there are several schemes that the housing Department is involved in, but the fact there are schemes like that shows that there also has to be some scheme for the possibly hundreds of homes that did not have sufficient pyrite for it to be fixed fully under the remediation scheme.

I want to send my solidarity to all of those affected by the defective concrete blocks issue. I have seen first-hand the impact it has on people's health. Where there is damp and dust, anyone with an asthmatic or respiratory condition could testify that it has made it much worse, but there is also the issue of dealing with a crumbling home. The home is the one safety and security people have in their lives. To see this constantly happening to the adults, children and teenagers affected is unbelievable. When are we going to hold building companies to account in this country? Light-touch regulation or no regulation at all is what happened here. It led to these situations where quarries were not regulated and, therefore, mica, pyrite and all of these issues have developed. To allow builders to build and move off, and to then have the residents themselves pay for safety issues in apartments, is completely out of order. It is beyond time that this was dealt with. I fully support the motion.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: When you read the book *Defects* written by my colleague, Deputy Eoin Ó Broin, you realise that the decisions that led to this absolute disaster emanated from this Chamber. Again and again over the years, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Governments

and Ministers were challenged about the regulation of the building and construction industry. Again and again, they failed to properly regulate and oversee that industry, and we will pay a devastating cost for generations. As has been said, last night, we learned from Chris Brough, the head of Petrolab, an expert who is testing these concrete blocks, that he estimates the number of houses that will be affected is going to be over 20,000. I believe that is a very conservative estimate. The cost to the Exchequer will not be what the Taoiseach, Deputy Micheál Martin, said, which is €3.6 billion. It will be over €9 billion, and I believe that is a conservative estimate. We are going to be haunted by this for generations because of the utter political failure. Where we are at now is on a scale with the bailing out of the banks and the bondholders. That is the impact this will have.

It goes deeper. I live in the epicentre of this. My friends, my family and my neighbours are utterly devastated. Can we imagine it? The biggest purchase of your life is your home, the roof over your head. You commit to it with a mortgage for years and years. It is your castle, your pride and joy. All your memories, everything, are built around that. For a long time, I have seen the utter devastation of the impact and cost of the decisions that were made in this Chamber, the neglect that took place in this Chamber, and the relationships that people who are in this Chamber had with people who were building and manufacturing. It reached its apex during the Celtic tiger. That is when so many of these homes were built utterly recklessly.

I want to be very clear, although it has been said already. The Government wants to move on. It wants to say that it is on top of this: “See that protest with 20,000 people. We have all moved on from that now.” To be very clear, it is just the beginning of the realisation of the scale. There are housing estates in Donegal near my home area where only 10% or 15% of the whole estate is being rebuilt. All of those houses will have to be rebuilt. Tens of thousands of properties will have to be rebuilt. It will be a massive amount of money that will impact us for generations, thanks to people in this Chamber who made those decisions.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I thank Deputy Charles Ward for bringing forward this enormously important motion, but also for inviting Sinn Féin and other Opposition parties to co-sign it, which we did with enormous enthusiasm. It is deeply disappointing that the Minister has tabled the amendment. In fact, what it says to me is that he is not listening to homeowners in the affected counties. What Deputy Ward and others have put in the motion is eminently reasonable. It is to encourage further scientific clarity to support homeowners.

The gap between the Government's rhetoric on the scheme to date and the lived reality of affected homeowners is growing ever wider. The numbers do not lie. It is eight years since the Government took a decision to introduce a defective concrete blocks scheme, six years since the first applications were received, four years since deeply problematic, controversial legislation for a renewed scheme was rushed through this House and three years since that scheme opened for applications. How many homes have been fully remediated in that time? According to the Department, the most recent update from May is 527. In eight years, only 3,500 homes have applied, and about half of those have been approved.

Why? This motion goes to the very heart of it. It is because of the uncertainty underpinning the science and the fact that it is not 100% redress. I spoke to a woman with a modest home in County Clare that needs a full demolition and rebuild. She had to find an additional €80,000

to cover the cost of her home, and that is not an unusual case. Of course, there is the ongoing bureaucracy and delay in decisions.

I am also deeply disappointed that the Minister is not able to give us a timeline for the review. This review is crucial to fix the many aspects of this broken scheme. We need the Minister to tell us when the review will be, who it will be led by, what the terms of reference will be and what the outcomes will be. Without a timeline, we are going nowhere. This motion is sensible and reasonable. The defective concrete blocks scheme is utterly broken and needs urgent reform, but there is simply no urgency whatsoever from the Government. That is not a surprise. The entire history of the Government dealing with building defects has been a lack of ambition and urgency.

A case in point is that we still do not even have the underpinning legislation for the redress scheme for Celtic tiger era building defects.

We were promised it would be introduced at the start of this year and be passed before the summer, with the Minister saying he hoped people would be able to apply for that scheme by the end of 2026. The legislation has not even been written yet. Deputy Coppinger is right; the two schemes for interim fire safety works and retrospective repayments are not working. Not a single retrospective payment has been paid to date, and only three schemes out of approximately 200 have got into the interim fire safety. It is utterly broken and needs change but this Government is not listening. However, I commend this motion to the House.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I welcome Deputy Ward's motion and am delighted to be able to sign it. There is no doubt that huge credit is due to people like Professor Paul Dunlop and his colleagues at Ulster University, as well as Members of this House, including members of my own party such as Deputy Mac Lochlainn and others who have led the charge along with Deputy Ó Broin in relation to this area here.

The reality is that the Government has got this wrong. For many years, we have stood in this House and in committees and told the Government it is analysing the wrong problem and that, as a result, it is coming up with the wrong solutions. Now, the penny has dropped. The international evidence has been accepted and the standards have been updated. However, there are now many people in my county and other counties who have been told the remedy was something flawed. Outer leaf was nonsense, partial demolition was nonsense and downgrading of the assessments was absolute nonsense, but the Government refuses to listen over and over again.

In the middle of all this, as we are talking about blocks in houses and costs and all the rest, there are human beings and families who are living in these situations. The Government continues with the misery, pain and hardship because it still will not recognise what needs to be done here. We need a full 100% redress scheme - an end-to-end scheme such as the one we in Sinn Féin put forward to the Government many years ago. For six, seven or eight years, we have been telling Government that the people of Donegal, Clare, Mayo and right across the west coast and beyond deserve the same rights as those who had it on the east coast, who got 100% redress and an end-to-end scheme.

The reality is that the Government wants to put its head in the sand and hope this will go away, but it will not. No matter what tinkering the Government does with this scheme, it is not

going to work for many people because they do not have €50,000, €60,000 or €70,000 under their mattress; it does not exist. There are people at an age in life who should never be asked to manage rebuilding their home. Why? Because it was not their fault. It was the Government's fault. As Deputy Mac Lochlainn said, it was the Government's fault because it cosied up to builders and developers and filled its pockets down in the Galway tent, allowing for no regulation. That has caused havoc in my county. It has destroyed the lives of people.

Now that the Government has finally seen sense with regard to the standards, it should please listen to the experts, the people on the ground and the Opposition when we tell it to stop with the tinkering. We need a 100% redress scheme, we need an end-to-end scheme and we need to end this misery once and for all.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank Deputy Ward for bringing forward this motion. It is no surprise that I and my colleagues are very happy to support it. It is very important we all work together to tackle this.

However, the Government is still not listening; it is not hearing what is being said. That is the great tragedy of all this. Since we started this nearly 12 years ago - or more than that - on the Erris peninsula in Mayo, the Government has not listened. If it had listened, we would now have a 100% redress scheme and many people would have their homes and lives rebuilt. I cannot understand why it is inflicting this cruelty on people through no fault of their own. This was negligence of Government; it was a lack of regulation. Now, we see all kinds of other things where we are told regulations are too strict and we need to deregulate things. My God, there is a human cost to this as well as the monetary and opportunity costs.

Yesterday, Dr. Chris Browne and Professor Paul Dunlop - I do not know where we would be without them and their colleagues in Ulster University who have brought forward the science on this, because the Government has not done it - presented the cost as being estimated at €462,000 per property for 20,000 properties, which will be at least €9.2 billion. That is what is coming out of taxpayers' pockets to do this. There has not been any proper attempt to recoup some of that money from anywhere else, as was done in Wales, as Dr. Browne explained to us yesterday, where there was a division of the responsibilities and how the redress funds were set up. It has not been set up like that here but the decisions have to be based on the science.

The other very important thing which came up yesterday was foundations. We have said all along that foundations have to be tested. For God's sake, Engineering Ireland has told the Government that. It cannot sign off on properties where the foundations have not been replaced. People cannot afford the gaps that are there. Deputy Doherty spoke about the gaps of €80,000 or whatever, but there are gaps of up to €100,000 that people are asked to find to pay for the Government's negligence on this.

The off-ramping situation also has to be looked at in order to be able to speed up the testing.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: Thousands of homeowners affected by defective concrete have spent many years living with uncertainty in their homes. They have constantly worried every time there is a storm whether their house is going to survive, and I have helped some of them

as they navigated the inadequate remediation options. I have watched as they have become experts in what is destroying their homes. When they finally get approval for a scheme, they are left with decisions on whether the existing foundations should be retained or not, or whether they can even afford to get the foundations removed on top of all the other costs involved in a so-called 100% redress scheme.

In the Minister of State's amendment, he states that 3,500 homeowners are now at various stages of the DCB scheme and will be supported with grants for 100% of eligible expenditure with a cap. In his opening statement, there was no mention of 100% redress, and I have yet to meet anyone going through this scheme who has not had to pay tens of thousands out of their own pockets to fix or rebuild their homes.

The Minister of State also said the DCB scheme is actively helping homeowners rebuild their homes, allowing them to move on with their lives. Has he gone out to meet these people? The process they have had to go through on a rebuild is not that simple. I have met them and they actively cannot just move on with their lives; it is not that simple. They have had to spend years fighting the system and many hours learning what it is that is destroying their homes, and they have had to beg and borrow in order to rebuild their homes. The mental scars they have been left with mean they cannot just simply move on.

The Taoiseach promised 100% redress and he has let the people down. The Government talks about changes and that a new standard could entail significant financial implications, but those who are actually responsible should be held to account. The homeowner should never have to be the fall guy when they are already the victim, but of course, it is easier to lay it all in the hands of families who just want to live in a home that is safe and secure. Does the Government even care that they have to borrow? Some couples I have met are in retirement and cannot get a loan. At a time in life when they should be enjoying the time they have, they are spending it in constant worry.

There are families out there living in crumbling homes and homes affected by fire safety regulations who have no choice but to continue living there until they fall down, because of the failure of this Government to make them feel they can rebuild with a 100% redress scheme and move on with their lives. We have repeatedly raised this issue with successive Governments for years now. I have attended protests over the years with those in Clare who are affected. The light-touch building regulation, poor oversight of construction products and the reckless practices of some manufacturers, builders and developers have left thousands of homeowners with the devastation of crumbling or unsafe homes.

They did not ask for this, and it is time the Government gave a genuine, 100% redress scheme delivered by the State from end-to-end. The standard IS 465:2026 is welcome and should be included. Professor Paul Dunlop has to be commended for this. I commend Deputy Ward on the motion.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I commend Deputy Ward on bringing forward this motion here today. The reality is that we are here because of the light touch regulation of Government and the practices of quarries and those who developed the concrete products used through the boom across many parts of the country. In my own constituency in Sligo, we have hundreds of houses that have been affected, and it has also spread to other areas. It is not just the counties on this list.

11 o'clock

It is important to recognise there are houses outside of it and people in other communities that are also affected.

I spoke to some people in a housing estate. They can see the issues, they are talking about them and they have spoken to the county council. They are afraid to tell their neighbours they have this problem because everybody is frightened of what impact it is going to have on the value of their home and that of the other houses built around them. The worry all this causes is devastating. That worry is compounded by the Government having refused to put in place a scheme that will actually give 100% redress.

I welcome the changes in the new regulations, where we now see that there is at least a recognition it may not be mica or pyrite in some of these houses. It may be other minerals causing these issues. I know of a number of cases where tests were done. I am thinking of two houses in particular. The first test said those houses had mica, while the second said they had none. They are going off now for a third test to see what the situation is. If the result again states there is nothing, then these people will be back in a situation where they do not comply with the standards. We have got serious issues here with many people who have serious problems.

The other issue is that it is not just blocks in many cases. It is other concrete materials, including the foundations. I welcome that this aspect is now going to be examined and will be part of the scheme. For years, however, we have been saying this, and the Government has refused to listen. The reason the Government has refused to listen is because it wants to continue to back away from the problem it created. The Government created this problem through light-touch regulation and the cosy relationship there was with the people who provided these products. The builders, who in so many cases are innocent, bought the products in good faith and put them into the houses. Who was left to foot the bill? Only the householders. We need to see a proper scheme put in place to give people at least some sense that the Government has their backs in these circumstances.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank Deputy Charles Ward for bringing forward this motion and for giving us the opportunity to co-sign it, which, as my colleague said, we were more than pleased to do.

I have been dealing with the legacy of the Government's soft touch or, indeed, non-existent regulation since I was elected. The core point here, and this is the thing that is very often lost, most especially on Fianna Fáil Ministers but also on the Government in general, is that my constituents in north County Dublin did absolutely nothing wrong. They bought their homes. They made what is the biggest investment of their lives in good faith. They are not engineers. When the builder told them that the house was up to scratch, they expected that it was going to be up to scratch. For decades, thousands of them have endured their homes crumbling. Can you imagine the trauma of not feeling safe in your home? It is the one place where you should have a right to feel safe and secure. While the lads who were in the Galway tent will sail away off into the sunset, happy, rich and benefiting from the sale of those homes, the people they left behind will deal with the trauma for generations.

Homeowners in Lusk are now being told they will have to pay for another test to get a green certificate, when they were told back in 2013 that they had to wait three years and would then get their green certificate. They are not getting it now. They have to get another test that is, potentially, going to cost them €2,500. This is never-ending. These people have been dealing with this situation now for 20 years. They bought their homes in 2003 and, within a couple of years, those houses started to crumble. The problem is never going to end unless the Government is prepared to deal with it. Likewise, Fingal was only admitted to the new scheme this year and already people are being told that this scheme is not fit for purpose.

I ask the Minister of State to please withdraw the Government's obnoxious amendment and listen to the people, and their representatives, who are dealing with this issue. I also ask him to acknowledge the role of his party, the Galway tent, its cosy relationship with developers and all that has happened, and to have the decency to say sorry to people and to make proper amends. A 100% redress scheme should mean 100%.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: On behalf of the Social Democrats, I am very happy to speak to this issue today. I commend Deputy Charles Ward on the work he has done in bringing this motion to the floor of the Dáil and for his tireless work on this issue. We are very happy to co-sign this motion. I will also mention that my colleague, Deputy Rory Hearne, is unavailable today, which is why I am stepping in. He remains, as we do as a party, 100% committed to 100% redress and to communities, particularly along the west coast, so horrifically impacted by this issue.

I also thank Deputy Ward and his team for the new research we were briefed on yesterday. Key to what we learned from that briefing, and it has come up a number of times already today, is that the County and City Management Association, CCMA, previously estimated at an Oireachtas committee that the number of homes affected by defective concrete blocks stood at 9,500. Members heard yesterday, however, that there could actually be up to 20,000 homes, and that is just the figure for private estate homes. This estimate excludes data from social housing, businesses and community buildings.

In relation to the Government's amendment, it is significant that a new revised standard, I.S. 465:2026, was published on 2 June. This new standard does allow for the testing of foundations, which is a key point of today's motion and for the campaign to date, but the ball is now very much in the Government's court. It now needs to review these new standards and make recommendations regarding any proposed changes. People will be postponing works while they wait on the outcome of these changes, and these are works which, in some cases, may have been in train for ten years.

I also wish to speak about the administrative issues associated with the scheme. Deputy Ward has brought a number of cases to the floor of the Dáil. He has discussed how some constituents of his were assessed and, subsequently, their remediation options were downgraded from full demolitions. If the guiding principle of these assessments is I.S. 465:2018, and this is causing people to have to stay in unsafe homes or is not providing sufficient remediation for the demolition needed, then the standard itself must be re-examined. The State cannot allow people to stay in unsafe homes due to an outdated standard applying to assessments. As of April, only 13% of applicants had completed the remediation process, with 87% stuck in administrative limbo.

This is where we now see the massive human cost of this scandal. Homes with defective concrete blocks are linked to a severely high prevalence of mental health conditions. Rates of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, complex post-traumatic stress disorder and suicidal ideation were “comparable to those seen in disaster-stricken and displaced populations”, as noted by one researcher in 2025. Researchers from Ulster University called for immediate, targeted mental health interventions for those affected by the issue of defective concrete blocks. There is extreme trauma in these communities and families that will have knock-on effects in these communities for years and generations if adequate supports are not provided to people in tandem with the appropriate and accessible redress schemes.

People living in these homes have described their lives as existing and not living. I have had conversations with people living in homes affected by this issue. I have previously mentioned their names here in the Chamber; Ms Marti McElhinney and Dr. Áine Sperrin. They spoke about how frustrating the process of getting redress is, how families are unable to finance a demolition that has been approved, and how they are unable to find somewhere to stay in the meantime, while their towns are dotted with short-term lets. They told me stories about engineers telling families that their houses needed to be knocked, only for the scheme to only approve partial works. They told me how all these costs have to be paid upfront by families who simply do not have the money, how the communities affected by this crisis are some of the most impoverished in the country, how their houses are literally falling down around them, how the knock-on impact means that children suffer health issues connected to living in unsafe conditions, and that those with disabilities are stuck in crumbling buildings because they cannot get temporary accommodation that is accessible. As has been raised time and time again, the mental stress and strain of this impacts every single aspect of people's lives. We are not only letting them suffer; we are denying them the basic rights of health equality and adequate standards of living.

Picking up on one of the points raised by those contributors, there is a dearth right now of alternative housing. This is because there has been stagnant social housing delivery for decades. There are estimates that 12,000 homes in County Donegal will need to be replaced. These people will need to be housed but, as is the case up and down the country, there is nowhere for them to go. There are very few homes to rent and fewer again of these are affordable homes. It is welcome that the scheme will be expanded to those who need it, but the problem of where people will live while works are ongoing will follow this scheme wherever it is available.

This brings me to my next point, which is that side-by-side building should be allowed under the scheme. Currently, side-by-side building is not permitted under the defective concrete blocks, DCB, redress scheme. This would have allowed for families to remain on site and not bear the burden of rent or storage costs while works are ongoing. In the last five years, 300 homes have been built, and over 3,000 people currently trying to go through the scheme are stuck in this process.

For children with additional needs, the disruption of moving home for the duration of the rebuild has been raised by parents as an issue. Finally, I want to speak to accountability because lax regulations and a hands-off approach from successive Governments has allowed cowboy developers to wreak havoc in communities across Ireland and essentially sowed the seeds for this scandal. Now, these cowboys are facing no consequences. These are builders who used

defective materials, built dangerously, and then walked away, leaving families and children to suffer the consequences of their carelessness and pay for it with their homes. The vast majority are still building. A number of them are getting very high-profile public sector contracts. It seems there are no consequences. There is remediation in this scheme but it is not close to justice.

I want to pick up on one line in the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan's statement, before the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, arrived. He said, "The level of commitment shown by this Government to affected homeowners is clearly shown by our actions over the past few years." It just does not ring true compared with every contribution that we are hearing here today. The counter-motion the Government has put forward needs to be withdrawn. The Government needs to support this motion. It is a detailed, technical motion, put forward by an expert and the community he represents, who are experts in their own lives and their own situations. We need 100% redress.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I support this motion. I am thinking of the thousands of families across Ireland whose lives are absolutely devastated by the defective concrete blocks crisis. I pay tribute to Deputy Charles Ward for his relentless work on this issue. Since he came in through this door, he has gone at this issue every single week. He could not have worked harder on this. The people who elected him to Dáil Éireann must be very proud of the work he is doing, so well done and keep going. I have no doubt that the Deputy will keep going. I know he is trying to secure justice, accountability and full redress for the people who he represents in Donegal and throughout the country, so well done to him.

I do not think this is just an issue in housing. It also has community-wide and education effects. As education spokesperson, I am aware that there are 16 schools in Donegal that we know of affected by this crisis, with seemingly a new report every week of it happening elsewhere throughout the country. If there are children in those schools who are living in a home that is affected by the defective blocks, then they go to school and it is the same situation, there is no let-up for that child. As my colleague said, this is affecting people's mental health. The foundations of their life are literally crumbling beneath them. If that is at home and at it is at school, it is utterly heartbreaking for those people.

I am aware the Department of education has confirmed that it is engaging with the schools. I do not know if it engages with every single school because it did not give me that number. If we are spending State money on State buildings and they are defective, it is an utter waste of money and an utter disgrace. This is creating untold anxiety for parents, staff and the children in those buildings. This whole scenario showed a lack of oversight, regulation and accountability. Families have spent years campaigning for their experiences to even be understood and believed. The Government is quite slow on this. I would say people feel a little bit gaslit. I do not think that is good enough. I think it is a shame, when an expert tables a motion, that the Government comes with a counter-motion. It is a waste. Why does the Government not just believe what is being said and why does it not listen and get this sorted? As my colleague said, cowboy builders have gone off, not a bother on them, and the State is left to pick it up. Do pick it up and do make it better for the people who are affected by this.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I welcome the visitors to the Gallery. As others have said, I pay tribute to Deputy Ward on the work he has done. Last October, my colleague, Senator Nessa

Cosgrove, and I went to Donegal to visit some of the people who are affected by this humanitarian disaster. I thought I knew about defective concrete and that I could quantify in my head the actual scale of the humanitarian disaster but I cannot. I cannot help thinking, every time I think of defective concrete, of putting my hand on someone's house and feeling the wall come away like dust. I cannot help but think of the smell of the black mould in the kitchens we went to visit, the fact that the lights and electricity keep tripping because water is ingressing through everything, and that chimneys fall off people's houses and that is considered to be not that big a deal. I met somebody else who was concerned about their safety and their children's because the walls were crumbling so badly on their house that they are afraid that the roof would come down and crush them.

The Government's amendment to the motion is tone-deaf. The amendment states that the scheme relies on IS 465:2018, which does not require testing of foundations. What is the point of pouring a brand new house onto a cracked foundation? It does not make any sense. The motion notes that 500 homes were remediated. Five hundred homes is a fraction. It is minuscule compared with the true level of need. We had a very informative presentation in the audiovisual room by Professor Paul Dunlop, who is an expert in this area. He quantified that at least 12,000 homes could be affected in Donegal at home. We have this in Limerick too. It is not just an issue in Donegal and the north west. We have this in Limerick city. I have had people in my constituency office in tears because they are living in semi-detached homes in Limerick city. As Professor Dunlop pointed out yesterday, defective concrete takes a lot longer to actually show up in areas like Limerick. A woman who came to see me, who is involved in the defective concrete campaign in Limerick, only had the defective concrete show up when she got an SEAI grant and got the walls pumped. When she got the walls pumped, that effectively showed all the cracks.

The core issue remains, that the people who are suffering this humanitarian disaster are being treated as second-class citizens in comparison to the people who were equally devastated by pyrite in Fingal and on the eastern seaboard of the country. That is a fact and the core of the issue here. The legislation is too narrow. I cannot believe that people are still talking about mica, when the fact of the matter is that this is not just something that affects defective concrete blocks in houses but affects poured concrete and other building material. The core issue, as always in this country with anything during the Celtic tiger period, is the lack of any accountability because we know that, as well as the quarry owners, the political system was up to its neck in this. We have had a total regulatory failure. We have quarries which have and are manufacturing defective concrete and getting away with it.

How has the State responded? It has responded, as it always does to victims of injustice, by forcing blameless citizens to prove that they are not lying, by bureaucratically downgrading their applications at the click of a mouse, and by passing the long-term risk back onto them. The State is effectively telling homeowners to rebuild their lives on top of foundations that we know contain pyrite and other sulphide materials, and it is absolute madness. You are talking about being penny wise but you are really being pound foolish. The standard that the Government is relying on is operating under conditions of material scientific uncertainty. There is no long-term evidence that these foundations will hold up over the next 30, 40 or 50 years. You cannot tell a family to build a home on a questionable foundation and just leave them to hold the legal and financial bag if the foundation fails a decade or more from now.

We need an independent review of IS 465:2026, specifically considering how sulphites and pyrrhotite destroy foundations over time. We need to amend the defective concrete block scheme so no individual is ever forced to retain a foundation where engineering uncertainty exists.

Homeowners must have an explicit, fully funded right to opt for a complete foundation replacement if there is reasonable doubt. We need to ensure that all residual structural risk remains with the State. If the State standard fails, then the State is going to have to pay because the homeowners cannot.

This crisis was caused by a catastrophic failure of government regulation and a total lack of oversight in the quarrying sector, particularly from the Fianna Fáil Government of 1997 onwards. The State completely failed to protect the affected people. It is now time for the Government to stop the ducking and half measures and actually deliver the 100% redress the families fundamentally deserve so that they can have peace of mind.

I welcome every opportunity to speak on this issue. I commend Deputy Ward on his motion because what he is seeking to do is ensure the State assumes accountability for the risk of defective foundations in concrete homes. It is imperative that this burden does not fall on homeowners who cannot afford to pay the difference.

We have a duty as legislators to listen to and reflect the views of the people we represent. The poor families who have been affected should not be expected or forced to bear the responsibility and cost required to remedy the problem when they have gone out of their way to secure a home for their family and made that purchase in good faith, with an expectation that the home they live in will not fall down on top of them.

Homeowners should be able to feel safe in their homes. They should have confidence in the structure of the dwelling they live in. These are relatively basic things. Invariably, when homeowners like these poor people are forced into some sort of rebuild, they have one shot to make it work. They must not be forced to put blood, sweat and tears, and an insane amount of money, into rebuilding their homes only for them to be rebuilt essentially on quicksand. Forcing them to do so is absolutely bananas because once a decision has been made to rebuild, one cannot turn back the clock on it. That is why this is really important.

Through detailed scientific research, it is now known that the problems with defective concrete can be traced to an internal sulphite attack. It is clearly apparent that, with the distribution of this defective and highly damaging concrete material, numerous EU and Irish concrete regulations were violated. It is of critical importance that these regulations be enforced to prevent the *status quo* from continuing.

As other speakers said, we do not just have defective concrete in homes. There is defective concrete in secondary schools in Limerick. We need the Government to address this by commissioning an independent international review of the scientific basis of IS 465:2026 because we need a greater understanding of how and why this entered the market in the first place.

In my city, Limerick, we reckon 2,500 properties may be affected by concrete defects and deterioration. We need a different approach to this, and that is why I am really disappointed by the Government amendment.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I thank Deputy Charles Ward for all the work he has done on this. What is the Government guilty of? I sat on the housing committee last term. It is on the record of that committee that I highlighted to the Minister, and all the various witnesses and so-called professionals brought in by the Department, the issues with blocks, foundations and the weight loads on foundations under the new regulations that you try to meet when rebuilding a house. How much has it cost to bring in all the people who have given the Minister the information? We brought in professors and people from all the different sectors to inform the Minister.

Deputy Ward is like me. I am a block layer by trade. I have 35 years' experience with something that none of the Minister's professionals could actually even answer questions on when asked at meetings of the housing committee. I was able to do weight loads for them. They could not answer.

Why has it taken so long and why have people been suffering? The Government is guilty. It takes so long to build houses in this country and so long to bring in redress. That is what it is guilty of. It cannot manage anything. It does not take advice from the people who can give it and who can speed things up. If you look at the record, you see the knowledge is available. For God's sake, will the Government wake up and look at the facts? The information has been available for five or six years but the Government allowed all the families to be put through stress and anxiety, with them not knowing whether their houses would crumble down around them. The Minister sat on that committee with me, so he was present to hear what was put on record. Therefore, I do not even need to verify it. The minutes are available.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I congratulate Deputy Charles Ward on tabling this motion in the House. I am aware of the tremendous work he has done on redress and I want to acknowledge that here today.

This motion goes to the heart of trust between the State and the homeowners affected by defective concrete. The defective concrete grant scheme allows foundations to be retained under IS 465:2026 but the research behind the standard has already found that minerals have been discovered in concrete, with early signs of internal oxidation and sulphate attacks. The State's own evidence admits it does not know how these foundations will perform over time. The Government is asking families along the western seaboard, from Donegal down as far as Limerick, to take an irreversible decision to retain something that may have to be replaced in 15 to 20 years' time. If the State sets a standard, the State must take ownership of the risk.

Deputy Ward's motion calls for three fair things: the publication of the evidence base behind IS 465:2026; homeowners to be given a clear right to opt for the full replacement of foundations, which is fair and the right thing to do; and the commissioning of an independent international review of the science. That is the right thing to do. I ask everybody in this House, even though Fianna Fáil has not attended the debate and only two Donegal TDs are here, to support this motion.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank Deputy Charles Ward and his group for putting forward this motion. Would anyone in the Dáil like to be one of the people living in the affected homes? That is the reality we are asking families to accept.

We all know that buying a home is the biggest purchase most people will ever make. It is the biggest expense they will carry in a lifetime. More than that, a home is supposed to be a place of comfort, a place where, after a long day's work, one can walk in the door and feel safe, secure and at peace. For many of the homeowners, that is not the case. Instead, they are going home to houses that are literally falling apart around them, with cracks in the walls and floors and shifting foundations. These are homes that no longer feel safe. While the physical damage to these homes is bad enough, we can only imagine the toll this is taking on people's mental health, the stress, anxiety, sleepless nights and constant fear of what lies ahead.

On top of all that, we are asking the families to make a permanent decision based on standards where even the science is still evolving. That is not fair and it is not right. Families did not build these homes incorrectly. They did not create the defective materials and they certainly did not write IS 465. The State chooses the standard. The State is asking people to rely on it and, if it is asking them to do that, it must stand over the standard completely. That means that where there is doubt, the benefit must go to the homeowner. It means that if there is any risk in retaining foundations, that risk cannot and must not rest on the shoulders of ordinary, hard-working families.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Gabhaim míle buíochas leis an Teachta Charles Ward agus leis an bhfeachtas atá ann mar gheall ar defective blocks, agus de bharr an rúin atá os ár gcomhair faoi láthair. Communities have been battling for years in relation to the very basic premise that the house they have paid for should be of a standard that they can live in and that can stand.

Communities have been battling for years in defence of the basic premise that the house they paid for should be of a standard they can live in and that can stand. Aontú has been solidly behind the campaign over the past decade. I have visited many homes in Donegal with Mary T. Sweeney and witnessed the devastation. We have held public meetings in Donegal about the issue. We have marched and spoken at demonstrations in Dublin. The truth is that families' lives have been absolutely destroyed by what has happened. Local authority buildings, public buildings and schools have been left in a situation where the blocks are crumbling around them. This has happened because of light-touch regulation by previous Governments. The fact that nobody has ever been held to account is at the heart of the problem. We have a system whereby the Government allowed light-touch regulation and then did not provide for any enforcement of any regulation. Therefore, there is a responsibility on the Government to ensure there is proper compensation and these homes are brought back to proper physical standards.

I have no doubt but that there is a spatial element to this. If those defective blocks were in south Dublin, there is no doubt in my mind that the Government's approach to the issue would be significantly different. It would make sure that proper standards were in place and the proper financial supports were in place as well. There is definitely a Dublin regional bias in respect of this issue.

The Government talks about 100% redress but house owners will tell you that there is a significant difference between the redress that has been achieved and delivering the change in the buildings themselves. This legislation is still making it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for many people to come up with the necessary finance to pay for the work that is being done.

It is not just happening in Donegal. It is also happening in Mayo, Clare and Limerick, and now Meath and Cavan have been brought in too. I ask the Government to sit down with the families and not to draw out the situation any further. I ask it to ensure there is proper investment and that the standards being used in rebuilding and redress are the standards that are scientifically appropriate, as ascertained by the campaigners. That is not the case at the moment and as a result, it is creating serious difficulties for families.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: I thank Deputy Charles Ward for tabling this latest motion on behalf of families who are living in defective homes and who have waited years for help. They have got some assistance but not anything near what is needed. As I have said previously, the Deputy is meeting his mandate 1 million times over and I am happy to support him.

This motion is important for families on the western and north-western seaboard but also for those in other counties, as we have increasingly found out. The motion references the lack of redress, but also specifically focuses on the scientific gaps in IS 465:2026, such as the lack of long-term evidence on sulphide-related deterioration and the impossible decision this places on homeowners when they are asked to make what are going to be irreversible decisions about the nature of their foundations and the works required when they have no way of knowing.

The Government amendment attempts to pass the buck or put it down the road. It does not address the issues. It lists the spending commitments and the process reviews, but is still placing the burden on the families to carry the long-term risk of failures that they clearly did not cause. This has, as we know, nothing to do with snag lists or anything like that. It is about woeful incompetence that was not monitored by the Government. The review required under existing legislation is not the solution but a delaying tactic. We had years of weak oversight and a regulatory system that did not police the standards. Others have mentioned the cosy relationship between the State, sectors of industry and developers, which allowed the defective blocks to enter the market unchecked. We cannot put the burden on families when the coffers were filled for the companies and businesses, some of which have gone bankrupt. That money has long since been spent. The Government failed to enforce its own rules. This motion demands tangible action, an independent review and full transparency and that homeowners be allowed to choose the foundation replacement where uncertainty exists.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Gabhaim míle buíochas leis an Teachta Ward. Bíonn sé i gcónaí ag caint faoin ábhar tábhachtach seo. Bím ag éisteacht leis agus cloisim an bród atá aige as Tír Chonaill. I have visited some of them in my own capacity since we last spoke about the issue in this Chamber. Some of the houses in the northern part of my constituency have faced concrete defects and other issues. I welcome the Deputy's motion, particularly in respect of IS 465:2026. Irish standards were set to protect Irish people. They should not be punishing them.

We must also ensure full and fair redress and ensure that it keeps happening. What happened in my constituency, and as too often happens, was that developers and construction companies walked away, leaving areas that could not be taken in charge by the council and houses that were unreliable from a fire safety perspective to fall into degradation. After going into liquidation, such companies reopened under another name. It is not acceptable that these developers are off the hook while Irish families are paying the costs. Those responsible for the defective building work must be held accountable and stronger protections must be provided.

I looked at the amendment to the motion. It refers to a review, but a review has been done. This is not new. I urge that the review come into action.

I welcome the Minister of State's work on this issue. I hope that the Government will do that and help Deputy Charles Ward to fulfil his mandate to his constituents.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I sincerely thank Deputy Charles Ward for bringing forward this important motion. It is a reasonable motion. I acknowledge the work that has been done by people from the Government and the Opposition in securing the situation with IS 465:2026. Large sums of money have been put forward to help the affected families. I have spoken to many of them over the years. The one thing of paramount importance is the case-by-case study. In other words, I note that the motion brought forward calls for "an explicit entitlement for homeowners to opt for full foundation replacement where reasonable doubt exists as to future performance". That is reasonable. I have read the countermotion by Government. Of course, it states "notwithstanding that there are no current cases of damage to foundations" and then goes on to state the Government's position. If you look at this, it makes no sense whatsoever to not make allowances where foundations are deemed to be unsafe or unsure. It does not make sense to be giving people assistance to build a house on top of a foundation that might in the future weaken and not be of a proper standard. That is why this motion is reasonable.

I highlight at this stage that tonight I am facilitating a Minister by pairing with him to allow him to do his work but only for that fact, I would be supporting this motion. It is a reasonable motion but I am unable to vote because I am facilitating a Minister in his work.

I highlight the concern among people who find themselves in this awful situation. It is like leaving the handle go with the hatchet. The Government has recognised that this is a problem. Ignoring the fact that the foundations could also be a problem is inherently wrong.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I, too, compliment Deputy Ward, an Teachta Ward, for bringing forward this motion and for all the work he has done since he was elected and before he was elected. I also compliment na daoine in the Gallery, including Councillors Denis McGee and Joy Beard. Indeed, I also compliment the staff of Deputy Ward and the people and families who are affected. How many more times must they make the major journey to Dublin, Baile Átha Cliath, with their plastic bags? They come with knobs of concrete and they are like sawdust. It is quite obvious.

The previous Government made efforts, but I cannot for the life of me understand how anyone could decide to have a redress scheme for the blocks, mortar and walls, and forget the foundations. I have some experience. I am a plant hire contractor in foundational work and site work and everything else. The foundation is the most important part of anything, including the foundation of the families. This is so distressing to the families who have had to put up with this for so long now. It is distressing that the foundations are not included.

It is just pure lunacy. We have standards and regulations, as we have in so many other areas in this country, but they are ignored. We have regulators for everything. They have fancy offices with a brass plate outside, a CEO and staff, but they do nothing. They are toothless, useless and fruitless in my opinion. There are many of them; we appointed another one last week. We appoint them every week and there are thousands of them now.

What about the families? It is a noble intention for any person to build their own house and have a house for their family. It is the noblest intention in the world. Now people are forced to replace their homes because of the incompetence and blackguarding of a big company, which has been fined hundreds of millions in Canada, America and all over the world. However, we will not fine it here; not at all. We will put a 5% levy on the ordinary man trying to build a house to pay for this, instead of making the company pay. Everybody knows which one it is. I would be nearly afraid to speak the name, even with privilege. It is CRH. There are different names on the lorries going in and out, but CRH owns the lot because it has a monopoly. It is disgraceful and despicable. I have attended its AGMs here in Dublin a few times, not to cover mica issues but to cover countless other issues where it got away with blatant corruption. This is a shocking case of big business in the pockets of the big parties. I was in a party for long enough and I know how it works. That is the holy all of it. The families are left thrown to the wind. We will have investigations, more reviews and a motion here. It is just pass the parcel. We need to think of the families sleeping in their houses in fear.

My daughter, Councillor Máirín McGrath, was in Donegal. Her colleagues up there brought her around and showed her the houses. They showed her housing estates that were empty, gan aon duine ansin. They had to move out. If this happened in Ukraine, we would be talking about it. No doubt we will find hundreds of millions to rebuild Ukraine and there will not be a word about it. There will be no questions asked, no reviews, no tests of the concrete and no anything else, but our own people do not matter. We know that our own families do not matter to this Government. I am not putting this personally to the Minister of State, who I know is a hard-working Minister of State, as is the Minister, Deputy Browne. However, what is going on is just not acceptable. It is time to lay it nakedly out there and support the families who home themselves; they did not ask anybody to home them.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I am glad to say a few words in support of Charles Ward's motion. He has raised it many times inside here since he was elected, as others have done. I cannot understand how this is taking so long to resolve. There has been quibbling about the foundation. It is only a day's work to put in a foundation. Often it is done much quicker than that if the concrete came - proper concrete - and it is organised on time. Something must have been lacking with Government regulations or if there was a regulator. Like all the regulators, maybe he did not want to be seen at all. For any regulator we are depending on, there is no account of him. He is either asleep or gone missing because all of the regulators we have are being paid for doing absolutely nothing.

Building a home is the biggest venture that a young couple will ever put themselves through given the cost and worry involved in getting it up. It is terrible for people to find their homes are falling asunder like they are. The faster this is remedied, the better. I welcome the people from Donegal to the House. I know they have plenty of other things to do. It is a priority for them to ensure that the people with defective homes in Donegal are sorted out. When Bridie Gallagher sang a song about the homes of Donegal, we never envisaged that this would be happening to the homes after she sang that song that so many people were glad to listen to.

The Minister of State should not put the people through having to come in here again. If it is down to the foundations and that is all that is at stake, just dig them out. It would not be a day's work to dig them out and order concrete and a few steel bars to build them up again. They will go off in a couple of days and people can start afresh. A house has to have good foundations

when starting out. There is no point in taking chances and saving that amount of money. There is more time spent talking about them inside here and in that time a lot of them could be fixed. The people are worried. They have children and they are worried what will be the end of all this. Some of the houses have been done, but there are a lot more to be done. For God's sake, will the Government come out and sort it for once and for all? It is no bother for me to support the people of Donegal, but we should not be having to do this day after day.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I thank all Deputies for their contributions and for their genuine advocacy and work in this area. I recognise the real hurt and anger right across the country of homeowners who have been impacted by legacy defects as a result of defective concrete blocks. I want to put that on record.

As the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, and the Minister, Deputy Browne, have said previously, the Government is committed to assisting homeowners who have been impacted by defective concrete blocks. We have provided significant funding to the scheme and we will continue to do so. We have also kept the scheme under review and have made changes to it as and when required to try to assist more homeowners. The statutory obligation placed on Government by the 2022 Act, arising from the publication of the new IS 465:2026 standard, will now be actioned as soon as possible and a review of the Act will get under way shortly. Importantly, the very large number of homeowners who have already received a determination and grant amount can continue with their works.

The current enhanced defective concrete blocks grant scheme has been open for applications since 2023. The Government put it in place to assist homeowners to remediate damage caused by the use of defective concrete blocks. Notwithstanding that the current grant scheme contains improvements on the previous scheme, the Government has been mindful that the scheme requires monitoring and when changes are needed, they have been actioned. When it was recognised that construction inflation was presenting difficulties for homeowners, an increase in the grant scheme cap and rates was legislated for. This brought the overall scheme cap from €420,000 to a maximum of €462,000, along with an increase in the associated grant rates.

The Government is committed to funding all eligible expenditure under the scheme. Originally, the estimated cost was more than €2.2 billion, excluding inflation, with an estimated 7,500 households impacted. I note the comments from Deputies here as to the scale of the challenge ahead. A review is ongoing, with the local government sector, of the numbers and of the impact of the new standard IS 465:2026. Furthermore, the changes to the scheme that the standard might necessitate could add further cost to the scheme. Therefore, Deputies will appreciate that the approach now being taken by Government to review the Act is a logical one.

The publication of the revised IS 465 is the culmination of years of work in a complex and sensitive area that has real meaning and importance to thousands of households in many parts of Ireland. The Government is mindful of the very real concerns of affected homeowners who deserve the chance to be helped to fix their homes and to move on with their lives as much as possible.

As the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, has said, the Department, in partnership with the local authority sector and the Housing Agency, will update homeowners in the near future in as clear and comprehensive a way as possible regarding what this new standard might mean

for them. From listening to the debate, it is clear that one of the primary focuses is to address the issue of foundations. While the focus on foundations is absolutely understandable, the Department's communication will address a wider suite of issues raised in the weeks since the publication of IS 465:2026.

Notwithstanding some of the genuinely articulated and personal cases that have been highlighted by Deputies, it is important to point out that the scheme is working for many. As of today, over 3,500 homeowners are at various stages of the grant scheme. Over 500 homes have been remediated, with another 750 at various stages of construction having notified the relevant designated authority of commencement. The Government realised at an early stage that homes affected by defective concrete blocks may not be limited to Donegal, Mayo, Clare and Limerick, and the 2022 Act provides a pathway for additional local authorities to seek designation under the grant scheme. Since 2023, Sligo and parts of the Fingal and Wexford County Council areas have been designated under the grant scheme.

As the Minister of State, Deputy O'Sullivan, pointed out earlier, parts of Meath County Council and Carlow County Council will shortly be designated under the grant scheme. I am sure this will be welcome news for householders in those areas that have homes impacted by defective concrete blocks.

At the end of 2025, the Minister, Deputy Browne, brought forward very important legislation, the Defective Concrete Blocks (Amendment) Act 2025. This Act contains numerous beneficial changes for homeowners in the grant scheme. The Minister operationalised the majority of this Act in February and June of this year. These regulations provided for additional funding to homeowners who were previously unable to avail of the uplift in the scheme cap and rates, which was a particularly important issue for many. Crucially, the regulations also provided for homeowners where either they or members of their family live in a home affected by defective concrete blocks that has been adapted for the needs of the resident living there.

The Minister is aware that since the publication of the new standard, homeowners either already in the grant scheme or intending to apply to the scheme will have questions on what the new standard means for them. I emphasise that homeowners already in the scheme and undertaking works can continue with those works. Grant payments will continue to be made by local authorities so homeowners can complete their works.

As some Members are aware, officials in my Department met members of the implementation steering group last week to provide an update regarding the scheme and the new standard, noting that the Department will issue guidance for local authorities and the Housing Agency on various categories of applicants to the scheme. At this meeting, members were brought up to speed on the review process and what it will entail. The group includes officials from the designated local authorities, the Housing Agency and the homeowner liaison officer, all of whom can assist homeowners with their queries. The Department met again yesterday with the group to focus on how best to keep homeowners informed of ongoing developments in a timely manner.

Allowing the review to be undertaken and completed will be key to the success of the grant scheme. The 2022 Act, as set down by the Oireachtas, clearly identified the need for this review. The review will focus, as per the provisions of section 51 of the Remediation of

Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022, on the operation of the Act, in the first instance, in all matters relating to the introduction of IS 465 and its interaction with the grant scheme will be considered as part of the review. On completion, the Minister will make recommendations to the Government on any proposed changes to the defective concrete blocks scheme. Ensuring homeowners are treated fairly under the grant scheme has and will continue to be the focus of the Government. The Minister is well aware of the urgency of the review. He and his officials are working hard to ensure it is prioritised in a timely fashion.

I will circle back to what I said at the outset. I totally understand and appreciate the impact defective concrete blocks have had on homeowners who have been impacted. Very real stories have been articulated by Members of this House. Of that, there is no doubt. I acknowledge everybody involved and their advocacy and work in this area.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: I commend Deputy Charles Ward on his diligent and relentless campaigning on behalf of the tens of thousands of people affected by defective blocks. He is one of those people personally affected, along with tens of thousands of others. I commend all of those who work with him in the 100% Redress party, and all of those who have been affected by this issue, on their campaigning and their refusal to take this lying down. I am very glad to support the motion.

In a way, I am also very glad that I do not have the expertise Deputy Charles Ward has. I have been trying to get educated by him on the issue. It is not something that has emerged in my constituency, at least so far, but I am aware of the consequences of the willingness by Fianna Fáil in particular, but also Fine Gael, to allow developers and people in the construction industry not to be properly regulated or controlled and for that to have devastating consequences on homeowners and renters, in particular with fire safety issues. Many tens of thousands of people are affected by buildings that were not built properly and have fire safety issues, which imposed costs and hardships on them. Some of that stuff is not over. I recently came across a new social housing development where, within months of moving in, people have damp, mould and so on all over the place and are having to fight to have those things addressed. This stuff is still going on, so there is a lot at stake on these issues.

It is shocking that at least 20,000 householders are living in homes that are crumbling around their ears and which are now worthless. They worked hard for those homes and they are worthless. They cannot sell them. The Government seemed to be crowing about its redress scheme, but if I understand this correctly, the reason only slightly more than 3,000 people have applied for it is that the scheme is so inadequate, and the gap between the cost of remediating a home and what the Government is willing to give means that for huge numbers of people affected by this issue the scheme the Government is proposing is completely inadequate and will not allow them to remediate their homes. That means they are stuck in crumbling homes unable to deal with the consequences of something that was basically the responsibility of the Government and its failure to regulate cowboys - profit-driven, unscrupulous people - in the construction industry.

On top of that, where people may try to rebuild their homes with an inadequate scheme, the Government is forcing them to build on foundations that may crumble in the future. Where people know that the material that could lead to that crumbling - the defective substances or

substance that lead to these defects - are there but we do not know what will happen in the future, rather than giving those people the option to fully replace the foundations, the Government is insisting they build on foundations that could crumble. Why would the Government do that? First, the people have gone through having their homes crumble around them and become worthless and they have to rebuild them. Then they are being made build on foundations that could crumble again in the future, causing them anxiety, concern and all the hardship that would involve, in addition to the cost of doing that.

It defies belief that the Government will not take on board what Deputy Ward is saying here, namely, that people should have the option to fully replace those foundations and, more generally, that the Government should be providing 100% redress from end to end to resolve this for all of those who have been affected by this terrible issue of defective concrete. The amendment the Government has put forward is extremely disappointing. It should withdraw it and take on board what Deputy Ward is very reasonably asking for to help the many tens of thousands of people affected by this scandal. There may be a lot more affected.

Deputy Charles Ward: I thank my colleagues who stood with me today and those who took the time to go beyond the briefing material and the political framing and had the empathy to understand what families are living through on the ground. Before we vote, I want to speak plainly, not in a language of schemes, standards or reassurance, but in a language that explains what is happening to people on the ground. I have sat in homes where families are in this crisis, and I have heard things that have never appeared in reports. People are lying awake at night wondering if their home is safe. Parents are trying to hide this fear from their children. Families are trying to hold ordinary life together while carrying on in an uncertainty that they did not create. This is the reality. There is no data and there are no summaries and no briefing. It is reality.

No homeowner or child caused this crisis, yet they are the ones that are carrying it. We are told the scheme is improving. We are told progress is being made, but uncertainty is still in people's homes. It is still at the kitchen table, and it is still in their lives. I ask the House one question. Who is carrying the uncertainty? It is not being carried in here.

12 o'clock

It has been carried elsewhere by the families, by the children. People who stood should never have been asked to carry this burden at all. Never should this have happened.

I recognise that many Members will vote under party instruction, but this Chamber has also seen Members break that. I ask that safety and security, and the future of children and their families, be on Deputies' conscience when they are voting. They have to go back to their constituents when it is in their area, and tell them why they did not vote to help. I hope Deputies will realise in the years to come what has gone on and that we have a catastrophic situation on our hands. The responsibility for this cannot be ignored. The time is now. We have to address this. There is a choice before us, it is a responsibility we cannot keep avoiding: families or system. I am clear. The uncertainty does not belong in family homes. This belongs now to the State. It is the State that has a responsibility to carry this burden, not the families, the people who did nothing wrong or the children growing up underneath the shadow of the defective concrete. When the bell rings for the vote this evening, this House will decide something very simple: where the burden sits. That decision does not end with this vote; it begins there. I

stand with the families, like all my colleagues in opposition today who have stood. I say to the homeowners that we are fighting for them night and day and we will not forget. I will not move the burden onto those who did not create it. I am asking this House to remember where the weight of this situation has occurred. The Government and the State have a responsibility.

Amendment put.

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

Message from Select Committee

An Ceann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage has completed its consideration of the Housing and Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 and has made amendments thereto.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: An tseachtain seo caite, vótáil Rialtas an Taoisigh leis an dlí a athrú chun praghsanna peitрил agus díosail a ardú ón 1 Lúnasa. Mar gheall ar chinntí an Rialtais, ardóidh praghas an díosail 32 cent agus praghas an pheitрил 27 cent. Ní féidir leis an Rialtas leanúint ar aghaidh leis na harduithe seo ar pheitreal agus ar dhíosail. Caithfidh sé a aithint go bhfuil botún mór déanta aige agus réiteach airgeadais a chur os comhair na Dála láithreach chun stop a chur leis na harduithe seo agus na praghsanna seo ag dul in airde an méid sin ón 1 Lúnasa, rud a chuirfidh brú ar ghnáth-theaghlaigh fud fad na tíre.

In the past year, soaring fuel prices have put huge pressure on ordinary households that are struggling to keep up. That pressure came to a head in April. After weeks of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael refusing to listen, ordinary people rose up in protest. They were forced to take action and they also forced the Taoiseach to take action to reduce the cost of petrol and diesel. They had to fight for what little relief they eventually got from the Government. Imagine their reaction last week when the Government voted to pass the Finance Bill, a law that will see the cost of petrol and diesel increase from 1 August. The Taoiseach voted against Sinn Féin's proposals and, as a result of his decision, diesel will go up 32 cent and petrol will go up 27 cent. What does that mean for ordinary folks out there? In just a matter of weeks, they will once again be hit with rip-off prices at the pumps, if the Taoiseach does not act now to stop it. Diesel will shoot up to over €2 and petrol will hit something similar. It is clear that the Government has not learned anything from the fuel protests or the pressure that ordinary people are under.

Did the Taoiseach not see the Barnardos report that was released just yesterday? It told us very clearly that more than half of parents are worried that they do not have enough money to put fuel in the car. Real people, real families, real pressure. Sinn Féin was the only party here last week that stood up to challenge the Government and stand against its decision. We proposed amendment after amendment to stop the fuel hikes because we understand those hikes are going to heap further pressure on ordinary families. The Government kept on going down

the track it has set and it is going to make things even harder for families. It is going to increase the price of diesel by 32 cent and petrol by 27 cent. While the Dáil is in recess and Ministers are off on their holidays, these price increases kick in. That is what the Taoiseach voted for last week in the Finance Bill. Unless he acts now, ordinary people are going to pay the price. We cannot have a repeat of what happened in April. It was only after those who keep Ireland moving rose up in protest that the Government was finally forced to act.

The Taoiseach needs to recognise the pressure that is increasing on people. It is not easing; it is increasing. The Government cannot go ahead with these petrol and diesel increases on the scale outlined. There is still time to change course. The Taoiseach needs to listen, and he needs to make it clear that this pressure will not be placed on families at the pumps in just a number of weeks. He needs to realise that he made a big, big mistake in voting against Sinn Féin's proposals last week. Will the Taoiseach urgently bring forward a financial resolution to stop these huge increases in petrol and diesel taking effect in just a number of weeks?

The Taoiseach: Is léir gur tharla ardú an-ard ar fad ar phraghsanna peitрил agus díosail de dheasca an chogaidh san Iaráin. Bhí brú faoi leith ar mhuintir na tíre agus ar an ngeilleagar agus tá fós. Rinne an Rialtas cinneadh faoi leith suas le €750 milliún a chur ar fáil chun an brú seo a laghdú do dhaoine. D'éirigh linn. Mar aon leis sin, rinneamar i bhfad níos mó, go háirithe ó thaobh cúrsaí talmhaíochta, iascaireachta agus iompair de.

The Government reduced petrol excise and diesel by 32 cent and 27 cent. We did not increase it. Clearly, the Deputy is all about politics and not about policy. He played politics last week with this and he is playing politics this week with it. Sinn Féin cleverly put in a few amendments last week. They get voted down, and then the Deputy turns it around and says the Government is voting for increases. It is a game he is at.

Deputy Seán Crowe: So much for legislation.

The Taoiseach: The pressures on people have been very significant because of the increase in fuel prices arising out of the war in Iran between America and Iran. On the Hormuz strait, there has been a cessation of violence and war, but there has also been at least a resolution which has given some respite to the situation. We took significant measures to try to help people. I will come back to that in a moment. Brent crude, as a result of what has been happening in recent time, oil prices currently stand at around \$75 per barrel. That is down from its peak closing price of \$115 per barrel in early May, but still above prices of around \$70 per barrel recorded before the war.

We have seen stability domestically in recent weeks, with steady declines in the prices for kerosene, auto fuels and marked gas oil. We are closely monitoring the international domestic fuel prices. This will inform our decision-making process. The latest Eurostat data shows that Ireland experienced one of the largest reductions in diesel prices across the European Union in May, reflecting easing international energy pressures and improved conditions in global markets. The recent increases as a result of the war are beginning to unwind. Irish diesel prices fell by 8.1% in May; I do not have June figures yet. That is the fourth-largest reduction in the European Union. Petrol prices in Ireland also declined by 2%, with Ireland among the countries

seeing reductions when many others continue to experience increases. Wholesale energy prices fell significantly month on month following the sharp spike recorded in April.

In terms of the measures we took, we took 32 cent off diesel, 27 cent off petrol and 7.4% off MGO. We deferred the carbon tax increase to 14 October. Some €40 million per month was allocated to transport over three months and a €100 million fuel scheme for farmers, contractors and fishers was introduced. The diesel rebate increased to 12 cent per litre. We increased the fuel allowance to €38 per week and expanded eligibility, with about 470,000 households supported as a result of that. In the budget proper we did the core budgets. The Deputy seems to be making assumptions. The end of July is more than a month away. The Government will keep this under review. We have said this repeatedly. The Government will take a decision in respect of the diesel and petrol situation before the Dáil recess.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am assuming nothing. Last week I put forward an amendment that would see those increases not taking effect. The Taoiseach accused me of games. This is nothing to do with games. How dare you? When I give voice to the concerns of people right across the State about the Government putting up the price of petrol and diesel by 32 cent, which it voted for last week, that is not a game for them. When people tell me they do not have enough money in their pockets to pay for the bare necessities in this Ireland of 2026, that is not a game for them. I am doing my job when I stand up and represent the people right across the State who are put to the pin of their collar because of decisions the Government has made. The Finance Bill has passed the Dáil. On 1 August, these prices will increase. I have asked the Taoiseach a clear question. The Government does not need more reports, reviews or anything bar getting its head out of the sand and recognising that putting up the price of diesel by 32 cent a number of weeks from now is reckless. It will put huge pressure on ordinary families. I asked the Taoiseach whether he will bring forward a financial resolution without delay or whether he will stick to his position, which is that these increases will go ahead.

The Taoiseach: First of all, we did not, as the Deputy said, vote last week to increase anything.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: There was.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Doherty just wants to look after the oil companies by giving them whatever. He does not even want to monitor what is going to happen over the next number of weeks. It makes sense that one watches the market - of course it does - otherwise one is just filling the pockets of the oil companies which will benefit from the decline. We are talking about taxpayers' money. As I said, we have some distance to go before the end of July.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You think there was no vote last week.

The Taoiseach: I did not interrupt you.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, he did not.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Okay.

The Taoiseach: The Deputy put the amendments down last week so he could then make the allegation that we are increasing prices and try to engineer protests. That is what is going on. I have seen the Facebook pages. I have seen it all. The Government makes a decision, there are going to be protests. That is the game.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Does the Taoiseach think we should pat him on the back-----

The Taoiseach: No, no.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----when he pushes up the price of petrol?

The Taoiseach: The Deputy is entitled to raise the issue, but that is-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Is that what he wants? Does he want a pat on the back for pushing up the prices? Not a chance.

The Taoiseach: -----the political agenda. I did not interrupt the Deputy. He has an awful habit of doing it. That is his political agenda. The Government has not made a decision in respect of the end of July. Is that clear?

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. Time is up.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You voted for it last week.

The Taoiseach: The Government is going to keep it under review and act accordingly.

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, the time is up. Thank you very much. I now call on Deputy Holly Cairns.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Someone dies from a drug overdose in Ireland almost every day. Drug deaths in this country are almost three times the EU average. The Taoiseach has a big decision to make. The Government can keep on doing what we all know is not working - criminalising people who struggle with addiction, failing to fund the services that could help them and cramming people into overcrowded prisons where drug use is endemic - or it can be radical and brave. It can opt to change its policy approach so that it is evidence-based and health-led. It can address the underlying causes of drug addiction. It can save lives.

That is what the cross-party report from the Committee on Drugs Use has recommended today. The decision was unanimous. Its key recommendations are that the possession of drugs for personal use be decriminalised and that we introduce a comprehensive health-led approach to the use and misuse of drugs. The committee did not pull these recommendations out of thin air. It listened to a wide variety of experts, community groups, people with lived experience of drug use and recovery and families affected by addiction.

The committee also heard comprehensive evidence about other parts of the world where this approach has worked, such as Portugal, which decriminalised drugs 25 years ago and has seen a significant reduction in drug-related deaths with no increase in drug use. The committee also heard about places where decriminalisation was introduced but not done properly, such as Oregon, where drugs were decriminalised but there was no increase in resources for treatment. What is clear is that decriminalisation must be accompanied by increased investment in health services. It will not work in isolation. That is key to the committee's recommendations.

Treatment options for drug use are threadbare. This is especially true in prisons, which are dangerously overcrowded. It is estimated that 70% of people entering prison have an addiction or substance abuse problem. That is about 4,000 people. How many addiction nurses are employed in Irish prisons? Zero. This is not a health-led approach; it is killing people. It is, quite frankly, inhumane.

The Oireachtas gave the members of the drugs committee a job. They have done that work and issued a unanimous report with cross-party support. The national drugs strategy will be finalised next month. If the recommendations of the committee are not included, it will have little credibility. Will the Taoiseach ignore the report or will he make a commitment today that its recommendations will be included?

The Taoiseach: I welcome the final report of the joint committee. I have not had an opportunity to read it in its entirety. Senator Mary Fitzpatrick, who is a member of the committee, made a presentation to the Fianna Fáil Parliamentary Party last evening on the report's core recommendations. Fundamentally, over the past 20 years we have moved to a health-led approach in terms of drug addiction. It has not been a criminal response, in the main. Rather, it has been health-led, going back to the methadone clinics for heroin in an earlier era. The focus, generally speaking, has been a health-led one.

A significant number of cases present for treatment for problem drug use. In 2025, the figure was about 15,422, a 16% increase and a 73% increase in the annual number of cases entering treatment since the commencement of the current national drug strategy in 2017. Communities continue to experience harm because of drug use. In some areas, the level of harm in communities is acute. The increase in treatment numbers reflects increased investment. There has been a lot of investment. We can continue to increase the level of investment, but we also have to be rigorous. That is why the Oireachtas report is important. It is also important that investment sees a return. Cocaine was the most commonly treated main problem drug in 2025, accounting for 42% of all cases. There has been an increase in investment in treatment services as a result of that.

In terms of diversion, the Government had agreed to divert those found in possession of drugs for personal use to the health services, in line with the health-led approach. The Minister responsible for that has agreed that will commence on an administrative basis for the time being. Obviously, the Government will assess the Oireachtas report in terms of the broader issues, including the decriminalisation proposal. About €170 million was provided last year to the Department of Health and HSE for drugs services, an increase of about €54 million over the past seven or eight years. It is all about treating addiction and having more drug treatment services. We will continue to expand that side of the equation. There has been an increase in

recurring funding and so on. Addiction treatment is extremely important and the education side is extremely important, as is the health-led approach.

Deputy Holly Cairns: The Taoiseach said the Government is taking a health-led approach to this issue. Respectfully, the Government is not taking a health-led approach. A citizens' assembly was established and issued its findings. A cross-party Oireachtas committee did the same. Both of them found that we need to change to a health-led approach. That includes decriminalisation among a range of other health-led approach methods.

From the Taoiseach's reply, I take it that he plans to continue with more of the same and he thinks we have a health-led approach. I really urge him to reconsider that. He highlighted that a lot of funding is going into different things. It costs a lot of money, too, to put people in prison. Crucially, the most important figure in all of this is the number of lives it is costing, which is equivalent to nearly one person every day in Ireland. It is hard to articulate the impact that has on those people's families and communities and on everything. The Taoiseach has an opportunity to do something that will save lives. I ask him again whether the recommendations in the report will be included in the drugs strategy next month.

The Taoiseach: The Government accepts and has accepted that possession of illicit drugs for personal use is fundamentally a public health issue and not just a matter for the criminal justice system. That has been the position for quite some time. The Government will shortly introduce a health referral scheme for those found to be in possession of illicit drugs for personal use. The report has just been published. As is necessary, both the Department of Health and the Department of justice will examine it. There are some 160 recommendations in it. The mental health dimension will be examined as well. We are going to give it very serious consideration.

However, having been a Minister in the Department of Health and having experience of dealing with this issue, I can say the approach has been predominantly health-led but that does not guarantee that consumption goes down. It does not actually quite guarantee it. There are different experiences in different jurisdictions. We need to examine the report and keep working on this. There is more than just one recommendation; there are 160 recommendations and we have to implement them all.

Deputy Charles Ward: When IS 465:2026 was introduced, I welcomed the intent behind it but had reservations about how it might be interpreted by engineers. Reading several reports tells me I was correct. I reference one report where a house was given a group 4 classification, indicating the worst possible level of structural damage, with widespread deterioration and a clear finding of evidence of chemical damage. There is evidence of sulphate attack gypsum replacing binder secondary eclogite formation, mobile sulphates within the concrete system and full carbonisation of the concrete metrics. This describes concrete systems that undergo significant internal change and ongoing failure. Yet, despite this, the home in question is excluded from remediation. The conclusion drawn was that the sulphates are likely externally sourced and not linked to defective blocks.

This is where the core issue is now arising, with decisions driven by a heavily focused but narrowly presented one-day snapshot of sulphate content. The most recent research, by Leemann, Münch and Dunlop in 2026, demonstrates that internal sulphate attack, ISA, can

occur even where sulphate content is low because the sulphates have consumed, transformed, distributed and leached over time. The damaging chemistry does not remain static. It evolves, which means a low sulphate reading today does not mean sulphate-driven damage was never present. It may simply mean the reaction has already run its course and the sulphates have been used up. It is like arriving at a house that has been burnt out. Flames may no longer be seen and there may be little smoke remaining but the damage to the structure is still there. It cannot be concluded that there was no fire simply because the active stage has passed. There was a fire once upon time.

This raises deeper concerns. Should decisions under IS 465 rest mainly with engineering interpretations and threshold readings or should they be grounded in a full materials science analysis of how these chemical systems evolve? There is a risk that homes are being judged on what chemical traces remain rather than the scientific reality of how the damage actually developed. Will the Taoiseach ensure that interpretation of sulphate-related damage under IS 465 is led by independent materials science expertise in order that evolved internal chemical deterioration is properly recognised, rather than leaving decisions to be based primarily on scheme engineers' assessments of present-day sulphate readings?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. Clearly, the defective concrete blocks issue has evolved. It is a very complex issue, which the Government is addressing in the first instance by agreeing and allocating very significant amounts of funds to the affected homeowners to enable families to rebuild their homes and get on with their lives. I believe in a multidisciplinary approach to issues. The Deputy's basic query is whether IS 465 should be led by independent materials science expertise or by engineering. I think perhaps it should be both. There always have to be inputs.

The grant scheme is underpinned by the national testing standard. We have agencies, including the National Standards Authority of Ireland, NSAI, and so on to determine the standards. IS 465 was revised on 2 June and that revision now needs to be examined in more detail. The Government remains committed to following the science when it comes to homes affected by defective concrete blocks, as per the provisions of the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022. The Minister for housing intends to carry out a review of the operation of the Act as quickly as possible. That is provided for under the legislation. The issue of how damage interpretation is dealt with under the revised national standard will be addressed as part of that review.

In the meantime, the scheme can continue to operate to fix homes for the many homeowners who have already received a determination and a grant amount under the former standard. Since the Government commitment of 2020, more than 3,500 homeowners have been progressing through the defective concrete blocks grant scheme, with grants covering 100% of eligible costs up to €462,000 per household. That is a 10% increase since 2023. Over €336 million has been spent to date, which shows the scheme is really ramping up, with a record €175 million allocated this year. More than 500 homes have been completed, with 750 currently undergoing remediation. Approximately 80% of the affected homes are in Donegal. This is a significant scheme by any yardstick. I do not think it has any precedent in terms of its scale.

The issue the Deputy raised is a technical issue, albeit a significant one, arising from recent changes to the national standard governing the scheme. The changes have to be assessed and a review process is required under the legislation. IS 465 is the national standard currently used to assess damage caused by mica or pyrite in affected homes.

Deputy Charles Ward: The reason I raised this issue is that right now, as we speak, there will be people going in with foundations with levels of ISA in them. They will potentially be building on top of a foundation that may fail in the future. I am talking about being fiscally responsible. As the revised IS 465 has been published, there is now a trigger. Can the Taoiseach give me dates for this? I do not want people to be building on top of foundations that contain an ISA and then, in a year or two years' time, the foundations on which their brand-new home is built are tested and shown to be damaged. It is about fiscal responsibility and doing things right. Is it possible to get some kind of timeframe for when this will happen? As the Taoiseach said, there are homeowners progressing through the scheme.

The Taoiseach: For what is the Deputy seeking a timeframe?

Deputy Charles Ward: I am asking for a timeframe for when this decision will be implemented. The trigger is off now with the revision of IS 465. When will the Minister for housing review and adapt to these changes?

The Taoiseach: The revision to IS 465 was made on 2 June. Under section 51 of the Act, the Minister must review the scheme following that revision. The review will examine several aspects of the scheme, including treatment of foundations. Findings must be reported to the Oireachtas within three months of completion. That is the timeline.

Deputy Michael Collins: Is the Taoiseach aware that parents of children with additional needs are now facing the prospect of being unable to access early years childcare services because of the Government's failure to support the childcare sector? In 2021, the Government made two clear promises, namely, that childcare costs would be reduced to €200 per month and that providers would be supported through a new core funding model. The reality is that it has failed on both counts. Childcare providers honoured their side of the agreement. When core funding was introduced, they accepted fee freezes because they believed the Government would work with them to address the mounting pressures facing the sector.

Instead, providers were left carrying rising costs, increasing regulation, staff shortages and growing financial burdens while Government Ministers sat on their hands. Today, we are witnessing the consequences. Children with additional needs are at risk of losing access to vital services. Parents who rely on childcare to remain in employment are facing impossible choices. Many will have to reduce their hours, take unpaid leave or in some cases leave the workforce entirely to care for their children. That comes at a huge personal cost to families and significant economic cost to the State.

This crisis did not appear overnight. It is a direct result of Government inaction. Every week another childcare provider closes its doors. Since 2021, 137 crèches have closed in the Taoiseach's county alone. Nationally, 977 early years childcare services have shut down in that time. That represents childcare places for between 32,000 and 35,000 children disappearing

from communities across the country. At the same time, approximately 40,000 children are now on waiting lists, with rural Ireland being hit hardest. Families in towns and villages are finding that there are no places available. Yet, when challenged on these figures, the Government points to the opening of 579 new services since 2021. What the Government fails to tell the people is that these are predominantly after-school services and do little or nothing to address the collapse in early years provision.

Once again, we see the Government massaging figures to suit a political narrative rather than confronting the reality facing families. The most vulnerable children in our society need support, their parents need support and childcare providers need support. Instead, they have been ignored. The solution is neither complicated nor unreasonable. Providers are calling on the Government to reverse the funding freezes and introduce a sustainable funding model that reflects the real cost of delivering childcare. They are asking to be treated as partners rather than an afterthought, but that respect has never come. Instead, it is the same old story. The men and women who get up early every morning to go to work, pay their taxes and try to provide for their families continue to be squeezed from every direction. Childcare providers are being choked by costs and parents are being left without options. This sector is on the brink. The warning signs have been there for years. How many more closures, how many more waiting lists and how many more families must be pushed to breaking point before the Government finally acts?

The Taoiseach: We need a sense of balance and perspective here. The Deputy's assessment is way off the mark, in terms of painting a picture of where childcare is today compared with where it was even five years ago. We have delivered more progress on childcare in five years than in the previous 30 years. Costs are down by 36%, investment is at a record high and now, for the first time in the State's history, we are beginning to directly build childcare facilities. New measures announced this month will reduce fees further from September 2026. Childcare will be a central priority in budget 2027. We will really focus on it. I know that the Minister, Deputy Norma Foley, has significant proposals which will be part of the budget preparations and negotiations. We are very conscious of the essential role that childcare plays, first of all, in the development of the child. We always have to keep the child centre stage in respect of childcare provision and child development, and then in terms of parents and to facilitate people to access the workplace.

Core funding participation is at its highest level since the scheme began, despite what the Deputy has said. As of today, over 4,590 services have signed up for the 2025-26 programme, making this the largest number of partner services in core funding since the launch. Some 177 services left core funding at some point over the lifetime of the scheme and currently operate outside of it. A total of 415 services left at some point but later rejoined and are now participating in year 4. Over 70% of services that had exited have returned. This demonstrates the scheme's underlying strength and stability. More than 92% of eligible providers remained engaged across the first three years of core funding, showing sustained sector-wide participation. We increased core funding again this year to about €480 million. That is an increase of €90 million on the current year.

We are just 16 months into a five-year term for this Government. We are focusing on reducing the fees and core funding is a mechanism for doing that. We have made significant progress in relation to that. For a typical full-day place, the maximum fee drops from

approximately €280 to €183 per week, after the universal national childcare subsidy scheme. This is a saving of over €600 per family since we froze price levels in 2022. We are also increasing income thresholds from September. About 25% of children in the national childcare scheme are now already paying under €200 per month. We will make continued progress on increasing the number who will be paying €200 or less and we will make a significant move on that in the forthcoming budget.

Deputy Michael Collins: My assessment is not way off the mark. I have sat down with early childcare providers and they are telling me this. They are the people who are on the ground. They know the crisis that is there. This is no longer a crisis but an implosion that is unfolding before the Government's eyes. The truth is that the Government has allowed the sector to drift from crisis into collapse. It is jeopardising the future of thousands of children, particularly those with additional needs, who depend on these services. What makes this even more astonishing is that after years of rising costs, soaring inflation and relentless financial pressure, the Government's response was to increase the base core funding rate by just 9 cent per child per hour. In what world does a 9 cent increase even begin to address inflation, wage pressures, insurance costs, energy bills and the wider cost-of-living crisis? It is completely detached from the reality facing providers on the ground. For once, stop kicking this issue down the road. Stop hiding behind future budgets and long-term reviews. The sector needs action now and not another promise, not another consultation and not another excuse. If the Government does not act urgently, the damage being done to children, families and childcare providers will be felt for years to come.

The Taoiseach: Budget 2026 invested almost €1.5 billion in early learning and childcare, which is a 12% increase. Going back a decade, that figure was €260 million. Numbers speak for themselves in terms of the funding. A total of 277,000 children will benefit from the national childcare scheme in 2026. That is 27,000 more than last year. That is not collapse; it is expansion. Childcare prices have fallen by 36% since October 2022, with fees held at 2021 levels while the rest of the cost of living has risen. Some 105,000 children accessed two free preschool years under ECCE.

The access and inclusion model supports a record 8,400 children with special needs or disabilities. That figure is up from 7,900. A total of 806 services receive equal start targeted supports, reaching 38,000 vulnerable children. For the first time in the history of the State, the Government is directly building and acquiring childcare facilities. Up to eight facilities will be delivered in 2026. That is not collapse; that is expansion. Yes, there are challenges. We will do more again in the forthcoming budget to copper-fasten, consolidate and expand services and reduce the price that people have to pay for childcare.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Gillian Toole: I hope I have the correct question because I submitted two. There are four issues that are separate and significant but share a common thread. Last November in Kells, County Meath, there was an important Samhain festival and food symposium. It was an excellent symposium attended by Darina Allen, where a lot of topics around food security, food safety, biosecurity, health and soil health were discussed, including the school meals

programme, the possibility of sourcing these meals as locally as possible and integrating local suppliers, chefs, shops such as SuperValu and Centra, etc. There were excellent books on the issues of ultra-processed food and the production of food. All of that was linked in to chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes, which are on the increase. That is the first issue.

The second issue concerns a family of seven brothers - seven sons and three generations of succession farming in action. They are all tillage farmers and acknowledge the excellent support of the tillage support payment that was made. However, grain from 2025 is still in storage and we have imports from other markets with genetically modified components to them.

The third issue is a land-use plan, which we are still waiting on, and the implications for renewable fuel and solar production. The tillage farmers are having difficulty accessing land to lease or purchase to produce the native grains and legumes that we require.

We know we have the cost-of-living crisis and the issues around the cost of fuel. They are all linked. There is then the point of defending ourselves and biosecurity and the food that we eat, whether it is imported or we produce it ourselves. With the balance of land availability to produce the food we need but also to produce renewable energy, we have possibly a defence situation.

My condensed question stems from Canadian Prime Minister Carney's presentation last week at Trinity College. It is something he also said, I think, at the World Economic Forum, and that is the question about sovereignty. There is much debate and discourse on social media and in the media on the interpretation of sovereignty *vis-à-vis* borders, migration etc. However, I am going to link sovereignty to our ability to feed ourselves, fuel ourselves and defend ourselves along the lines of the remarks from the Prime Minister of Canada. What specific steps are being taken to ensure we can feed, fuel and defend ourselves?

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Toole for her thought-provoking question and the ideas that emanate from it in terms of looking at security through a much broader lens than tends to be the case where people look at it more conventionally as military or defence capability. Food security, in my view, is a fundamental part of both economics and a nation's security and it goes to the very heart of sovereignty.

Ireland, in respect of food security, has to be looking at a European context, given our membership of the EU, but also because we export to about 180 countries. It is an extraordinary story. It is about €21 billion in exports. A lot of that is in dairy, beef, lamb, poultry, pig meat and so on and the added value products deriving from those.

There is more work we can do on the horticultural front because we import a lot as well on the vegetable side and fruit side. The Government is always open to it. We have supported horticulture and continue to do so. Over the past number of years there has been a strong investment in organic farming, in particular over the past five years. I think there has been a step-change in our approach and attitude to organic farming both within the Department of agriculture and culturally within the agricultural community. That has continued to grow.

I have received correspondence from Darina Allen in respect of the issues Deputy Toole has raised. They are pertinent. We do need to make sure we create the environment to facilitate

the continued growth of healthy foods because there is a connection to cardiovascular health and health more generally in terms of fresh sourced food. That is something we will continue to work on.

The land use study will be published shortly. That will create its own debate. We will publish it and invite society generally to reflect on it. Obviously, various stakeholders will come back in respect of that.

Deputy Toole mentioned the family with the seven sons who are all tillage farmers and the access to land issue. It is an issue for tillage because they can be at a disadvantage to others who might have greater access to resources and land access is a significant issue.

Climate change is the other big factor here. Climate is going to dramatically impact food production. We can see it through drought or excessive rain and floods. We saw it all across Europe and the world in the past number of years and it is happening here too.

Deputy Gillian Toole: I welcome those tentative updates. Could we firm up timelines for the publication of the land use study and particularly the timelines for the issuing of solar farm guidelines? Land use in general is particularly important because a lot of local authorities are currently preparing county development plans or variations on county development plans. If we are to really have a macro-consideration of all the elements of sovereignty and of security - yes, we are part of the greater Union - we have to begin from our home standpoint. There is great value to be achieved in transportation costs, with a shorter route from farm to fork, and in terms of the reduction in additives to food if it is produced as close as possible to home.

The Taoiseach: When I mentioned Europe, I meant Ireland will be feeding a lot of Europe. That is my point. We are. In fact, I was reading Ronan McGreevy's work on Seán Lemass recently. During the war a lot of our foodstuffs went to Britain. That is an aspect of war and security that rarely gets documented or referenced but it was a significant contribution in its own way. Even globally, the work we do in Africa, particularly in terms of climate resilience advice and product and so on in terms of crops is quite strong because of our experience of famine. The point I am making trying to make is that we have a global role in terms of food security and we should maintain our own production capacity as a result of that.

Regarding the solar farm guidelines, there are many guidelines falling due. Solar is growing very fast. It is now the third fuel. When we look at all the debate we have about war in Iran and fossil fuel volatility, we need a broader debate in the House on the balance here-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----because we need more renewables so we are not subject and exposed to volatility on fuel prices into the future, which derails our economy very quickly.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you. You will have to talk to the Chief Whip about that.

The Taoiseach: Sorry?

An Ceann Comhairle: You said we need a debate.

The Taoiseach: I will ask her on the Order of Business.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Women's Aid has recorded the highest level of domestic abuse disclosures in history. The organisation's annual report is a stark reminder for us all that, for many women and children, escaping domestic abuse is made harder by failures that are within the Government's power to fix. Victims are trapped by the housing crisis, delays in the family court, inadequate access to civil legal aid and a family justice system that often fails to recognise the realities of domestic abuse and coercive control.

For many women, leaving an abusive partner does not mean the abuse ends. Ensuring safety after leaving an abusive partner requires the enforcement of protection orders and ensuring a consistent approach, particularly around bail conditions when they are breached, is implemented. For example, the Government commissioned a review of bail laws that recommended that breaches of domestic violence court orders be made an offence under the Bail Act. I am going to ask the Taoiseach something, in particular in light of this report. There is a simple fix. Will the Taoiseach implement this simple but important proposal that came from the Government's own commissioned review? It could mean a lot for so many people.

The Taoiseach: This is a societal issue. Blaming Government for what is going on alone is not a sufficient response. The impact report is quite shocking. It reported 62,275 disclosures of domestic abuse. That is an increase of 33%, including 4,755 involving children. This is a shameful and shocking indictment on Irish society.

We need, and there has been, a significant criminal justice response. The Minister for justice has progressed Jennie's law and Valerie's law, the first of which relates to a domestic violence register and the second removes guardianship rights of those convicted of killing partners. We have the national strategy. We are now heading towards a fourth strategy and I invite submissions from the House and different parties in respect of this issue. We have the O'Malley report in terms of the journey of a victim through our courts system and a lot of that has been implemented. Cuan was established, probably the most significant development in the past number of years, which is a national agency to try to pull things together. There is more investment in refuge.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What about my question?

The Taoiseach: It is going to need more than that, I think.

An Ceann Comhairle: Thank you, Taoiseach. I call Deputy Jen Cummins.

The Taoiseach: We need to stand back, read the report and reflect on it. We will follow up on that proposal.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I thank the Taoiseach.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I also want to raise the Women's Aid annual report for this year. It shows a 33% increase in domestic violence disclosures and a significant proportion of those - almost 5,000 - are children. A long time ago I worked in the UK with a domestic violence project. What I see is that it is just getting worse. I do not want to play politics with this.

Every single person in this House has a responsibility to work together to make sure we increase the supports to women and increase the punishment for the people who are perpetrating these crimes.

We were delighted, as Social Democrats, that Senator Patricia Stephenson's Bill went forward to support women and people who are escaping domestic violence. I refer to the free travel scheme. We were thankful to the Government for supporting that. We need to work together. This is an epidemic of massive proportions, not just in Ireland but throughout the world. However, we are responsible for here. I really want us to work together. Will the Taoiseach work with us?

The Taoiseach: Absolutely. I agree 100% with the Deputy. We do need to work together on this. There are many factors here that we have to address. The Minister for justice, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, has been very proactive in terms of quite a range of legislative measures that he has introduced. I referenced Jennie's law and Valerie's law. The fourth strategy on domestic and gender-based violence is perhaps one we can structure an all-party approach to and input into as well. My understanding is that by the end of the year, we should have about 94 safe homes and about 193 refuge units, with 50 also under construction. There is a multifaceted response required here. It is a very shocking situation. We have to stand back and see how we can input further on this.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I welcome the report today from the Oireachtas committee, which has recommended decriminalisation of possession of drugs for personal use. I commend the work of the committee's members, including our Labour Party Deputy Marie Sherlock. This follows from the recommendations of the justice committee some years ago. I was a member of that committee, which also recommended decriminalisation and took, in particular, the Portuguese approach as a model. This is long-standing Labour Party policy led by our now MEP, Aodhán Ó Ríordáin, who as a Minister of State some years ago, brought in facilities for injecting centres, which we have now seen put in place.

The evidence from around the world is increasingly clear. Prison is no place to treat the sick and criminalising addiction has not worked. The war on drugs has not worked. Addiction is a public health issue, not a criminal justice issue. The Labour Party brought forward a motion on decriminalisation of drug users in 2025 and the Government told us then to wait for the report. It has been launched today.

An Ceann Comhairle: The question, Deputy.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Have we a timeline for implementation of the recommendations of this report?

The Taoiseach: The Government will have to examine it. There are 160 recommendations. We will examine them. Much of the thrust of that report in terms of the health diversion programme, which will be introduced by the Department, is in that direction in any event. The de facto reality on the ground is that we are implementing a health-led approach. We have been adopting a health-led approach for the past 20 years, fundamentally.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: Not in the courts.

The Taoiseach: We more or less have in reality. That is the situation but we will examine the report. There are 160 recommendations. I welcome the fact that the committee has unanimously agreed those recommendations and we will certainly examine them. Senator Mary Fitzpatrick, as I said, presented to us last evening very briefly on it and we will come back again.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Workers at Castolin Eutectic have been out on strike for three days now. They are due to go on strike again next week for five days. This is about eight workers being made redundant. The company agreed to go to the Labour Court but has since refused to implement the Labour Court's recommendation of 1.5 weeks per year of service on top of statutory redundancy. The cost of this to the company is minimal. It will be €30,000 or so. This is a company generating over €300 million annually in sales. It is owned by a venture capitalist company, Paragon Partners, which manages about €2.4 billion. Does the Taoiseach agree that this very wealthy company should at the very least abide by the recommendation of the Labour Court and pay the workers a half-decent redundancy?

The Taoiseach: First of all, I thank the Deputy for raising the issue. I do not have the specifics of the Labour Court recommendation but where people participate in and engage with the Labour Court, or the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, acceptance and implementation of awards should follow that engagement and participation.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: Each week, thousands of mothers face the worry of not knowing when court-ordered child maintenance payments are going to arrive, or if they will arrive at all. Their ex-partners can drive their flashy cars, go on loads of holidays, sometimes gamble the money away and often live extravagant lifestyles while the women are forced to take out multiple loans just to pay the mortgage, buy food and pay for fuel. This deliberate non-compliance is basically a malicious form of coercive control and financial abuse but the courts system tends to largely ignore it, especially if you are broke. It is great that the Government has brought in some social welfare updates to help people but we also need real enforcement to tackle the shysters abusing their children in this way, such as automatic deductions at source tied directly to personal public service numbers, PPSNs, Revenue refunds and even assessing inheritance payments, because people get big payouts and no one knows about them. When is the Taoiseach going to bring in the tough enforcement legislation that is needed to make sure people pay up?

The Taoiseach: I thank the Deputy for raising what is a very important issue. In many instances, he has accurately reflected the experiences of people out there around the volatility

or unreliability of child maintenance payments being delivered on and paid. I will talk to the Minister for justice and others in the Department of Social Protection to see what we can do, particularly on automatic deduction at source. These are proposals that have been around for quite some time.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: The Taoiseach will be aware of the devastating situation now facing two major festivals in the north west following the collapse of *Tickets.ie* over the June bank holiday weekend. The Rory Gallagher International Festival in Ballyshannon is owed €283,000 and the Cowboys and Heroes festival in Leitrim is owed €130,000 in revenue that rightly belongs to them. These festivals are not just annual events. They are significant cultural and economic drivers for communities in Donegal and Leitrim and attract thousands of visitors every year. Organisers are determined to pay their suppliers but without intervention they will be left with crippling debt and may struggle to survive to 2027. What is urgently needed is Government assistance to ensure the revenue can be recovered. Beyond that, we need robust legislation to compel ticketing agents to ring-fence client funds so this kind of collapse can never happen again.

An Ceann Comhairle: The question, Deputy.

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: What support can we give these people? Legislation should be introduced to make safe clients' funds, as is the case with solicitors and estate agents.

The Taoiseach: I thank Deputy Scanlon for raising this issue. They are both very significant festivals - the Rory Gallagher one in particular. Even in Cork, I have always admired the Donegal capture of Rory Gallagher in terms of its wonderful festival. In a serious vein, this is a serious issue for them. It is-----

Deputy Eamon Scanlon: It is €283,000.

The Taoiseach: -----€283,000. That is huge. There is need for a legislative response but I also think we have to work to see if we can help those festivals in the short term. I understand the Minister, Deputy Burke, has been examining this but I will talk to my colleagues to see what assistance we can provide or what we can do here because these are important festivals in those localities. I will revert to the Deputy on that.

Deputy Brian Brennan: I am looking for an update in relation to the Taoiseach's plans on dealing with inheritance tax in the upcoming budget. It is believed that approximately 1 million people in Ireland do not have children. That is for many reasons - maybe life choice, medical or simply their personal choice. Under the current inheritance tax threshold, if a parent leaves a property or investment, there is a threshold of €400,000 but if an aunt or uncle leaves their property or investment to their niece or nephew, their threshold is 10% of this amount. This is simply unfair and is actually discriminating against people who do not have children. Since the boom in 2007, there has been no change to the threshold despite property prices increasing by 25%. As society changes and property prices increase, and as people have already paid their

taxes to build their homes and invest, can we look at a fairer and more equitable scheme to address these fundamental issues?

The Taoiseach: I am very conscious of the issue, particularly in regard to those without children who have worked hard all their lives and want to leave an inheritance to nieces, nephews or family members. The Government, in the last budget, increased the thresholds by about 20% across the different categories. We will examine this again in the context of the budget to see what we can do, particularly on that issue of those without children who want to leave an inheritance. The costs are significant as well.

1 o'clock

We also have an income tax package to frame. There are many demands on the budget, both on the tax side and the public expenditure side, which the Government, over the next while, has to try to reconcile. Various TDs and Senators from different political parties, including the parties that make up the Government, have also brought forward ideas and solutions on tax, including this one.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Members of the Fórsa trade union working at the Oberstown Children Detention Campus will commence industrial action, including work to rule, tomorrow, 25 June, on the basis of issues with staffing and safety and capacity concerns. We have all heard about them. Reports of assaults are in the public domain. I have spoken to a number of people who work in Oberstown. What is the Government's response going to be? We need this place of detention to be safe for those who work in it and, obviously, for the children who are detained there.

I will quickly deal with legal fees and associated claims for State claims payments for the last three years. In 2023, the figure was €854,645; in 2024, it was €826,541; and last year, it was €861,807. Obviously, there is a particular issue here. It needs to be dealt with and we need a Government response.

The Taoiseach: Oberstown is the State's only dedicated detention facility for children, providing care, education, health and rehabilitation supports. Children with complex needs are often referred to Oberstown by the courts. There is always a very difficult balance between safety and care. The latest available information shows that 129 children were detained in Oberstown in 2023, 120 in 2024 and 119 in 2025. I pay tribute to all those who are working there because HIQA found strong provision in Oberstown in education, health and aftercare planning. The Council of Europe committee for the prevention of torture, CPT, report in 2024 showed that young people spoke positively about staff and their approach. I hope this matter can be resolved through the industrial relations machinery. Work is perhaps under way to resolve it.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: In the base of the redress scheme and the different grades that people get in redress, there is an issue turning up at the moment-----

The Taoiseach: Which redress scheme?

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: The scheme for pyrite. There are different grades. People might get grade 1 or grade 4 or 5. One of the grades is where people are told their roof is okay but their block walls have to come out. What people are being asked to do is prop up the house and take out the walls down to the foundation level, which means the footpaths and floors collapse. It is specialised work. When we work out the economics of it, we do not have enough specialist contractors in this country to do this. There are not enough of them here and those who are here are trying to build houses. There is a cost to doing this and it also means people will be out of their houses longer. The realistic thing to do is demolish and rebuild the house.

The Taoiseach: We have spent about €317 million on the mica scheme alone. Increasingly now, we are working through a specialist, standard-based approach. We have agencies. I am not going to argue to and fro on the specifics.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: It is common sense.

The Taoiseach: Yes, but Dáil Éireann cannot-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: We have experience.

An Ceann Comhairle: Do not-----

The Taoiseach: We have legislation-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: We have 35 years' experience. Come on.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is enough, Deputy. Allow the Taoiseach to answer.

The Taoiseach: I am not going to arbitrate in terms of professional advice and expertise on how to operate various schemes. Everybody is coming in now with solutions to every single issue from a technical point of view. We have established agencies to deal with standards, technical aspects and the remediation of the homes. This is a legislative assembly, not the national building standards agency. The agencies have work to do and we have to resource and improve them. We have appealed for common sense in terms of how people deal with issues.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: This week, people around the country will be enjoying the good weather that is currently forecast. However, hot temperatures can be a real challenge for some in our communities, such as the elderly, the very young and people with underlying conditions. Once again, we are seeing record-breaking temperatures around Europe, with red alerts being issued in many countries and temperatures of over 40°C expected. Sustained heat in summer is here to stay. Over the last year, I have been seeking information from the Department of Health and the HSE on how Ireland records the impact of heatwaves on vulnerable populations. The HSE has admitted that heat-related deaths are simply not recorded and the Minister has acknowledged that more needs to be done to improve recording in this area. If we do not measure a problem, we cannot bring forward a real solution to it. Will the

Taoiseach commit that the Government will bring forward clear measurements about how heatwaves are impacting vulnerable communities, particularly in the area of mortality?

The Taoiseach: An evidence-based approach is always to be recommended, and we should measure. People should begin to measure the impact of severe heat. We have not had too many heatwaves. That is the sense anyway. People are amazed this week by the heat. It is a serious matter. We are looking at 40°C across the water tomorrow. That is very serious from a health and climate point of view. We need to start adjusting because climate change is here. We also need to start changing our systems to meet that reality. From a health and public health perspective, ordinarily the focus is on the cancer front and using sunscreen and so on, but there is a very real health issue in terms of such high temperatures - dehydration and so on. Therefore, it does demand and command a response. Maybe I will talk to the Health Research Board and ask it to do some research on this.

Deputy John McGuinness: Two cases in my constituency concerning farming families have been dealt with in the course of the business of this House and the committees. Dan Brennan is one of them. It was agreed that an expert, Dr. Seán Brady, would be appointed to provide the Department with a report. Dan Brennan is an excellent farmer. He has been waiting for the outcome of this since 1990. I have been told, through a response to a parliamentary question, that the Department cannot say when it will be concluded.

The second case relates to a family and serious health concerns affecting horses. Again, the Department of Health has been on site. However, a report that was issued in 2016 dropped off significant recommendations and findings that did not come to light until 2024. The Minister will not meet this family who have written to the Taoiseach about the matter.

Will the Taoiseach intervene in those two cases and ensure the rights of those two farming families are acknowledged and vindicated?

The Taoiseach: I presume we are talking about the Department of agriculture.

Deputy John McGuinness: Yes.

The Taoiseach: I am not familiar with the first case but it seems extraordinary that a report would have been started in 1990 and it is now 2026, so that is 36 years that a report has not been published. I will check that and get a response from the Department of agriculture as quickly as I can.

On the second case, I will check in terms of correspondence. It is not ringing a bell right now. It may have, but we have a lot of emails and so forth. The Deputy said a report issued in 2016 but that certain recommendations, if I heard him correctly, were dropped off or not included in that report.

Deputy John McGuinness: A number of them.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy can follow up in correspondence.

The Taoiseach: I want to get the information so people can check this. I will obviously have to check the provenance of the correspondence and try to get a response.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Deputy can have further engagement.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I met with the parents of Grace Lynch. I commend them on their advocacy on road safety and tackling scramblers and illegal e-bikes and scooters. On Monday, hundreds of residents in Hartstown marched around Hartstown Park to highlight the issue of antisocial behaviour, scramblers and illegal e-bikes in the parks. People are saying there are a couple of things that can be done. The first is a change in legislation to allow gardaí to actively pursue those on scramblers. The second is that resources be given to the Garda to establish a specialised anti-scrambler unit. I have called for this on many occasions. These units are in place in Britain, France and all over Europe. They are specially trained, specially resourced and equipped to deal proactively with people who are using illegal scramblers on the roads. They are a danger to themselves and other people on our roads. We know what the issue is at the moment.

The Taoiseach: I have also met Grace's parents, who have been through a very traumatic and harrowing experience but have also articulated how communities are impacted by scrambling. The legislation is very clear. Scramblers cannot be on the public roads and there are significant additional powers there. There was a recent case in the courts involving a garda. My understanding is that the Minister is going to bring further legislation to amend that to make sure gardaí will not suffer any negative repercussions from pursuing scramblers in the interests of public safety. On having an anti-scrambler unit, that is an operational decision for the Commissioner. However, I understand well over 1,000 scramblers have been seized. We want more activity. The Commissioner is adamant that he is going to focus very strongly on this issue. I will continue to engage with the Deputy on this.

Deputy Marie Sherlock: While I warmly welcome the announcement of the public consultation on the future of the GPO, I express my deep disappointment in the plans for the meanwhile use. There are 4,000 sq. m of enormous potential in the heart of Dublin, yet we are hearing it is going to be allocated to office space, with some vague notion of cultural and community space. We know there is a very sizeable office vacancy rate in Dublin. The OPW has also had empty office space for a considerable period. We know there is a massive shortage of artists' space in Dublin. I would love the OPW to show real ambition for the meanwhile use of the GPO space. The State's plans for an artists' campus in Dublin Port have been put on hold and we know there is a big gap in Dublin with regard to artists' space. I ask the Taoiseach to ensure the OPW shows greater ambition for meanwhile use of the GPO, so that it becomes a proper living and thriving institution for the next few years while we understand what its future use will be.

The Taoiseach: The steering group has been established under the chairmanship of my office and officials from my office will co-ordinate across all Departments. The cultural and artistic dimension will be the strongest dimension of the building itself and of the GPO. The Government approved this only yesterday, following a lot of work. We need to get it right. Sometimes what becomes interim becomes permanent too. We have to be conscious of that.

This is an opportunity to really transform not just the GPO's impact but the wider area, with multipurpose functions on this site, while also being conscious of the remainder of the street to see what we can do there, as well as the work on Moore Street.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: I urge the Government to outline its position on the EU lead ammunition proposal. This is the proposal to take lead out of ammunition, which could have a negative effect on 150,000 licensed shotgun owners in Ireland. There seems to be a problem in government in identifying which Minister and Department is actually going to be responsible for this. I would like a bit of effort to be made in that regard because rural stakeholders deserve to know what position Ireland intends to take before any decisions are made that could have significant negative consequences for firearm owners, farmers and sporting interests across the country. I know this is of particular interest to the National Association of Regional Game Councils of Ireland. These people represent real people on the ground. They are very responsible licensed gun-holders. What is being proposed by the EU is nonsensical. I would like to know what our position will be and which Minister and Department will be responsible for this.

The Taoiseach: The proposed restriction on lead ammunition is being developed at the level of the European Union under the REACH regulation, which aims to protect human health and the environment from harmful chemical exposure. The proposal is intended primarily to reduce lead pollution from spent ammunition and to protect wild birds, hunters and their families from the harmful effects of lead exposure. The Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment participates in REACH processes through the Health and Safety Authority. Policy responsibility for matters relating to hunting, firearms and wildlife protection and environmental impacts rests with other Departments and agencies. The Department of enterprise has engaged with a number of relevant bodies. The Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment is engaged with the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of housing, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Department of justice, and it continues to circulate relevant Departments.

Deputy Michael Healy-Rae: Yes, but the Minister seems to be saying it is not his responsibility.

An Ceann Comhairle: No, Deputy. That is not how this works.

The Taoiseach: I hear the Deputy. Having read the reply, I know what is going on in the sense-----

An Ceann Comhairle: The clock is not with you, Taoiseach. I call Deputy Heneghan.

The Taoiseach: I will revert to the Deputy.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: As someone who was recently diagnosed with ADHD, and as chair of the Oireachtas cross-party group on ADHD reform, I acknowledge the work done by

the Minister of State, Deputy Butler. Continuing on from that, we had the ADHD Ireland strategic plan last week. I was lucky to have supports growing up when I had not been diagnosed with ADHD, but there are people in my constituency and across Ireland who do not have the family supports I have. When someone has ADHD they are more likely to engage in crime or experience addiction. Will the Government commit to ensuring the strategic plan is matched with real improvements in assessments, treatments and support for children and young adults living with ADHD?

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I thank the Deputy for his advocacy in relation to ADHD, for the way he speaks openly about it and also for forming a cross-party committee on ADHD. As he knows, the model of care was launched in 2021 for adults with ADHD. We look after children with ADHD through the child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS. There was a recommendation to have 14 funded adult teams. All 14 teams have been funded. Eleven are in place and we are working to get the last three under recruitment. However, when the model of care was devised we did not anticipate the number of referrals that would be made to it. It is under review again. I can talk to the Deputy about it. I thank him for his advocacy.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are nearly out of time. I ask Deputy McGrath to be as brief as he can.

Deputy Séamus McGrath: I raise the offence of spiking. As we know, this is where a drug is administered to somebody, without their consent, in a drink or an injection in a busy night-time scene. It is a gross invasion of an individual and it can result in catastrophic consequences such as serious sexual assault. The programme for Government states that we will impose stronger laws in relation to spiking. Currently, spiking is dealt with under the Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person Act through an offence of poisoning. Stand-alone legislation is required to make this a dedicated and stand-alone offence. Will the Taoiseach take this matter up with the Department of justice to ensure the Government fulfils its commitment under the programme for Government?

The Taoiseach: This is a very serious issue and I will take it up with the Minister for justice. I will talk to the Minister in respect of this issue and work to see if we can make progress on it, which I think we can.

Deputy Gary Gannon: Last week, I had a meeting with two individuals, Sharon Lynn and Bryan Gallagher, which left a lasting impression on me. Both lost siblings individually in one-punch attacks. What they are asking for is structured sentencing guidelines for manslaughter cases, but also a national strategy on male-on-male violence. Is that something the Taoiseach's Department has considered?

The Taoiseach: I appreciate the work that Sharon Lynn and Bryan Gallagher are doing. Courts often respond negatively to mandatory guidelines from the Oireachtas but, nonetheless, it is something I will ask the Minister for justice to explore, in terms of manslaughter and male-on-male violence. More broadly, within our education system and the criminal justice system,

we should focus on violence more generally. We had an earlier discussion on the shocking report from Women's Aid in respect of the number of terrible, violent incidents and domestic violence. There is an issue there that needs to be addressed.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I received a letter from Louth County Council, which I did not expect, requesting urgent support in securing Government funding to assist the council in addressing the extensive damage caused to the county's road and drainage infrastructure following Storm Chandra. The scale of the damage across the county is significant in both urban and rural areas, with the council recording 69 road closures and 81-----

An Ceann Comhairle: A question please, Deputy.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: -----road locations, with an estimated overall reinstatement requirement of €3.61 million. In all my years dealing with Louth County Council, it has always gone through the proper channels, but for the council to call on TDs and Senators to publicise the need for additional Government funding highlights the dire situation.

An Ceann Comhairle: I said briefly.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: Will the Taoiseach explore this with the relevant Departments and Ministers, if he can?

The Taoiseach: This is a general issue, not one that just applies to County Louth. What the Minister for public expenditure would say is that all county councils will have received funding that involved a provision for emergencies. That said, submissions have been made from county councils across the country, particularly those that were more affected than others by Storm Chandra.

The Government is giving consideration to that.

Ceisteanna - Questions

Cabinet Committees

1. **Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [16734/26]

2. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [46798/26]

3. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [16739/26]

4. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [16740/26]

5. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [34547/26]

6. **Deputy John Connolly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [37325/26]

7. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [46893/26]

8. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [41562/26]

9. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [41565/26]

10. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [44846/26]

11. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [45030/26]

12. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet [45463/26]

13. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [46909/26]

14. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [45466/26]

15. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Water Quality will next meet. [45629/26]

16. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [47341/26]

17. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [47364/26]

18. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [47401/26]

19. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [47446/26]

20. **Deputy Ivana Bacik** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet committee on water quality will next meet. [47750/26]

An Ceann Comhairle: We have two groupings, the first is questions Nos. 1 to 20, inclusive. The Taoiseach will have three minutes and I propose that Deputies will have 30 seconds each in order to accommodate the 20 Deputies.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Are there 20 in the room?

An Ceann Comhairle: I am afraid I have to prepare on the basis that they will turn up. That is my job.

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 to 20, inclusive, together.

The Cabinet committee on water quality oversees the implementation of programme for Government commitments in relation to issues affecting Ireland's water, including those related to agriculture, forestry, land-use change and wastewater treatment.

Water quality is vital to the well-being of our society, economy and environment. The programme for Government commits to improving water quality. The EPA recently published Water Quality in 2025: An Indicators Report, which signals annual changes and key indicators for water quality. In 2025, some improvements were recorded at a local level, although there had been no overall improvement in water quality nationally, with 54% of rivers recorded as having good or better biological quality. While the EPA analysis shows that significant challenges remain, it is important to recognise the progress that has been made. An example of positive improvement is the Ballyteigue-Bannow catchment in Wexford seeing the biological quality of a number of its rivers improve.

Last year's budget allocated almost €2.5 billion to the delivery of water services. That is an increase of €612 million on 2025. As part of this, €42 million in funding has been allocated to the 2026 water quality capital programme. Uisce Éireann is investing more than €2.3 billion in stand-alone projects at 108 wastewater treatment plans. This will deliver ten new wastewater treatment plant upgrades where current discharges place significant pressures on water bodies.

The water action plan published last year sets out over 150 actions to protect, improve and restore water quality. These include: the implementation and tracking of water action plan actions; the development of a stronger sixth nitrates action programme; the Farming for Water European Innovation Partnership project; and the national barrier mitigation programme, which will support fish migration and water quality.

The Minister, Deputy Browne, published the sixth nitrates action programme in December. It will run until 2028. This plan gives effect to the nitrates directive, which governs the management of nitrates loss from agriculture to water bodies. On foot of the measures included in this plan, in December 2025, the European Commission granted Ireland a three-year extension to its nitrates derogation. The Minister, Deputy Heydon, is working with his officials to address key conditions within the derogation decision. These include operationalising the

environmental assessments to demonstrate enhanced compliance with respect to the nitrates derogation, the habitats directive and the water framework directive.

It will be important to safeguard the economic contribution of farmers in the areas most affected by the derogation while also implementing workable solutions for water quality. Last year, the Government published *Water and Agriculture: A collaborative approach*. This plan sets out a range of measures that address the twin objectives of improving water quality and building a convincing case for the maintenance of Ireland's derogation from certain aspects of the EU nitrates directive.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

The Environmental Protection Agency recently released its report, *Domestic Waste Water Treatment System Inspections 2025*. This details the findings of septic tank inspections by local authorities in 2025. A total of 1,466 septic tank inspections were carried out in 2025, targeting areas of greatest risk from an environmental and health perspective. Of these, 59% failed inspection, with many posing a risk to nearby rivers and drinking water wells. Since 2013, 7,212 septic tanks have failed inspections, with 84% fixed by the end of 2025. Improved resolution of faulty septic tanks by homeowners has been aided by increased Government grant support.

The water quality Cabinet committee provides a focus to drive the improvement of water quality. The Cabinet committee met most recently on 30 October and will meet again in July.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are 20 questions and there are nine Members present. I will give them a minute each. They may risk not getting a fair answer if other Members join us.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I am happy enough because I am first.

An Ceann Comhairle: You are still only getting a minute.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: As someone who was born and reared in rural Ireland and who lives there, I will highlight the very real challenges facing communities in my constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny. In communities like those of Mullinavat and Inistioge, inadequate wastewater treatment capacity is becoming a serious barrier to future growth and future investment. People in these communities want to see homes delivered and young families supported. They want to see local businesses, sports clubs and schools given the opportunity to develop. However, without the necessary water and wastewater infrastructure, rural towns and villages around the country are being limited in their ability to reach their full potential. If this Government is serious about rural regeneration and balanced regional development, essential infrastructure must be delivered to deliver on those ambitions.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Last week, we read headlines such as "No improvement to water quality standards in 2025 - EPA" and "Ireland's 'best rivers' continue to deteriorate in water quality". I will raise the specific issue of combined sewer systems. In many of our urban areas, these are a particular contributor to deterioration in water quality. In these systems, wastewater and surface water are combined. The EPA has a programme to address this issue but it is not

ambitious enough. Significantly increased investment is needed in the town of Kells in County Meath to rehabilitate its sewers through this combined sewer programme.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I ask that the Cabinet consider expanding eligibility for the septic tank grant scheme so that every household with a defective system can access support regardless of geography. If we do not take that step, we are asking people to protect water quality without giving them the means to do so. There are close to 500,000 septic tanks in use across the State. The recent grant of €12,000 is welcome but the scheme remains far too narrowly focused. Most of the time, people fall outside the criteria. In practice, households can only access support if they fail an inspection or fall within specific priority areas. If we are really serious about protecting water quality, we cannot rely on this reactive scheme. We want to be proactive. We need to take a preventative approach that supports homeowners before pollution occurs.

An Ceann Comhairle: I call on Deputy Ó Murchú. I am sorry; I did not see Deputy McCormack.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I am not that small. I welcome the progress being made on the Shannon water supply project, which is now before An Coimisiún Pleanála. This project is about much more than supplying Dublin with water. It is also about creating opportunities in the future to develop spurs leading to Tullamore and Mullingar, which would create a counterbalance to Dublin and drive balanced growth within the midlands region. We all know that, when projects get done, the second phase can sometimes be left on the long finger, which can push them 20, 30 or 40 years down the road. Will the Taoiseach work with me to put pressure on Irish Water to ensure this second phase happens? It should become part of the first phase to provide more opportunities in Offaly, Westmeath and right across the midlands.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I will again bring up the issue of water infrastructure in County Louth, particularly in Hackballscross and Sheelagh. With regard to the reservoir in Dunbin, there have been telemetric monitoring failures and an issue with pumps being unable to contact these monitoring systems. For a number of weeks, families have not had water for days. Farms have gone without water and schools have been closed early. It is not good enough. We need to solve this issue. Locally, Irish Water has told me that it has some of the issues resolved but I need a meeting with Uisce Éireann at a corporate level. I request that the Taoiseach's office help facilitate this because I am having an issue with it. It is absolutely necessary. We should also look at an alternative water supply in the short term.

Deputy John Connolly: I ask the Government to examine legislation and regulation in respect of the term "bathing season". The bathing season began on 1 June and will run until the end of September. The challenge is that local authorities will only sample water quality in bathing areas during the bathing season. This is despite the fact that people are now swimming outdoors throughout the year. This has developed in popularity since the Covid pandemic began. We do not know the quality of the water people are swimming in outside of what is considered the bathing season. Galway City Council only samples the water during the bathing season. Dublin City Council is the only local authority in the State that samples water outside of the bathing season. I know the Taoiseach himself enjoys a swim on Christmas Day.

Everyone who enjoys swimming throughout the year needs to know the quality of the water they are swimming in.

Deputy David Cullinane: I will raise an issue in respect of Woodlands, a housing estate in Portlawn, County Waterford. At the moment, water is provided through developer-provided infrastructure. This is costing the residents in this housing estate a lot of money. They obviously want to be connected to the public infrastructure. That will come at a cost. Catherine Burke, a councillor in the area, has been engaging with Irish Water on the issue for a long time. There does not seem to be a resolution. Will the Taoiseach make inquiries to Irish Water on my behalf? I have contacted it but I believe contact from the Taoiseach could make a difference.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Met Éireann is saying that we are facing tropical temperatures tonight.

It is absolutely baking out there and people want, and should be able, to swim. However, all across Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown there are warning notices saying people cannot swim. The reason - and I have raised this repeatedly - is because of the failure of Irish Water-Uisce Éireann to rehabilitate the water infrastructure and the fact that when heavy rains come down, rainwater mixes with sewage and it goes into Dublin Bay. The test results come three days later and there is a warning asking people not to swim. By the way, people are swimming despite this and endangering their health. I have raised this repeatedly. The only reason we have testing outside the bathing season, by the way, is because we fought for it in Dublin. We need same-day testing and the rehabilitation of this decrepit water infrastructure that is preventing people swimming.

Deputy Paul Murphy: There are thousands of people already at our coasts or on their way to our coasts to swim but there are swimming restrictions in place across all of the closest designated swimming spots south of the city centre. The Half Moon, Seapoint, Dún Laoghaire Baths, Sandycove and the Forty Foot have all been under an eight-day swim restriction notice since Thursday last. The notice warns of a possible increase in bacteria following heavy rainfall. In other words, there is a good chance you are swimming in faeces. The same notice goes up every time there is heavy rain, which means it happens a lot, because the sewage system is overloaded due to decades of underinvestment. The council is advising beach-goers to reduce the risk of illness by avoiding splashing or swallowing water. Tell that to the hundreds of kids swimming at beaches yesterday. Does the Taoiseach think it is acceptable for children to be swimming in faeces?

Deputy Peadar Kirby: One of the most basic responsibilities of a Government is to keep water in the taps and keep the lights on, yet in County Meath our water infrastructure is that of a developing country. County Meath towns are regularly without water and new housing estates are being delayed as a result of the water infrastructure. I know of one housing estate that has to wait more than a year for Uisce Éireann to connect it to the water infrastructure. Last month, Ballivor was without water for so long that the school had to close. Today, they are trucking water to Ballivor. Tomorrow, Athboy and Kildalkey will be without water. Water supply is cut regularly and the water is regularly discoloured, and vulnerable people are hurting.

Can the Taoiseach confirm that the people of County Meath will have clean and consistent water within the next 50 years?

The Taoiseach: Did the Deputy say 50 years?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Yes.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The people of Newport have waited decades for a wastewater treatment plant that is fit for purpose. This is absolutely critical infrastructure. For them to hear now that it may be 2031 before they get this critical infrastructure is absolutely not acceptable for families, businesses or community groups in the area. This is a beautiful town that has waited too long. I am asking the Taoiseach to intervene so that it does not have to wait until 2031 for something as basic as a wastewater treatment plant.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: In 2024, 59% of Ireland's existing treatment plants failed to consistently meet the standards set out in their EPA licence. Nearly half of these, that is approximately 120 instances, were due to poor operational management, things like pumps not working and maintenance not happening on equipment. In fact, the EPA has prosecuted Uisce Éireann 35 times for failing to properly treat wastewater. Can the Taoiseach tell me why Uisce Éireann gave 47 of its best-paid employees an average of €21,000 in bonus payments for good performance in 2024, while at the same time there were 120 instances of someone, somewhere not doing his or her job when it came to treating our water and ensuring and protecting our water supply?

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I was swimming in Dún Laoghaire this morning, so I am very worried. I have raised this multiple times. In the north Dublin coastal communities of Clontarf, Bayside and Howth, swimmers constantly get swim warnings. Seán Dublin Bay Loftus, a former Independent TD in my constituency whose family endorsed me, fought to protect Dublin Bay from pollution. Other countries have cracked this. The Netherlands has restored millions of seagrass plants along its coasts, as well as oysters which can use natural means to clean the water. However, that is treating the problem. At the end of the day, we need to get to the root cause, which is more water treatment plants. The water treatment plant in north Dublin proposed under the greater Dublin drainage project needs to be brought in faster. The current overflow system in Poolbeg is not large enough and needs to be looked at for swimmers in my area.

The Taoiseach: I would love a swim now. I will not get one.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: The Taoiseach cannot go to Dún Laoghaire, I am afraid.

The Taoiseach: I am working too hard all day and will not get the chance. The Deputies have all made me very envious. Everyone is going swimming and we are in here. We should reflect.

Deputy 'Chap' Cleere made a very valid point in terms of Mullinavat and Inistioge. I have been saying this to Irish Water. As the Deputy knows, one of the outcomes of our discussions

has been developer-led treatment plants. There were some decisions made on that, but it is in terms of naturally based water treatment processes which would then enable developer-led waste treatment to be put in for villages and towns, because Irish Water has said it will never get to them. It will be doing the bigger stuff and it will not get out to the villages and towns around Ireland. That has been decided upon. We need to do more than that, if I am honest. I am not quite satisfied that is sufficient, but it is a start. We have many towns which have basic facilities in terms of additional housing contiguous to the village and so on. I am with the Deputy on that one.

Deputy O'Rourke spoke about Kells and the combined sewer investment. Again, I will talk to Irish Water. There is progress and work on that but I will certainly raise it with Irish Water.

Deputy McGreehan gave a very interesting presentation on septic tanks. She said the scheme is too narrowly focused. I will examine that. The EPA recently released a report on domestic wastewater treatment system inspections in 2025. It is interesting that 1,400 septic tank inspections were carried out and 59% failed inspection, with many posing a risk to nearby rivers and drinking water. Since 2013, 7,000 septic tanks failed inspections, with 84% fixed by the end of 2025. There is Government grant support, as the Deputy said. I will speak to the Minister. The Deputy is saying to broaden it out and have a more proactive approach. That is a very good idea and I will see if we can activate that as opposed to a reactive one.

I could not agree more with Deputy McCormack. It is the eastern midlands project. I did not realise that the midlands was the second phase. In my view, if we are going up along, we need to sort it out and do the midlands. By the way, it will be the best argument for the east as well. Some people are worried about it and opposing it but it is absolutely essential for the future of the country the that project gets off the ground and developed in terms of water supply and wastewater. It will have a negligible impact on the Shannon or ecology, in my view. It should have happened earlier. This Government has taken a decision in terms of a fundamental piece of infrastructure that simply has to happen. The midlands is a natural growth area that would take pressure off the east and whose time has come for a broader-based economic development prospect. Between the energy side and this project, that gives us the fundamentals to do that.

All politics is local but I note Deputy Ó Murchú wants a meeting at corporate level.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I have met locally. What I am looking for-----

The Taoiseach: My experience in life is that the engineer or person on the ground might know an awful lot more than the corporates in terms of specific pipes and so on. I will pursue it and I will raise the fact that the Deputy has raised it with me.

Deputy Connolly has a sensible proposal. The bathing season of June to September does not make sense any more. Particularly since Covid, an awful lot more people swim all 12 months round. I interviewed Professor Luke O'Neill some time back, before I became Taoiseach. Cold water is very good for you, apparently. It is very good for the immune system. People are swimming all year round. Deputy 'Chap' Cleere should try it some time.

(Interruptions)

The Taoiseach: It makes absolute sense to carry out testing, particularly in rural towns and villages, during the festive season and the winter when there are many swimming events, such as on Christmas Day, new year's eve and new year's day. A lot of people gather in those areas for those events.

It is a very good point. I will get the Minister to send a circular to the local authorities on that.

Deputy Cullinane said to inquire with Irish Water about Portlaw and Woodlands. I hope he does not mind but I better inquire with the Minister of State, Deputy Mary Butler as well. She is from Portlaw, as the Deputy knows. I will try to sort out what is happening and what the county council is doing.

Deputy David Cullinane: Just to get a response from Irish Water.

The Taoiseach: We have a number of areas where things are not taken in charge. These things should be facilitated by the agencies.

I got the message from Deputy Boyd Barrett but he went from tropical weather to torrential rainfall within one minute.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: It was within three days.

The Taoiseach: Within three days.

Deputy Paul Murphy: That is precisely what tropical weather is.

An Ceann Comhairle: We have to be fair to everybody. The Taoiseach, please.

The Taoiseach: I am trying to work out when the torrential rainfall was but the point is well made. There is a fundamental issue there and that is why we are putting €2.5 billion into this to do some very substantial wastewater infrastructure. Dublin is one of the areas that is probably most impacted because of the access to the coast, the huge population and so on.

Deputy Paul Murphy essentially made the same point in terms of the impacts on swimmers. This is a public health issue and we cannot take it lightly. When warnings are given we have to take them on board because it can result in significant illness for people who could be immunosuppressed or whatever, which would be doubly dangerous for them.

Deputy Tóibín----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Fifty years.

An Ceann Comhairle: In 50 years. I would like to commit, yes, but I think we will do it much sooner. There is huge investment going in. The delivery and upgrading continues apace.

On the issue raised by Deputy Conway-Walsh, I am not sure of the background as to why there are delays until 2031. The project is under way, I take it.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Could the Taoiseach tell them to hurry up?

An Ceann Comhairle: No, Deputy.

The Taoiseach: I will examine it with Irish Water. They make a very good black pudding in Newport as well, by the way.

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, there are two more Deputies and one minute.

The Taoiseach: I will certainly look into it and check with Irish Water as to why. It might be an operational or planning issue. I do not know but I will check with them.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Whitmore's question was next.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Whitmore referenced 59%. This is a very serious point which I have raised with Irish Water. In my view, there should not be operational errors or non-performance which then leads to poor water quality. The Irish water authority should be the personification of excellence in terms of clean water. There has been some pretty poor evidence in some areas where standards have dropped. In fairness to the 47 best-paid employees, I would say they were not involved.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Someone at the top has to be.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, we will be out of time.

The Taoiseach: Collectively, there is a question about ethos here. We have had presentations from the EPA and Irish Water and this is an issue.

An Ceann Comhairle: We are out of time, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Heneghan, too, raised the issue of water quality. You are looking okay but, that said-----

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Thank you very much.

The Taoiseach: You are looking very well, actually. You are invigorated from your swim.

An Ceann Comhairle: Time, Taoiseach. We have to move on.

The Taoiseach: However, at the same time, we will-----

An Ceann Comhairle: We will report further.

British-Irish Co-operation

21. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent UK-Ireland summit. [46799/26]

22. **Deputy Liam Quaide** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent UK-Ireland summit. [46800/26]

23. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent UK-Ireland summit. [46910/26]

24. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent UK-Ireland summit. [21382/26]

25. **Deputy Shane Moynihan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent UK-Ireland summit. [21383/26]

26. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent UK-Ireland summit. [36905/26]

27. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent Britain-Ireland summit. [37337/26]

28. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent UK-Ireland summit. [41563/26]

29. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent UK-Ireland summit. [41566/26]

30. **Deputy Ruth Coppinger** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent UK-Ireland summit. [45029/26]

31. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent UK-Ireland summit. [45329/26]

32. **Deputy Erin McGreehan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent UK-Ireland summit. [45333/26]

33. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent UK-Ireland summit. [45464/26]

34. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent UK-Ireland summit. [47342/26]

35. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent UK-Ireland summit. [47365/26]

36. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent UK-Ireland summit. [47400/26]

37. **Deputy Conor D. McGuinness** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on the recent UK-Ireland summit. [47447/26]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 21 to 37, inclusive, together.

I note the announcement of the resignation of the United Kingdom Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, earlier this week, and acknowledge the very significant role he has played in resetting the Irish-British relationship, as well as relations between the United Kingdom and the European Union, during his time as Prime Minister. Since Prime Minister Starmer took office two years ago, he has worked with us to set a new direction and depth in the relationship between Ireland and the United Kingdom for the benefit of all our citizens, North-South and east-west. Our two Governments also took an important step forward in dealing with the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland, publishing a joint framework on addressing the legacy of the Troubles. As I said this week, Keir is a person of great ability, decency and honour and I want to wish him, his wife Victoria and their family the very best in the next chapter in their lives. I have no doubt that his successor as Prime Minister will wish to continue to deepen and strengthen the relationship between the United Kingdom and Ireland, and we will continue to work in furtherance of that objective.

I hosted a United Kingdom-Ireland summit in Cork on 12 and 13 March. This was the second summit in a series initiated in Liverpool last year, at which Prime Minister Keir Starmer and I agreed a new comprehensive programme of strategic co-operation: United Kingdom-Ireland 2030. This year's summit was an opportunity to review progress on United Kingdom-Ireland 2030 and to identify further areas for co-operation and work to be taken forward across government in collaboration with United Kingdom counterparts.

The summit in Cork had an extensive programme over two days, reflecting the significant nature of this bilateral relationship. The opening engagement was a round-table event attended by businesses and business representative groups to explore issues related to trade and investment and what Ireland and the United Kingdom can do together to further our already substantial economic relationship.

The Prime Minister and I also had the opportunity to meet representatives of the Ireland-UK Youth Forum, established in January 2026 in fulfilment of a commitment made at last year's summit. The aim of the forum is to ensure that a new generation is involved in the strengthening of relations across these islands.

The summit programme also included a civic and cultural reception in Cork City Hall and a research- and innovation-focused visit to the Tyndall National Institute. Prime Minister Starmer and I also met over dinner on 12 March.

The summit plenary, held in Fota House, saw a wide-ranging discussion on achievements to date under United Kingdom-Ireland 2030, and on shared ambitions to see co-operation

deepen and deliver to 2030 across a range of areas, including energy security and the transition to clean energy, protection of subsea infrastructure, cybersecurity, cultural exchange and competitiveness. We also discussed wider international issues, including the Middle East, the Gulf region and Ukraine.

Additional information not given on the floor of the House

We agreed a joint statement reflecting the overall theme of the summit, Shared Prosperity, Shared Seas, Shared Ties, which set out achievements over the past year and looked ahead to future work together to the mutual benefit of both countries.

I was accompanied at the summit by the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance, Deputy Simon Harris; the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence, Deputy Helen McEntee; the Minister for Climate, Environment, Energy, and Transport, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Deputy Jim O' Callaghan. Accompanying Prime Minister Starmer were Ed Miliband, Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero; Emma Reynolds, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; Peter Kyle, Secretary of State for Business and Trade and Hilary Benn, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are 17 Deputies and the best I can do is to give those here a minute each.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Now that we have the EU asylum and migration pact there needs to be particular recognition and consideration of the Border with the North and the common travel area. Has the Taoiseach discussed or considered how those asylum and migration systems will work North-South and east-west? Are there plans for improved co-operation?

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Some 85% of asylum seekers who come into this State are coming from Britain through the North of Ireland. It is by far the biggest pathway for the movement of people in relation to the asylum process. We enjoy a common travel area with Britain but there have been significant problems over the past number of years. That is because there are three separate jurisdictions and not a lot of sharing of information. It means Ireland and Britain cannot control the movement of people and we do not have accurate records as to who is where. The Traditional Unionist Voice, TUV, has indicated recently there needs to be a hard border but that is simply impossible. There are 270 roads going north and south. I got information on Operation Sonnet last week. This is where Border checks are placed North and South. They happened on 30 days last year and there were 184 detections. It is window dressing, in reality. What we need is an Irish sea border for the movement of people. That has been accepted by the Taoiseach, Europe and Britain for the movement of goods as the only real way to be able to track the movement of goods.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Devlin is next.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: It is possible to have an Irish sea border and still enjoy the common travel area-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Devlin is on his feet.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: -----just with the use of passports and driver's licences in relation to British and Irish citizens.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Will the Taoiseach bring this up with the new British Administration, please?

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Devlin.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I join the Taoiseach in his remarks about Prime Minister Starmer and all of the work he has done in rebuilding the relationship between Ireland and the UK, including through the UK-Ireland summits that have taken place in Liverpool and Cork.

I welcome the €377 million announced overnight for the shared island initiative, particularly the €193 million for the Dublin-Belfast-Derry line. That is real all-island progress and the Taoiseach deserves credit as well for starting that initiative. Much of this funding rightly is for large infrastructure but some of the most lasting reconciliation happens at community level. On that point, in my own constituency of Dún Laoghaire, local schools and sport links had been created between Shankill in Dún Laoghaire and Shankill in Belfast. That is practical community relations.

Will the Taoiseach consider whether the shared island fund can support more of these people-to-people connections, be it sporting or community organisations, on both sides of the Border, alongside its investment in roads and the rail network?

Deputy Shane Moynihan: I associate myself with the Taoiseach's remarks about Prime Minister Starmer and I wish him and his family well.

One of the great things about our relationship with UK is the fact that we can still take advantage of the cross-border directive. However, constituents have been contacting me in recent weeks about significant delays in reimbursement under that directive. Some applicants are waiting five or six months despite indicative timelines of three months. In many cases, this is causing financial strain for patients who must pay upfront, including accumulating interest costs where loans are required. Will the Taoiseach intervene and see if clarity can be provided on whether these backlogs relate to staffing constraints and whether the additional interest that may be accrued will be reimbursed when processing times are exceeded? The cross-border directive is an excellent scheme and I would hate for it to lose public confidence due to operational issues.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I welcome the establishment of annual UK-Ireland summits. These have the potential to strengthen further bilateral relationships and intensify collaboration in areas such as trade, business, technology, investment, energy and environment. Alongside these annual summits, the Government must also ensure that the potential of the institutions established under the Good Friday Agreement across our jurisdictions are maximised to the

best possible extent. As well as that important work, legacy issues must get priority attention in all Irish-British discussions. I refer again to the heinous crimes and loss of life inflicted on communities in my constituency, crimes for which nobody has been brought to justice. I instance again the murder of two young teenagers in my own home area when Geraldine O'Reilly and Patrick Stanley were killed in the bombing in Belturbet on 28 December 1972, and the dreadful loss of life in Monaghan and Dublin on 17 May 1974, when 34 innocent people, including an unborn child, were killed and 300 were seriously injured. Decade after decade has passed and families continue to grieve but there has been little if any progress on investigations into these murders. These must be addressed.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We have seen recently the Tánaiste's foray into united Ireland politics. I would like to think that would lead to a change in relation to Government policy. We all welcome that infrastructural deficits will be dealt with as a result of the shared island unit. We all want to see the likes of the Narrow Water Bridge and we also want to see whatever relationships can be built, but let us be clear, the one thing that we do need to see is movement towards constitutional change. This means preparation. It is sensible to do preparation. Sinn Féin wants to see a Green Paper and a citizens' assembly. It does not have to be citizens' assembly, it just needs to be any kind of forum to have those discussions on what this could look like. That would be the best means of dealing with the issue that we constantly talk about as regards reconciliation and whatever else. I would like to think that we would see movement on that.

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett: Workers at Haldane Fisher in Newry, one of the biggest construction supply companies in the whole of Ireland, North and South, and in the UK, are on strike because Haldane Fisher, a very profitable company, is offering them pay increases that are significantly below the rate of inflation. The workers reckon that they have actually lost about 3% or 4% in real income terms over recent years. Haldane Fisher seems to be trying to break the strike and is refusing to negotiate with Unite the Union, which represents the workers.

I would say that one reason Keir Starmer is on his way out is because he failed working people on the cost-of-living crisis. That is something we should not do. It is important that a message be sent to Haldane Fisher. It should engage with these workers. These workers, and all workers, deserve pay increases that at least keep pace with inflation so that they are not losing income.

Deputy Paul Murphy: You would not know it from listening to the British commentariat, but a key factor in the downfall of Keir Starmer was his complicity in genocide and, in particular, that infamous clip where he says Israel does have the right to block water, block food and block electricity from Gaza while engaging in very blatant war crimes.

Another man entirely complicit in genocide is Peter Thiel, the founder of Palantir, which is deeply integrated into the Israeli military structure and has played a crucial role in the slaughter of huge numbers of Palestinians. Peter Thiel is planning a sinister event in Ireland, organised by Dialog. It is a secretive event involving 200 people, with high-powered people and others with connections to genocide, including US Senator Ted Cruz, Secretary Scott Bessent and the NATO Europe commander. The topics are bizarre and include bringing back nuclear,

navigating a third world war and battlefield technologies. Does the Taoiseach think the Powerscourt Hotel should be facilitating this event?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: The Taoiseach talked about Keir Starmer being decent and resetting relationships. If ever there was a Prime Minister who did moral bankruptcy, it is Keir Starmer. Here is somebody who got in with a huge Labour majority and proceeded to lean in to racism, anti-migrant sentiment, transphobia and every single thing you can think of. He inflicted austerity on pensioners and the disabled. Let us talk about Palestine. Deputies here are meant to be supporting Palestine and yet they are congratulating Starmer and wishing him well. What about the Palestinian families whose water he thought it was fine to cut off? What about the spy flights over Gaza which Starmer endorsed? He shared intelligence with the Israel Defense Forces, IDF, and exported military goods worth \$169 million. He has jailed young people for committing non-violent crimes. He put them on a par with ISIS and jailed them as terrorists. That is not decent. It is absolutely reprehensible. To support a genocide is reprehensible. Good riddance to him.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: There is a significant opportunity to place research, innovation, higher education and collaboration at the centre of any future conversations we have with regard to any UK-Ireland summits. The UK's return to Horizon Europe is an important and welcome development. Restoring those research links will benefit both our islands. It should also encourage us to think more ambitiously about what additional bilateral initiatives could achieve. I propose that between now and the next UK-Ireland summit we consider the establishment of a dedicated UK-Ireland innovation and research partnership to complement Horizon Europe and deepen collaboration between our universities, researchers and industries. Such a partnership could support joint research projects, research and mobility, doctoral training programmes and innovation-led collaborations in areas where both our countries share strategic interests, such as healthcare, climate action, food security, AI and advanced technologies. The academic relationship between Ireland and the UK took a hit during Brexit and this an opportunity for us all.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Plug-in solar represents a huge opportunity to enable renters and those who live in apartments or in heritage homes to access the benefits of solar power and to make savings on their bills. The UK is powering ahead with this and I hope Ireland will follow suit. I have raised this repeatedly with the Minister and I know he is open to this. I understand the ESB is looking at it. I ask that the Taoiseach actually put a timeline on it because the Department has been looking at this for two years and we really cannot have any delays. This really needs to be fast-tracked. The benefits are huge and we are obviously in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis. I ask that the Taoiseach speed up progress on this.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Any upcoming legislation on clerical institutional abuse must have a cross-Border dimension. Catholic dioceses like Clogher span the Border and so do their school networks. We have evidence of clergy being moved between jurisdictions because of abuse concerns. Survivors of abuse in this State who sought refuge in the North found that the abuse continued there, and they are now dealing with both An Garda Síochána and the PSNI. Will the Taoiseach commit to engage with the Executive in Belfast, or is he already doing so,

to strengthen co-operation between the two criminal justice systems so that abusers cannot use jurisdictional gaps to escape accountability?

The Taoiseach: Deputy O'Rourke asked about the EU asylum pact and the common travel area. The European Union asylum pact creates a structure that is positive, firm and robust. It has critics on the left and it has critics on the right. One side is saying we are not going far enough and the other is saying that we are going too far in terms of the returns aspect. We need to protect the common travel area because it is of enormous value to our citizens. Equally, as others have said, it creates challenges in terms of migration flows, particularly with people coming from the UK into Northern Ireland and over the Border. That is reality. The Minister for justice has been in touch with the home secretary. There was a call last week. We discussed this during the UK summit.

2 o'clock

I do also believe, in terms of Operation Sonnet and other operations, that there is strengthened monitoring of traffic and people coming across, and that there is checking of public transport and other areas. There will never be a hard Border. There cannot be a hard Border. Deputy Tóibín also raised this issue and made a claim of 85%. I do not have a precise figure on that.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Nobody has the precise figure because of the movement of people.

An Ceann Comhairle: Everybody needs an answer, so do not interrupt.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Tóibín then went on to give a precise figure. I will just leave it----

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: I am only telling the Taoiseach what the Minister said.

An Ceann Comhairle: I do not care.

The Taoiseach: The point is I think it is high. I am not arguing the figure, but the point I would make is there is a need for data on this. There are also less and less coming in through airports because of controls and so on that have been implemented over the last two to three years. There is an issue, but I am not clear. Could the Deputy flesh out his proposals and send me a paper on the Irish Sea border, and how that would operate and could be implemented? That is challenging as well and we need to be honest with people when ideas like that are floated. We do need more monitoring and controls so that we understand what is happening in these flows, as well as to deal with traffickers. I came across some terrible cases when I met Women's Aid in Northern Ireland recently in terms of women who were trafficked and horrifically abused in the course of the trafficking. Trafficking is a significant driver of migration also, and that does not get captured enough in the debate and the narrative.

I appreciate Deputy Devlin's reference to what is a very significant allocation from the shared island fund. It is more than just infrastructure. It is about people and the shared island initiative has put more research into systems North and South, such as health and education, than anything that has been done since the foundation of the State. I also direct that to Deputy Ó Murchú. Under the shared island initiative, there is facilitation for people-to-people

supports. The shared home place programme is one potential area, and the Department of foreign affairs, under the shared island initiative, has a community-based funding scheme and programme. We have a dialogue strand which is bringing people together and then we have a research strand. The funding strand deals with research between universities, collaboration on cancer and issues of mutual concern to communities. If the Deputy has particular ideas, please talk to us. The connectivity that is happening now-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Nine Deputies.

The Taoiseach: -----is particularly important. In that respect, I would make the point that in terms of the Narrow Water Bridge project, a lot of people were talking about it for a long time and nothing was done-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: True.

The Taoiseach: -----both in the North as well as the South, including members of Deputy Ó Murchú's party, but the point is that this Government has done it and we have put a scheme in place to enable that.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Moynihan.

The Taoiseach: Deputy Moynihan raised the cross-Border directive. We are going to do more work on that. We have identified that as an area generally under the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF, and also in terms of North-South relationships. We are asking Departments about tax, treatment of workers and so on. Have I picked up the Deputy's issue correctly?

Deputy Shane Moynihan: It was in reference to health procedures and reimbursements.

An Ceann Comhairle: That is not fair to other Members. There is no interaction. The Taoiseach has eight Members to respond to.

The Taoiseach: I am going to get everyone done.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Taoiseach has three minutes.

The Taoiseach: Anything is possible. In response to Deputy Smith, I want to say that legacy issues remain a very top priority, particularly with a new Prime Minister coming in. The legislation is in the UK and they need to implement it. We will pursue the Monaghan and Dublin bombings, although we are waiting for Operation Denton to perhaps bring more clarity to that.

In response to Deputy Ó Murchú, the amount of research that has been done under the shared island initiative is revealing. It is extensive and it is pointing up issues that we are trying to

deal with and are dealing with. Where is the Deputy's Green Paper? There is nothing stopping Sinn Féin from producing a Green Paper. It is my view that Sinn Féin-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: He is the Taoiseach. He has the power of the State.

The Taoiseach: We are working. We are working flat out. I am substance all the way. I am not about slogans.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Do something on unity.

The Taoiseach: I am not saying someone else give me the solution.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am saying the State.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy, please.

The Taoiseach: Sorry, the Deputy is always saying that Sinn Féin's view is that "Everybody else must do the Green Paper except ourselves". That is the bottom line.

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Boyd Barrett.

The Taoiseach: In any event-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Deputy Boyd Barrett.

The Taoiseach: In response to Deputy Boyd Barrett, again, I do not have the specifics on the strike. Industrial relations mechanisms are there to resolve issues between companies and workers and they should be utilised.

In response to the Deputy Murphy's comments on the British commentariat, to suggest that Prime Minister Starmer committed genocide, as Deputies Murphy and Coppinger did, is outrageous. He did not commit genocide. I do not know much about the event the Deputy is talking about. We are a democracy in this country. If people are meeting, so long as they are not doing any harm to anybody else-----

Deputy Paul Murphy: They are planning to do a lot of harm.

An Ceann Comhairle: There are three Deputies, that is not fair.

The Taoiseach: There is a tendency on the far left and on the far right to say that no one else can meet but themselves. I have no truck with these people. I have no interest in whatever is going on there, but-----

An Ceann Comhairle: Five deputies, Taoiseach.

The Taoiseach: -----citizens of different countries are entitled to come to Ireland. If they get visas, they are entitled to meet and organise. We have a very good democracy here. In the international transparency index, by all measures, we score very highly because of our approach to these issues. That is generally a positive, and we should not try to undermine that either.

I disagree with Deputy Coppinger's remarks on former Prime Minister Keir Starmer. I would not have agreed with all his views on Palestine and the Middle East, but I would not make the assertions and allegations that she has in respect of him.

In response to Deputy McGreehan's question on research and education, the idea of an innovation partnership with the UK is one that we will next pursue for the next summit. We endeavour to try to bring industry and businesses together more, but the idea of an academic collaboration, which has an enterprise dimension to it around new ideas, products and services, is definitely something we could and will pursue to see if can put flesh and bone on that in preparation for next year's summit. Again, the combination of universities, companies and State agencies, like Enterprise Ireland and InterTradeIreland, with their UK counterparts, is something that is very positive.

An Ceann Comhairle: Taoiseach, please be quick.

The Taoiseach: We recently endowed a chair for history in Cambridge university to try to strengthen the academic partnership in the humanities between the UK and Ireland.

In response to Deputy Whitmore, I will actually go the Minister and ask him for a timeline. He is committed to plug-in solar. Deputy Heneghan has spoken about this quite a lot as well. The Minister is worried, and he is getting feedback that we have to make sure that domestic capacity exists and we do not unintended consequences like fires at particular houses and so on. He is concerned about that, and it is real concern. I will put it to him that we need a timeline, if he does not have one already.

In response to Deputy Heneghan, there is ongoing co-operation between the PSNI and the Garda, but also in terms of abuse North-South, we will work with the Executive on issues of that kind.

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

Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 2.08 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 3.10 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 2.08 p.m. and resumed at 3.10 p.m.

Message from Select Committee

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Migration has completed its detailed scrutiny of the Victims of Sexual Violence Civil Protection Orders Bill 2025 and, in accordance with Standing Order 185, has recommended that, for the reasons outlined in its report, the Bill should proceed to Committee Stage.

Pride: Statements

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: We commence our debate with a statement from the Minister, Norma Foley, followed by one from the Minister of State, Emer Higgins. The 25 minutes are to be shared, I think.

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Norma Foley): A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leat as ucht an deis seo a thabhairt dom. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the House on Pride. It is a time of celebration, a time of reflection and a time of renewed commitment. Pride is not merely a festival; it is a living reminder of courage, resistance and the enduring pursuit of dignity for LGBTIQ+ people. It acts as a reminder of the work still to do to allow the LGBTIQ+ community to live openly and freely without fear of discrimination or hatred.

Throughout Ireland, many events will take place for Pride throughout designated days in June and July and, as always, I look forward to those events in my home constituency of Kerry in the coming weeks. However, the impact reaches far beyond just one singular day in any part of the country. It is inspiring to see the expansion of Pride festivals across Ireland, particularly in rural areas, and I warmly welcome their continued growth year after year.

In Ireland we often speak of progress, and rightly so. We have travelled a remarkable distance in a relatively short time. The marriage equality referendum in 2015 changed Ireland in so many profound ways. There is so much to celebrate in terms of the path to equality for the LGBTIQ+ community since that remarkable day. Ireland has in many ways become an example of what social change can look like when driven by compassion, activism and active engagement with the Government.

Last year I launched the national LGBTIQ+ inclusion strategy 2024-2028 and its associated first two-year action plan. The strategy aims to promote and respect the right of LGBTIQ+ people to live their lives safely, free of harassment and free of violence. This is by means of several prevention and protection measures. The strategy incorporates a stronger outcomes-focused approach and a transparent implementation structure. It features achievable actions and clear performance indicators. It has adopted a more focused approach to ensure that actions are realistic and achievable while still being ambitious.

The pillars on which the strategy is built are: safety; health and well-being; participation and inclusion; and equality and non-discrimination. These pillars seek to directly confront the continuing challenges faced by LGBTIQ+ people today. The actions through which the strategy is being implemented reflect the determination of the whole of government and State agencies to work together to that end. Since the launch of the strategy in June 2025, Departments and agencies have been advancing a range of actions set out in the first action plan. While progress takes time, important and promising work is taking place under all four pillars.

As my colleagues will be aware, I submitted a memorandum for Government for information to Cabinet on 23 June in relation to the inaugural national LGBTIQ+ inclusion strategy. The report marks an important milestone in our shared commitment to building a

more equal, a more inclusive and a more respectful society, a society where every single person can live with dignity, safety and full participation. The drafting of this inaugural report not only provides an opportunity to reflect on the progress achieved over the past year but also strengthens our determination to address the challenges that remain.

The safety pillar includes several prevention and protection measures to promote and respect the right of LGBTIQ+ people to live their lives safely, free of harassment and, as I have said, violence. Coimisiún na Meán's online safety code came into full effect in July 2025, thereby strengthening protections against harmful content, including harassment and abusive remarks directed against LGBTIQ+ people. An Coimisiún has also made strong progress on sector-wide equality and diversity supports and the development of gender equality, diversity and inclusion standards.

Local community safety partnerships were established under the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act 2024, which commenced in 2025. These partnerships represent a significant step towards a more collaborative, responsive and locally driven model of community safety.

An Garda Síochána has continued to invest in its network of Garda diversity officers. These officers are trained and supported to actively engage with and attend to the concerns of minority, diverse and hard-to-reach communities. They aim to provide reassurance, build trust and extend the accessibility of the Garda service. A review of the Garda diversity officers' network took place in November 2025, and workshops were carried out for 12 Garda divisions. This added an additional 150 officers to the network, bringing the current number of Garda diversity officers to 666.

Progress under the health and well-being pillar shows increased investment in strengthening mental health supports for LGBTIQ+ people. The Mental Health Commission developed a guidance document for staff working in mental health services on the care and treatment of LGBTIQ+ people and launched it in 2025. This progress is essential because research has shown that LGBTIQ+ people can face higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress.

A key achievement under the national inclusion strategy was the establishment of the LGBTIQ+ community services fund. This fund provides vital funding for initiatives that promote inclusion, protect rights and improve the quality of life and well-being for members of the LGBTIQ+ community. It helps them to participate fully in Ireland's social, economic, cultural and political life. The fund supports the establishment and enhancement of safe spaces in their many forms across the country. The importance of these safe spaces cannot be overestimated. They allow for the creation of connection, solidarity and a sense of belonging. Today I was delighted to announce that 52 projects are to receive funding under the 2026 community services funding call. Through the fund, a total of €1.8 million will be made available to support organisations to deliver projects at national, regional and local levels. This support will help ensure that LGBTIQ+ individuals across Ireland can access these vital services and continue to flourish within their own communities. Successful projects include assisting LGBTIQ+ people living in rural communities to access safe spaces, providing supports to older and disabled LGBTIQ+ people and strengthening community and counselling supports. Since 2020 over €9 million in funding has been provided to 231 projects. The amount of funding available under the fund has increased annually since 2020, indicating the importance of this funding both to the Government and to the wider community. I thank the

community for its continued engagement with the community services fund over the past six years.

Notable achievements have been made under the participation and inclusion pillar. This reflects strong efforts to ensure that LGBTIQ+ voices are heard as part of the relevant strategy and policy development and are embedded across national youth engagement structures. LGBTIQ+ people are now represented within Youth Ireland's governance structures, and work is ongoing to ensure their inclusion in wider Government consultations.

Under the strategy, the first annual LGBTIQ+ forum was successfully held in April of this year. The event brought together representatives, organisations, civil society, public bodies and colleagues from across Government Departments. The forum was established to showcase examples of best practice, provide an opportunity to ask questions on implementation of the strategy and to feed back directly to the steering committee that oversees the strategy. I acknowledge the importance and the value of the forum. It brings together people with lived experience, community organisations and public bodies to talk openly about what is working and, importantly, what still needs to change. Personal insights and experiences are essential to shaping better outcomes.

The strategy only works if it leads to real change, manifest change in people's lives. That is why the work done at the forum discussing the implementation of the strategy as it relates to the community and identifying the most important actions for the second action plan was so valuable. It illustrates how we in government remain committed to working in partnership with LGBTIQ+ people. We know that progress requires listening, respect and genuine collaboration.

As we approach our Presidency of the European Union, we have chosen to showcase and uphold the values of the Union, values founded on the respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights. This choice once again confirms our Government's commitment to creating an equal society. Now more than ever, the EU needs to defend and vindicate those values within Europe and globally. The Irish Presidency will seek to strengthen the EU's approach to equality, social inclusion, non-discrimination and the protection of the rights of minorities in line with the renewed Union of equality strategies. Ireland will use the EU Presidency to advance LGBTIQ+ equality and inclusion.

The Department of Children, Disability and Equality will host a high-level conference on non-discrimination on 6 October 2026. The conference will offer an opportunity to highlight achievement across key policy areas while considering the varying levels of progress towards advancing more and more equality across the EU, ensuring there are areas of interest for a broader audience. The policy areas considered at the conference will align closely with the Equality Strategy 2026-2030. One area that will be explored is LGBTIQ+ equality across the lifecycle, looking at supporting young LGBTIQ+ people and their families, with a particular emphasis on the digital environment, and examining the challenges faced by older people. The event will gather national governments, EU institutions, international organisations and LGBTIQ+ civil society representatives among others to discuss progress and challenges. A meeting of the expert group on LGBTIQ+ equality will follow the conference. The expert group is composed of government experts nominated by member states to support and monitor progress and the protection of people's rights in the member states. Ireland is also supporting

a further conference in October as a Presidency-associated event. The ILGA-Europe annual conference is the largest gathering of LGBTIQ+ activists, organisations and allies in Europe and central Asia. It brings together around 400 participants each year for several days of strategy-building, networking, knowledge-sharing and decision-making.

We must be mindful that equality is not a single destination; it is a continuous journey, and one that we must remain committed to. As a Government, we must continue working to build an Ireland where diversity is embraced, where equality is not an aspiration but a lived reality for all citizens. Pride is a moment to look forward, not just a moment to look back, to reflect on the work still to be done to combat discrimination, to ensure our schools, services and workplaces are inclusive for all and, most importantly, to show the LGBTIQ+ community that we stand in solidarity with them and that we will rise to meet the challenges they continue to face.

Minister of State at the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (Deputy Emer Higgins): I want to start by wishing everybody a really happy Pride and a really happy Pride month, especially those who are heading out to celebrate this weekend. Hopefully, the weather stays as fabulous as it has been the past couple of days for the Dublin Pride parade. Every year that I attend the Dublin Pride parade, I am struck by the sense of community, inclusion, fun, colour, energy and positivity. It brings the streets of Dublin to life and I wish everybody participating in it this year the very best. I think we can see that same feeling reflected in celebrations right across the country. Those celebrations are taking place right throughout this month, and that is something we can all be proud of. Pride is a really important month and a really important moment in the year, a time to celebrate and a time to reflect, as the Minister, Deputy Foley, said. It is a powerful expression of visibility, dignity and joy for the LGBTIQI community but it also reminds us why it is so important that we speak up, stand together and show our solidarity and support. It is really important to recognise how far we have come as a country when it comes to supporting and including LGBTIQI+ people. There is a lot to be proud of but Pride is also a reminder that it all started as a protest and that part of it is still really important too. There are still people who experience discrimination and online abuse. We are seeing more and more of that online, unfortunately. It can be incredibly damaging. It has a real impact on people, on their confidence and well-being and on how safe they feel to just be themselves. While Pride is a celebration, it is also a moment to remind ourselves to keep standing up for each other, call out hate when we see it and keep working towards an Ireland where everyone feels respected, supported and free to be who they are.

It is through that continued commitment that we are seeing real, tangible progress in our policies, our services, and in how we support people in their day-to-day lives. One area where we are seeing that progress is in transgender healthcare. Work is well under way to improve services for both adults and young people, including the development of an updated clinical model of care for gender healthcare which we expect to be completed later this year. A national clinical programme for gender healthcare working group has been set up to develop this, bringing together expertise from across the system with a clear focus on delivering more joined-up, accessible care linking primary care, community supports and specialist services in a way that works better for people.

We are also continuing to focus on challenging stigma and raising awareness. The You, Me and HIV campaign is back again this year across TV, radio and online channels. It is sharing a

really clear message that effective treatment means HIV cannot be passed on. Through real life stories, this campaign is helping to build understanding and create a more supportive and informed society. We are beginning to see some impact from the campaign and recent figures point to a modest downward trend in discriminatory attitudes, with levels decreasing from 54% in late 2024 to 49% at the end of last year. We still have a way to go. More people are also saying they feel comfortable with someone living with HIV in their everyday lives, whether it is a family member, friend, neighbour or colleague. That is clear progress but it is gradual and the level of stigma remains significant. While we are making some progress in the right direction, it is clear that we need to keep moving. Changing attitudes takes time and continued effort. That is essential if we are to achieve more meaningful and lasting change. That is why it is so important that we keep having these conversations and that we keep challenging the stigma and continuing to build a society where people feel fully accepted, supported and included.

We are also seeing really positive progress in our schools. Inclusion is becoming part of everyday learning. The updated senior cycle SPHE programme, which now includes LGBTIQ+ identities, is being introduced for students in the leaving certificate applied. This is being supported at primary level through the new well-being curriculum, including SPHE, which covers topics like diversity, gender stereotypes and tackling bullying from an early age. It is because of our core values, inclusion, respect, understanding and acceptance, and that really matters. As we all know, it is these early experiences that shape how we see and treat each other, as individuals but also as a society. More broadly, we are continuing to strengthen the legal protections that protect LGBTIQ+ people from discrimination, harm and hatred. While I know progress in this area can sometimes feel slow, it is important to take the time to get it right and to make sure the laws we introduce are strong and effective and that they make a real difference in people's lives.

It is in that context that there are very clear commitments in place, including a commitment in both the programme for Government and the national LGBTIQ+ inclusion strategy, to ban conversion practices. This goes to the core of protecting people's equality and dignity. Of course, turning that commitment into something meaningful in practice takes time and careful work. That work is already well under way, with officials developing the approach and working closely with the Office of the Attorney General. Alongside that work, we have also seen important progress in other areas. Just this month, the Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, Deputy Jim O'Callaghan, recommended that the Criminal Law, Civil Law and Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 include an amendment regarding historical convictions for consensual same-sex activity. In practical real terms, this amendment will introduce a process where people can apply to have a certain historical conviction for consensual same-sex activity formally disregarded. This is particularly significant when we reflect on how recent these laws are in our history. Homosexuality was only decriminalised in Ireland in 1993 following a long and hard-fought campaign led by former Senator, David Norris, and many others.

For many people those convictions did not simply disappear. They were punished for relationships that were entirely consensual, something that should never have been criminal in the first place, and they have carried that burden for years, often quietly, through their everyday lives. While we have moved forward as a society, it is important to recognise that this is not the case everywhere. At an international level, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade,

alongside Ireland's diplomatic missions, continues to advocate strongly for the rights of LGBTIQ+ people, including supporting the decriminalisation of homosexuality where it still exists and opposing any attempts to introduce such laws.

It is in that context, recognising the progress we have made and the work that remains, that the legislation is important. It will provide a formal process through which individuals can and will apply to have convictions disregarded and effectively nullified. It also represents a sincere recognition of the violation of individuals' human rights and dignity and acknowledgement of the lasting harm caused by the criminalisation of LGBTIQ+ people and communities more broadly around the world.

That recognition matters all the more in the context we are in today. While we have made real progress, we are seeing that progress being challenged not just at home but influenced by wider international trends, including the more polarised debates that we are seeing, especially overseas. Those conversations, in particular online, can quickly take hold and contribute to an increase in negative rhetoric, misinformation and, in some cases, harassment directed at the LGBTIQ+ community. That is why steps like this are so important, not just in terms of addressing the past but also in reaffirming the kind of society we want to be and the values of equality, dignity and respect we all stand for.

Work does not stop there. Work on the Health (Assisted Human Reproduction) (Amendment) Bill, as colleagues will be aware, is now at an advanced stage, with drafting being led by the Office of Parliamentary Counsel alongside relevant Departments. I am informed it is expected to be introduced to the Dáil this term. Finalising the legislation, along with establishing the assisted human reproduction regulatory authority, will be key to enabling the introduction of surrogacy leave and ensuring that families are recognised and supported and treated equally. I commend Irish Families Through Surrogacy and all those who have advocated in this space.

All this work across policy and legislation, and across seas in terms of our international engagement, shows the direction we are moving in and reflects a clear and ongoing commitment to advancing equality at home and abroad. The Department of Children, Disability and Equality leads on a number of whole-of-government equality strategies, including the national LGBTIQ+ inclusion strategy. As the core, they are about addressing the barriers that people face and making sure that everyone has the opportunity to participate fully and equally in society, regardless of their sex, race, ethnicity, social origin, religion, belief, political opinion, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity or sex characteristics.

These strategies also give us a way to respond to the challenges that people face, many of which are shared across different communities. They are all designed to work together. That is where an intersectional approach becomes so important. It helps us to better understand and respond to inequality in a way that reflects people's lived experience. It is important to say that those lived experiences have been central to shaping our most recent strategies, including the national LGBTIQ+ inclusion strategy. At the end of the day, it is only by listening to people, trying to understand their experiences and putting people at the centre of our policy decisions can we develop policies that are truly meaningful and will make a genuine difference. This is about listening, learning and making sure that people's experiences are reflected in the decisions that we take.

While today is an opportunity to reflect on how far we have come, it is also a reminder of the responsibility that we all share to keep moving forward. Equality is not something that we achieve once. It requires commitment, listening and action. There is much to be proud of this Pride but there is much more to do. We are moving in the right direction. I thank everyone who continues to play a part in making Ireland a more inclusive and compassionate place for everyone, all of the NGOs operating in the space and everybody who is celebrating Pride this month.

Deputy Máire Devine: I welcome the groups in the Gallery who have come to listen to this debate. I hope it proves inspiring from all of us to you.

Pride, or Bród, month began with the bravery of a demonstration in Dublin in 1974. A group of men and women protested against the archaic laws of the 1800s that criminalised homosexual relations. It was not until 1993 that it was decriminalised, marking a significant step towards LGBTQI rights in Ireland. Another significant step towards equality was taken by ICTU in 1986, which produced and implemented a radical policy for the time regarding lesbian and gay rights in the workplace. This paved the way for progressive legislation, including the hatred Act, equality in all public sector employment, sexual orientation on the basis of equality in 1993, the Equal Status Act 2000 and many other laws. I am a member of the Oireachtas rainbow caucus and we are progressing plans to mark the 40th anniversary of ICTU's progressive role in promoting equal rights. It was the beginning of a safer work environment, which made a huge difference to the lives of LGBT people of the time.

Decriminalisation, led by the indomitable Senator Norris and others, including my pal, Kieran Rose, went on for 16 years but did not expunge prior convictions. My colleague, Deputy Ó Snodaigh, introduced legislation to do so, known as the disregard Bill. It has passed all Stages in this Chamber and is working its way through the Seanad. It will be enacted in the next few weeks before the recess. It is another milestone in righting wrongs.

The rise of hate crime and anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric worldwide by bad actors is calculated to reverse hard fought human rights gains. It is a hateful and destructive narrative, fed by some world leaders. It is divisive and damages the human spirit. The manosphere narrows the mind and seeks to regress human civil rights and dignity. It is amplified by the increase in online and offline hate. It is a mammoth task to counteract this as a global political shift to the right is happening. Homophobic and transphobic rhetoric is seeping more and more into the public domain. We can never let our guard down. It needs to be called out.

In 2015, marriage equality was a momentous and proud moment for Ireland, the first country to legislate for this by a referendum of the people. Those glorious days which were celebrated and embraced seem to have dwindled since then, with Trump and his cohort and Brexit and xenophobia playing their part as civil rights are being rolled back. Bród has come a long way. June is the month of celebration and Pride continues its success.

More work is required. Nothing is ever done and dusted. Things evolve, damage is repaired and wrongs are corrected. Ireland's transgender healthcare is a mess. The National Gender Service is not fit for purpose. Trans people deserve care based on international best practice. Everybody has the right to safety, integrity of identity and happiness. Conversion therapy, which is abhorrent and has inflicted so much suffering, is another breach of human rights. The former Sinn Féin Senator, Fintan Warfield, introduced a Bill to ban it, as did Sinn Féin Minister

of Communities, Deirdre Hargey, in the Six Counties. This legislation is the antidote to the barbaric and medieval practice of conversion.

There is much to be positive about. A debate was part of a Pride event on Monday. It discussed statistics showing that we have evolved from a dark place of fear to an LGBT community that is more accepted and we are up there with the top countries in Europe. There is an accepting and welcoming involvement by all of us in shaping our society and island and respecting an Ireland for all.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: As we mark Pride, we celebrate courage and resilience. However, Pride is not simply a celebration; it is also a call to action. For decades, LGBTQI+ people across Ireland were told they were less than equal. They were criminalised and excluded. Yet, through sheer determination and solidarity, they changed society for the better. We have come a long way. We have seen marriage equality become a reality. We have seen greater visibility and acceptance. We have seen countless people being able to live openly and in a way that is true to themselves, which is something of which previous generations could only dream. That progress belongs to those who fought for it, to those who marched when it was unpopular and dangerous to do so and to those who never lived to see the equality they helped to secure.

While we celebrate progress, we must also be honest about the challenges we face today. Across Ireland and internationally, we are witnessing a disturbing rise in anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric. Online abuse and intimidation have become all too common. Both my son and I have personal experience of being at the end of such hateful attacks. Social media platforms are awash with hateful attacks directed at LGBTQI+ individuals, particularly young people and transgender people, and their families. Behind screens, some seek to spread fear and division. Words matter and hate has consequences. LGBTQI+ people have been subject to violent attacks and, tragically, lives have been lost. We remember those who have lost their lives through murder or suicide. We remember the people who felt they had no place in the world after experiencing rejection and bullying. Every single one of those lives mattered and is a reminder that equality on paper does not always mean equality in practice.

While we have moved forward in many respects, there are areas where we have gone backwards. Rights that many believed were secure are now being questioned. Across the world, we see attempts to roll back protections, restrict healthcare and target transgender people. Those developments should concern us all. The lesson of history is clear: progress is never guaranteed and rights won through struggle can be eroded if they are not defended. As proud republicans, Sinn Féin's position is unequivocal in that the rights of LGBTQI+ people are human rights. They are not a matter for culture wars and should not be used as a political football.

I stand firmly with LGBTQI+ individuals and families. We support equality and respect, strong protections against discrimination and the right of every person to live free from fear and hate. The hatred shown by those who seek to attack or intimidate people has no place in Irish society. We reject it. We cannot stand by while any community is targeted because of who its members are or whom they love. Pride is a positive force. It is about dignity, visibility and building a society in which all people can reach their full potential and live with respect and equality. When LGBTQI+ people thrive, our communities are stronger and our society is

richer. Today, let us celebrate how far we have come, honour those who paved the way and, most importantly, remember those we have lost. Let us recommit ourselves to the work that continues. The struggle for equality is not over. Solidarity matters and an Ireland of equals must mean equality for everyone.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I welcome the opportunity to mark Pride Month. It is a time to celebrate diversity and inclusion and also to reflect on the journey that has brought us here and the work that remains to be done. Ireland has made significant progress in recent years in advancing the rights and dignity of LGBTQ+ people, including, as my colleague Deputy Devine noted, through the work of ICTU. We welcome Deputy Ó Snodaigh's legislation and hope it will be passed by the House in the next couple of weeks. From the historic marriage equality referendum to the greater visibility and acceptance of LGBTQ+ people across society, these achievements are a testament to the courage and determination of the activists, campaigners, families and communities who have fought tirelessly for equality and basic human rights. We recognise the contribution of LGBTQ+ people to our families, communities, workplaces, our culture and our country.

However, progress cannot be measured solely by legislative change. Last week, I met with a member of the LGBTQ+ community from County Mayo who spoke really candidly and honestly about the challenges many people continue to face, particularly in rural Ireland. Despite the advances we have made, too many LGBTQ+ people still experience isolation, discrimination and barriers to accessing the healthcare, including mental health services, they need and deserve. People living in rural communities should not have to travel long distances or face lengthy waiting lists to receive appropriate and affirming care. Everyone deserves timely access to healthcare and services that recognise and respect their identity and to mental health supports that are responsive to their experiences.

We must ensure that young people feel safe, supported and valued at an early age. I commend our schools and teachers on the vital role they play in fostering understanding, respect and inclusion. However, it is the Government's responsibility to make adequate supports available at school level and within school communities to challenge discrimination and to ensure all young people know they belong and that they are not alone.

Pride reminds us that we must continue to stand together to challenge prejudice wherever it exists and to work towards an Ireland where all people can live openly, safely and with dignity regardless of who they are or whom they love. It is beyond time that we stamped out hatred and intolerance everywhere in our society. People cannot abuse others either online or in person and then call themselves decent. A person who does that is not decent. The technology and social media companies that are making money on the back of such abuse have a responsibility to ensure it stops. Some of the material we see online, particularly in recent times, should be of concern to all of us. It is not acceptable. LGBTQ+ rights are basic human rights.

Deputy Shónagh Ní Raghallaigh: It is more than ten years since marriage equality was achieved. It is an achievement of which we all can be proud but it is important that we continue to strive forward until equality is achieved in every aspect of life for LGBTQI+ citizens. As we make statements on Pride in this House and as thousands take to the streets for Pride festivals around the island, it is easy to miss how much inequality still exists.

It is important that we remind ourselves every June of where Pride really began, which was on the streets of Greenwich Village in New York. In Ireland today, in places like PantiBar and The George, gay communities are free to host and curate in spaces that are run by them and for them. That was not the case in New York city in the sixties. It was after the police raids at the Stonewall Inn in Lower Manhattan in 1969 that members of the LGBTQI+ community took to the streets to fight back against the persecution of sexual minorities and to affirm their rights as human beings in a world that was trying to marginalise and repress them. That is a burden that continues to be borne to this day with the rise of fascism and the far right and the efforts to erode rights that were hard fought for and won by the LGBTQI+ community. Those reactive elements also look to discriminate against and marginalise people of colour, women and anyone who comes from abroad. Marsha P. Johnson, a key activist for LGBTQI+ rights in New York city, once said, "No Pride for some of us without liberation for all of us".

While Ireland may be progressive on LGBTQI+ rights in comparison with some other countries, we are far from perfect. Last month, a constituent of mine in Kildare contacted me to tell me about an ordeal she and her wife faced when seeking passports for their young twins. While both mothers are listed on the children's birth certificates and both are recognised in law as the parents of their children, the Passport Office sought court orders to explain how it is possible for two women to be on the birth certificate, asking invasive questions about the circumstances of the children's birth despite their mothers' legal parenthood. When I asked the Minister for foreign affairs to confirm whether this is standard practice for same-sex parents, the response I received from her officials was that they simply did not know. A system of institutional suspicion and shame surrounding same-sex parents in this State still exists today, just as it did historically.

Caithfidh muid, mar shochaí, a bheith i bhfad níos tuisceanaí ar an bpobal LADTIA+ sa tír seo. Tar éis na mblianta fada a bheith ag troid ar son chearta pósta, sláinte agus fostaíochta, tá gnéithe den eite dheis ag iarraidh fáil réidh leo. Tá siad ag iarraidh fáil réidh leis na cearta sin ní hamháin don phobal LADTIA+, ach do mhná, daoine le dath agus imircigh chomh maith. Seasaimis go léir an fód ina gcoinne le chéile.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I too welcome everyone in the Gallery, including many former colleagues of mine who work in LGBT organisations across the country. They do phenomenal work every single day supporting people in the community. I thank them for their work; it is greatly appreciated. Pride is an important time of year and a very good celebration. It is also a protest and a time to call for progress. Sadly, we have not seen the kind of progress we need to see on these crucial issues. Sometimes when I listen to the speeches of Government Ministers I think I live in a different country. It was painful to listen to the speech by the Minister of State in which she described as one of the achievements progress on trans healthcare. We have the worst trans healthcare in all of Europe. How can a Minister of State stand in the Dáil and call that an achievement and say there is progress on it when the lived reality for trans, non-binary and intersex people in this country is awful in terms of accessing basic healthcare?

Similarly, the Minister spoke about progress in terms of the community service fund. That has existed for many years now. It is basic funding to provide basic services, but it is not enough. It is a drop in the ocean compared to the need.

The Minister of State mentioned progress on HIV and while the campaign is certainly good, the Government has given up on its target of ending HIV transmissions by 2030. It has admitted it is not going to get there. That is not an achievement. We are missing the mark. We could be ending HIV transmissions in this decade if we would just commit to putting in the services, doing the rapid testing and rolling out pre-exposure prophylaxis, PrEP. We know what needs to be done but the Government is not committing to doing it. It is deeply frustrating to have members of the Government come into the House and call these achievements when the Government is utterly failing to make progress on crucial issues.

Conversion practices were mentioned. There was a commitment in the 2020 programme for Government to ban conversion practices. That is six years ago. The Minister spoke about taking time but how much time does she need? It has been six years since the Government committed to a ban. Eight other countries in Europe have done. We do not have to reinvent the wheel here. We can look at what other countries have done and implement it here. We do not have to keep waiting. We should not keep waiting and we should demand more.

Assisted human reproduction was mentioned. It has been 20 years since the Commission on Assisted Human Reproduction produced its report. Twenty years we have been waiting. The Minister said we will have legislation this term. Does she mean before the Dáil recess? We need to know exactly when. Families are waiting to have their rights vindicated and the gaps in family law closed. We need to know when that legislation will be before the Dáil because we have waited far too long.

The disregard legislation was mentioned. It has still not been enacted and we are still waiting for it to happen. It should have happened 33 years ago when the State decriminalised homosexuality. We have been left waiting and it is not good enough. Rainbow flags outside Government Buildings are nice but what we actually want to see is progress on LGBT rights. I could come here and give the same speech I gave last year. I could have said exactly the same, because we have not made progress. If the Minister does not believe me, she should believe ILGA-Europe, which is holding its conference in Dublin this year. It ranks every European country on LGBT human rights and policy protections. It has ranked Ireland 14th year after year and has told us we are not making progress on this crucial issue.

If the Minister needs to know what needs to be done, she should have a look at the policy platforms set out by the Social Democrats. We have listed the LGBT rights that need to be progressed. We need to see law reform, family rights issues addressed, the Equality Acts updated, legal gender recognition for non-binary people and a ban on infant genital mutilation. Ireland scored 0% on the ILGA-Europe rankings on the rights and protections for intersex people. We need a national action plan to ban hate crime. I could go on and on. We also need to address issues of mental health. We need better funding and services. We need to tackle HIV transmission and invest in community services across the country. We need to close the remaining gaps in the law and focus on the more marginalised parts of our community. A large number of people who are LGBT are homeless or seeking international protection. We need to ensure we have support and dedicated services in place for more vulnerable members of the community. We are not making the kind of progress we should be making on these issues.

We also need to stand up to countries around the world that are rowing back on LGBT rights. We need to get a stronger stance in international and foreign affairs on these issues.

I do not want to be back here next year saying again that we have not seen the kind of progress we need. I want the Government to make progress. I will cheer it on if it advances the law reform agenda set out by the Social Democrats and others, but the Government has not made that kind of progress. It has not done the kinds of things that need to be done to improve people's lives. During this Pride, we want the Government to make commitments to advance all of these issues and more.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: I wish a happy Pride to everybody, particularly those in the Gallery who are visiting today. I welcome everybody to the House. This month is a celebration of our queer community. I want to give a shout-out to my daughter Bella, one of my favourite members of the queer community, and maybe I can also mention Anna Nolan, one of my other favourite lesbians who is in the Gallery today.

Pride is also about its origins, which was about calling out the systemic ways in which the LGBT community are marginalised. We have to do that here in Ireland and recognise the ways in which we are failing those among us who are LGBT. My colleague Deputy Rice has just given a *tour de force* on how exactly that is happening. It is also important for us, as legislators, to acknowledge and recognise the ways in which we can fix this and the things we can do to make progress.

I will tell a short story to illustrate three things, namely, the pride we are celebrating, the ways in which discrimination happens and what we can do to fix it. I was contacted by Joe Caslin, who is a brilliant mural artist. In the coming days, he will be unveiling a new piece, which has a trans theme and celebrates our trans community. Joe's work is hugely celebrated; it is beautiful, thought provoking and prompting. I am sure many of here will remember his work, *The Claddagh Embrace*, which, in the run-up to the marriage equality debate, really helped to prompt public discourse and dialogue about how we were all feeling about that debate, and also for us to see a visual representation of gay men. It was beautiful and really well received, and it is something I think we all remember. Joe is an incredibly well-respected, internationally-reputed artist. It was unfortunate for me to hear his experience. He was commissioned to do this work last year and we are at the point where it is about to be unveiled in the coming days. Unfortunately, what he came across as a street artist was a framework, when he was engaging with Dublin City Council, which was totally opaque and which did not nurture that street art as a genre or the community he represents. Instead, he was made to jump through hoops. He was given no clarity as to how the decision was being made. He was forced into decisions that he should not have had to make. It looks like a lot of these decisions are made in the planning part of the organisation rather than where they should be, which is in the artistic part of the organisation. Unfortunately, what this results in is that this art, which is such an important part of who we are, is relegated to construction hoardings and electricity boxes. This art is challenging, as it should be, and that is why we have to celebrate it. It is why I give a commitment to Joe today that I will do everything I can to resolve that and to work with my colleagues in Dublin City Council to make sure we acknowledge street art for what it is. Street art is a crucial way for us to recognise all parts of society, prompt dialogue and celebrate our queer community.

Deputy Jen Cummins: Why is Pride important and why do we march every year? I was contemplating these questions over the last while. For as long as people are being attacked for

who they are, are not able to be who they are and are targeted for their sexuality or identity, we will need to continue marching. That is why. I look forward to Saturday.

Verbal abuse of the LGBTQ+ community is a daily, casual occurrence. It is a chipping away of safety, security and belonging. An Garda Síochána said there has been a rise in hate crimes over the last number of years. Not all of these were aimed at LGBTQ+ people but sexual orientation and gender identity are among the monitored motivations. Belong To has recently opened a space for young people in town to make sure they feel welcome, they can be who they are and they can be with people who will accept them for who they are. I commend Belong To and its youth workers on creating that space for those young people. Belong To has found that one in four people has been attacked physically because of their identity.

I will talk about teachers since the Minister is here. The INTO's LGBTQ+ teachers group has said that about one in five teachers in primary schools is not out in their school because they know that it would not be accepted.

4 o'clock

Even though there are protections in the employment equality Act 2015, the reality for so many teachers is that they do not feel they can be themselves when they apply for jobs, when they are in those jobs or when they are delivering the curriculum set out by the Department and the NCCA.

The Children and Family Relationships Act did not include all children. I am thinking particularly of the families in my constituency who contacted me and who are looking for that legislation to be fully implemented. It is so important for those families. They love their children as much as everybody else and they need to be recognised like everybody else is.

Minister for Education and Youth (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): Ireland has made remarkable progress in promoting and protecting the rights of LGBTQI+ people. Pride offers us a valuable moment to reflect on that journey, to celebrate the diversity, inclusion and joy that define it and to stand in solidarity with the LGBTQI+ community.

I want to acknowledge those who campaigned for equality at a time when doing so required great courage. The freedoms we recognise today were hard won and Pride is both the celebration of that progress and a reminder that our work is not yet complete.

We must ensure everyone in our society can live openly, safely and with dignity, especially our children and our young people, who deserve to grow up in environments that are supportive, inclusive and free from fear. Our schools are guided by a whole-school approach that prioritises respect, belonging and inclusion for every student. This is regardless of their background, beliefs, their sexual orientation or gender identity. Well-being sits at the heart of this approach because we know that when young people feel safe and supported, they are better able to thrive both academically and personally. However, we must also be clear eyed about the challenges that remain. Some LGBTQI+ young people still experience discrimination, bullying and isolation, both in person and online.

There can be no complacency. We must remain vigilant in protecting that progress that has been achieved and in challenging any efforts to roll back hard-won rights. Throughout my Department, we are taking concrete steps to address these issues. The cineáltas initiative

provides a comprehensive framework for preventing and tackling bullying in schools. This includes bullying related to both gender identity and sexual orientation. The *bí cineálta* procedures take a child-centred partnership approach. These procedures bring together students, teachers, staff and parents to create school communities that actively prevent and address all forms of bullying.

We also continue to work closely with organisations such as *Belong To*, supporting initiatives like *Stand Up Awareness Week*. This empowers schools to foster respect and inclusion. This partnership reflects our commitment to building an education system and a society where every young person feels valued and supported.

Pride is not only a celebration; it is a call to action. It reminds us how far we have come and of the responsibility we share to protect that progress and to extend it further. Together we can ensure that Ireland remains a country that is safe, fair and inclusive for all and one in which every person can be themselves without fear.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I am glad to have speaking time in this debate. I was born in 1982, so I spent much of the 1990s in primary school and secondary school, finishing up in 2000. During all those years the schoolyards were, I think, tougher places than they are now. I was a teacher before I became a TD and I think the school I taught in was quite soft and inclusive. However, certainly when I was in school, you shot insults from the hip like a gunslinger. Usually those insults were homophobic and they were thrown around the schoolyard here, there and everywhere, every single day of the year. To many, they were brushed off and were water off a ducks back but years later, I met some of my schoolmates who said how those comments hurt because during those teenage adolescent years, they were struggling with their sexuality.

It was not a time when people would just come out, although nowadays some people do not come out at all. They just grow up, meet people and form relationships. They do not have to tell mom, dad or their circle of friends they are gay. Coming out is not a thing but back then coming out was a colossal thing.

For these people to be struggling in those years and for everyone around them in the schoolyard throwing these insults, that was quite typical in the 1990s. I do not fault the school system, parents or anything. I think it was a cultural thing. It is a cultural thing that, to a large degree, we have overcome. I was delighted years later when holding electoral office that I and many more people of my era were able to atone for those schoolyard days when we went out and campaigned for marriage equality.

Naively, as an ally of the LGBTQ+ community, I thought that was it. I thought that was the moon landing moment, that there is marriage equality, that it is fantastic and that anything that went before, including the illegality of homosexual relationships and the criminalisation people who were in same-sex relationships was all behind us because we recognised, as a State, that marriage equality was a thing that was to be cherished and respected but not so, as it turns out.

What I increasingly hear when people come to my clinics and when I speak with the gay community in County Clare that life is not getting easier for them and, if anything, it is getting more difficult. They attribute some of this to the rise of the far right and an intolerance of people who might have different coloured skin, a different religion or who love differently.

That kind of intolerance has no place at all in modern Irish life. It is 2026 and it has no place whatsoever in modern Irish life.

Like others, I am alarmed. I am an INTO member and a teacher and I am alarmed that one fifth of my profession who identify as being LGBTQ+ have only come out in the school environment with the employers, colleagues and the school patron. That is something we need to seriously look at. Someone should feel comfortable in their workplace to be who they are. In that staff room over a cup of coffee, they should be able to talk about what they are doing with their boyfriend, girlfriend, husband or wife and what their weekend plans are and what their relationship is. All of that is quite commonplace and it should not be the case that someone feels they have to hide something from their employer or their colleagues and it is quite perverse in that regard.

It is great that in this House we have had a Taoiseach who is openly gay as well as many Members of this House who are married and very open. Maybe they do not consider it day to day but they carry huge leadership roles within the LGBTQ+ community. However, as someone who follows sport avidly, it does concern me that in elite sport, we have very few people who have felt comfortable enough to come out and be able to share with fans and supporters. They share so much of their lives now. It is not just what happens on the field, on the court or on the running track. So much of their lives is now lived out on social media or on the back pages of the newspaper that have the sporting columns. Yet, within so many sports - I will not just single out one - they too feel the need to hide. I think some of that may be down to terrace chat. To some degree, it happens in Ireland but certainly in the UK when you go to soccer matches, the insults roared from the sidelines are not acceptable. We need to support athletes, in particular, because in music and in the arts there does not seem to be those same barriers and people can be who they want to be. In politics, thankfully, in 2026, any Member here who is gay is able to be, without any judgment. There are probably idiots online who give them grief but colleagues, from all political persuasions, would not.

We are coming up to the fifth anniversary of the awful attack in August 2021 on Olympian Jack Woolley in Dublin city centre. He is someone who has represented our nation at the top level. He stood many times on the podium in his preferred sport, taekwondo. He is an outstanding young man. He was on "Dancing with the Stars" as well. He is an outstanding role model for young people and yet he was attacked just a couple of hundred yards down the street in Dublin for being who he is. That is wrong.

To close on a positive note, I wish all who celebrate Pride, those who are part of the LGBTQ+ community - they will have to shorten that or make it easier for us to rattle off - and those who will march at the weekend a very happy Pride. As someone who grew up in the 1990s, with a bit of maturity and getting away from that schoolyard when the bell rings and all that happens in the schoolyard, I would be absolutely thrilled and delighted if any son or daughter of mine came out in years to come and said "Dad, I am gay, I love someone the same sex as me" but I hope they will not have to. I hope we get to that point. A lot of people are in inclusive families where they do not have to say that. Hopefully, that is the pathway forward for most.

Those of us who sit in government and in opposition have to make sure public policy reflects the kind of inclusive values we have. One thing that jumped out from a few contributors today is the idea that four fifths of teachers - my own profession - who are gay feel they cannot say

that in their work environment. That is something we need to reflect on. I am Chair of the Oireachtas education and youth committee and working in tandem with the Minister, we need to do a body of work on that because it is not acceptable.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before I go to the next speaker, I welcome the ladies from Ballybofey and Stranorlar to the Public Gallery. They are here with Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher. I hope they enjoy their day in the Dáil with him. I also extend a very warm welcome to all of those in the Public Gallery who are here specifically for this debate. They are very welcome. We will now move to our next speaker, Deputy Graves.

Deputy Ann Graves: Pride has grown from a small gathering in Dublin to a nationwide celebration of diversity and inclusion. While it is very important that we recognise and celebrate progress, we must not become complacent. There are those who would roll back the progress and drag us back to the dark and less inclusive times.

Pride has its roots in the struggle for equality and human rights but now these human rights are under attack. According to Amnesty International, attacks and hate crimes against our LGBT+ brothers and sisters have significantly increased in recent years across Europe, Britain and the United States, with transgender and gender non-conforming people being disproportionately targeted. This is really concerning.

This wave of hate does not happen in a vacuum. It is encouraged by political rhetoric and the online spreading of misinformation and lies. Unfortunately, we in Ireland are not insulated against this. An Garda Síochána recorded a 12% increase in reported hate crimes. A survey by Belong To found that, sadly, one in four members of Ireland's LGBT+ community has been physically attacked due to their identity.

As politicians, we have an important role in challenging this homophobia and discrimination and to provide leadership. Pride must be more than speeches. While it is great to have the opportunity today to make our statements, simple gestures are just not enough. They need to be seen as a rallying call to challenge hate speech and misinformation. It means standing up to those who spread lies. Sinn Féin condemns these increasing attacks. We reject transphobia and homophobia in Ireland and overseas.

I want to take this opportunity to congratulate Fingal Pride, which is part of Dublin Pride. Launched in 2021, its mission is to support people and their friends and families in Fingal by organising regular events and activities throughout the county and by increasing visibility and integration. This year, the theme is, "Beat a drum for Pride", with an event today in Clonsilla. I wish them very success. I would also encourage everyone to come along and join the main national Pride parade this Saturday at 12.30 p.m. at the Garden of Remembrance. Sinn Féin will be there front and centre on Saturday and I hope every other political party is well represented.

Now, more than ever, we need to send out a loud, proud message: we do not tolerate homophobia or transphobia here in the Oireachtas, on the streets of Dublin, in the workplace or anywhere it raises its ugly head. Sinn Féin wants to build an inclusive, all-Ireland nation based on equal rights for all, and we will continue to work actively with the LGBT+ community across the island of Ireland.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I welcome the statements on Pride this week. Pride is as important as it has ever been. Pride is protest and it is a call on people to stand in solidarity with those who identify or whose way of life is under attack. I pay tribute to my colleague, Senator Laura Harmon, on her work and advocacy as cathaoirleach of the rainbow caucus.

Speaking up for trans healthcare is so important, given that Ireland ranks bottom in Europe for healthcare provision. It is vital that we discuss Pride and highlight the culture war on the trans community. Many colleagues in this House, in government and in opposition, are allies who stand up to the hate levelled at trans people and I thank them for their advocacy and decency.

We have seen the resignation of a Prime Minister in the UK in recent days. Starmer's Labour Government scapegoated trans people and painted them as an enemy to women. Rather than standing up for a minority group under attack, they furthered the misery and culture war on trans people. I know for certain that trans people in the UK will be happy to see the back of him. I genuinely hope his successor stands up for trans people and trans rights and changes tack from punching down on people who simply want respect and dignity - a bare minimum expectation from a leader who hoists the red flag.

For same-sex partners, the fight for equality continues for what is an administrative change on the State's part that has brought consequences for family life and parenting. I commend the advocacy of Irish Gay Dads. Gay dads still face significant legal inequality in family law in the context of parental recognition, where many male same-sex families cannot get both parents legally recognised on their child's birth certificate from birth. I put it to the Government and the House that we passed marriage equality and changed the law. That work does not end there and I believe we have the numbers in this House to right the wrongs that still exist. I call on the Minister for justice to meet with Irish Gay Dads and begin this work.

I only have a few minutes, so I cannot acknowledge every group or person but I would also like to commend Belong To, whom I have met with and regularly engage with, in particular on its research and advocacy in protecting young gay people online. I want to mention Cork's first LGBTQ+ inclusive GAA club, Na Laochra Aeracha, who have faced significant hurdles fielding their team due to the Ladies Gaelic Football Association, LGFA, strictly enforcing 2010 city limits rather than the expanding city boundary agreed upon by councils in 2019. Because of these restricted boundaries, the club cannot meet the minimum number of players required to legally register a women's team in competitive leagues. These matters can be resolved and I encourage the association to do it. I ask now that the Minister would engage constructively with the LGFA to do so. Having inclusive teams like this in our games only serves to grow our sports.

Deputy Mark Wall: The point we have reached today, with Members proudly speaking on LGBT Pride, does not just happen. It comes after decades of work, bravery, courage and consistent fighting by advocates. We can never forget this. We must always remember this fact and remember the many people who broke down the closed doors and made Ireland a much more welcoming place for our LGBT comrades. They did so because it was the right thing to do and, in many cases, they walked a long and lonely road to get Ireland where we are today.

I am proud to stand here as a member of the Labour Party, which has fought so hard over the years to achieve the social progress we enjoy in this country today. It was the Labour Party

that in 1993 decriminalised homosexuality. We continued fighting for equality and, in 2015, delivered same-sex marriage, a defining moment in this country's history. In 2018, we secured an official State apology for gay and bisexual men, and I want to commend the work done by my Labour Party colleague, Deputy Ged Nash, who has tirelessly worked to ensure Government disregards these convictions.

Pride is more than a celebration. It is a march founded on civil activism and protest. Pride is a collective of pivotal moments in Ireland's history that lead us to where we are now. We must remember this and how far we have come as an island.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I welcome the visitors to the Gallery. First of all, it is a real privilege to be a gay man because you are navigating a world that was not built for you. I think most LGBT people have a heightened sense of empathy because you know, for example, that many people around the world do not have the human rights which many of us - including myself, as somebody who is privileged enough to live in Ireland - take for granted. There are so many countries around the world where it is illegal to be gay. It was illegal to be gay here until 1993. There are so many men - and they are men - who are still living with convictions for same-sex activity. You are also free from the traditions, expectations and pressures that many of my straight friends have in relation to what I call the heterosexual normality of life.

However, at the same time, the world is getting more dangerous for LGBT people, including here in Ireland. Homophobia is on the rise again. Transphobia is, unfortunately, becoming more and more normalised. It has even come into this House. It has crept in, in ways. People whom I would consider totally reasonable on loads of issues have said things on the record in this House, jollied up as concerns, that are, in effect, transphobic and dehumanising.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: Hear, hear.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Furthermore, I look, for example, at *Belong To* and the work it has done, and the 87% of teenagers who have received online harassment for being LGBT. I can even look at my own social media. Any time I talk about any of these things, I get a plethora of stuff underneath the posts and, to be honest, it is horrible but it does not particularly bother me because I know there is some young boy or young girl out there in this country at the moment who probably thinks they are better off being dead than being LGBT. The fact of the matter is that while we have come so far, we have a much further journey to travel.

We need to see the full commencement of the 2024 Act in relation to the issues around surrogacy. I have one friend who is a parent and is, effectively, legally a stranger in the lives of their children. We need to move on trans healthcare. Thankfully, by having the Minister of State, Deputy Butler, in government, we actually have somebody who genuinely gets it and wants to make a difference and will make a difference. We need to make sure that all forms of homophobia, including transphobia and biphobia, are called out and that we have zero tolerance.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this matter today. This debate is particularly poignant for me because one of the members of my staff is a member of the LGBTQ+ community. Mark, whom I work alongside every day, is someone I value

enormously - he is my friend and someone whose experiences remind me that these discussions are not abstract debates. They are about real people, real lives and real journeys. Every LGBT person has their own story. Some are accepted early on in life. Others spend years wondering whether they will be accepted within their families, communities, workplaces or society itself. Some even emigrate to find that acceptance.

As a party that was founded to protect workers, Labour can be proud of that achievement. We have always understood that equality is not simply about words or aspirations. The struggle for workers' rights and the struggle for LGBTQ+ rights are not separate stories. They are part of the same stories; the belief that every person deserves dignity, equality and fair treatment. With that in mind, I want to pay tribute to former Labour Party Minister Mervyn Taylor, who was at the forefront of the struggle to ensure that equality that meant having the right to work, earn a living, provide for one's family and live with dignity, free from discrimination.

To echo Deputy Crowe, not one person from any community, background or gender who walks into their place of work should feel bullied, isolated, ignored or discriminated against. No one should walk into their place of work with anxiety or have to take a circuitous route to get to their place of work to avoid someone who might make them feel like they are not good enough.

To Mark, my staff member, and to the wider LGBTQ+ community, I hope I have done you justice to bring your experiences to life in the Chamber today.

Deputy Mark Wall: Hear, hear.

Deputy Grace Boland: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this debate and to mark Pride. Pride is at the heart about people. It is about recognising the dignity, worth and equality of every person in our society. It is about ensuring that people can live their lives openly, safely and authentically without fear of discrimination, intimidation or abuse.

Ireland has come a long way. Many people in this House will remember a very different Ireland. We have made enormous progress thanks to the courage of those who spoke up, shared their stories and challenged attitudes. That is progress we should be proud of, but we cannot be complacent and we still have work to do.

I echo Deputy Sheehan's call for the commencement of the provisions in relation to surrogacy. Across Ireland and around the world, we are seeing an increase in hate-motivated incidents and a hardening of public discourse. We see examples of people being targeted because of their sexuality, gender, race, religion or simply because they are perceived to be different.

Much of this is amplified online. Social media has brought many benefits but it has also provided a platform for those who seek to divide communities, spread misinformation and pit one group against another. Too often, bad actors deliberately exploit people's fears and frustrations for their own political, ideological or financial gain. We know this division generates clicks. Anger generates engagement. Outrage generates attention. However, the consequences are very real for the people on the receiving end. We saw that recently in Fingal when my colleague, Councillor Luke Corkery, who is in the Gallery, became the target of online abuse following his post on the gorgeous rainbow road crossing which was painted by Fingal

County Council in Swords. People are entitled to have views on public policy. People are entitled to agree or disagree with decisions made by local authorities. However, what is not acceptable is the personal abuse, intimidation and hostility that can follow.

Nobody should be subjected to harassment for championing and supporting inclusion, nobody should be subjected to harassment for who they are and nobody should be afraid to participate in public life because of the abuse they may receive online. The reality is that we do not have to agree with one another. In a democracy we never will, and that is a good thing. We will have different views on social issues, economic issues, local issues and national issues. Robust debate is healthy and essential, but there is a fundamental difference between disagreement and disrespect. We can challenge ideas without attacking one another. We can argue passionately for our beliefs without dehumanising those who hold different views. We can stand firmly for our values while still recognising the humanity and dignity of others. That is true when discussing Pride. It is true when discussing immigration. It is true when discussing housing. It is true when discussing termination of pregnancy or any other issue that comes before this House. The tone we set here matters. The language we use here matters. The examples that we provide matter. Public discourse does not stay in this Chamber. It influences conversations in workplaces, schools, sports clubs, community groups and online spaces throughout the country. Young people, in particular, are watching. They are learning what respectful disagreement looks like. They are learning how we treat people with whom we disagree. We have a responsibility, in every debate in this House, to ensure that the example we set is one of decency, respect and empathy. Pride gives us an opportunity to celebrate diversity and inclusion but it should also remind us of something broader, which is that a strong society is one where people can be different, hold different views and live different lives while still treating one another with respect. That is the Ireland I want to live in; an Ireland where everyone feels they belong, where nobody is targeted because of who they are and where our disagreements never come at the expense of our common humanity.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: I welcome the opportunity to speak today as we mark Pride and reflect on the progress we have made as a country and, more importantly, the work that still lays ahead. I want to acknowledge my friends, family members and, indeed, colleagues here this afternoon as we mark Pride. It has been said here a few times already but Pride is not just a celebration; it is a restatement or statement of values. It reminds us that equality is something we must continue to advance, protect and, indeed, demand.

Ireland's journey over the past three decades has been remarkable. In fairness, it has been slow but it has happened. The decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1993 was a foundation of reform that opened the door to a more equal society. The marriage equality referendum in 2015, which many people here were involved in, was another defining moment, not just legally but culturally. It demonstrated that the Irish people believe in fairness, dignity and the right of every person to live and love openly.

However, progress does not mean that the challenges have disappeared - far from it. Recent data have shown that 22% of people in Ireland have experienced discrimination in the past few years. For LGBTIQ+ communities, the figures are significantly higher; 59% of gay and lesbian people, 55% of bisexual people and 46% of trans and non-binary people report discrimination. The workplace remains the most common setting for harassment and exclusion. These numbers are stark and they reflect lived experiences that we cannot ignore.

The Government is committed to building a safe, fair and inclusive society for all and the national LGBTQI+ inclusion strategy provides a whole-of-government framework to advance equality.

Its vision is clear: a society where LGBTQI+ people can live safe, healthy and fulfilling lives, and participate fully in every aspect of Irish life. The accompanying 2025 to 2026 action plan sets out concrete deliverables across safety, rights, protections, health and well-being. From an inclusion perspective there are several areas where continued focus is essential. The first area is education. Young LGBTQI+ people deserve to feel safe, supported and respected in their schools, be that primary, secondary or third level. We know that early experiences of exclusion or bullying can have long-lasting impacts. Strengthening teacher training, embedding inclusive curriculums and ensuring that every school is a welcoming environment must remain priorities for both the Department of education and the Department of further and higher education.

The second area is healthcare and mental health supports. LGBTQI+ people continue to face barriers in accessing appropriate care and many report negative experiences when seeking support. Improving cultural competency across the health service, expanding mental health supports and ensuring timely access to gender-affirming care are all vital steps in building a system that serves everyone fairly. Surrogacy has been commented on here on a number of occasions this afternoon, as has the full commencement of the 2024 Act. That must proceed. I have friends in same-sex marriages with children and they face difficulties day in day out, in terms of recognition. That needs to be prioritised by the Minister for justice.

The third area is safety and confidence in reporting. Too many people still feel unsafe in public spaces or are reluctant to report harassment or hate crime. Strengthening community policing, which has worked well in a lot of other areas, improving reporting mechanisms and building trust between communities and the State are essential if we are to ensure that every person feels protected. As we mark Pride, let us recommit to the work ahead. Let us ensure our workplaces our respectful, our public services inclusive and our society one in which every person, regardless of who they are or whom they love, can thrive. Pride, as I said at the beginning, is a celebration, but it is also a call to action. I believe that this House working together can honour both.

Deputy Joanna Byrne: I welcome these statements on Pride and the chance to talk of where it began in Ireland and where we are now. Pride began in response to the darkest of crimes. It has now grown into a beacon of light, positivity, progressiveness and inclusivity. Pride, a banner that previously criminalised and marginalised, is now one that cohorts of people can stand behind together full of colour and hope. The first Pride parade in Ireland was in 1983 in response to the homophobic murder of Declan Flynn in Fairview Park in Dublin. There were earlier smaller marches but this was the first Pride parade.

It beggars belief that it took another decade and a case at the European Court of Human Rights brought against this State in 1988 by former Senator David Norris for the 1993 Act that gave us the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Ireland. It is almost unfathomable to me that homosexuality was illegal in my lifetime. That is why these statements on Pride are important. Even though gay rights have come a long way in a truly short period of time, we must be reminded that it is, in fact, a short period of time. Just like in previous decades, there are those

out there who would row back on gay rights, ban Pride like they did in Orbán's Hungary - an EU country - and drag this State back to the Dark Ages. We must now and always speak up on Pride, support Pride, educate people on what Pride means and on what this State was like before Pride.

We still have work to do to heal some of the sins of the past. That is why the joint Opposition Bill, originally sponsored by the now President Catherine Connolly, the Disregard of Historic Offences for Consensual Sexual Activity Between Men Bill 2025 is especially important. It is an example of a broad church of Opposition parties working together to correct a historic wrong and a stark injustice perpetrated on the gay community. It is testament to Pride that this Bill is on our legislative agenda here in the Dáil. However, it cannot and should not be left to this House to speak up for Pride and for gay rights. Pride parades in every county, city and town should be supported. As a straight woman, Pride is a movement that is close to my heart. In my first year as a Louth county councillor in 2016, I cut the ribbon to officially start the first Pride celebration in Drogheda and did so for many years afterwards. I have marched in Pride parades, I have attended events, and I was and am keen to show our LGBTQI+ family, friends and neighbours that modern Ireland is friendly, welcoming and accepting.

It has also been a great honour of mine to support the Dundalk and Drogheda Outcomers and the Drogheda LGBTQ Social and Support Group in many ways over many years. They do phenomenal work in supporting the LGBTQ community in Louth. Their hard work, along with huge teams of political and non-political canvassers, including us here in Sinn Féin, drove Louth to a 63.5% yes vote in the May 2015 marriage equality referendum. It was a proud day for the wee county, a proud day for this State, and a sign of our more positive and more progressive times. However, there are still many challenges facing the LGBTQI+ community such as youth homelessness, mental health, violence and healthcare. These are all things on which we need to redouble our efforts to address. Pride seeks to address those issues as an unbelievably happy and positive social justice movement. It is actually quite unique. Everyone who supports Pride should be proud of Pride.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I acknowledge the presence in the Gallery of representatives of many of the LGBTQ+ groups around the country. I thank them for their work and I recognise that I, and queer people all over our country, enjoy rights as a result of their efforts.

Pride remains an empowering expression of community, visibility and celebration. It is a chance for LGBTQ+ people to gather openly and proudly. However, as many of the speakers have noted, while it is an opportunity for us to reflect on how far Ireland has come in recent years, it also has to be a truthful recognition of the challenges our communities still experience. I have made the point in this Chamber and elsewhere that the trajectory of progress in Ireland has not all been one-way. In particular, the level of abuse that gay, lesbian and particularly trans people receive online, and now regularly in person as well, has spiked in recent years. Most gay people have had to deal with homophobia at some point in their lives. We learn how to deal with it, we learn how to overcome it and sometimes we learn how to ignore it. That can be a very deeply personal journey for each person involved.

For a time in the afterglow of the marriage referendum, it was felt that we had turned a corner and that Ireland had settled a fundamental question about dignity and equality. I believe, as I know many in the community do, that there has been a change, and a change for the worse,

in recent years. The biggest driver of that change is the poisoning of our online spaces. It is not right that harmful and hateful content can be posted and shared so widely. It is not right that an innumerable amount of bot accounts can spread this type of hate. It is not right that a person struggling to come to terms with their own sexuality or their own gender identity is bombarded with that content. In the past, at least you could be safe from verbal homophobic abuse in your own home space, but now through the ubiquity of platforms that abuse feel inescapable. It is not because there is suddenly more hateful people in our society but because social media platforms have built systems that reward outrage, division and fear. This is not a question about simply offensive comments online; this is a question about who feels safe participating in our public life.

There are bad actors out there who would like nothing more than to stigmatise us and drive us back into the closet. We will not allow that to happen. As Dublin celebrates Pride this weekend we mark how far we have come. Let us also be clear that we will not accept any push-back on our LGBTQ+ rights; not internationally and not here in our own country.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Pride has always been a protest as well as a great party and a celebration, and unfortunately there is still a lot to protest about. The Government's record on trans healthcare is really shocking. It is the worst in the European Union with record waiting lists of up to 18 years for the only public gender clinic. You cannot talk about trans rights when you cannot access trans healthcare. It is eight years since the Government's own review of the Gender Recognition Act recommended non-binary recognition. Still, the Government has done nothing. I am pleased to support Deputy Coppinger who is introducing a Bill to recognise both non-binary and intersex people for the first time. I hope everyone in the House will support it.

The rise in hate directed at the queer community by the far right is absolutely frightening. You see it. It is not just online. It is in the real world as well, with a big increase of homophobic and transphobic attacks both verbal and physical.

All of that hate is being massively amplified by toxic social media algorithms designed to increase the profits of the big tech social media companies by pushing hate, whether homophobia, transphobia, misogyny or racism. Dublin Pride, Belong To, LGBT Ireland and TENI all want recommender algorithms to be turned off by default. They are not calling for under-16s to be banned entirely from social media, which can be a vital lifeline for young queer people who may be socially isolated. A survey of young queer people in Australia before the social media ban found that more than half felt they could more be themselves online than in person. A blanket social media ban on under-16s ignores that and lets big tech off the hook as regards cleaning up its act. This is why we introduced a Private Members' Bill months ago to require social media algorithms to be turned off by default. That now needs to happen urgently. It was a bad mistake on the part of the Government to vote it down. We need to turn off the hate against queer people that is being pushed by the likes of Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg and the rest of the social media bosses.

I will also say a word about the disgusting attempt to create a provocation at Pride this Saturday. A far-right Dublin councillor who is known for promoting racism and anti-immigrant hate is hosting a so-called "march for Ireland", coincidentally just an hour or two after Pride stops. Given his previous comments about the rainbow flag, I suspect this is designed to be a deliberate provocation. We will see, however. We will see that many more people will turn

out for Pride to stand for equality and respect than those who will turn up to call for hate and discrimination against gay people, trans people, people of colour and immigrants. I believe there is a big majority on our side.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: These annual statements are important. It had to be called out when they were not tabled in June last year. However, they also have to be real. We saw remarkable progress in 2015 with the same-sex marriage referendum passing after a grassroots movement. This was followed by repeal, the Gender Recognition Act and huge social progress. However, this is a completely different decade. Hostility, transphobia, homophobia, misogyny and racism are being unleashed. Within Ireland, while the Government is not doing that or anything like it, certainly not openly, progress has stalled. Promises the Government made in terms of non-binary recognition under the Gender Recognition Act, which were part of the programme for Government, still have not been fulfilled. I hope the Government and other Opposition parties will get behind my Bill to recognise non-binary and intersex people. Non-binary people are recognised in 17 other countries. Intersex people are also recognised in other countries.

I will talk about trans healthcare. As has already been said, we have the worst trans healthcare in Europe. It has got worse even since last year's debate. A UCD report found a 13% increase in discrimination against LGBT+ people and an increase in the waiting lists. Some 23% of trans people report spending over €2,000 on healthcare because of the Government's failure. We do not have an informed consent model but a gatekeeping model. In the North, the Executive signed off on a ban on puberty blockers for teenage trans people, leading to a ban on all Assembly parties in eight Pride parades in the North this year.

While there has been progress, we can clearly see that the influence of the far right and the anti-LGBT lobby is also having an impact. Belong To has talked about the experiences of young people. I do not have time to go into all of the details but rates of depression, suicidal ideation and so on are all much higher. We should be very clear. We need to correct some of the myths that are put out there. No surgery is done on young people in this country, with the exception of surgery carried out on intersex babies as the result of a push for a strong binary in our society. We need to turn these statements into action. We need to continue to support the LGBT+ community. We need to challenge the scapegoating of trans people. We need to stand rock solid against that and against the scapegoating of other minorities.

Deputy Barry Ward: I am very pleased to be able to speak on this issue. It is hugely important. There is so much to be said about Pride and the importance of expressing pride and of facilitating that expression of pride but I will focus on two particular issues.

The first is conversion therapy, which is not banned in this jurisdiction. This practice is there to "convert" or "cure" people of their sexual orientation or gender identity, or tell them that it is wrong, and essentially convince them of the opposite. It is appalling. The UN recognises it as a form of torture. It is done in the totally misguided belief that these things are a choice and can be changed when we all know they are inherent in people. Conversion therapy is banned in a number of European Union countries. Malta banned it in 2016. It has also been banned outright in Germany, France, Greece, Spain, Belgium, Cyprus and Portugal. The Dutch Senate has also recently voted to pass legislation to ban so-called conversion therapy. It is not banned here, however. It is still legal in Ireland. A landmark 2023 study by Trinity College

Dublin confirmed that practices aimed at changing or suppressing sexual orientation or gender identity do occur in Ireland. That honestly surprised me. I thought that people's sexual orientation was just accepted in this country and that there were not issues with it. However, I have looked into this and it is still a major issue. Two successive programmes for Government have committed to a ban but it still has not happened. The then Minister, Deputy Roderic O'Gorman, announced research into a ban on conversion therapy in 2022 and reaffirmed the Government's commitment to legislating to ban the practice but it still has not happened. There is a gap there. It is something we need to fix. We need to bring in the legislation we promised we would.

As I said, I was surprised. I am aware that it is a big problem in the United States and even elsewhere on this island. I did not think it was something that happened in this jurisdiction but, as I said, there is academic research showing that it does. Such a ban is therefore far more than symbolic. It is a real, practical and forceful measure that would prevent the genuine harm that is done to people who are subjected to this so-called therapy. It would also make an important statement to members of the LGBT community in this country, particularly young people who might be struggling with their identity or with something that is new to them, that they are as accepted as anybody else in this society by this State, that we stand with them, that they cannot be "fixed" and that they are valuable exactly as they are. I hope the Minister of State will take on board the need to move on that particular subject with a view to moving things along.

The second issue I will mention is hate speech. There was hate speech legislation before the previous Dáil with a view to changing the law and updating the prohibition of incitement to hatred Act, which was so ineptly phrased that only 50-odd prosecutions have been taken under it. Again, you would like to think that in a modern Ireland, people who are LGBT or who present with a different gender identity would be safe from incitement to hatred and incitement to violence but they are not. Emily Bolger, who works in my office and who is incredibly valuable to us, tells me that she was abused on the street in town last night. Somebody across the street roared at her because of her sexual orientation. You would think that in 21st-century Ireland we would have moved beyond such absolutely craven nonsense but the reality is that it is still happening.

We had a Bill in these Houses that aimed to advance the prohibition of incitement to hatred and incitement to violence. That has fallen by the wayside. It shows a certain political cowardice on the part of these Houses that we cannot address this issue, which we know exists, and put in place measures that protect not just LGBT people but anybody from a set of vulnerable groups listed in the legislation. The fact that we cannot do that is a really poor reflection on the ability of this House to enforce laws that make a difference to people's quality of life. That is what it is really about. It is about the notion that members of the LGBT community or any other minority or vulnerable community would be entitled to enjoy their lives and have space to go about their business, their social lives and their work lives where they live with exactly the same entitlement to peaceable enjoyment as the Minister of State, myself or anybody else in the county has.

These two issues have been left on the table and we have not dealt with them.

The time has come to deal with them. Let us ban conversion therapies and get to grips with hate speech and actions which incite violence and hatred against people once and for all, so that everyone can feel safe and included.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: I am very grateful to be able to speak about Pride in the Chamber because it means so much to so many people. It is a celebration of love, identity, courage and hope. However, it is also a reminder of the journey that has brought us here and the responsibility we all share to continue to build a kinder, fairer and more inclusive society. I am proud to speak about Pride because it represents something much bigger than a parade or celebration. It represents the freedom to live openly, honestly and authentically, as well as the belief that every person deserves dignity, respect and the opportunity to be themselves without fear. Ireland has come a remarkable distance.

In 2015, the people of Ireland made history by becoming the first country in the world to approve marriage equality by popular vote. That referendum was about far more than changing our Constitution. It was about recognising that love is equal. It was about neighbours, families, friends and communities standing together and saying that everyone deserves the same rights, respect and opportunity to build a life with the person they love. It was one of Ireland's proudest moments, and showed the world what compassion, equality and hope can achieve.

School remains one of the toughest places in Irish life to be an LGBTQ+ young person, with three quarters of these students reporting that they feel unsafe, and half experiencing bullying. No young person should have to feel he or she has to hide who he or she is simply to feel safe. Pride gives hope to those young people and reminds them they are not alone. It tells them there is a community that accepts and values them, and believes they deserve every opportunity to live full and happy lives. Pride is equally important for parents and families because every parent wants his or her child to grow up safe, confident and accepted. Many parents of young children carry worries, not because they are anything other than immensely proud of their children, but because they know society can still be unkind at times and worry about bullying, discrimination, mental health and whether their child will be judged for simply being themselves. No parent should have to carry those fears.

One of the greatest challenges facing all young people today is social media. This has given many LGBTQ+ people the opportunity to find support, build friendships, and realise they are not alone. For many it has been life-changing but it does have another side. Too often social media rewards outrage instead of understanding. It can amplify division instead of dialogue, spread misinformation instead of truth and give a platform to abuse that would never be tolerated face to face. We are seeing, not just in Ireland but across the world, how online hostility can create a more divided society. If we want a more inclusive Ireland, we must ensure that the values we show offline are reflected online too.

We must not forget the excellent services that our youth services provide in our local communities, especially those in my own constituency, where we have the Carlow Regional Youth Services in County Carlow, and Ossory Youth in County Kilkenny. Their staff and volunteers do unbelievable work for our young people. Continued financial support for them is essential to continue to provide these irreplaceable services. The Pride festivals of counties Carlow and Kilkenny are taking place in July. They have fantastic committees of volunteers who do outstanding work to make the city of Kilkenny and county of Carlow vibrant, colourful and safe places to be.

When people march in Pride, they are not simply marching for themselves. The march for the teenager who is still afraid to tell his or her parents who he or she is, for the young person

sitting in a classroom wondering if he or she will ever truly belong, and for those who still fear rejection because of who they love or how they identify. Their courage lights the way for someone else.

We must continue to work harder than ever to build a society that is truly inclusive and respectful of all those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Those who identify as heterosexual have an equally important role to play. Being an ally is not complicated, it means standing up against bullying, challenging prejudice, speaking with kindness and creating workplaces, schools, sports clubs and communities where everyone feels welcome. Equality is strengthened when everyone stands together. The Ireland we should strive for is one where no one feels they have to hide who they are; a country where every child grows up believing he or she belongs. It is a society where difference is celebrated rather than feared. The marriage equality referendum showed us what Ireland can be when compassion triumphs over division. Let us honour that legacy, not only during Pride month but every day of the year, because love is love and no-one should ever have to live that love in fear.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis labhairt ag an díospóireacht seo. Pride, it is important to remember, emerged from repression, as a movement for equality. It is important that we celebrate all those who stood up and fought for change during periods when it was not easy to do so.

In Ireland and in this State, Pride emerged as a response to what was, for much of our history, a conservative and reactionary State that was hostile in the extreme to anybody who was perceived as different, particularly gay people but also often women, working-class communities, republicans, and left-wing activists. Pride emerged from the horrific, homophobic murder of Declan Flynn in 1983, which rightly caused widespread revulsion. The Sinn Féin Ernie O'Malley Cumann from Drumcondra was part of that very first Pride protest in 1983, when activists marched to Fairview Park where Declan Flynn was killed. It was another ten years before homosexual acts were decriminalised and the Government only acted then having being forced to do so and having been dragged to the European courts. The reality, not always acknowledged, is that the reactionary Irish State was a harsh place for far too many people, particularly anyone who was different; as I said, gay people, single mothers, victims of abuse, those with mental health struggles and those from deprived communities.

From partition to 1983, the Irish State treated gay people as criminals and outcasts. Male homosexual acts were illegal under laws inherited from Britain. The pervasive influence of the Catholic Church hierarchy reinforced stigma, censorship and silence around homosexuality. Before decriminalisation, many gay people lived hidden lives under shame, isolation and criminalisation. This had serious mental health and indeed, often tragic outcomes. Many gay people, like others who faced discrimination, just left what they considered to be a suffocating State to build lives elsewhere. I remember when I attended my first Pride parade in Dublin in 1997, there was still a sense of repression and isolation. It is right then, that at Pride we celebrate how far we have come from the dark days when Government Ministers dismissed any suggestions of law reforms, to the point where we had a successful referendum on the recognition of same-sex marriage. At the core of that vote in that referendum was the humanity of the Irish people and an understanding of why equality matters - something that reactionary Governments had lacked in preceding decades.

We are proud of those who stood against discrimination during dark days and we are proud of those who continue to demand equality for all of our people today, including those from the LGBT+ communities. In particular, I welcome the fact that the Government has finally moved to provide for the disregard of historical convictions for homosexual activity. It should not have taken 33 years since decriminalisation to achieve this. It is further evidence that the work is not over and the aspiration of pride in, and equality for, all of our citizens remains unfinished business.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Some 43 years ago, the killing of Declan Flynn shocked Ireland. There were thousands who marched through Dublin afterwards to refuse to accept violence against gay people. I speak today as a gay man and I am proud of the history and of the rights the gay and lesbian community has won over those years. That violence did not end in 1982. In 2022, Aidan Moffitt and Michael Snee were tragically murdered in County Sligo, because they were gay men. Their deaths are proof that hatred towards this community is not a thing of history but is indeed something of present tense.

I raise this not for sympathy but for honesty about this movement and what it was built to fight. That is exactly why I will say what many gay, lesbian and bisexual men and women say privately and that many in this House are too afraid to say plainly, that is, this movement has been hijacked. It no longer speaks for the people who built it or the people who are still at risk. We are told to make room and redefine same-sex attraction to fold into the ever-expanding list of letters that has grown so broad it has become meaningless. Does anyone in this House know at this stage what the plus even means or stands for any more? That is not progress. To my mind, that is erasure dressed up as inclusion.

I want to be direct about the flying of flags.

5 o'clock

I truly believe that one flag should belong to all our State buildings and local authority buildings in this country and should be flown for 365 days per year. That is the Tricolour. It belongs to every citizen regardless of their sexuality, religion or political belief. State buildings should be there to unite the citizens. They should not be there to divide for competitive identity groups, each waiting for its day, week, month or turn. I remind this House that men and women died for that flag; they died in 1916. They died afterwards fighting for the right to fly that flag for a free Ireland, the flag that draped the coffins of Irish patriots and servicemen in the Defence Forces alike. They did not die so that a sitting Member of the Upper House of the Oireachtas could stand up generations later and call it a source of terror. That is not just an insult to me; it is an insult to every Member and every family who buried someone under that flag and called it a price worth paying. I will name the hypocrisy plainly. Senator Eileen Flynn told Seanad Éireann she feels terrified at the sight of the Tricolour. She is a public representative, paid for by this State and she said it in a State building that flies the flag every day. That is not principle; it is an insult to every citizen who has ever stood under that flag, and I will not pretend otherwise to keep the peace.

The people who marched for Declan Flynn did not march so that gay men and women could become a Government photo opportunity once a year. They marched for freedom to live without fear, not for the right to be paraded out as proof of what seems to be a progressive country, as it claims to be. We must not let their courage be reduced to press releases or photo

opportunities. Their courage was not given so it could be borrowed by other people with other agendas. Lesbians, gays and bisexuals are citizens of this Republic, not props for other political uses. They marched once and, let me remind the House, they did not march so their fight could be handed over to others who shout the loudest.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: LGBT and Pride. Pride stands for "respect". I listen in this House daily and people say "far left" and "far right" and brand everything. What is wrong with just being yourself? Why do you have to be branded? Respect means that if somebody is gay, lesbian or trans, you give them respect and let them give you respect. I do not believe in all of this branding. They are people, human beings. That is what they are.

I have been attacked here and called far right and a homophobe and then people found out I have a son who is gay. Why should he be branded as gay? He is my son. He is a person. Why do we have to brand everything? Regardless of what you are or what you want to be, you should be treated with respect for whatever you want to be. If someone has a problem with that, it is they who have the problem, not the person who wants to be whatever they are. That is what it comes down to - simple respect.

As a father, grandfather and public representative, I am hopeful that, in future, regardless of what you are and how you identify as in this country or in this world, you will be safe and when you go out, you will not be targeted or identified for being different. For decades, people who had disabilities were hidden from the public. Now, and rightly so, they are part of our families, communities and workforce, where they were previously identified and hidden away. If anything can be learned from this today, it is that respect equals pride. Regardless of what you are or who you are, nobody should be labelled. You are a person, a human being, and that deserves respect from all sides, regardless of your beliefs or religion. It does not matter. I have my religion and other people have theirs. I respect theirs and they respect mine. That is what I stand for - respect. If you cannot respect other people and you have a go at other people, even down to religion, then you have the problem. I do not and it does not bother me any more. There is only one answer I have for people like that; in one ear and out two.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I am pleased to join my colleagues today in marking Pride month. This is an important month to reflect on the role we each play in supporting equality and inclusion in Irish society. Pride is about visibility, dignity, respect and celebrating identity and belonging. As a Minister of State in the Department of Health, I am particularly conscious of the importance of inclusion services. Good public health policy must recognise difference and remove barriers to access. Members of the LGBT+ community can face more complex health challenges in relation to mental health, well-being and substance use. Our goal is for everybody to be equal. We want Ireland to be a place where absolutely everyone can live healthy and safe lives.

As Minister of State with responsibility for the national drugs strategy, I am determined our drug and alcohol services across the country are designed to be accessible, safe and responsive. That is why building capacity within services to understand and meet the needs of diverse communities remains a key priority for me. Our community services enhancement fund has previously helped expand access for groups which can face additional barriers, including women, minority communities and the LGBT+ community. We also know that tailored supports are important. Dedicated services for LGBT+ young people, developed through local

drug and alcohol task forces, provide safe and non-judgmental spaces for support. These services focus on education, early intervention and harm reduction, empowering young people to make informed choices and to seek help when they need it.

The draft national drugs strategy for 2026 to 2029 places a strong emphasis on fairness and access and seeks to ensure services are responsive to the needs of all communities. We are also continuing to implement our national sexual health strategy and develop a model of care for HIV. This is alongside continuing to invest in PrEP and expanding access to meet demand. Every year, €6.5 million is invested in this and we also make sure we have the staffing there, which is hugely important.

Our Healthy Ireland framework is also being reviewed for the first time since 2013. I want to ensure the importance of promoting good health and well-being for our LGBT+ community is acknowledged in the framework.

Pride is a celebration of identity and community and I wish everyone who is celebrating this weekend in Dublin a happy Pride. I know Carlow is having its Pride parade on 12 July and Kilkenny's Pride celebration runs from 23 July but the parade itself will be on 25 July.

We have come a long way in Ireland in improving rights for the LGBT+ community and it is important to celebrate this. It is also important that we are mindful of those who would seek to take us backwards or say we have not done enough. I know we need to do more and we have to do so. I compliment my good friend John Paul Payne who is organising the Pride parade in Carlow with a load of volunteers. Well done to him. Carlow Regional Youth Services has a dedicated youth worker and a safe drop-in place. All these measures are important. Pride is important, not just as a celebration but as a chance to refocus our efforts on making Ireland a truly inclusive society.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I often wonder why are we having these statements on Pride? I reflect in many ways on my own political journey and I remember that, as a student and young person, I saw Máire Geoghegan-Quinn decriminalise homosexuality. As someone who was very closeted at the time, that had a big impact on me in terms of challenging my own thinking.

My experience, even though I never hid my sexuality, was that I ended up being outed by the media in 2006. What struck home to me about that was the support I got from family, friends and my local community. I knew the real Ireland that existed then. In 2012, at the Fianna Fáil Ard-Fheis, we became the second party to support marriage equality and, interestingly, the first to support same-sex adoption at the time. There was the joyous occasion of the marriage equality referendum in 2015. Now, we have a cross-party equality caucus here in Leinster House. I pay tribute to the leadership of the Minister of State, Deputy Buttimer, in that regard. In many ways, it is now unremarkable that we have so many Members of these Houses who identify as LGBT or as allies and no one really passes many remarks on it.

I also see this in my local community, in the likes of The Vault youth centre in Arklow, the Gorey Youth Needs group and FDYS in Gorey, all of which have LGBT support groups. I pay particular tribute to Creagh College, which has done an incredible amount of work with the LGBTQ allies' support group in the school. The school has now achieved the Belong To quality mark. Incredible work has been done by the teachers and students to ensure the school is an inclusive environment. So many schools are doing that.

I was at Gorey Library this week where, flying proudly outside the library, as indeed it is outside many libraries, is the Pride flag. It has a lot of books celebrating that and ensuring our libraries are inclusive spaces.

When I look at all that progress I wonder if we still need to discuss and raise these issues. I am certain, even hearing some of the comments in the House today, that we do. I have no intention of pulling up the ladder on my trans brothers and sisters. We still have a long way to go, particularly in areas like trans healthcare. There is a responsibility on those who have been on our own journey to be supportive of those who still feel that the State is not recognising their needs or being sufficiently supportive.

Reference has been made to social media. I am deeply concerned about Facebook. Meta is not taking sufficient action. Facebook used to be very much a community space for those who identified as LGBT to be able to come together. We are now seeing hate, particularly homophobia, discrimination and racism, being amplified. In the last year or two, in every single case where I have reported hate as being against the community guidelines that are set out, Facebook is upholding the content. There has to be a challenge made to Meta. If Facebook is taking part in the Pride parade in Dublin this weekend, it needs to look at itself and ask what it is doing as a company to be able to tackle this. Facebook, which was always an inclusive and welcoming space, has now gone nearly as bad as X in terms of fostering division and hatred.

While we are fortunate in this country that we have come so far, we need to look at what continues to go on around the world. It is abhorrent that there are still countries where same-sex relations are illegal, even where there is an assumption that one has a same-sex attraction. Not only that but there are also countries where same-sex relations remain punishable by death. We have a moral obligation to continue to call out those countries. They include Brunei, Iran, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and other parts of the world, including a number of regions in Nigeria where Sharia law is implemented.

With regard to our foreign policy, I commend the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. When it comes to making decisions on overseas development aid, we should include a requirement that citizens are respected, regardless of who they love or are purported to love. The European Union must be a union of values as well as interests. I certainly believe that we are now seeing progress in Hungary where we had seen a lot of discrimination against members of the LGBT community. For countries on the accession pathway, these values also need to be very clearly communicated. I welcome that the Pride parade in Kyiv last weekend was ten times larger than normal. There is in Ukraine a recognition that the country needs to adhere to the value of inclusiveness.

As others have said, this is a republic and we are judged by how we treat all of our citizens. For those who are LGBTQ, identify as LGBTQ or are our allies, I say "Happy Pride".

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I am an Irish republican and I believe deeply in the principles of equality, solidarity and community. Those values shape my politics. They are also the values that exist at the heart of Pride. That is why I am proud to stand here today and every day as an ally of the LGBTQ community.

Pride is a celebration of people being able to live freely, openly, honestly and without fear. It is about recognising the dignity and worth of every person and building a society where everyone feels respected and included. Tá cearta agus comhionannas ríthábhachtach agus tá sé chomh tábhachtach céanna go dtógfaimid pobal ina bhfeictear gach uile dhuine, ina gcloistear iad agus ina bhfuil grá, cineáltas agus meas mar chroílár na beatha.

While we have made significant progress in recent decades, we know that the work is not finished. Many LGBTQ+ people continue to experience discrimination and isolation, and barriers to services continue to exist. We see this in areas such as mental health and housing in particular. Those challenges can be especially acute outside major urban centres. We know that visibility and representation matter. Knowing that you belong in your community matters. Every person, regardless of where they live, deserves to feel safe and accepted for who they are.

We should also remember that the rights enjoyed today were secured through the determination and courage of many activists. There is nothing inevitable about the progress that we enjoy today. The progress made to date was only achieved because people stood up, spoke out, demanded equality and fought for it. Tá cumhacht ar leith ag baint le saol a chaitheamh le bród, le bheith mar chuid de phobal, le glacadh le daoine eile agus a bheith glactha ionat féin. Is é sin croílár an Bhróid.

As republicans, we seek an Ireland based on equality and respect for all. We must continue working towards that full lived equality where every LGBTQ+ person is seen, heard, protected and valued. We know that Pride is about solidarity, community and belonging. Those principles are worth defending every single day of the year.

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jerry Buttimer): Gabhaim buíochas le gach ball a bhí páirteach sa díospóireacht thábhachtach seo. Guím Bród sona ar gach duine. Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCeann Comhairle as ceannaireacht a thabhairt do gach Ball den Teach an tseachtain seo caite mar gheall ar cheiliúradh Bhród.

I thank the Ceann Comhairle for her leadership as the custodian of the Chair of the House, for being impartial and for being a leader in building an equal and inclusive Houses of the Oireachtas. It does mean something and it is important. I thank all Members of the House for their participation in this important debate. It is not just a debate; it is an opportunity to participate in a discussion and look at where we have come from and where we are going to move to. I was struck by the varied contributions of the debate. Those people who know me will know that Harvey Milk has been a hero of mine. I was struck by these words of his:

It takes no compromise to give people their rights. It takes no money to respect the individual. It takes no political deal to give people freedom. It takes no survey to remove repression.

As we celebrate Pride and reflect on some of the contributions made in this debate, I am not being nostalgic in saying there are some key moments where we have jumped and made significant progress. This is Pride month, but not for everybody in the world, as we just heard. Just 12 months ago, in the European Union, people in Budapest were fighting a battle to have the right and ability to march, celebrate and protest.

I thank Deputy Roderic O'Gorman and the former Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, for their leadership, and the Mayor of Budapest for having the bravery to have that parade. I was in Budapest recently and people were looking forward to Pride this year. Deputy Byrne mentioned Kyiv as an example of a place where people do not just want to celebrate, but to advocate and protest too. That is what this month is about. It is about that opportunity to shine a light on the aspiration of equality for all people that was spoken about at our coffee morning and the diverse, rich lives that our Proclamation speaks about, of cherishing all of us equally. As we heard today, not everybody feels they can inhabit that space and be free to be who they are.

I thank the activists in the Gallery, those who are watching online and those who are back in the offices working to ensure we have people who will campaign, raise issues and hold us to account. I ask all Members of the Oireachtas to read this wonderful document by Transgender Equality Network of Ireland, TENI. I thank Daire Dempsey for putting it together. I also thank the Library and Research Service, which put together a comprehensive document for today's debate as well. I will come back to both those documents in a moment.

I read an article in the *Irish Independent* during the week by Kevin Penrose, a footballer from Tyrone. He spoke passionately about his life. He said that for a long time he resented the sport as he never thought he could truly be himself, whether it was his sexuality or a GAA player. If we take the example of sport, look at the transformative change that has taken place in our country. There is acceptance, progress and inclusivity in the GAA, soccer, rugby and athletics, and they are just examples of some sports. That shows us the progress we have made.

I also thank members of the Oireachtas equality caucus, which is led by Senator Laura Harmon, and our allies and friends. Deputies Devine and Byrne are here. These are meetings of people where there is little rancour. We have a lot of debate, we seek change and we work on a cross-party platform to deliver for people.

The backdrop to this debate has been against some of the briefings and engagements we have had. One of the questions posed in this discussion today was why we still have Pride. TENI speaks about the outstanding gaps in the law, policy and services that prevent people achieving full equality, and that is the tenor that has come through some of the debate here. Many people who do not understand and do not necessarily read about the issues think the marriage equality referendum put a roof on the house but, of course, it did not, as we all know. It was an important milestone and an extraordinary result, but we still have significant work to do.

For many of us in the community, and we heard it in the debate today, it feels like the world is in fire. Deputy Byrne listed a number of countries where no progress has been made and there is no recognition in any shape or form. I have had the privilege of being the Cathaoirleach and Leader of the Seanad, a Minister of State and a Member of the House. I have travelled the world raising matters and have been met with a frosty silence. In many ways, it reminded me of Bertie Ahern's image of playing handball against a haystack.

However, in the despair that we heard in some of the contributions, we have to be optimistic. We have to continue with our statements, which have the support of so many. If we are honest about it, there has been monumental progress and a sea change in opinion in all our political parties, which allows us to have that person-centred approach so that we can have the gender-

affirming healthcare service we need to have for our trans community and friends. Deputy Byrne is right. We cannot and should never pull the ladder up. We must fight, advocate and stand with our family members, colleagues and friends because if we do not, we will fail them.

Building on the Gender Recognition Act 2015, it is clear that we need to reform and review our healthcare system, and inculcate the need not just a real pathway, but also the delivery of gender-affirming healthcare. We owe that to our trans friends, colleagues and family members.

We are thankfully in a Parliament where the majority of us are on the same page. We may be on different lines but we are on the same page, and that is a positive.

We have all met and spoken to representatives from End Discrimination in Inheritance Tax, EDIT, the reform group looking for a change to the inheritance tax. I pay tribute to James Sexton and his group on their campaign. It is an important point that it raises. Many of us who will not have children will be faced with that inheritance issue at the end of our lives. What we have or do not have is not the point. The issue is equality in the treatment of people. I hope the families EDIT represents will see a change in the policy around inheritance tax.

Reflecting on today, the theme of love, acceptance and inclusion has come across very much. I will single out two people before I conclude. Bishop Paul Colton has retired as the Church of Ireland bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross. At a time when it was not popular, he led. He brought people and his church along. Deputy Carthy made reference to the church earlier and I think he may have been reflecting on the leadership of the Catholic Church. Bishop Colton made a hugely positive contribution. I ask all of the churches to reflect upon their attitudes and doctrines. As a former seminarian and someone with a degree in theology, I hope they do so because language and words matter.

I also pay tribute to Kate Moynihan, who has retired as the chief executive of LINQ in Cork. A Kerry woman living and working in Cork, she did huge work building an inclusive and empowering society for women and all of us in the community. I thank her and wish her well in her retirement.

As we head towards Pride at the weekend, the flying of the rainbow flag is about visibility. It shows that we have come from Stonewall, where oppression was the order of the day, to liberation today. To the Members of the House and staff, thank you. To our friends watching and listening at home, have a good Pride. Without our friends in the Gallery, who have worked so hard and are working every day, we would be a poorer society. As we have said, Pride is a day of celebration and protest. It is a day to be enjoyed and to walk with pride. To everyone, I say "Thank you". Gabhaim míle buíochas, a Cheann Comhairle, for your leadership.

An Ceann Comhairle: I thank the Minister of State. That concludes the statements on Pride. I add my own voice in wishing everyone a happy Pride weekend. May the sun continue to shine for them, so they can enjoy it all the more.

Messages from Select Committee

An Ceann Comhairle: The Select Committee on Transport has completed its consideration of the Dublin Transport Authority (Amendment) Bill 2026. It has made no amendments thereto.

The Select Committee on Transport has completed its consideration of the following Supplementary Estimate for Public Services for the service of the year ending on 31 2026: Vote 31 - Transport.

Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Bill 2026: Second Stage

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

I am very pleased to bring this Bill before the House today. The purpose of the Bill is to give full effect in Ireland to EU Regulation 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and Council, and of the EU's Artificial Intelligence Act, which I will refer to throughout as the AI Act.

The AI Act is designed to provide a high level of protection to people's health, safety and fundamental rights and to promote the adoption of human-centric, trustworthy AI.

As with all EU regulations, the AI Act has direct legal effect across all member states. It aims to harmonise rules for AI systems across the EU, creating a single market and ensuring a consistent approach to risk, safety and fundamental rights. With those aims in mind, this Bill is a technical implementing measure. It neither adds to nor alters the obligations placed on regulated entities by the AI Act. The Bill establishes essential domestic regulatory architecture for the supervision and enforcement of the AI Act in the State.

A central feature of the Bill is the establishment of oifig intleacht shaorga na hÉireann, the AI office of Ireland, as an independent statutory body. Our new AI office will be designated as the single point of contact for our citizens at home, the European Commission and other member states. In this role it will support consistent enforcement of the Act and facilitate co-operation between competent authorities and fundamental rights bodies. The office will promote AI innovation and literacy and oversee the AI regulatory sandbox, which will foster innovation and support startups and SMEs in compliance with the AI Act.

The Bill also empowers our competent authorities and it creates a robust administrative sanctions framework. The Bill establishes a regulatory foundation on which to build trust in society for an evolution of AI that serves as a tool for people, with the ultimate aim of increasing human well-being.

Artificial intelligence is one of the defining technologies of our era. Its applications now reach into virtually every corner of the economy and society, from healthcare and financial services to the delivery of public services and much more. AI has brought remarkable benefits. It is accelerating scientific discovery, improving outcomes in medicine, expanding access to services and generating significant economic opportunity. Our national digital and AI strategy, Digital Ireland: Connecting our People, Securing our Future, sets out Ireland's ambition to be a global hub for applied AI innovation.

AI also carries real risk, however. Without appropriate oversight, it can embed and amplify discrimination, manipulate behaviour or exploit the vulnerabilities of people, posing threats to the health, safety and fundamental rights of our citizens. The AI Act, which entered into force in August 2024, is the first ever legal framework designed to address these concerns while simultaneously fostering innovation of responsible and ethical AI. The AI Act is a risk-based, horizontal regulation. It applies across all sectors of the economy, both private and public, with targeted exemptions for national defence, national security and purely personal use. Crucially, its measures are proportionate: most AI systems will give rise only to minimal risk and can be marketed and used subject to existing legislation, without additional obligations under the AI Act. This ensures that the EU and Ireland remain competitive for AI investment and innovation. The AI Act also takes into account the specific interests and needs of SMEs in terms of simplified obligations and tailored supports.

There are five main pillars to the AI Act, which set out obligations across a number of categories and uses of AI systems and models. Under prohibited practices, eight AI practices are prohibited due to the unacceptable risk they pose to European values and fundamental rights, including practices such as harmful manipulation, social scoring and real-time remote biometric identification. Given the rapid development of technology, the AI Act also provides for the list of prohibited practices to be kept under regular review. Stringent requirements apply to high-risk AI systems used in eight areas set out in the AI Act, such as biometrics and critical infrastructure. Under transparency obligations, specific requirements apply to AI systems that interact with users, generate synthetic content with risks of impersonation or enable deepfakes. Under the general purpose AI pillar, providers of general-purpose AI models face obligations to mitigate systemic risks. Enforcement will be led by the European Commission with member state co-operation. Under the enforcement pillar, member states are required to designate competent authorities to supervise and enforce the regulation of AI and to provide for significant penalties, with fines of up to €35 million or 7% of global annual turnover for the most serious infringements.

I will now speak to the importance and urgency of the legislation. Ireland has a key position in the European regulatory landscape. Eight of the leading providers of foundational AI models are established here. These are the companies at the frontier of AI development and deployment globally. Maintaining the competitiveness and viability of Ireland's digital economy is an overarching national imperative, as outlined in Programme for Government: Securing Ireland's Future, and is the driver behind a number of key commitments in the Government's recently updated national AI and digital strategy.

As Ireland assumes the Presidency of the Council of the EU, meeting our obligations under the AI Act will further strengthen our position as an EU centre of excellence and digital regulatory hub. It will also demonstrate our commitment to fostering responsible, human-centric AI innovation, both domestically and across Europe.

There is also a firm legal deadline. Enforcement of prohibited AI practices posing unacceptable risks, as set out in Article 5 of the AI Act, takes effect as of 2 August 2026. Ireland must have the necessary national supervisory and enforcement infrastructure in place by that date. I acknowledge the considerable complexity and pace of work required to reach that point. The EU allowed a comparatively short window between the AI Act entering into force and its application. The complexity of the Bill, combined with the parallel development of the EU's

digital omnibus proposal, has required extraordinary efforts from my officials, the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel and the Office of the Attorney General. To them I am most grateful.

As I have noted, and as Deputies will no doubt be aware, the EU's digital omnibus on AI, a set of targeted amendments to the AI Act, was provisionally agreed in May 2026 and approved by the European Parliament in June. Ireland supports the agreed omnibus, which helps increase legal certainty and reduce administrative burden. Importantly, the omnibus extends certain implementation timelines, including for transparency obligations and high-risk AI system requirements. However, the omnibus does not extend the timeline for enforcement of prohibited AI practices under Article 5. The 2 August 2026 deadline remains firm, and this Bill addresses it directly. Any amendments to domestic legislation that may be required following formal adoption of the digital omnibus on AI will be addressed as part of phase 2 of this work in the autumn. The second phase will also provide an opportunity to further enhance AI regulation in accordance with the AI Act if required.

Having set out the context and the urgency of the Bill, I will now outline its provisions. The Bill is structured in ten Parts, with 139 sections and 4 Schedules. Its overarching policy objective is to ensure that the AI Act can be comprehensively and effectively implemented here in Ireland.

Part 1 of the Bill, comprising sections 1 to 5, inclusive, provides for the Title and commencement, key definitions, regulation-making powers, service of documents, and expenses, to provide that the costs of administering the Act are funded with the appropriate ministerial approval.

Part 2 is set out over sections 6 to 40, inclusive, and provides for the establishment of oifig IS na hÉireann and its governance structure, including appointment of its board, CEO and staff and its accountability, funding and functions. Sections 12 to 23, inclusive, are concerned specifically with matters relating to board governance, with provisions on board establishment and membership, appointment process, terms of appointment, membership of either House of the Oireachtas, remuneration, conflict of interest and others. Sections 24 to 33, inclusive, relate to the chief executive officer role and provide for the matters relating to the CEO's appointment, resignation, accountability and functions. Sections 34 to 36, inclusive, relate to the staff of oifig IS na hÉireann and confidentiality.

The appointment of staff is subject to the Public Services Management (Recruitment and Appointments) Act 2004 and the Civil Service Regulation Acts 1956 to 2005. Sections 37 to 40, inclusive, provide for funding and accountability, including the strategy statement, accounts and annual report.

Part 3, comprising sections 41 to 52, inclusive, provides for the practical operational infrastructure underpinning enforcement of the AI Act in Ireland. Section 42 designates the AI office as the national single point of contact in relation to the public and other counterparts at member state and Union levels, and to help increase organisational efficiency as required by the AI Act. Section 43 provides that the AI office will establish and maintain a national AI register, recording all instances of prohibited AI practices, serious incidents involving high-risk AI systems, and other required notifications. Transparency and public accountability are embedded from the outset. Section 46 provides for the establishment of AI regulatory sandboxes under the supervision of the AI office. SMEs and start-ups are to receive priority

access. Sections 48 to 50, inclusive, make provision for real-world testing of high-risk AI systems in controlled conditions, subject to appropriate safeguards, oversight, and rights of review.

Market surveillance authorities are a key cohort of the national competent authorities required for the implementation of the AI Act and Part 4 sets out, at sections 54 to 62, inclusive, the general obligations and powers of market surveillance authorities, including the power to receive complaints from the public. Section 59 enables fundamental rights bodies to request the testing of high-risk AI systems where infringements of fundamental rights are suspected. Sections 63 and 64 are concerned with co-operation agreements of relevant market surveillance authorities. Sections 65 and 66 set out data protection matters for relevant competent authorities.

Part 5 provides market surveillance authorities with a comprehensive, structured, and proportionate enforcement toolkit, progressing from co-operative compliance measures through to coercive intervention. Authorised officers, appointed by each market surveillance authority under sections 68 to 70, inclusive, will have powers to enter premises, inspect relevant AI products and records, require the production of information, and take samples. Section 71 provides that contravention notices may be issued requiring an operator to remedy a breach. Section 72 provides that prohibition notices may be issued to stop an AI system from being placed on the market or put into service where it poses a risk or breaches the AI Act. Sections 73 and 74 provide powers for seizure, disposal, and forfeiture of unsafe AI products and, under section 75, in the most serious cases, for the removal of online content to eliminate serious risk. Section 77 provides rights of appeal to the District Court throughout.

Part 6 establishes, at sections 78 to 120, inclusive, the independent adjudication system for the imposition of administrative fines for breaches of the AI Act. Sections 79 to 86, inclusive, provide that where a market surveillance authority believes an infringement has occurred and an authorised officer has conducted an investigation, the matter may, with the authority's consent, be referred to an independent adjudicator. The administrative fines, set out in section 105, are substantial and fully aligned with fines set out under the AI Act. For public bodies, fines are capped at €1 million, in line with the data protection legislation. Section 114 provides that no administrative fine takes effect without confirmation by the High Court, which is a key procedural safeguard. Sections 107 to 109, inclusive, provide for the rights of appeal. Sections 116 to 117 provide for the nomination of adjudicators by the AI office and appointment by the Minister for Enterprise, Tourism and Employment. Section 118 expressly provides for the adjudicators' independence in the performance of their functions.

Part 7 of the Bill concerns penalties and miscellaneous provisions and, at sections 121 to 127, inclusive, sets out criminal penalties for obstruction of authorised officers, failure to comply with enforcement notices, and unauthorised disclosure of confidential information. Part 8, at sections 128 to 133, inclusive, amends the Central Bank Act 1942 to equip the Central Bank with the investigatory and sanctioning tools necessary for its role as a market surveillance authority under the AI Act. Part 9, at sections 134 to 137, inclusive, amends the Competition and Consumer Protection Act 2014 to equip the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission with the investigatory and sanctioning tools necessary for its role as a market surveillance authority under the AI Act.

Part 10, at sections 138 and 139, contains miscellaneous amendments, including consequential amendments to the Communications Regulation Act 2002, and the Freedom of Information Act 2014. Additionally, there are four Schedules governing oral hearing procedures, the assignment of adjudicators and the register of adjudicators.

In conclusion, establishing a credible and coherent AI enforcement regime in Ireland underscores our commitment to responsible AI development and is a core component of our international competitiveness offering. In this respect, the Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Bill 2026 matters to how AI will impact our society, our economy, our international standing and, of course, our future. It puts in place the enforcement structures that will protect people in Ireland from AI systems that pose unacceptable risks to their health, safety, and their fundamental rights. It provides the regulatory clarity and helps build the public trust that businesses, both indigenous and multinational, need to invest, operate, and grow with confidence.

As we assume the Presidency of the Council of EU, meeting our obligations under the AI Act demonstrates our commitment to responsible digital governance and to being a trusted partner in the EU. The implementing measures enabled by this legislation, including the establishment of the new AI office of Ireland, will provide an enduring foundation, strengthening our position as an EU centre of excellence and digital regulatory hub, and demonstrate our commitment to fostering and promoting responsible AI innovation and adoption both in Ireland and in Europe. It is imperative that the State has a comprehensive and robust legal basis for the full and effective implementation of the AI Act. I am confident this Bill achieves that objective in a balanced, proportionate and technically sound manner. I thank colleagues for their attention and commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Artificial intelligence is transforming our economy, workplaces and daily lives at an extraordinary pace. It offers enormous opportunities to improve public services, drive innovation and enhance productivity but it also presents serious risks that cannot be ignored. We all can recognise the benefits AI can bring to individuals, business and the public sector, be it through task automation, improved data analysis or increased efficiency and competitiveness across many sectors. However, AI is not an inherently positive force. It is a tool that can be used for good or bad, depending on the intentions of those who develop and deploy it. This is precisely why it must be properly and robustly regulated.

I welcome the Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Bill 2026, which will establish the national structures required to implement and enforce the EU AI Act in Ireland. It will provide the governance, supervision and enforcement framework necessary to ensure Ireland meets its obligation to have a fully operational AI regulatory regime in place by 2 August 2026. This important deadline falls during Ireland's Presidency of the European Union. As a country that has positioned itself as a major digital hub within Europe, it is important that Ireland demonstrates leadership and a clear commitment to online safety, accountability and the responsible use of emerging technologies.

The establishment of a dedicated national AI office is indeed welcome. However, its effectiveness will depend on whether it has the necessary independence, staffing and financial resources to carry out its functions properly.

It will be important that the board members of the new office collectively possess expertise in AI and computer science, human rights and equality law, trade union and workers' rights matters, consumer protection and civil society engagement. There must be no conflict between the State's deployment of AI and its role in promoting innovation and its responsibility to regulate and enforce compliance. The office must have sufficient authority and capacity to support other regulators and fundamental rights bodies. We in Sinn Féin support empowering enforcement bodies to tackle the misuse of artificial intelligence and protect citizens from harmful or unlawful practices. However, enforcement mechanisms must be matched by adequate resources, transparency and oversight.

While much of the debate around artificial intelligence focuses on innovation and competitiveness, we must not lose sight of its impact on workers. Technological advancement should improve people's lives, not undermine their livelihoods. AI should enhance human labour, not replace it. We are already witnessing the consequences of AI-driven restructuring. Recently, 720 workers in Covalen learned their jobs are to be made redundant as advances in artificial intelligence increasingly replace functions previously carried out by people. The Government cannot simply sit back and hope for the best as artificial intelligence reshapes our labour market.

A recent report by the ERSI and Department of Finance estimated that around 7% of jobs in Ireland could be displaced by AI in the short- to medium-term, the equivalent of almost 200,000 jobs. This should serve as a wake-up call that future displaced workers need meaningful protections and supports to be put in place. The new AI office must promote the development and deployment of AI systems that advance high-quality employment, regional development, social inclusion and the provision of public services. Workers must be supported to adapt to changing technologies, gain new qualifications and transition into emerging sectors. More broadly, I want the Government to develop a comprehensive national strategy to manage the impact of AI on employment and ensure workers are partners in shaping technological change, rather than casualties of it. The new AI office could contribute significantly to this work.

The Government has already stated that the Bill does not create substantive administrative obligations beyond those already contained in the EU AI Act. With this Bill we need to be careful not to over-regulate AI and add to the already large administrative burden of SMEs. It is a difference between the administrative burden and regulation that we need. We must also ensure Irish companies can access AI technology to the same extent as international competitors, otherwise, Ireland's competitiveness will be negatively impacted. Regulation must protect citizens while also enabling responsible technological development and economic growth. For Sinn Féin, regulation of AI must be guided by clear principles. Transparency is essential. AI-generated content and tools should be clearly identified where there is potential for public consumption. Copyright protections must be upheld to protect artists, designers, writers and those working in creative industries from having their original works replicated and exploited without consent.

Privacy rights cannot be compromised. AI systems must comply fully with the GDPR and all relevant data protection legislation. Personal information, including sensitive and biometric data, must be processed lawfully, fairly and transparently. Fairness is another key consideration. AI must never reinforce discrimination, inequality or social exclusion. I say that in particular in regard to access to vital public services by elderly people, people with

disabilities and vulnerable people in our communities. Regular monitoring of systems is required to identify and eliminate biases, in particular where AI is used in employment decisions, recruitment processes or the delivery of public services.

We must also recognise the growing cybersecurity threats associated with artificial intelligence. AI has already been used by malicious actors to create increasingly sophisticated phishing exercises, deepfake scams and fraudulent communications. It can automate cyberattacks, identify vulnerabilities at scale and facilitate the spread of misinformation. As AI capabilities become more advanced, the potential for criminal exploitation also increases. The State must ensure that cybersecurity considerations are embedded in AI regulation and governance frameworks. Businesses, public bodies and critical infrastructure providers must be equipped to deal with these evolving threats. Therefore, public engagement and education are vitally important. The Government must be proactive in informing citizens about what artificial intelligence is, how it is being used and what risks and opportunities it presents. Public awareness campaigns, online tutorials and our education system all have a role to play in ensuring people can use these technologies safely and competently.

Particular attention must be paid to vulnerable groups in society, as I said. The rights of children and the elderly must come first and we must have meaningful engagement with people with disabilities to better understand their experiences with AI technologies. Artificial intelligence is evolving much faster than legislation. The Government must remain agile and capable of responding quickly to emerging risks and developments. Sinn Féin supports the principle of effective AI regulation. We welcome measures that protect citizens, uphold fundamental rights and ensure accountability, but regulation alone is not enough. The Government must ensure that workers are protected, citizens are informed, enforcement bodies are adequately resourced and innovation proceeds in a way that benefits society as a whole. Artificial intelligence should serve people, strengthen our communities and support our economy, while always remaining subject to democratic oversight, human judgment and public interest.

On SMEs, in particular small businesses and the use of AI, we see the use of AI in big tech. We need to be conscious of the supports that are necessary for small and medium businesses, including small retailers, in order to be able to avail of the opportunities of AI while also protecting their businesses. I want a front-loading of the supports and services that are available to SMEs.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Bill 2026. It represents a significant step in establishing the institutional and enforcement framework for the EU AI Act in Ireland. It creates a new AI regulator as an independent statutory body and establishes the supervisory powers and penalty regime we need to meet our obligation to have an operational regulatory framework in place by 2 August. That deadline falls during our EU Presidency. As a digital regulatory hub, it is essential that we demonstrate our commitment to online safety.

Let me be clear from the outset. The Bill is the absolute minimum required. Meeting the deadline is not the same as meeting the moment. I ask that the Minister of State engage with the Opposition on the Bill as it goes through the Houses because there are opportunities for improvement to every aspect of it, to put it mildly. Fundamentally, I would argue that it

prioritises economic competitiveness over the protection of fundamental rights. It is important that we get the Bill right.

There are systemic gaps in the regulatory architecture. The enforcement regime is not what it needs to be. The AI office needs to be more than a single point of contact. I know from different iterations of the Bill and pre-legislative scrutiny that some surveillance powers or duties were not included.

6 o'clock

Regarding the enforcement regime and its funding and resourcing, there is a deep concern that we will end up with a regime that is incredibly fragmented and impossible to navigate. There are also very real concerns in relation to child protection. Children are a vulnerable group and there is concern to ensure their fundamental rights are protected.

It was frustrating for the members of the AI committee that we were not more central to the design of this legislation. However, we have an opportunity now to discuss it. Concerns were raised about the independence of the AI office and how it will be constituted. I am open to discussion on this but I still question the influence of the Minister, the role of the Department and the potential for executive overreach. Along with my colleagues in Sinn Féin, we will chart our own way forward on this legislation but I am flagging these issues at this Stage because they are concerns that immediately are apparent to me and I know others have raised, and will raise, similar concerns.

We in Sinn Féin recognise the immense potential of artificial intelligence. The benefits are there to see, including automation of repetitive tasks, improved accuracy in data analytics, enhanced healthcare outcomes and increased productivity. The potential at least is there for those outcomes to be achieved. However, we are equally, if not more, aware of AI's profound capacity for harm. Those aspects are very apparent and have already been seen. This is not a choice between embracing the future and protecting our citizens. It is our duty to do both and to do so with foresight and determination.

The Grok scandal some months ago, where generative AI was used to create non-consensual sexualised deepfake images of thousands of Irish women and children, was a watershed moment. It was not an event that could not be predicated. Rather, it was a direct consequence of a regulatory vacuum and the failure of successive Governments to act with the vigilance and urgency the situation demanded. The scandal exposed a profound failure to protect citizens from the predatory usage of AI. What happened was not a glitch or accident and it certainly was not acceptable.

Sinn Féin brought forward legislation to close the loophole in Coco's Law by explicitly criminalising the generation of non-consensual intimate deepfake imagery. While the Government did not oppose our Bill, it remains to be seen whether it will match our and others' commitment to this measure with meaningful action. The message must be made clear that creating such material is illegal. A zero-tolerance approach to violence against women and children means taking action when new threats emerge, not waiting for harm to be done before we intervene. The victims of such attacks deserve more than sympathy. They deserve justice. The State's approach to AI regulation cannot simply be reactive. The Government cannot afford to wait for a scandal to force its hand.

For Sinn Féin, the focus is clear. Safety, ethics and fundamental rights must be central to the design of our regulatory framework. We must ensure that technological advancement does not come at the expense of the rights and dignity of our citizens, particularly our most vulnerable and especially children. When we talk about vulnerable groups, we are talking about real people, including young girls whose images are stolen and manipulated, women whose career and reputation can be destroyed by a single malicious deepfake image and members of minority communities that are already disproportionately targeted by disinformation and algorithmic bias. These are not abstract risks. They are present dangers that require an immediate and robust response.

The Bill before us introduces enforcement powers. It will allow regulators to issue contravention notices requiring compliance, withdrawal, recall or destruction of AI systems. There is a need for improvement and enhancement of every aspect of the Bill. The Oireachtas AI committee has argued that the EU AI Act must be treated as the minimum legislative requirement, not the ceiling. As AI development moves much faster than legislation, the Government must be able to combat negative developments in a swift manner. We need regular monitoring of AI systems to ensure illegal activity, inequality, bias and discrimination can be detected and removed. That will protect citizens' rights where AI is used in decision-making, where deepfake images are circulated and when AI is used for the delivery of public services. It will ensure that racial, gender or socio-economic discrimination is prevented.

GDPR and copyright legislation must continue to apply to AI. New and stronger legislation may be necessary to ensure that AI systems process data in a lawful, fair and transparent manner. There must be proactive delivery of public information and education. We need to ensure AI is inclusive and accessible for everyone. Public campaigns, online tutorials and the education system must inform citizens about how to use AI in a safe and appropriate manner. The rights of children and young people need to come first. Operators must ensure their platforms account for child safety and protection. There must be engagement with people with disabilities and supports for older people navigating technological developments.

Adoption of AI comes with the danger of job losses, which we are already seeing in manufacturing, technology and finance. Sinn Féin advocates for strong protections to ensure technological advancements do not erode workers' rights, safety or employment security.

We must also look at the bigger picture. Sinn Féin has serious concerns about the direction of travel at EU level. The digital omnibus package significantly weakens broader AI regulations and I am proud to say our MEPs voted accordingly. We will not accept a future where safeguards are traded away in the name of simplification and where the primary focus is on facilitating innovation, profits or competition between tech bros to the neglect of fundamental rights. The drive for competitiveness cannot come at the cost of our citizens' safety. The Government must stand firm against any efforts to dilute protections. There are real questions in that regard. This Bill is an important step but it is really important to get it right. I appeal to the Minister of State to work with the Opposition to ensure that happens.

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Cuirim fáilte roimh an mBille seo. Tá sé thar a bheith tábhachtach go mbeidh na dlíthe cuí againn chun dul i ngleic le AI agus go mbeimid réidh le déileáil leis an teicneolaíocht atá romhainn.

On behalf of the Social Democrats, I welcome the Bill and the discussion on Second Stage on the regulation of AI, as provided for in the Bill. Before speaking more specifically, including on some of the amendments I have already submitted, I will comment more broadly on AI and how it is impacting on our society. That is the basis on which we are trying to regulate its use. It is what is prompting governments and regulators around the world to deal with it.

My first point concerns the definition of AI. I am a member of the artificial intelligence committee, where we obviously discuss AI, and the communications committee, where part of our role involves the regulation of technology platforms. I am my party's spokesperson on enterprise, which is the area within which regulation of AI currently sits. In addition, data protection comes within the justice sphere. We are already in a very complex arrangement whereby a lot of different bodies and different perspectives are informing the discussion. I highlight this because in some people's mind, there is still a separation between technology in the form of online platforms and social media, for example, and AI. There is an idea that they are separate but that is no longer the case.

In fact, AI is the only show in town. It has long been the case that it is powering the social media platforms. The use of artificial intelligence is why algorithms are becoming more and more effective at making their products addictive. I worked in the technology sector between 2006 and 2014 and I remember someone telling me that some of the operations in the company I worked at went from a 5% level of automation to 95% during that period.

It is the case that AI is powering the technology all around us and it is not just the robots, the more exciting stuff that people sometimes associate with it. It is powering so much of the technology that reaches deep into our lives and it really has such a broad range. Some of it affects us directly, some of it is hidden, some of it is clearly technology and some of it we do not even associate with that. For me there are three different categories of concerns this raises.

The first one is the existential risk that we do not talk about it a lot in this Chamber. It has to be acknowledged that there are ways in which the technology is developing faster than not only regulators but even the engineers themselves can keep up with. We have seen headlines recently about this tipping point that we are currently getting to where AI agents can potentially start making decisions for themselves. They can start doing things which essentially contradict the wishes of the engineers who have developed that technology but are of a self-interest basis. That is the kind of dystopian world we see in movies and TV programmes and we do not really think it is ever going to happen. That is part of what is happening now and really why we are at such a critical moment right this minute of getting a handle on this and really getting control of it.

The second huge category that artificial intelligence raises for me as a concern is in labour displacement. Only this morning I was speaking to the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, about the Covalen workers and the broader picture of AI labour displacement in Ireland. We are not dealing with this. In fact, it is for me the definition of "head in the sand" that when I raise this, the stock response from Government is that it knows AI is going to disrupt labour, but actually it has the potential to augment - I think that is the word the Minister of State, Deputy Dillon, used earlier - it as well, that it will improve jobs and we will have better-quality jobs and more critical thinking within our roles because all the automation and more mundane and tedious tasks will be done by technology. There is nothing in the path that has got us to this point so far that gives me confidence that this will be the case. It is automation which has transformed

industries around us, like taxi drivers and delivery drivers more generally as well. None of it has been good for job security, job stability or for pay and conditions of those workers. What automation has done so far is to turn various parts of our employment sectors into a gig economy and it is not to the benefit of workers. It might be to the benefit of innovation, competitiveness and profit, but it is not to the benefit of workers. Unless we acknowledge that there is going to be major labour displacement as a result of artificial intelligence and unless we are honest with ourselves as policy makers and the Government is honest with itself, then this is going to be an issue that will absolutely dominate the next ten years of politics.

Within that for me one of the most important parts is that we do not have the structures for workers' rights in this country which allow us to deal with a crisis of this size. This is the thing. It should not be a crisis. It should be that if labour is being displaced that actually we have more time as a species for leisure to actually get to do things and we get to value, for example, professions that are traditionally undervalued, like teaching or caring, which are things that cannot be automated and are predominantly done by women. That is an opportunity, but unless we acknowledge it and are honest about it, none of these things are going to happen. As is the case with so much of AI there is opportunity, but unless we are honest about the threats, we will not be able to harness that opportunity and I have major concerns about that.

The last of the three categories that I would see as being evoked in this is the harms one. Grok was an example of that. I know the Minister of State's response was to be horrified, and rightly so, at what happened earlier this year when that feature became available. However, the reality is that this feature still exists. People can access it on their phones in this country using the right technology if they wish to do so. People can still nudify images. They can still promote child sexual abuse material and image-based sexual abuse using the technology that is made available to them by a private company. Nobody has yet been prosecuted, no sanctions have been levied and nothing has actually happened. I know there is a range of different responses in terms of inquiries, investigations, prosecutions and so on. I keep being told that there is this overburdensome regulatory framework that people are trying to deal with and yet we have a clear scandal and this overly burdensome regulatory framework cannot seem to react to it in any level of real time. Maybe it will get there eventually but the reality is that we can still access these features. That is just an example of the whack-a-mole model the Government will be dealing with. Grok is one feature on one application on one platform. It abounds. We do not know yet; just like we did not anticipate nudification being the crisis that it became, we do not know where the next one is coming from. Adding to the digital omnibus, which is essentially what happened, the very specifics around nudification, is not enough, because it is not treating the fundamental issue around the business model of these tech companies and the control of power they currently have.

I agree with other speakers who have mentioned that, unfortunately, the view of this Government, which is absolutely mirrored from Brussels, is a very industry-focused lens for the governance of AI. Everything is done through the prism of business and industry, competitiveness, enterprise and innovation. Unfortunately, that is not going to work. Establishing our AI office in the Department of enterprise is, to me, the first mistake we are making in that lens being applied to the development of this governance. It does not balance effectively the rights and protections that we need to bake in to the governance of this technology. Every time I hear a Government spokesperson, they speak about those things and say that the Government has to balance it with the protections, but nothing that is being done

is convincing me that this is actually happening. I am sorry but it is just not coming through in the Government's actions.

I mentioned power and this is really important. It is becoming more and more accepted that the control and power of this technology is in the hands of too few people and specifically in the hands of five or six tech brologarchs in the States. This group of people is pushing Donald Trump to lobby Brussels to deregulate so that they can have more access to the market. We have heard them say this. They do not hide this. This control and power means that we will always face this imbalance. We will always have to deal with a heavy regulatory framework to try to wrestle back that control, but there are other ways we can do so. We need to open that conversation and be honest about it.

Another thing we need to think about is the just transition. We talk about a just transition in relation to the climate but we need to add to that a digital component. We are dealing with a transformation in society because of the man-made climate change and we are also dealing with a transformation in society because of the technology we are developing. Beyond the governance, we also need to talk about it at that very fundamental, societal level. Here is the thing; if we trust AI and we actually build governance that is effective and good, there is so much to harness. There is so much benefit that we can bring to society that we can all enjoy. I have said before that algorithms are not bad things. Algorithms are bad at the moment because they are designed to keep our eyes on the screen and to addict us to the products, but they are just a maths equation. If we instead were able to repurpose those algorithms to promote well-being, equality, employment, whatever it might be, whatever the social difficulty is that we are tackling at any given time within a jurisdiction, we can actually harness these tools for good social impact. We will never be able to do that as long as the control sits in the hands of so few people who are entirely motivated by profit. Whatever the secondary missions of their companies might say, these are for-profit businesses with shareholders and all that involves. As long as that is the case, we will have issues with it.

I encourage the Minister of State and I will give her my copy of a brilliant book by Bruce Schneier titled *Rewiring Democracy*, which really helps to unpick this. It is a brilliant piece of work by a cybersecurity expert. I have quoted it a few times as it is such a helpful book. It is a very positive take on it and it says how this is technology that can be good in society but it will only ever work if we trust it. Otherwise, we will see a complete divergence between people paying to have technology they can trust and the rest of us swimming around in the cesspit that the Internet is increasingly becoming.

Before I go into specifics of the Bill, I want to touch on the AI Act and the digital omnibus because I do not support the digital omnibus. It has moved what could have been more promising legislation back towards light-touch regulation and that is a problem. I appreciate that there were a couple of carve-outs at the last minute, which meant that the digital omnibus was not as negative as it could have been. Nonetheless, I think it has cut the AI Act at the knees before it has even started to get going. That is a real shame. Specifically on the Bill, I want to talk about some of the amendments I have submitted, which we will get a chance to discuss further on Committee Stage.

While it is obviously welcome that we are legislating for artificial intelligence, I note it is disappointing that such vital and important legislation is being rushed because of what I can only call inadequate advanced planning. The EU AI Act applies from August and we have had

years of lead-in time to legislate for that application but yet this 106-page Bill was published late last week and the deadline for amendments for Committee Stage was this morning at 11 a.m. We have to get legislation like this right and to do that we need proper parliamentary scrutiny in the establishment of new State bodies and a complex framework of regulation. We need a process that will create space and time to identify key improvements for this Bill. That is extremely difficult to do when legislation is rushed through these Houses in the manner we are seeing right now.

Governance and independence of the AI office is something I have commented on a lot. I will continue to work on it throughout the passage of this Bill and it pertains to the bulk of the amendments I have put forward. I have spoken at length about the importance of the AI office as a regulator having the appropriate independence and resources to operate. That means it can act appropriately in its functions and that it is insulated from potential corporate capture, like we saw with the environment agency in the UK, or pressure from those it seeks to regulate. It needs independence from the Government like other regulators in this country. Its board and leadership must be appointed in a transparent manner and we cannot have a situation where such a vital piece of our regulatory framework - a framework that affects all parts of Irish society - is shaped wholly by the wants and interests of the Department of enterprise.

I was the head of an independent State agency. I understand what that independence looks like and how it can make bodies so much more effective. I raised this in committee but I also encourage the Minister of State's Department to look into the Paris Principles as essentially a gold standard in independence. The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission is the only agency in the State that applies the Paris Principles and that is because it is a UN accredited body, but there is no reason we cannot apply those same standards to other bodies.

As it stands, this Bill suggests that the first board and CEO be appointed by the Minister for enterprise with little reference to any binding recommendations from the Public Appointments Service or procedures in the appointment to safeguard independence from the beginning. This is not for a caretaker or interim period before permanent appointments can be made; it is for the full five-year term. If we want independence, transparency and due regard for all sections of society that are impacted by the proposed remit of the AI office, we cannot have all that power and discretion over the people who will shape the direction and the governance of the office resting solely with the Department of, or the Minister for, enterprise.

I have concerns over that control within the Department because I have been reassured time and again by the Government that the AI office will be wholly independent. However, in my reading of this Bill I do not see how that can be the case because if we are serious about having an effective AI office and an effective administration of the AI Act, we need to address the gaps and deficiencies in this Bill and I hope we are able to discuss the constructively on Committee Stage.

The idea that the Minister can instruct the office to act as he sees fit, even with carve-outs for specific enforcement matters, undermines that independence. We cannot have an effective, independent State body that must provide clear and evidence-based views and guidance on the regulation of artificial intelligence that is not permitted to comment on Government policy when asked by Members of these Houses at Oireachtas committees. These are very basic and straightforward infringements on the potential independence of the AI office under this Bill. We have a myriad of examples of agencies and bodies in this State where these constraints are

not applied and we see the benefit in ensuring accountability, boosting public confidence and giving us all clarity when it comes to legal and policy areas that need work. I want the perspective of those working in regulating AI to inform wider society, us included, but that is not possible if they are explicitly prohibited from sharing their perspective.

Next, I wish to speak to high-risk systems and ensuring that dangerous products are taken off the market. I welcome that we will eventually have a clear way of dealing with high-risk AI systems, but we need to be able to reflect reality. There are high-risk systems already in use that should not be there and waiting for legislation to catch up is just not okay. Under the digital omnibus plans that the Government has said it supports, we will be waiting another year until the regulations on these systems apply. That means we are essentially inviting companies to enter their products into an unregulated space within the next year before the regulation kicks in in 12 months' time when we will have rushed products and where developers' own safety processes will be rushed.

These are not simple, harmless products. They are explicitly the type of AI product which poses a high level of potential risk to our fundamental rights and safety. We, as a State, and particularly as a country where a lot of AI and tech companies are based, should be pushing for these safeguards for our citizens to be introduced and bedded in as soon as possible. With deepfakes, AI scams and more already affecting people, we cannot let these extremely powerful business interests have their way when it comes to the current *status quo* of no regulation, light-touch regulation and, in some cases, even self-regulation.

We also need to see clarity when it comes to the remit and co-ordination of market surveillance authorities and fundamental rights bodies because I understand and appreciate the reasons for adopting a distributed approach to the implementation of the EU AI Act but as others have mentioned, this approach is only effective when the national co-ordinating body, the AI office, can act as that co-ordinator effectively, that is, when it can mediate disputes between bodies where there are competing investigations and ensure smooth co-operation between the bodies involved. This is something that was flagged during pre-legislative scrutiny and which I am disappointed to see was not addressed in the Bill itself. I hope we can address this gap as the Bill proceeds through the Houses as it is absolutely vital to ensure that businesses, citizens and regulators have certainty on where they stand, how investigations proceed and who is in charge of those investigations in each case.

On that last point, it might be helpful for the Minister of State and her officials to have a look at the national preventive mechanism, NPM, structure. It is not actually legislated for here in Ireland yet. This is for the optional protocol to the convention against torture, OPCAT. It is actually quite a similar model where there is a co-ordinating body at the top and then that is co-ordinating sectoral inspectors. The legislation will eventually come in here in Ireland but there is a similar model in New Zealand that the Minister of State can examine. Basically it says that, because certain agencies will have greater powers in terms of independence, powers of publication and so on, they should then be able to co-ordinate bodies that do not have that same level of autonomy or independence. They may be further embedded into Departments, for example, but have quite specific roles to play because obviously, with the market surveillance authorities and the fundamental rights bodies identified within the Act, that is going to be the case.

As there will be a mixture of independence and autonomy within each of those agencies, making that co-ordinator as independent, autonomous and well resourced as it can be to do its job is absolutely crucial. Again, having been in a body where these functions are designated to you and assigned to you, rarely are they matched with the resources needed to do the job. We need to make sure that those fundamental rights bodies that are listed in Article 77 have the actual resources to do their job well. I have a range of amendments submitted and I look forward to discussing them on Committee Stage.

Deputy Naoise Ó Cearúil: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as an mBille seo a thabhairt os comhair na Dála. I welcome this Bill and want to start by commending the Minister of State and her officials on the considerable work behind it. As a member of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Artificial Intelligence, I have watched this framework take shape and I want to state clearly that its arrival is good news. It puts our implementation of the EU AI Act on a proper statutory footing and it does so at a moment when certainty matters.

The Act requires member states to have their market surveillance authorities, MSAs, in place by August 2025 and the high-risk rules apply from August this year. Businesses, public bodies and citizens have been waiting for this clarity and this Bill begins to deliver it. There is a great deal to welcome. The establishment of Oifig Intleachta Shaorga na hÉireann will give us, for the first time, a national home for AI co-ordination, literacy and public awareness. The regulatory sandbox and the real-world testing provisions in Part 3 are genuinely pro-innovation and they give smaller Irish companies and start-ups a supervised path to develop responsibly. That balance of safeguarding people while supporting innovation is exactly the balance we should strike.

I also welcome the careful enforcement process in Parts 5 and 6 with proper notice, the right to make representations and appeals to District Court and confirmation of fines by the High Court. This is firm but fair and it respects due process. I welcome that the Bill names our fundamental rights bodies in section 53 with the Data Protection Commissioner, IHREC, Coimisiún na Meán and An Coimisiún Toghcháin among them, with a clear route to test high-risk systems.

So, the foundations are strong and I support this Bill. I rise not to oppose it but to help strengthen it. In that collaborative spirit, there will be a need for some amendments, in my opinion, on Committee Stage and I want to set out some of those that I believe the Minister of State and her officials should be considering, and that we will consider, on Committee Stage with this House.

The first concerns the office itself. Under section 9, it is provided that Oifig Intleachta Shaorga na hÉireann co-ordinates, advises and promotes but it does not investigate, inspect or enforce.

Those powers rest with the designated sectoral authorities. I understand the logic of a distributed model and there is much to be said for drawing on the deep expertise of our existing regulators but there is a risk that the body the public will see as the national AI regulator will have no power of its own to act. There is a related point in section 42, which states, "The Office is designated as the single point of contact", yet Article 72 of the AI Act provides that the single point of contact is to be a market surveillance authority. I will bring an amendment to clarify the office's mandate in order that it can co-ordinate with real authority and our single point of

contact will sit comfortably with Article 72. I would welcome the Minister of State's thoughts on that as well.

The second concerns co-ordination. Co-operation across several authorities and the Central Bank depends, under section 63, on voluntary co-operation agreements, and section 63(8) provides that a failure to comply with such an agreement does not invalidate the exercise of any power. Co-operation is welcome, but co-ordination that rests only on goodwill can become co-ordination on paper. Again, I will bring an amendment to provide a modest backstop so that where authorities overlap or a gap appears between them, there is a clear means to resolve it rather than hoping they agree it between themselves.

The third concern for resourcing is that Article 73 of the AI Act requires our competent authorities to have adequate technical, financial and human resources. The Bill provides for funding of the office but it is quieter on the capacity of the sectoral authorities that will carry out the enforcement on the ground. Again, I will bring an amendment for regular reports to this House on the resourcing of those designated authorities, which goes beyond the Minister of State's remit and, obviously, to the competent authorities.

I will add one further point. Section 9 provides that the office is independent while section 11 allows the Minister to direct it. I simply ask that, as the Bill progresses, we ensure such directions can never reach the operational or investigative judgment of the office.

I offer all of this in genuine partnership. This is a welcome and important Bill and I want to see it enacted and working well for the people we serve. I look forward to working with the Minister and my colleagues across the House and on the AI committee on Committee Stage, and to making the Bill even stronger.

Deputy James Geoghegan: I commend the Minister of State on bringing this Bill to these Houses. I want to make one point about the Oireachtas AI committee. Unfortunately, as the Minister of State knows, this was a Bill that did not go to the Oireachtas AI committee; it went to the Department of enterprise committee. This is not within the Minister of State's gift but I do not believe this is the last time in these Houses that we will be regulating or legislating in the area of artificial intelligence. I think the work we have done on the AI committee demonstrates a level of knowledge and understanding in relation to these issues. In the future, we should look at making it a permanent committee that would have the role and function of scrutinising legislation like this.

Unlike some other speakers, I like the aspect of the Bill whereby the Minister can direct certain aspects of how the AI office would operate outside of the regulatory and enforcement level. I think we should be more specific as to what kinds of directions we are going to give the AI office. Right now, we know what the AI office is going to do. It is going to enforce the EU AI regulation and make sure that enterprises are compliant in relation to it. What we do not know is the role it will have in regard to advocacy. I would like to see the Bill reflecting an AI office that would work on AI literacy, for example, and would have a clear, stated function in the whole area of AI literacy for both enterprises and consumers.

Ultimately, the fears and apprehensions people have about AI are similar in industry and to people just living their daily lives. There is a great fear about what AI is going to bring and yet people, particularly in Ireland, have taken up its usage quite rapidly. In the OECD, we are even

making improvements in respect of our small business adaptation, yet that fear remains and prevails. Quite clearly, this new AI office, perhaps working with Enterprise Ireland, could have a very strong role in delivering a wide literacy programme. However, AI literacy is more than just enterprise. It is in our primary and secondary schools. What role will the AI office have in respect of AI literacy everywhere?

What we are doing at a regulatory level with the AI office makes sense. We are going to have a number of competent authorities that are going to have a regulatory function as it relates to AI within their own specialist domain and yet we are still going to have this single, overarching AI office when it comes to regulation. Surely we should have the exact same thing when it comes to advocacy, understanding and AI literacy that while it might not be the AI office delivering AI literacy schemes in schools, it could be the AI office that advises and directs the Department of education. It could be the AI office - if perhaps not meeting with small business to foster greater understanding of their adaptation of AI - playing a role in working with Enterprise Ireland to ensure that Enterprise Ireland is sufficiently tooled up to provide those necessary levels of adaptation if we are going to remain competitive.

I might conclude with the wider context. It is a good thing that we are introducing laws in the area of AI. It should help grow and foster trust among the public as regards what we are doing but let us be real here. There are massive fears about the impact of AI in regard to unemployment. I know SOLAS is establishing a national skills observatory under the Department of further and higher education but there are even greater global fears. They talk about superintelligent AI being a global systemic risk. Even industry is now kind of saying the same things as people were perhaps previously in industry and are critical at the pace of growth among these frontier AI companies. They are talking about a moment similar to the nuclear arms race, where the world needs to come together and agree certain levels of norms.

Right now, the European Union, with 700 million people, has agreed certain levels of norms but if the United States, China, India and other major global powers are not all in agreement as to how we are going to regulate AI moving forward, if we are at a certain level of superintelligent AI, God knows where we will be in 20 years. If we do not deal with that challenge, everyone will suffer. I hope that in our hosting of the EU Presidency, the AI summit, our enactment of the laws today and the establishment of the AI office, that we can play some role in that major global decision and that we can use the Presidency to do that.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne: I welcome this Bill and I thank the Minister of State and her officials for the work on it. I note that there was a fairly tight timeframe for amendments so I hope, on Committee Stage, there will be consideration of some of the issues here. While I commend the Minister of State on her understanding of the implications of AI right across society, I am concerned that there are certain Departments that have not yet got sufficiently up to speed and are not sufficiently invested in this area.

To speak specifically to the Bill, I welcome the fact that the AI office is, in a sense, positioning itself as a key hub and that it is going to be regarded not as a "thou shalt not" regulator but as an enabling body. I certainly welcome the distributed regulatory model that is proposed within this legislation. There is sector-specific expertise within all of our existing regulators and it needs to be supported to be able to ensure - for instance, if it is the Central Bank and it is dealing with a financial product but in these circumstances it is an AI-designed

financial product - that it can regulate it in the same way as every other financial product. The legislation is quite silent on this and the Minister of State might respond on it, but that requires ensuring that those regulators and those who are identified within this legislation are adequately resourced both in terms of cash and, more importantly, personnel. That needs to be addressed.

In regard to some of the functions, it needs to be seen more as enabling. I welcome the provisions around the regulatory sandboxes but how this will enable businesses to safely use AI, certainly in respect of the educational role and the whole area of what I would call AI fluency, is essential.

There is one thing I would like to see in this. The Minister of State knows that when she worked with me in the context of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Act, we provided, when Coimisiún na Meán was being established, that there would be a children and young people's advisory panel. That was established. The Minister of State knows that it worked very successfully as well with the Ombudsman for Children's Office. I think it is critical within this legislation. It should be put on a statutory basis that we have a children and young people's advisory panel and that they are very specifically identified as a vulnerable group but also people who are going to be very engaged with this technology. I ask that on Committee Stage there would be statutory provision for such a panel in the same way as we have seen with some other bodies.

I welcome the definitions in respect of the chief executive. I understand recruitment for the role is under way at the moment. On the appointment of whomever that individual will be, he or she will, in many ways, set the direction for this body. I appreciate the Minister of State will have certain roles in being able to direct how the office is going. The message that has to go out there is about how Ireland will balance support for innovation on the one hand with safe regulation on the other, and that this office will be an enabling one rather than an office that will seek to shut down the possibilities that AI provides.

Deputy Martin Kenny: The whole world has changed so much in the past decade. Certainly, the advent of AI has been a huge advance, in one sense, in respect of all of that. I recently spoke to somebody who has developed a business in the United States in regard to the whole issue of cybersecurity and AI is central to what they do in respect of all of that. We also, of course, know that it has the ability to do repetitive tasks without ever getting fatigued or tired or lazy. It can do all those things. It can assess vast amounts of data and zone into what is effective. It has huge potential and that has to be acknowledged as well. It is not a force for good only; it can also be a force for great harm. It depends on how it is used and who uses it. That is where human intent comes into play in respect of that.

That is why it is important that we have regulation. We often talk about the enforcement of regulation and enforcement to ensure that the negative is not enabled in respect of this but is disabled. It also has to have an element where the enforcement of that regulation has to be able to ensure that the positive is enabled and that there is a means by which people can easily access and bring forward ideas and prospects and that the means of using artificial intelligence are for the good and advancement of people. We must ensure we have better systems in place that can deliver for populations.

The big issue people often come up against is that it can have a very negative effect in that it will take away jobs and all of those things. That is always, of course, an aspect to it.

However, there are so many of the tasks we cannot find people to do that artificial intelligence will never be able to do. I refer to healthcare and a whole range of areas where we absolutely will never be able to do any of those things without having human beings to do them who can show care and compassion and all those things. Artificial intelligence does not have that. That is what we need to acknowledge and understand.

While the whole issue and one of the big focuses in respect of this is safety and security, it is also about ensuring that the negative aspects of it are not allowed to overtake to become the dominant feature of it. So much of what we see and understand of the world of cyber and the Internet has become so negative. It has become so damaging and so evil, one could say, when we see some of the stuff that is going on there. We want to ensure that artificial intelligence is prevented from - it is already starting to do it - magnifying and exaggerating and pushing of those negative things even further. That is a big aspect of what to put in place here. Of course, there also has to be accountability, fairness and integrity around it. Having an office in place and having laws and regulations in place do not provide any of those things unless we ensure that we have the intent and we are absolutely sure we have the ability. That is about staffing. That is about funding. That is about making sure we can have the regulations but that those regulations are applied rigidly, particularly in situations where we have large groups in different parts of the world that can hide behind each other. We talk about the cloud. Where is the cloud? Where does it exist? How does one get access to it? There are big issues here that need to be dealt with. Artificial intelligence can actually be used to deal with those difficulties and that is where it needs to be done positively. The concept of this is welcome, but we have a distance to go. I am particularly concerned with regard to the funding and staffing of the offices. I am concerned that we may not have enough time to get into this race because we are in a race against very negative actors who are continually trying to undermine the very aspect of civilisation. They are trying to set us back into the past and we need to make sure that does not happen.

Deputy George Lawlor: We in the Labour Party welcome the intent of this Bill. We are far from the first to say it, as the Minister of State knows, but the emergence of artificial intelligence could be the most significant societal and economic change we will see in our lifetimes. AI is already reshaping how decisions are made that affect people's lives - decisions about credit, employment, healthcare and policing. It is reshaping our economy, our jobs market, the way we work and, fundamentally, how we live our lives. The pace of change is only set to pick up. Sadly, we see AI almost on a daily basis attacking jobs, particularly in the tech sector. Governments around the world need to recognise the scale of the change and challenge here and respond. It is not enough to leave this transformative change in the hands of the tech giants whose sole priority will be the power and profits they hope to reap from this transformation. Regulation is essential. Democratic guard rails are essential. Governments are facing a choice, not between AI or no AI but between AI that serves the people or AI that serves the tech billionaires. The false dichotomy that some powerful interests would paint between regulation of AI, on one hand, and innovation on the other needs to be rejected. AI has the potential to deliver so much good in healthcare and how we deliver services and productivity but to unlock any of those benefits requires public trust. Securing that public trust requires effective regulation.

That is why the EU AI Act was such an important world first in beginning to put regulatory guard rails on how we use and develop artificial intelligence. It was pushed for by socialists and democrats in Europe who recognise that in the face of a new industrial revolution, we need to put the safety and well-being of citizens first. We need to keep humanity at the centre of AI policy. The EU AI Act is not perfect. There are issues around companies effectively self-designating as high-risk or otherwise and around how it fails to effectively safeguard copyright protections for creatives, to name but two. There are gaps in its definition of high-risk AI uses, such as chatbots used by children. It was, nonetheless, a hugely important step for Europe to take.

The Bill aims to implement some of the requirements on member states arising from that legislation as they relate to Ireland. That indeed is a welcome aim, and the establishment of Oifig Intleachta Shaorga na hÉireann is to be welcomed. However, we need to make sure this legislation is watertight. The regulation we put in place needs to be effective and workable.

It is in that light that while I support the ambition of the Bill, I want to raise a fundamental concern about one specific part of it. The Bill creates a system of very large financial penalties, fines that in some cases could run to tens of millions of euro or a percentage of a company's global turnover. It provides that these fines are to be determined not by a court, but by a person called an adjudicator who is appointed under the Bill and who operates within the regulatory system. The role of the courts comes late. By the time the courts are involved, the critical decisions have already been made. In Ireland, we have had systems of administrative fines in financial regulation, competition law and data protection for many years. This Bill pushes the model further than it has been pushed before. At some point, the model breaks, not as a matter of legal technicality but as a matter of basic constitutional principle. As the Minister of State knows, our Constitution is built on a separation of powers. The judicial function is reserved to the courts by Article 34 of the Constitution. It cannot be handed over to a civil servant or regulator or an adjudicator, however well-qualified and however independently they act. The reason is that the independence of the courts and the procedural protections of court proceedings are structural guarantees that protect the citizen from the power of the State. They are not formalities.

With that background in mind, let me set out the four concerns we have. The first concerns the nature of the penalties themselves. Our courts recognise that not everything attracting a financial penalty is a criminal matter in the constitutional sense. A fine imposed by Revenue for late filing of a tax return is not a criminal conviction. A penalty imposed by the Central Bank on a financial institution for a regulatory breach is not the same as a criminal prosecution. The courts have drawn a distinction, in broad terms, between penalties that are genuinely regulatory in character, aimed at securing compliance with a scheme that the regulated party has voluntarily entered and penalties that are, in substance, punitive, aimed at identifying, denouncing and punishing wrongdoing. These punishment cases require the full protection of a criminal trial before an independent court.

The difficulty with this Bill is that the fines it contemplates do not sit comfortably in the regulatory category. They can be absolutely enormous. The AI Act provides for fines of up to €35 million, or 7% of a company's total worldwide annual turnover, for the most serious of violations. For a large technology company, 7% of global turnover could be billions of euro. No court in Ireland has ever had to decide whether a penalty of that magnitude can be described

as regulatory rather than punitive. I am advised that when looking at a fine that could put a company out of business entirely, the word regulatory starts to lose its meaning and the constitutional protections that attach to criminal proceedings start to apply.

There is also a difficulty with the consent argument that sometimes justifies administrative penalties in other regulated sectors. For banking and financial services, there is at least an argument that companies entering a licensed sector applied for a licence and knew what they were signing up for. That argument simply does not work here. The AI Act applies to anyone who develops, deploys or uses certain types of AI system. There is no licence to apply for. The consent justification, which has some logic in the banking context, is not available here.

I should also address directly the argument that because this Bill gives domestic effect to an EU regulation, our domestic constitutional concerns do not apply. That argument does not work in this case. The EU AI Act requires Ireland to have a penalty regime, but it does not prescribe how that regime must be structured. The choice to use an adjudicator model with a court confirmation mechanism is an Irish choice, made by the Irish Government, and it falls to be assessed against the Irish Constitution. We cannot borrow the authority of EU law to excuse a domestic structural choice that EU law did not require us to make.

The second concern goes deeper and it does not depend on the penalties being characterised as criminal. Even if one accepted that these are purely administrative rather than criminal penalties, the process of imposing them may still amount to what the Constitution calls an administration of justice, and the Constitution permits only limited functions of a judicial nature to be exercised by non-judicial bodies. Our courts addressed this question directly in a case called *Re Haughey* in 1971. That case arose from proceedings before a Dáil committee. The Supreme Court held that the label attached to a proceeding does not determine its character. What matters is the substance. Is a body making findings of fact about a named individual, with legal consequences adverse to that individual? If so, the proceeding has the character of an administration of justice. Then, the constitutional rules that govern the administration of justice apply regardless of whether the body is called a court, a committee, a tribunal, or, I would add, an adjudicator.

Applied to this Bill, the argument is straightforward. An adjudicator under Part 6 makes findings of fact on whether the company breached the AI Act and, on the basis of those findings, imposes financial consequences of enormous severity on a named legal person. That is, in substance, an administration of justice. The adjudicator is not merely advising, not merely investigating or not merely recommending; the adjudicator is determining. I am advised that a body that determines justiciable controversies with serious consequences for individual rights is administering justice, whatever it is called. Again, by looking to the size of the available penalties, it is very hard to see how this could be classed as a limited exercise of a judicial function.

The third concern arises directly from what the Supreme Court said in *Re Haughey* about the mechanism used in that case to involve the courts. The Dáil committee in that case could certify a person for contempt to the High Court, which then had jurisdiction to punish. The argument was made that this saved the constitutional position. The committee investigated and certified that the court punished, therefore, the judicial function was exercised by the court after all. The Supreme Court rejected that argument, however. It said that what was being sent to the High Court was not a case to be tried. The trial, such as it was, had already taken place.

What was being sent was effectively a person to be sentenced, and a sentencing hearing before a court that has not itself tried the matter is not an administration of justice. The court was being used as a rubber stamp, not as a decision maker.

We can compare that with the confirmation mechanism in this Bill. Under sections 110 to 114, when a fine imposed by an adjudicator is not appealed, the market surveillance authority must apply to the High Court to confirm it. The High Court must confirm unless there is a fundamental and manifest error of law or the fine is clearly excessive or disproportionate. The evidence available to the High Court is limited to what is before the adjudicator and the adjudicator's findings are binding. The High Court does not rehear the case and it does not make its own findings of fact. It reviews, on a deferential standard, a determination already made by someone else. The parallel with *Re Haughey* is exact. The adjudicator tries and the High Court merely confirms. The findings of fact are not revisited. The evidence is not re-examined. That is a sentencing hearing, not a trial. I am also advised that it is open to precisely the same constitutional objection that the Supreme Court upheld in *Re Haughey*, in that the court is being given a jurisdiction to endorse a determination made elsewhere and not a jurisdiction to determine anything itself. If the process before the adjudicator is constitutionally infirm for that reason, nothing the High Court does at the confirmation stage can cure it. A flawed process does not become constitutionally valid because a court subsequently endorses it.

The fourth concern is that constitutionally it is for the court, and the court alone, to make findings of fact in proceedings with serious consequences. A statute that requires a court to accept as established a fact found by someone who is not a judge, in proceedings that were not a trial, is removing the fact-finding function from the court and that, the Supreme Court said, is unconstitutional. I am advised that the confirmation mechanism in this Bill is open to precisely this objection. The High Court at the confirmation stage is bound to accept the adjudicator's findings of fact. It cannot go behind them. It cannot hear fresh evidence that contradicts them. It must treat those findings as established and proceed to confirm the fine on that basis, unless the error is fundamental and manifest. The facts have been found elsewhere by a non-judicial body and the court is required to accept them. The High Court cannot be given a jurisdiction that presupposes the facts have already been found.

Taken together, these four concerns point in the same direction. The confirmation mechanism is not a genuine exercise of the judicial function. It is a review of a determination made elsewhere, on a deferential standard with a closed evidential record, in respect of findings of fact that the court is not permitted to revisit. That is not what the Constitution means by the administration of justice. I am also advised that a court exercising that kind of jurisdiction is not curing whatever constitutional deficiency existed in the adjudication process. It is merely adding a judicial gloss to a process that remains, in substance, non-judicial.

I invite the Minister of State in her response to engage with the constitutional question directly. These are not peripheral concerns. They go to the central mechanism by which this Bill proposes to enforce the AI Act in Ireland. I appreciate the Bill has been carefully prepared, but careful preparation and constitutional validity are not always the same thing, and on this particular point the Bill, as drafted, is on genuinely uncertain ground. We absolutely need to get this right. AI, as we all know, is rapidly changing the world around us. Regulation is vital to ensure that ordinary people are protected and proper guardrails are in place. That idea is not

in conflict with innovation or adoption; it is essential to it. Europe has led the way globally on this. When we are now looking to implement those regulatory guardrails in our own State, we need to be certain that we are on firm ground. It is too important to get wrong. As I said at the outset, we in the Labour Party welcome the intent of the Bill, but we simply need to get it absolutely watertight and right.

7 o'clock

It is far too important not to. I look forward to the Minister of State's response. I commend the principles of the Bill to the House.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: I very much welcome the opportunity to speak on the Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Bill. I commend the Minister of State on bringing forward such important legislation and congratulate her on all the work she does in her brief. I wish her continued success in this area.

As we all know, artificial intelligence is transforming how we live, work, learn and access services. It offers enormous opportunities in healthcare, education, scientific research, agriculture, and business innovation and productivity. However, those opportunities come with significant responsibilities. This Bill provides a necessary framework to implement and enforce the EU Artificial Intelligence Act in Ireland. It establishes the AI office in Ireland as an independent statutory body and ensures that appropriate oversight, accountability and enforcement mechanisms are in place. Importantly, it does not create additional burdens beyond those already provided for under EU law. Rather, it ensures that Ireland can meet its obligations effectively.

As Chair of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, I particularly welcome the establishment of the AI office. I believe its role should be extended beyond regulation alone. The office should become a national co-ordination hub, working closely with organisations like Skillnet Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, our local enterprise offices, higher education institutions, further education and training providers, schools and industry partners to drive AI awareness, adoption and skills development across our entire society.

The reality is that AI is not something for the future; it is already here. Our challenge is to ensure that individuals, businesses, public services and communities are prepared. We need to build AI literacy across the population so that people understand both the opportunities and all the risks. At the same time, we must ensure that workers, students and enterprises have the practical skills needed to harness the benefits of these technologies. If we get this right, AI could help us improve public services, support innovation, increase productivity and deliver breakthroughs in research, healthcare and education. However, those benefits will only be realised if we invest in people and equip them with the confidence and skills to engage with AI effectively.

We must ensure transparency, accountability and inclusion remain at the heart of all of our approaches. New technology must empower people and not exclude them. That means paying particular attention to accessibility, disability inclusion and equal opportunities as AI systems become embedded in everyday life. AI must always serve the public good. Innovation cannot come at the expense of public trust, child safety or the rights of vulnerable people. Technology

companies must be properly regulated and high-risk AI systems carefully monitored. We must also ensure that workers whose jobs may be affected by AI are supported to retrain and adapt, including through greater use of the National Training Fund to provide flexible upskilling and reskilling opportunities.

Ireland has a huge opportunity. I am hugely ambitious about our role in this. We can be a leader not only in AI innovation, but also in AI readiness. This legislation is a really important step in building the foundations for that future. I am very pleased to support it.

Deputy John Clendennen: I welcome this Bill. It underscores Ireland's commitment, under EU direction, to a future where technological advancement will be inextricably linked to ethical governance and societal well-being. The commitment to implementing this through the EU AI Act is about protecting citizens and building trust around AI. More often than not, we hear too much doom, gloom and negativity around AI. We hear about the threats it poses rather than the opportunities it presents. We must focus on ensuring the regulations are robust in that regard. The context makes this Bill not a mere legislative formality, but our collective national response to artificial intelligence as we ensure that we implement the EU AI Act effectively and responsibly. I want to focus particularly on responsibility this evening.

We have discussed SMEs at length in the enterprise committee. Let us look at some statistics. SMEs are the backbone of the Irish economy, yet evidence shows a growing divide in AI adoption between larger companies and smaller firms. Recent data from the CSO shows that while 58% of large enterprises are using AI, only 17% of small enterprises are doing so. Ireland currently ranks only mid-table in Europe for business AI adoption. If we are serious about competitiveness, we must close that gap.

Should the AI office have a stronger statutory mandate than is currently provided for in the Bill? At present, the legislation contains extensive provisions regarding investigations, sanctions and enforcement. By contrast, there is no real focus on supporting businesses to adopt AI responsibly and successfully. The AI office should have a stronger enterprise support mandate. This would include providing practical guidance to businesses on compliance, delivering training and awareness programmes, advising Government and State agencies on measures to increase SME adoption, and promoting innovation, competitiveness and responsible deployment. We must be cognisant of the fact that regulation and innovation are not competing objectives. If implemented appropriately, they complement each other.

The Data Protection Commission could also have a greater role. It has protected citizens and their rights through the enforcement of the GDPR. However, as AI becomes more deeply integrated into business operations, organisations increasingly need practical guidelines and guidance on how to comply with both data protection requirements and emerging AI rules. Strengthening the DPC's mandate to include a clearer business support and guidance function would complement rather than diminish its independence as a regulator. I encourage the Minister of State to look at the amendments to strengthen the enterprise support mandates of the proposed AI office and the DPC.

I acknowledge our position globally. We will ensure that protections in high-risk areas such as biometrics, education and employment are robustly implemented by the December 2027 deadline. Considering our location and that Ireland is home to eight of the leading foundational AI model providers globally, we are uniquely positioned to be a hub for AI innovation.

Implementing a functional, clear and effective regulatory framework will not only meet our EU obligations, but also strengthen our position as a leader in responsible AI development, which will, in turn, attract further investment and foster economic growth.

This Bill demonstrates our commitment to online safety and the promotion of trustworthy AI innovation. I commend the Minister of State on bringing it to the House. I very much welcome it.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Before I call on our next speaker, I welcome all of those in the Public Gallery. I hope they are enjoying the debate and finding it informative. They are very welcome to Leinster House. I particularly welcome Peter and Briege Rust from Dundalk, who are here with Deputy McGreehan, and Deputy Cormac Devlin's friends and neighbours.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the Leas-Cheann Comhairle for that. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Bill 2026. As the Taoiseach noted, the accelerating growth of AI is both a challenge and an opportunity. AI is here, being used daily by businesses and individuals, and it will continue to develop. It is not something we can ignore. AI-related economic activity is already beginning to materially influence the Irish economy.

I support the Government's ambition to make Ireland a global hub for applied AI innovation. The Bill implements European legislation in this area, establishing the AI office of Ireland, which will co-ordinate efforts to supervise the sector. In itself, legislation is insufficient. We learned that from the failures relating to the banking sector and social media policy. Given Ireland's position as a base for many companies, it is important that we support the sector, but it is also critical that regulators take an active role, proactively working alongside major providers to ensure algorithms and products benefit the public good and do not create undue risk.

More broadly, I will raise the issue of access. Together, the EU and UK comprise a market of almost 520 million people with a combined GDP of almost €24 trillion. We need to see a far more robust response from the European Commission to ensure businesses and individuals have access to the latest software to remain competitive. I hope Ireland will take this up as a priority for the upcoming Presidency. Europe cannot be allowed to fall behind or be locked out of essential advanced products and services. Together, the US, EU and UK comprise the largest global market by far. It is in everyone's interest that we work together, remain competitive and deal with the challenges and opportunities presented by the growth of AI.

Deputy Paul Donnelly: I welcome the Bill and the opportunity to speak on it. It is critically important. AI is something we use every single day, whether we know it or not. Many of the applications we use have a major component of AI. In many areas it has a really useful purpose. Students and workers use it, and people in here use it on a daily basis. As I said, AI has a really useful purpose. I have watched a number of programmes on the use of AI in medical and pharmaceutical applications. This technology is driving real innovation and speeding up the time it takes to complete trials looking at different ways pharmaceuticals and medicine can help people. In that regard, it is really important and useful.

The genie is out of the bottle. AI is with us and it is not going anywhere. What we do with it is the most important issue. What this House does in terms of regulation and ensuring the companies driving all of this do so in the proper way and are monitored, with proper due diligence done on how AI impacts society, is very important. We know AI has positive impacts but it also has extremely negative impacts. We are talking about social media and how it impacts on young people, with different countries moving towards banning social media for young people. Sometimes we look at all of this in very simplistic ways. AI is deeply complex and something we are going to be learning about as it changes exponentially. It is moving at such a fast pace that what we talk about and think about today in relation to AI could be obsolete in a couple of months' time. That is how fast this is moving.

We need to make sure we have properly resourced structures in place. We are dealing with multibillion dollar companies which have vast resources and profits on a scale we have never seen. They have the capacity to tie up organisations such as the one we are discussing in legal issues. If we do not have the structures we are talking about in place and properly resourced and supported, our approach will not be effective. We will then be relying on the companies themselves to police themselves. That is the one thing we cannot do because we know they are driven exclusively by profit.

In relation to workers' rights, we are already seeing workers directly affected by AI. We need to make sure workers and young people are protected. We have talked about AI and social media use and the damage caused by algorithms and the lack of attention social media companies are giving to dealing with the harmful issues in relation to them. We need to make sure this body is regulated, well resourced and capable of taking on the big companies because we cannot trust them. That is the most important thing. We cannot trust these companies. They are driven by profit only.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy John McGuinness): I extend a welcome to Deputy Heneghan's former teachers and class who are in the public Gallery. They have a lot to answer for. They are very welcome and I hope they enjoy the debate.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: This legislation seeks to ensure that AI transformation is guided by key principles, namely, safety, accountability and trust. We must also ensure that we extend those principles to the transformation AI is having on higher education. AI can, of course, supporting learning but it can also produce essays and other assessments. Now we have AI tools to help us detect AI-generated assessments. This has resulted in a weird arms race, with increasingly sophisticated AI tools to generate assignments and increasingly sophisticated AI tools to try to detect its use. Meanwhile, the impact of AI is threatening the success in widening access to higher education because in many cases, information technology is now being removed from assessments entirely.

The only comparator I have to the impact AI is having on higher education is Covid, which resulted in everybody having to work from home and teaching going online. However, there is one key difference. With Covid, there was always the expectation that eventually we would return to campuses and more familiar operations. It is not the same with AI. There is no return to the *status quo* there. This transformation is permanent.

The higher education system is not designed to withstand this level of a systematic shock. It is designed for gradual change and structured review. Assessment methods are regularly evaluated but these are informed by industry, research and engagement with stakeholders before any changes are implemented. This protects academic integrity and ensures students are taught what they need to prepare them for their futures. It is a core element of the design of system. This is not a system designed for overnight transformation.

Covid prompted a rapid shift to promote teaching and assessment and staff very much rose to the challenge. They transformed how they worked to support the students they had. However, it required an enormous amount of staff effort and commitment, which were never really fully recognised. It was the same for many other people who had to change how they did things during that time. After only a few years, we are asking those exact same staff to once again transform how they work.

Another key difference is that this time we have no established play book. We have no experts out there who have already solved all of these problems. Research is still emerging and best practice is still evolving. Meanwhile, our lecturers and researchers are on the front lines, addressing these challenges in real time on a daily basis. They are redesigning curriculum, rethinking assessment methods, responding to the misuse of AI tools and helping their students navigate AI ethically, all the while maintaining high standards of teaching and research. They are expected to do this in a system that was never designed to be this agile. This is an unrecognised and unacknowledged extra workload and responsibility on our academic staff. This adds to the existing workforce issues, where we have one in five academic staff employed in temporary or short-term contracts. We are now expecting those staff to navigate this changing world of AI and engage in all that adaptation, not knowing if they will have a job next semester or year.

If we are serious about ensuring AI is well governed, we need to invest in a national approach to AI in education because there are no ivory towers in a post-AI higher education world. We owe that to our third level staff and students and to the future of our higher education system.

Deputy Shane Moynihan: Tá áthas orm bheith in ann labhairt ar an mBille seo trathnóna. Ba mhaith liom moladh a thabhairt don Aire Stáit, an Teachta Smyth, agus an Teachta Ó Cearúil as ucht a gcuid oibre leis an mBille seo a chur le chéile.

I welcome the establishment of oifig intleachta shaorga na hÉireann, which will be a very important piece of the architecture to ensure the overall enforcement and monitoring of this legislation. My plea at this stage, as we establish that office, is that we staff it appropriately, get the appropriate talent and hire the appropriate professionals with the skills necessary to ensure we have strong and competent regulation in terms of how we engage with AI in Ireland. I emphasise that is not necessarily just saying we need to regulate. It positions Ireland as a very strong centre for companies and research centres that want to learn more about how to use AI. If we have the people and professionals in our regulatory and monitoring authorities who are able to watch, monitor and collaborate with that innovation, it will set us up to be a better centre for regulation, both in Ireland and across the European Union. Alignment with the European Union is extremely important in this instance.

The second point I make is with regard to the need to encourage innovation. LinkedIn data shows that Ireland is exceptionally attractive to AI engineers from all over the world. We have seen net positive migration of those individuals to this country over the past year.

That shows we have the skill sets and competence in this country and in that sense the oifig should be thinking about innovation. I encourage the Minister to consider whether there is scope to include in the Bill provisions to make oifig intleachta shaorga na hÉireann take the mandating and encouraging of innovation very seriously, not only in encouraging innovation around AI but also ensuring the regulation is fit for purpose. Often the criticism is made in this House and other places that regulation does not catch up with technology as it is developed. One solution would be to have the regulator sitting beside centres of innovation so it understands how that innovation takes place and how the resulting regulation can take account of that.

My third point relates to the need to ensure the oifig takes training and proficiency in AI skills as a core part of its mandate and in the roll-out of its work. All of the research on AI points to the fact that while AI technical skills are extremely important, human-centric skills, such as problem solving, team building and critical thinking, are also important. They are what makes AI such a powerful tool and it is important the oifig does not lose sight of that. I encourage those three points to be taken into account as the Bill proceeds to Committee Stage.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am delighted to have this opportunity to speak on the Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Bill 2026. It has been said by many previous speakers that AI is just a reality we are dealing with. Even though some people worry about it, we are a long way removed from Skynet coming live, if anyone remembers the glorious days of "Terminator".

We all know the issues with the tech sector. When we talk about AI, we know about the part that crosses over into the issues we are having with social media. We know there is a requirement for regulation. It is obviously vital we have oifig intleachta shaorga na hÉireann, the AI office of Ireland. We need a body to co-ordinate this. I get that in some level it will almost work against itself, in the sense that the first part of its work will be regulation, which will be required given all the issues we have seen with the tech sector lately and the fact we are not even entirely sure where AI is at now, never mind where it will be in two weeks' or two years' time.

It is very easy to talk about ensuring we promote AI literacy and have the proper regulatory sandboxes - controlled and contained situations where we can actually try to test AI. Obviously there will be a huge amount of international co-operation. We know who the big players are, namely, America and China. We know there is a certain element of open source and we are not entirely sure who wins out here. We know the huge dangers there are. The very simplistic dangers are the ones we know only too well. People will talk about Covalen and the loss of upwards of 720 jobs there. I have said it for a long time in relation to some of the jobs I have seen being lost in the likes of PayPal. I get the point that can be an issue of machine learning meeting AI. We have to have a strategy to ensure we do not miss out on the benefits of AI but we also have to deal with the displacement of jobs and other risks.

I attended a Children's Rights Alliance event earlier. A major part of the discussion related to where AI meets recommender algorithms in social media. We can all work on the basis that

social media and big tech companies are about keeping you online. They will show you whatever they need to show you to keep you online. It is about you staying online and them making money. It is as simple as that. We know we will have to see a hell of a lot more from the Government, but also from Coimisiún na Meán, the European Commission and the Data Protection Commissioner, if we are going to see those companies brought to book properly. That needs to happen because we know of the huge dangers there are for children.

It was pointed out to me that, in dealing with this legislation, we have to make sure there is regulation of AI and protection and that we put in specific protections for children. The social media issue is about regulation. As others have said, as much as we want to see AI literacy, we also need to see digital literacy. We also need to see that people show a capacity and ability to critically analyse circumstances and situations. We need to ensure we teach-----

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The time is up, Deputy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I could go on for a lot longer but I will not.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I understand Deputies Michael Collins, O'Flynn and O'Donoghue are sharing time equally.

Deputy Michael Collins: I do not think I will take the full amount of time I have. As a young fella growing up, AI had a totally different meaning in west Cork from what it means today. When we talked about AI, we were looking after animals and trying to bring a new type of animal into the world, but now AI refers to artificial intelligence. I do not know what they are going to call the artificial insemination man now. He was called the bull man down my way but they will have to call it some other kind of intelligence.

There is another aspect of artificial intelligence that we need to speak about plainly, that is, its misuse in everyday life. AI is a powerful tool when it is used correctly, or so I am told because I do not use it at all myself. It can help businesses to grow, improve services and make life easier for people. No one in this House disputes that. However, when it is misused we start to see real problems and ordinary people are the ones who pay the price. I am increasingly hearing from people who are on the receiving end of AI-generated communications, messages and letters that look like they have come from solicitors, are dressed up in legal language and are designed to put the fear of God into them. These are automated, often aggressive in tone and sent out in bulk. That is not professionalism; it is intimation by automation, and I have no time for it.

We are also seeing AI being used to waste people's time with endless, low-quality content, spam-type material and automated responses that add nothing valuable but create confusion and frustration. People are busy enough without having to deal with that kind of nonsense.

Then there is this issue of fake images and misleading content. AI can now generate highly convincing pictures that are simply not real. These are being used alongside exaggerated or completely false headlines. This is clickbait designed to grab attention rather than tell the truth. It undermines public trust, not just in technology but in information itself. Again, let me be very clear that I have no time for that either.

If we are serious about regulating AI, we cannot just focus on high level systems or large corporations. We must also recognise the everyday misuse that affects ordinary people, including the farmer, the small business owner and the pensioner who receives a threatening letter or sees a misleading image online. Regulation must send a clear message that AI is not a free licence to mislead, intimidate or waste people's time. There must be accountability when AI is abused. While we support innovation, we must also draw firm lines. AI should serve people, not frustrate, frighten or deceive them. That balance is what we need to get right. It is right, therefore, that we regulate AI. Independent Ireland accepts the need for clear rules, strong consumer protections and accountability.

However, supporting regulation does not mean giving the Government a blank cheque. The Bill creates a new State body with significant structures. The public deserves clarity on the cost and on whether we are duplicating existing regulators. We must also be honest about the burden on small Irish businesses. Large multinationals can absorb complex compliance rules. Local businesses in Cork and elsewhere cannot. We cannot create a system that suits big corporations while leaving Irish enterprises behind. The enforcement powers in this Bill are substantial, including access to data and even source code. These must be exercised in a balanced and proportionate way to maintain industry confidence.

There are positives. The regulatory sandbox, AI literacy and the complaints system are all welcome but the key is balance. Ireland should be the best place in Europe for responsible AI innovation, protecting people while supporting enterprise. We support the objective of the Bill but we will press the Government on cost, proportionality and fairness for small businesses.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: My colleague has spoken about the positives and negatives of AI. I want to concentrate more on the technicalities of the Bill.

I want to be clear from the outset what this Bill is and what it is not. Whatever we are being told it is certainly not a modest piece of housekeeping. Indeed, it is a scaffolding for an entire, new, State-run, artificial intelligence regulator, a Bill which now has 139 sections and four schedules, a statutory body and a sanctions regime reaching €35 million, or up to 7% of a company's global turnover. That is what we are discussing here. Yet, this House is being invited to waive through this legislation on the understanding that it is just a little bit of housekeeping. That is the Government's own framing of this. We are told that these are technically implementable measures. We are told that the real law is going to be written in Brussels, and that we are just there simply to be the building mechanism and the machinery behind that, to enforce something that will be taken from Brussels legislation and which has not yet been fully written. For that reason, and for that reason alone, to rush this Bill through should tell this House that for the reasons I have outlined we need to scrutinise this legislation far more closely, have far more time on this debate, and look at the legislation and the Bill far more than we are.

When a Parliament is reduced to installing the plumbing for a law that it cannot amend, the least we can do in this House is make sense of that plumbing work. Here in this Bill it does not. The Bill requires a new AI office of Ireland to be operational by August of this year. The State has set up an entire institution, it has to staff it, it has to fund it, and it has to switch the lights on within weeks. Yet, at a European Union level, the very obligations this office are meant to enforce are being pushed back under the digital ombudsman agreement, which I do

not believe has been mentioned in this House, reached in May and not yet formally adopted, but already agreed between the institutions. The high-risk rules at the heart of this regime to be set up and applied will not be this August but in December 2027. We are here in this House and we are actually building a referee, at speed and with cost, 16 months before the match even begins. I put it to the Minister of State, Deputy Smyth, that we are legislating in the fog. That is what we are doing in this House at the moment with this information and this Bill. We cannot be told in this House the certainties and rules by which this office will finally have something to enforce. It is not coming in from Europe yet. We have not yet received that information.

Let us turn now to what is at stake for this country. I do not think we have played this out enough or thought enough about it. Ireland is not a bystander when it comes to artificial intelligence. We host it in American technology companies that lead the field and run their European Union operations from all across this country. They did not do this accidentally. The point, which the Government will not say out loud, is that last year corporation tax brought in the sum of €33 billion, which is a record amount. The top ten companies, overwhelmingly American multinationals, paid well over 50% of it. Around 75% of all corporation tax comes through United States firms. Those companies employ directly almost 200,000 people in the State, and another 160,000 indirectly in this State. That is not competitive advantage, or should be taken as casual trade. That is the single most concentrated precarious revenue stream in this State, and it must be protected and minded. With that in mind, what are we doing with it? We are volunteering to be the most diligent enforcer of a framework from the European Union that is imposed on an industry that it has failed to build itself. Europe has not built AI: America and China have. Europe is way behind when it comes to AI and AI firms. What are we doing here with the very firms we depend on for finance? Is the Minister of State aware that the independent Irish Fiscal Advisory Council has already said that tighter regulation in the sector will be a risk to the revenue receipts of the State? That is a very important statement and something we all need to reflect on in this Chamber. The Minister of State has met with these companies. They are mobile companies. They make location decisions every day. We should be giving them every reason to stay in this country rather than giving them reasons to exit this country. Instead, what we have decided to do through this Bill is implement and hand them a €35 million fine regime and 15 separate regulators to answer to. It seems bizarre to me to have 15 separate regulators to answer to.

Let me be straight with this House. I am not against oversight of technology in any way. No serious person in this House should be against oversight of technology, but artificial intelligence raises real questions and the public are entitled to real answers. A Parliament that truly cares about its citizens does not switch on an enforcement mechanism or an enforcement machine without knowing the rules around it first. It does not impose a cost on its taxpayers by putting at risk the very receipts that fund the Exchequer, that fund our social welfare, that fund our schools, that fund our third level colleges, that fund our hospitals and that fund our senior citizen homes.

To my mind, good governance has always been about sequencing. It means waiting until the European Union rules are there and settled upon before we build Irish machinery to enforce them. It means protecting the jobs of the State and the revenue that the State actually depends upon, and not gambling them to look busy in front of our lords and masters in Brussels in their shadow. For this reason, this Bill in its current form and in this timeline is an entire mistake. The Bill asks this House to legislate before Europe has done so. It asks us to put taxpayers'

funds at risk 16 institutional months ahead of its own purpose. It firmly asks this economy to carry and absorb the cost at haste, and the firms that deliver so much of that tax revenue to us. Currently I cannot support the Bill. I ask the Minister of State to rethink it before she brings it to the House.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: AI in some instances scares me and in some instances it is good for different parts if it is used correctly. How many people go on their phone and then no longer know what is actually factual or not? My concern about AI is that we need to get on top of it fairly quickly. I was in the Central Bank on Tuesday for a visit with the budgetary oversight committee. There are concerns about AI in this country. Now we do not know if the Strait of Hormuz is open or not because we do not know what to believe on this or not. What kinds of decisions are being made when things are happening around this world and people have a knee-jerk reaction to something they think is happening but it is not? From that point of view, we need to do something with AI.

Children today actually look at their phones and everything they look at on their phone actually works on them whereby anything they click on is put in front of them every time they turn on their phone. Every time they flick up on something or look at something, regardless of what it is, it keeps a rota going on with that system because the algorithm knows this is what the child is interested in. So, what does it do? It brainwashes them. If you keep seeing the same thing over and over again, then you start following different paths.

When it comes to our children and our students, they go to school to learn but they now have systems put in place to see if they are using it for their homework. Now we have to put a system in place to see if somebody is doing their homework or not, and that is based over the four or five years that they are in school. They are actually using the system now to see if they are actually using AI as part of their homework system. Again, technology is good and it can help with research and so on, but now we have to put things in place to make sure it is actually the person who is doing the work. This does not just apply to children and students. A lot of people use it in their jobs at the moment and also the people in this House. How many of us are using AI? How many used AI to do their speeches today? I did not.

Deputy Joe Neville: A pen and paper.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Good man, but paper does not mean that you have got it in front of you. If you have the pen in front of you, that is what makes the difference.

A lot of the time I do not come into this House with paperwork because I do not want it to be shown that it was AI-generated. What you are looking at when you look at me is me. What comes out of my mouth is what I researched myself. I have never used AI.

Something was sent to me during the week and the person who sent it said, "Richard, you looked great at a function". I was not even there. It was another me. This is the part that scares me. In a situation where we might have a terrorist issue or a financial issue, my concern is that we will have a knee-jerk reactions to something that is not actually there. How safe is our banking network? How safe are our identities when they can be used? With the stuff that is being put out at the moment, we cannot differentiate between what is real and what is not unless it is on mainstream media. That is a concern that I have with AI. We need to put whatever

procedures in place to protect us, livelihoods, businesses and to stop people misusing AI for the wrong reasons.

There is no doubt that it will replace jobs. People read comments on social media. Most of the comments that are posted, if person looks at them and segregates them, are coming from bots. They are not coming from people; they are coming from bots. How many people were caught out by something that was AI-generated and put online? They then apologise and say that it was not them and was generated through AI.

When people look in at this House, they want to see real people delivering real results that they have researched themselves and that it are not AI-generated. That is my concern for the future and the here and now.

We are putting measures in place to try to counteract this, but we are also last on the field. The United States and China are on the field a long time. We are only playing catch-up. We are so far behind in stopping this from becoming destructive instead of something that can help. We are so far behind on that. We need to get on top of that for the protection and the governance of this country and all walks of life. If we are not careful, AI will take over and the simple part of our existence will be mirrored everywhere we go. I would like to see how AI will get on with me because sometimes I do not know what I am going to do myself when I walk out the door, so it will have a hard job with me. There are, however, a lot of people who are repetitive and it will screen them and know their next move all the time.

We need to put measures in place for the protection of everyone and the protection their finances from criminality so the sooner we get something put together the better. We also need to get it right. It needs to be researched correctly - not AI research. It needs to be researched properly for the protection of this country.

Deputy Joe Neville: Deputy O'Donoghue just spoke, and I have a west Limerick background. When I heard about AI when I younger, it was on the farm, and it was not artificial intelligence. It was artificial insemination, but things have changed over many years. That joke has been made many times but it always speaks to me about how we have to keep in touch.

Deputy O'Flynn spoke earlier, and I have a lot of the same concerns he has. He spoke clearly about them, and many people have the same concerns. We need regulation but we have to be careful. We do not want to over-regulate or over-instruct, but AI is an evolutionary change. We cannot have it becoming like the Wild West, so we need strong rules and regulations in place, and we need to harmonise them and make sure they are there because they have to be. That is why this is such a balancing act and why it is something that is brand new.

We all know that artificial intelligence is having an effect on all our daily lives in many different ways. Some people use it all the time. Some people use it for work. It is changing small companies, and it is really having an impact on large companies. Employee numbers are probably smaller. I started in PriceWaterhouseCoopers as a young auditor. I am sure that within the next couple of years, those numbers will be reduced over time, especially in the US. It will be first to embrace this and after that Ireland will, no doubt, follow the same path. Companies will no longer need people to go in and assess the basics. They will go in at a higher level.

Regarding the impact that AI will have, we do not know where it is going to end up. Those large companies that are in charge of it are working with other companies and getting in deeper. Ultimately, the risk is that people will be excluded and that is the larger existential AI risk in the workplace.

Previous speakers mentioned about a potential AI tax, a term I hate, on users and corporates, which is something I referenced before, because no one knows where it will end up. If workers, companies and smaller SMEs are going to be displaced then we have to have some way to monitor this. That is further down the field, but these conversations need to be had at the outset because we do not know the impact that AI will have. That is why I welcome the Bill in place and the office being established. We need someone to spot the gaps, differences and potential impacts because this needs to be monitored.

As was referenced earlier, Ireland is currently benefiting from AI through corporation taxes and even business. I was in with the Central Bank yesterday. Its officials spoke about how a vast element of the growth in the economy is related to AI and data centres. That is where we are seeing the benefits in many ways that other countries are not. I am not going to speak out of two sides of my mouth and complain and worry because we are seeing a real benefit from it. At the same time, it does not mean that we cannot look towards the future.

I welcome the Bill, and it is really important that we do this. We also need to ensure that we do not over-regulate and go too far. At the same time, we have to monitor it and that is the balance that we will have to get right out of this.

Deputy Keira Keogh: If Deputy O'Donoghue thinks that he has not used AI before, he definitely has. Even if he has not used a particular AI app, if he put a search into Google this evening, he would have got an AI summary whether he wanted it or not.

As a member of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Artificial Intelligence, I welcome this Bill and the work of the Department officials and the Minister of State. It is legislation that is hugely important and necessary to ensure that Ireland meets its obligations in overseeing the development and deployment of artificial intelligence systems. More importantly, this legislation aims to protect our citizens and uphold their fundamental rights. I welcome the establishment of the AI office, but I would like it to have more of a role in advocacy and literacy. It has the opportunity to be a one-stop shop with a cross-sectoral approach that will look at health. We know that people are turning to AI at the moment to get advice on health. Children in our education settings are using AI and they may not be aware of the hallucinations and the misinformation that it can produce. We have the risk to our SMEs and other jobs in business and enterprise. The disability space has a real concern that the bias that is already in place will unintentionally be reinforced by AI. The AI office could be a trusted one-stop shop to also engage in advocacy and literacy. I welcome the enforcement mechanisms and sanctions. It seems the Bill will give us robust oversight and significant penalties.

As the chair of the children and equality committee, I must examine this through the lens of children's rights, and I see where there might be gaps. Under the heading "fundamental rights", children will be protected but the issues relating to technology and social media have more consequences for our young people growing up in this new reality.

I have serious concerns about harmful chatbots. We know there have been times when people have been coached into suicide. I often talk about the fact that there was no Tinder when I was in secondary school and now there are Tinder babies and marriages. I am worried about the next generation. It might not even be Tinder. They might have their first relationship with a chatbot. What happens then when the company introduces a significant subscription fee for that chatbot?

Do they then lose access to their boyfriend or girlfriend, and where does that leave their mental health? I think children will face this concern more than others. We know they are facing deepfakes and having their videos manipulated for potential bullying. I ask that provision be made for the expertise of children and young people, perhaps through an advisory panel, which we have seen work so well in other areas, and to support the rights groups that are watch-guards in this space. This afternoon I was on a panel discussion with the Children's Rights Alliance, and this is something it and its members are passionate about. I believe there will be scope to address those concerns on Committee Stage or at phase 2 in the autumn. Children need named protection in this Bill. As I said, AI features are now embedded into almost everything they do, from daily Internet searches and their gaming to the educational tools within their classrooms. On every single screen a child touches, AI is now a feature.

The fundamental rights agencies will, of course, still play a role. They can make complaints, they will co-operate with regulators and they may channel decisions through legal mechanisms. We must continue our work towards a system that genuinely protects the rights of all those who might be most at risk. I have mentioned children in my role, but the disability community and our older people are also very much at risk of AI, aside from the jobs that could be lost in the enterprise sectors, an issue which has been very much covered.

As we approach the beginning of Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the EU, I really welcome this Bill and our obligations under the AI Act. I hope we remain steadfast as we continue to demonstrate our commitment to online safety in promoting responsible AI innovation.

Deputy Barry Ward: I welcome the Bill. Regulation in this space is perhaps more important than any other regulatory Bill we will pass in this House this year. Any new technology poses problems, difficulties, challenges and threats and, undoubtedly, that is true of artificial intelligence. It does not mean we cannot regulate to protect ourselves and it does not mean we cannot put measures in place to protect ourselves and our children. There is a concern about the notion of over-regulation, that we will therefore stifle innovation or prevent people from coming up with new ideas or new technologies. In fairness, artificial intelligence represents one of the greatest achievements of mankind from the point of view of creating something that can grow itself, feed itself and inform itself. That in and of itself should not be overlooked. The danger that comes with that is that we do not control how it feeds itself or how it informs itself. We have already seen the many pitfalls where artificial intelligence will throw up results in a search online or through an artificial intelligence app that are patently false. As a lawyer, I can tell the House that I have seen many instances of that happen in the legal world, thankfully not in this jurisdiction but certainly, if the Internet is to be believed, and frequently it is not, quite a lot in America. You see lawyers in legal cases submit legal submissions which cite cases that never actually occurred. The danger is that artificial intelligence does not have the

ethical framework that humans have. It does not have the understanding. It certainly does not have emotional intelligence or any of those things that we factor into human decision-making.

We therefore need to put in place regulation to ensure we do not have a raft of falsehoods being propagated by artificial intelligence. Now, that already happens. It happened with the Internet before artificial intelligence. It happens very often at the nefarious hand of humans with normal intelligence, but artificial intelligence can do it on a scale and at a pace we cannot match, so regulation is hugely important there.

I do not believe that regulation stifles innovation necessarily. It can, of course, and over-regulation can hold things back. However, one of the things we can say very proudly in Europe is that innovation and regulation are not mutually exclusive; we can have both. We can have regulations that protect us, protect our information systems and protect our children from exposure to these things online, but we can also have an environment that allows entrepreneurs, developers and the creators and the creative people in this world to constantly build new technologies. That is a good thing. Many of the criticisms that are made against artificial intelligence were made against the Internet and the computer and, before that, the machine that sliced bread, if proverbs are to be believed. I am not a Luddite. I do not believe we should not be progressing - of course we should - but we need to progress in a way that can ensure the protection of the citizenry's rights and the integrity of what they view, for example, on the Internet. Reference was made earlier to the fact that anybody who has done a Google search in recent times has used AI, whether they actively consented to it or not. I have an issue with that because nobody asked my consent to enter my search criteria into an AI bot or an AI application. This is the kind of thing for which regulation is needed. If people are to engage with artificial intelligence, they should do so in an informed way and actively consent to doing that. Otherwise they do not really know what is coming back or whether they can rely on the search results that come back. Perhaps what is most important is that, irrespective of what regulations arise from this legislation, people still have to check things themselves.

May I make just one point about the drafting? The Bill does not actually define what artificial intelligence is. In section 2, the interpretation section, it does make reference to the European legislative instruments, but it does not actually say what they say. That is a drafting difficulty that means people will have to look up that stuff elsewhere, which can be quite difficult for them.

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment (Deputy Niamh Smyth): I thank everybody for their contributions, their helpfulness and their thoughtfulness in their statements, comments and observations. It has been a very wide and varied discussion. AI inevitably touches almost every aspect of society, from innovation and economic growth to public services and jobs. While these are important and wide-ranging issues, today we are here to introduce this legislation, which is focused on implementing the EU AI Act in Ireland and establishing the framework necessary for its effective supervision and enforcement. I have no doubt this House will continue to discuss and to debate the broader implications of AI in the months and years ahead. That is both necessary and welcome.

There were some comments that this is very rushed. Since I have come into the Department 16 months ago, these very smart and bright people to my right, the officials in my Department, have been working night and day on this legislation. They could in no way be accused of

having rushed this without real and proper consideration and thought. While I do appreciate we are bringing it through the Houses quite quickly, I am certainly open to working with the Opposition on any aspect of this in the weeks ahead.

On the protection of fundamental rights, which came up quite a bit across the House, and the enforcement regime in the Bill, I point to the fact again that the EU AI Act has direct effect in Irish law and it sets out very clear obligations on providers of AI systems, deployers, importers, etc., that the Bill must be read alongside the EU AI Act. You cannot read or consider one without the other. Safety, ethics and fundamental rights are the key focus of the AI Act. The enforcement regime in the Bill is robust and builds on the strong market surveillance frameworks already in place. It enables the ramping up of enforcement, from contravention notices to encouragement of compliance to the larger fines. That is incredibly important to say about safety, ethics and fundamental rights.

There was some discussion about the labour market. I would be the first, and I think I always have been since I have come into this Chamber to discuss artificial intelligence, to put my hand up and say there will be labour disruption and displacement. There is certainly no putting our heads in the sand over that matter. The establishment of the AI office seeks to address that. The Government is committed to preparing Ireland for the inevitable transition that is happening within the workplace. Ireland has had its third highest level of STEM graduates. One of the biggest demands of qualified students coming here to Ireland is for AI-related jobs, even though I acknowledge there have been job lay-offs in certain companies. However, it is important to note that there is still huge and driving demand for those skilled in AI. The leading providers have established in this country, along with our strong education system, and we continue to attract that talent and investment. It was noted that we have some of the biggest AI companies here in Ireland. That is because we create the environment for that. We are in no way attempting to compromise that or compromise any of the jobs that are directly affected by that. The national AI and digital strategy provides establishment of OBAIR to monitor and provide insight into the evolving impact of AI on skills and the labour force. That is all done under the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Within our own Department, we are also setting about to establish an observatory that looks at exactly that - the implication for jobs - and trying to mitigate that as much as possible.

8 o'clock

The national AI digital strategy has been refreshed on a number of occasions to try to really be that agile blueprint that we can refer to and work with all the time. It is certainly not going to be stiff or stale, or sitting on a shelf. Again the officials are to be applauded for the incredible work on that.

Deputy Lawlor went into great detail on constitutional matters. I know he may not have been here for my introduction to this but all the provisions of the Bill have been drafted with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel, with constant engagement and consultation with the Office of the Attorney General on the legal and constitutional matters. However, I have taken copious notes, and I am sure my officials have too, on the matters he raised tonight. We will certainly do our best to bring peace of mind to that.

Another matter that was raised on a number of occasions was AI literacy. The role of the AI office is not just oversight of the regulatory market surveillance and regulatory bodies that already exist. As the general scheme recognises, effective AI regulation depends not only on enforcement but also on the appropriate level of AI literacy of those who develop, deploy, use or are impacted by AI systems. To support the development of AI literacy, the AI office has been given a very specific role around AI literacy, supporting awareness of AI-related risks and obligations; providing guidance and information to organisations and to public bodies; facilitating informed engagement with AI technologies and contributing to public trust in terms of the AI systems. It is not going to be a one-trick pony. It is a very broad, all-encompassing, across-the-board piece of legislation, which has been described to me as horizontal, that the AI office will bring to the fore.

I thank Deputy Conway-Walsh for being here until the conclusion of the Bill. She raised certain things and I assure her they are being addressed. I can provide her with further reassurance and notes. She raised independence and resourcing. I am certainly going to address that. I think I have addressed displacement already in my closing comments.

On regional developments, the Deputy is absolutely right that there is huge potential. She and I both come from very rural parts of this island, and I think that is one of the absolute benefits to AI deployment.

Simplification has come up quite a lot, with negativity about having another regulatory body. The Department and officials have been so cognisant of not bringing in more red tape or burying business and SMEs in more bureaucracy, to actually make things simple and not add another layer of time-consuming cost burden to business. I want to acknowledge that and state it on the record.

Deputy Conway-Walsh also raised transparency and the creative industries. As somebody who has come from the creative industries, I am very mindful around copyright and artists' work being mimicked or copied without their approval, their say or any remuneration. All of that is being taken into consideration and I can supply the Deputy with further information on all the matters she raised here tonight.

I hope I have addressed Deputy Keogh's piece on AI literacy in some way tonight, too.

I thank all the Deputies for their contributions to the debate and look forward to their support in this Bill and its further consideration on Committee Stage. I re-emphasise that the purpose of the Regulation of Artificial Intelligence Bill 2026 is to provide for the implementation in Ireland of the AI Act and EU regulation. This Bill is a landmark for Ireland's digital regulatory framework. AI is a transformative technology which offers extraordinary potential for our economy and our citizens, but realising that potential requires appropriate oversight and accountability. This Bill delivers exactly that. It fulfils Ireland's EU obligations, giving effect to Ireland's pioneering AI Act in domestic law by ensuring we have the national infrastructure in place to supervise and enforce it effectively.

The Bill establishes Oifig IS na hÉireann, the new AI office in Ireland, as an independent institution at the centre of our AI regulatory system, and empowers our competent authorities with the investigative and enforcement tools they need and, most importantly, the skill base that everybody has referred to, the skills that are needed in terms of scrutinising AI that will be available to the competent authorities.

Ireland has adopted a distributive model for the regulation of AI, leveraging the expertise and capability of the State's existing regulators and providing that expertise to them. This is speaking to the fact that we do not want to bring any extra regulatory burden. We must remember that regulation is the gold stamp of approval. The businesses I have talked to want that approval. They want to know what the safeguards and rules of engagement are around AI. That is going to bring confidence to this country, particularly to those in business and enterprise. It is not mitigation or putting a huge emphasis on enterprise and forgetting about the human centrepiece, which is being really considered throughout this work.

I would particularly like to thank the many Government Departments and their authorities, agencies and offices that have been involved in consultation on this Bill. My Department remains actively engaged with the competent authorities and their line Departments as preparations for implementation of the AI Act and enactment of the Bill continue. Again I note that the Bill is a technical instrument that will ensure that the rights and protections provided by the EU's AI Act will be rigorously asserted in Ireland for the benefit and protection of Irish citizens. It does not add to or alter the obligations on businesses under the AI Act. It is mandatory under the AI Act for EU member states to give effect to these national provisions by 2 August 2026. I thank all the colleagues around the House and most particularly the officials in the Department, who have worked might and main to bring this to fruition.

Question put and agreed to.

Public Health (Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products) (Amendment) Bill 2026: Report and Final Stages

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendment No. 1 in the name of Deputy Sherlock has been ruled out of order, as it does not arise out of committee proceedings.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I move amendment No. 2:

In page 27, to delete lines 5 to 39, and in page 28, to delete lines 1 to 7 and substitute the following:

“Retail packaging of nicotine inhaling product and nicotine consumption products

32E.(1) Subject to Regulation 29 of the Regulations of 2016 and subsection (6), a unit packet of a nicotine inhaling product or a nicotine consumption product intended for sale by retail in the State shall comply with the following requirements:

- (a) the outer surface thereof shall be a prescribed colour;
- (b) the inner surface thereof shall be a prescribed colour;
- (c) it shall not bear any decorative ridges, embossing or other embellishments;
- (d) it shall not contain an adhesive that is coloured or non-transparent;
- (e) it shall not contain any imagery such as cartoons or graphics, other than—

- (i) a single realistic depiction of the nicotine inhaling product or nicotine consumption product, which depiction complies with the requirements of sections 32C and 32D, or
 - (ii) any illustrated safety or usage instructions;
- (f) where any text, safety or usage instructions or a trade mark is visible, such text, safety or usage instructions or trade mark shall be a prescribed colour;
- (g) it shall not contain any affixed item or any item other than the nicotine inhaling product or nicotine consumption product itself and any inner packaging other than as provided for by law.
- (2) A barcode or other identification mark or code may be printed once on a unit packet and, if so printed, shall be printed in a prescribed colour.
- (3) Subsections (1) and (2) shall apply with all necessary modifications to any other form of outside packaging of nicotine inhaling products or nicotine consumption products.
- (4) A wrapper that covers a unit packet or any other form of outside packaging for a nicotine inhaling product or a nicotine consumption product shall comply with the following requirements:
- (a) it shall be transparent and not be coloured;
 - (b) it shall not bear any decorative ridges, embossing or other embellishments;
 - (c) where a tear strip is included, such tear strip shall be a prescribed colour;
 - (d) it shall not have any affixed item other than as provided for by law.
- (5) Where a unit packet of a nicotine inhaling product or a nicotine consumption product contains a lining or inner packaging, such lining or inner packaging shall be of such colour and material as may be prescribed.
- (6) Subsection (1) shall not apply to any warnings or identification marks (including health warnings) provided for by law.
- (7) A person who sells by retail a nicotine inhaling product which contravenes subsection (1), (2), (4) or (5) commits an offence.”.”.

On the amendment that was ruled out of order, just to note that it deals with an important issue. Maybe it could be considered at a future stage. It is happening that they are being given out for free at festivals and I think Deputy Sherlock had a point there.

On my own amendments, I will speak about amendments Nos. 2 and 3 together because they are related. On Second Stage, I raised concerns about the exclusion of nicotine pouches from the packaging and flavouring restrictions. We should treat nicotine pouches and any other nicotine consumption products the same as we are treating vapes. It is incredibly short-sighted not to amend this legislation. If it is not addressed now, it seems inevitable that further legislation will be required. As I have said repeatedly, we should use our time effectively and efficiently in the Dáil and we should legislate here while we have the opportunity instead of waiting, coming back with another Bill and doing this at a future stage. We should do this now.

The amendments I am putting forward today have been drafted in collaboration with the Irish Cancer Society and the Irish Heart Foundation, which support the calls here. I hope the Dáil will endorse them. As people will know, nicotine pouches are small, odourless tobacco-free pouches that contain nicotine, flavourings and other ingredients. They are placed between the lips and the gum. You get between 15 and 20 pouches for around €5 to €7. They are available in various strengths and are designed to deliver high-concentration amounts of nicotine into the bloodstream. There is no smoke or vapour with these products, unlike cigarettes or vapes. At the moment these products are openly displayed in shops in bright, attractive packaging and in a wide variety of flavours. We have talked in the Social Democrats - my colleague, Deputy Whitmore, has raised it numerous times - about the rise in teens using these products and how they are being targeted in the advertising of these products. It is no longer just anecdotal evidence. We now have data which was financed by the Department of Health. In May 2025, the European school survey project on alcohol and other drugs found that 8% of 15- and 16-year-olds reported having used nicotine pouches at some point, while 4% currently use nicotine pouches. The use of nicotine pouches was significantly higher among male students at 9.1% and the most common age at which people started using these nicotine pouches was 15. It is important to note that this data is from fieldwork carried out between March and May of 2024. Given the noticeable surge in nicotine pouch use since then and the aggressive marketing of these products, we would have to assume that it is much higher now. We need to take action on this and I do not think we should delay, otherwise we will be back here again. If we do not accept these amendments tonight, we will be here in future with another Bill.

We will be trying to do it then. As I said, we should try to close all of the gaps now and be efficient in how we deal with legislation in the House. The Government should be open to taking amendments from the Opposition. These amendments were drafted in collaboration with the Irish Cancer Society and the Irish Heart Foundation. I encourage the Minister of State to accept them.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor): I thank the Deputy for tabling the amendment, which relates to flavours and packaging law being introduced in respect of vapes as a result of a nicotine consumption order. The Bill introduces measures relating to nicotine consumption products, including pouches or any other products containing nicotine, in order to protect our children and take action while the use of these products is low. The measures in the Bill include a ban on sale to minors, a prohibition on advertising in retail outlets and a display ban in mixed retail outlets. These are important measures to protect our children and because of their nature are not likely to fall under harmonised law.

While I understand the intention behind the amendment, if these amendments were accepted, they would require a new notification at EU level. The provision in the Bill in this regard has already been notified to the EU. If no issues arise from a member state or the Commission, the process will conclude on 7 July. As it stands, the Bill has gone to Europe. It is my intention that the Bill will be enacted before the end of the year. I hope to have it passed before the recess. A new notification at EU level at this stage would mean not only a three- or six-month standstill period, but also a risk that the Bill would be delayed by at least 12 months

or more. This will happen if the European Commission determines that Ireland is proposing law on an issue that it has already announced its intention to legislate for at EU level.

In April, the Commission announced that it will publish a revision of the tobacco products directive this year. The evaluation of the latest framework for tobacco control documents signals the areas that a revised directive will target, namely new tobacco and nicotine products and the rise of digital marketing, which particularly targets our younger people. Accepting the amendments would risk delaying the Bill by a year or more. While the same measures are likely to be proposed at EU level later this year, the law would be more effective in harmonised form. If we were to change the Bill now, that would mean waiting another year or so to pass it.

The Department and I hope to be able to pass the Bill by the end of July. As the Deputy said, we will have to look at this. There is no question about that. We need to move quickly on this, and that is why I will not be able to accept the amendment. As I said, we need to move on this now and then consider other matters. All of this can be examined in a few months' time. We need to get this through. I understand the Deputy's concerns, but, as I said, we are awaiting word from the EU.

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Deputy wish to respond?

Deputy Pádraig Rice: If I understand the Minister of State correctly, what she is suggesting is that the Government did not think about this and neglected to address this part of the legislation, thereby leaving a hole in the law. We now have to proceed because if we address this, we will have to go to the EU to get permission to do so. There is clearly a gap in the Bill, and there is no explanation from the Minister of State as to why this was not dealt with in either the first draft or the original notification to the EU.

I accept the Minister of State's argument that addressing this could delay the Bill, particularly as it was not done in the first place, but that is a mess of the Government's making. It is not our mess; we are trying to fix the hole in the law. It is inevitable that we will have to deal with nicotine pouches, advertising and flavours. Our argument is that we should do so now.

On EU law, the Minister of State might clarify whether there is a suggestion that the EU might pass an EU-wide law or give direction at national level, meaning that we will be back here dealing with another Bill. Is an EU-wide law proposed for nicotine pouches? Why was this not included in the Bill in the first place?

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Again, I understand. Pouches have been spoken about. We are all learning about pouches. Vaping was new to us a while ago. We are looking at pouches now, and that is why there will be a second Bill to deal with pouches, colours, flavours and packaging. There are directives from the EU. We moved very quickly on this. We feel that this younger people, and we need to move on pouches, colours, flavours and packaging. The Government will move as quickly as it can and will work with its European counterparts on the other matters.

An Ceann Comhairle: Does the Deputy want to respond?

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I am not convinced that we should not be doing this now. As I said, we will be back here trying to do it anyway. I do not see a reason for that, other than the fact that there would be a delay. That seems to be part of the EU process. It appears that we will have to legislate in any event and will be back here with another Bill.

I do not accept the argument from the Minister of State that we are only hearing about these matters now. My party and my colleague Deputy Whitmore have raised this point repeatedly in the media and in the House over a number of years. This is not new; it is not something we came up with last week. There has been concern about the use of nicotine pouches by teenagers in schools. We have flagged this concern, but it is clear that we are not being listened to when we make contributions in the Dáil. Ministers and their officials do not listen to us. We then end up with legislation that is defective and that needs to be improved. It is not just me saying that; it is also the Irish Cancer Society and the Irish Heart Foundation. Very well respected national organisations which campaign on these issues have stated that there is a gap in our law and that we should proceed with our amendment. I would like to see these amendments being progressed.

An Ceann Comhairle: For clarity, has the Deputy moved the amendment?

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I have.

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendment No. 2 arises out of committee proceedings. Is the Deputy pressing the amendment?

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Yes.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 64; Níl, 78; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Bennett, Cathy.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Brady, John.	Brennan, Brian.	
Buckley, Pat.	Brennan, Shay.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Brophy, Colm.	
Cairns, Holly.	Browne, James.	
Carthy, Matt.	Burke, Colm.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Butler, Mary.	
Collins, Michael.	Butterly, Paula.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Cronin, Réada.	Byrne, Thomas.	
Crowe, Seán.	Cahill, Michael.	
Cullinane, David.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Cummins, Jen.	Calleary, Dara.	
Daly, Pa.	Canney, Seán.	

Devine, Máire.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Chambers, Jack.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Ennis, Daniel.	Clendennen, John.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Connolly, John.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Cooney, Joe.	
Gannon, Gary.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Cummins, John.	
Graves, Ann.	Daly, Martin.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Healy, Seamus.	Dillon, Alan.	
Hearne, Rory.	Dolan, Albert.	
Kelly, Alan.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Kenny, Martin.	Fleming, Sean.	
Lawless, Paul.	Foley, Norma.	
Lawlor, George.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Geoghegan, James.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Harkin, Marian.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Heneghan, Barry.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Heydon, Martin.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Higgins, Emer.	
Nash, Ged.	Keogh, Keira.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Kyne, Seán.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Lahart, John.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	Maxwell, David.	
O'Donoghue, Richard.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	McCarthy, Noel.	
O'Hara, Louis.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	McCormack, Tony.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	McGrath, Séamus.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Moynihan, Michael.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Moynihan, Shane.	
Quaide, Liam.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Murphy, Michael.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Naughton, Hildegard.	
Sheehan, Conor.	Neville, Joe.	
Sherlock, Marie.	O'Connell, Maeve.	
Stanley, Brian.	O'Connor, James.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	O'Dea, Willie.	
Wall, Mark.	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
Ward, Mark.	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	

	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	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.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Pádraig Rice and Cian O'Callaghan; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and John Clendennen.

Amendment declared lost.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: I move amendment No. 3:

In page 28, to delete lines 8 to 39, and substitute the following:

“Flavour names of nicotine inhaling products and nicotine consumption products

32F. (1) Subject to subsection (2), a person shall not sell by retail a nicotine inhaling product or nicotine consumption product with a flavour name.

(2) Subsection (1) shall not apply to the sale by retail of a nicotine inhaling product or nicotine consumption product with a flavour name specified in the Schedule.

(3) Subject to subsection (4), the Minister may, by regulation, add flavour names to the flavour names specified in the Schedule or remove flavour names specified in the Schedule.

(4) When making regulations under subsection (3), the Minister shall, having regard to public health and to the objectives of reducing harm from tobacco products, nicotine inhaling products and nicotine consumption products and prioritising the protection of health of children, take the following matters into account:

- (a) the need to limit flavour names that may disproportionately appeal to children;
- (b) evidence relating to flavours for nicotine inhaling products and smoking cessation, initiation and continuation of nicotine inhaling product use, or harm to health relating to nicotine inhaling products and nicotine consumption products;
- (c) the prevalence of smoking of tobacco and use of nicotine inhaling products or nicotine consumption products in both children and adults, and the demographics of children and adults who smoke tobacco or use nicotine inhaling products or nicotine consumption products;

(d) evidence of the effectiveness, and other impacts, of the restrictions concerning flavour names for nicotine inhaling products and nicotine consumption products contained in this Act.

(5) A person shall not sell by retail a nicotine inhaling product or nicotine consumption product with a variant name which implies that such product has—

(a) a particular sensory characteristic, or otherwise contains references to temperatures, textures or oral sensations, or

(b) a flavour other than that described in the flavour name.

(6) A person who contravenes subsection (1) or (5) commits an offence.”.”.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Deputy David Cullinane: I move amendment No. 4:

In page 34, between lines 5 and 6, to insert the following:

“

Menthol	<i>Mional</i>
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”.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 43; Níl, 98; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Bennett, Cathy.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Brady, John.	Aird, William.	
Buckley, Pat.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
Byrne, Joanna.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Carthy, Matt.	Brabazon, Tom.	
Clarke, Sorca.	Brennan, Brian.	
Collins, Michael.	Brennan, Shay.	
Conway-Walsh, Rose.	Brophy, Colm.	
Cronin, Réada.	Browne, James.	
Crowe, Seán.	Burke, Colm.	
Cullinane, David.	Butler, Mary.	
Daly, Pa.	Butterly, Paula.	
Devine, Máire.	Buttimer, Jerry.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Byrne, Malcolm.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Byrne, Thomas.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Cahill, Michael.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Cairns, Holly.	
Graves, Ann.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Calleary, Dara.	
Healy, Seamus.	Canney, Seán.	
Kenny, Martin.	Carrigy, Micheál.	

Lawless, Paul.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Chambers, Jack.	
McGettigan, Donna.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Clendennen, John.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Connolly, John.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Cooney, Joe.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Cummins, Jen.	
O'Donoghue, Richard.	Cummins, John.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	Daly, Martin.	
O'Hara, Louis.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	Devlin, Cormac.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	Dillon, Alan.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Dolan, Albert.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Ennis, Daniel.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Farrelly, Aidan.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Fleming, Sean.	
Stanley, Brian.	Foley, Norma.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
Ward, Mark.	Gannon, Gary.	
	Geoghegan, James.	
	Gibney, Sinéad.	
	Harkin, Marian.	
	Hayes, Eoin.	
	Hearne, Rory.	
	Heneghan, Barry.	
	Heydon, Martin.	
	Higgins, Emer.	
	Kelly, Alan.	
	Kenny, Eoghan.	
	Keogh, Keira.	
	Kyne, Seán.	
	Lahart, John.	
	Lawlor, George.	
	Maxwell, David.	
	McAuliffe, Paul.	
	McCarthy, Noel.	
	McConalogue, Charlie.	
	McCormack, Tony.	
	McGrath, Séamus.	
	McGreehan, Erin.	
	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
	Moynihan, Michael.	
	Moynihan, Shane.	
	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	

	Murphy, Michael.	
	Nash, Ged.	
	Naughton, Hildegard.	
	Neville, Joe.	
	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
	O'Connell, Maeve.	
	O'Connor, James.	
	O'Dea, Willie.	
	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
	O'Meara, Ryan.	
	O'Shea, John Paul.	
	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Feargháil, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Quaide, Liam.	
	Rice, Pádraig.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Sheehan, Conor.	
	Sherlock, Marie.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Smyth, Niamh.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	
	Wall, Mark.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies David Cullinane and Pádraig Mac Lochlainn; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and John Clendennen.

Amendment declared lost.

An Ceann Comhairle: The time permitted for this debate having expired, I am required to put the following question in accordance with an order of the Dáil of 23 June: "That Fourth Stage is hereby completed and the Bill is hereby passed."

Question put and agreed to.

An Ceann Comhairle: The Bill will now be sent to the Seanad.

National Treasury Management Agency (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026: Report Stage

An Ceann Comhairle: Amendments Nos. 1 and 3 are related and may be discussed together by agreement.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move amendment No. 1:

In page 8, between lines 13 and 14, to insert the following:

“Report on NAMA performance

7.The Minister shall, within 6 months of the passing of this Act, prepare and lay before both Houses of the Oireachtas a report on the performance of NAMA including a specific analysis on the potential for higher returns to the State had the property portfolio been managed for longer rather than sold off.”

We discussed this at length on Committee Stage and I want to put on the record again that I genuinely believe that NAMA has failed in its obligations, its duties and what this House set out for it in terms of the legislation, which I opposed and one of the Government parties opposed at the time. NAMA was to recover the assets of the State at that time. The book value of the loans was €74.4 billion. NAMA purchased those loans for €31.8 billion. That means it got a reduction of €42.6 billion. The job of NAMA at the time was to recover all of the money. The Ministers went on television and said that developers would be chased to the ends of the earth to secure that money.

If property prices did not recover then it could not actually manage assets and could not sell assets to realise values that did not exist, but the reality is that asset prices have recovered and, in some cases, have surpassed where they were at the time. That is not universally the case and there are portions of land that did not have planning permission, that were overvalued or where the loans taken out should never have been given. However, generally, property prices have recovered. Therefore, we should ask ourselves a question. How, if NAMA bought loans for €42 billion less than what the book value was and property prices have recovered over the ten years, when the job of the agency was to manage the assets and recover the full cost or as much as it could, it made a surplus of only €5 billion? That €5 billion sounds like big money for ordinary punters out there, but in the context of a €42 billion haircut and the context of recovering all of its assets, I believe it is a staggering failure.

It is a staggering failure because NAMA was also interfered with in terms of the direction of the Government. Michael Noonan made it very clear that he wanted to find a floor for the property market back in 2013 when he invited in the vulture funds. They made no bones about this. They were very clear that they rolled out the red carpet, welcomed the vulture funds for this State and pressed NAMA into what was, in my view, a fire sale of assets at the wrong time, incurring huge losses to the Irish taxpayer as a result.

NAMA did not just fail in that regard. The Comptroller and Auditor General has the unique task in this State to look at expenditure and value for money in Government Departments and also in respect of NAMA. The Comptroller and Auditor General in the 2024 report concluded:

NAMA did not achieve the residential output target. As at the end of 2021, it had delivered 11,049 units on sites in which it has an interest. This represents delivery of 55% of the target, a year later than originally projected.

A return of 55% of the target is appalling. That is really bad in the middle of a housing crisis. There is nothing to be writing home about regarding that. The C and AG went on to say:

NAMA estimated that sites sold by NAMA debtors/receivers by end 2024 had the potential to deliver 105,000 residential units. By end 2024, an estimated 27,108 units had been constructed on sites sold. This level of delivery represents just 26% of the estimated overall capacity of the residential development sites sold by NAMA debtors/receivers to end 2024.

Anybody who sat the junior certificate or leaving certificate last week and got a result of 26% got a big, fat "F". That is a failure, and that is what NAMA has done in relation to the housing part of it, never mind the billions of euro that could and should have been collected in the recovering-property scenario of its objectives. That is why the amendment before us is crucial. It is crucial that there is: "a report on the performance of NAMA including a specific analysis on the potential for higher returns to the State had the property portfolio been managed for longer rather than sold off."

I argue the Irish people deserve nothing less. It is their money. It is their children who were forced to emigrate because of the policies of Fianna Fáil at that time, because of how Fianna Fáil wrecked the economy, because it cosied up to the bankers and developers and bust not only the banking situation but also the construction situation and had our public finances in such a weak position that so much damage was done. As we wind up NAMA in this legislation, it is important that the full truth is exposed and that everybody knows what the missed opportunity was here, what NAMA was tasked with and why it did not recover more than the €5 billion additional it did recover. That is the question.

I do not know what the Government is hiding from. I do not know why the Government does not want the Irish people to know that. Is it because the Minister of State knows, in his heart of hearts, that NAMA should have recovered a lot more, that there was political interference in relation to the strategy in terms of the vulture funds? I believe that is the case. Otherwise the Minister of State may surprise me, support this amendment and allow the public to have what we are asking for, a report. That is all we are asking for. Just show the public the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. That is what we are asking for so please support the amendment.

An Ceann Comhairle: Did Deputy O'Callaghan raise his hand?

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Yes, but thank you for the encouragement. My amendment No. 3 is very similar to amendment No. 1 from Deputy Doherty. There is a slight difference in that I am being more generous in the timeline being afforded to the Minister to make this report.

The fundamental point here is that the public has a right to know. They should get this information. I made the point on Committee Stage that, with NAMA there was a massive lost opportunity in terms of what could have been delivered in affordable housing for people. NAMA took on 60,000 individual assets, sites, land banks that should and could have been used to create affordable housing for the people of this country. That would have made a massive difference and would have meant we were not in the housing crisis that we are now. Instead, we saw land banks and in some cases housing almost completely finished and

unfinished housing sold on at discount rates that was then often bought back by the State or financed by the State through long-term leases and so forth. It was a terribly bad use of money and terrible value for money.

I think a report like this would help shed some light on this and on some of the impact of this failure. As I have said before, it is not the individuals working in NAMA where the failing was here. The failing here was the political direction given to it by Government. Whatever about at the start, as prices were recovering and as there was a change going on in the housing supply conditions and prices, at that point, at the very latest, the Government should have intervened and redirected NAMA towards not just recovery in terms of price, but also in terms of making sure one of its key aims was affordable housing.

To this very day, while things are done in terms of affordable housing, if we look at our planning system and our housing system in general there is not enough of that at all directed at affordable housing. It should be one of the core aims we are trying to achieve. It should have been for NAMA and it should be something we are trying to do through the planning system and through our housing delivery system.

Minister of State at the Department of Finance (Deputy Robert Troy): I thank the Deputies for tabling these amendments. While I fully appreciate and understand the intent behind them, I am not in a position to accept them. This matter has been considered in detail at pre-legislative scrutiny, Second Stage and Committee Stage.

I agree that scrutiny of NAMA's performance and of the value delivered to the taxpayer is both appropriate and important. However, I must again set out why this amendment is neither necessary nor feasible. First, NAMA's performance has been subject to extensive oversight throughout its lifetime. Its annual and quarterly accounts were laid before the Oireachtas and audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General. The Department of Finance conducted statutory five-year reviews and the Comptroller and Auditor General has also taken independent reviews including one published as recently as last month. Taken together, these provide a comprehensive and independent evidence base on NAMA's performance.

Second, the available evidence indicates that NAMA has met and, in some respects, exceeded its objectives. It delivered a lifetime contribution of €5.6 billion to the State and eliminated a significant contingent liability through the early redemption of its senior debt.

The Comptroller and Auditor General estimates a lifetime return of 6.8%, compared to the initial expectation of 5%. More broadly, NAMA is widely regarded internationally as a successful example of a state-backed asset management agency.

Turning to the substance of the amendment, there are clear, practical and legal limitations. NAMA did not acquire property assets directly. It acquired and managed loans secured on property, with the assets remaining in the ownership of debtors or receivers. Once loans were resolved or the underlying asset disposed of, they exited the NAMA system. NAMA's mandate, as set by the Oireachtas, was to deal with its portfolio expeditiously. It was never intended to operate as a long-term asset holder nor would it have been appropriate to attend assets on a speculative basis in the hope of future price increases.

The recent report by Professor John FitzGerald provides useful context. It notes that despite the Government facing external pressure to accelerate disposals, NAMA adhered to its strategy

and, in doing so, was able to maximise value. The report concluded that this was the right approach. As market conditions improved, many borrowers refinanced or repaid their loans. In such cases, loans exited the NAMA system and the agency could not, and should not, have prevented this. This is a normal feature of a recovering financial system. It is also the case that in the post-crisis environment, debt levels in many instances exceeded underlying asset values. In that context, agreed disposal strategies were a necessary part of deleveraging and reflected the financial realities of the time. As a result, NAMA does not systematically retain or control information on subsequent resale values or updated valuations.

Constructing such a database retrospectively would require extensive third-party data, much of which are not publicly available or are commercially sensitive. More fundamentally, even if such data were available, the proposal would be inherently counterfactual. It relies on assumptions about future market conditions, financing costs and risks that cannot be reliably reconstructed. It does not reflect the context in which NAMA operated - a distressed market, significant uncertainty and a statutory obligation to reduce risk and dispose of assets over time and not to speculate on future price movements. Subsequent valuations taken in isolation do not provide a reliable basis for assessing decisions taken at the time. In many cases, assets were further developed, restructured or invested in after disposal and any uplift in value reflects those subsequent actions. This is not unique to NAMA but a normal feature of property markets.

Crucially, only the property owner holds the full information on post-sale investment, including capital and operating costs. This information is essential to any robust comparison but is not accessible, even to the Department of Finance. Without it, any analysis would be incomplete and potentially misleading. There are also strict, statutory confidentiality obligations limiting the disclosure of debtor-specific or commercially sensitive information. These obligations continue after NAMA's dissolution.

It is important to consider the broader context. NAMA has delivered a strong return to the State, repaid its debt in full and substantially completed its mandate, and successfully managed a complex and high-risk portfolio by supporting financial stability. NAMA was established to manage impaired loans, not to hold assets indefinitely in anticipation of future gains. It operated within a statutory and state aid framework that required it manage and dispose of assets over time. A speculative holding strategy would have exposed the State to ongoing risk and delayed deleveraging and would have potentially hindered economic recovery. In that context, comparison with later market values does not provide a meaningful basis for assessing decisions taken at the time nor is it well-founded to assume that assets could simply have been held longer to generate higher returns.

While the objective of transparency is fully accepted, the approach proposed in this amendment would neither be feasible nor produce meaningful results. NAMA's performance has already been subject to extensive audit reporting and independent review and for those reasons, I will not accept the amendment.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: In regard to the reasons I outlined, I understand the Minister of State has to defend NAMA and his position but the facts speak for themselves. The Comptroller and Auditor General's facts also speak for themselves and for that reason, I am pressing the amendment.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I move amendment No. 2:

In page 8, between lines 13 and 14, to insert the following:

“Report on transfer of staff to NTMA

7.The Minister shall, within 1 month of the passing of this Act, prepare and lay before both Houses of the Oireachtas a report detailing all of the transfer of staff from NAMA to the NTMA, provide information on salary and if any existing vacancies were filled or new positions created within the NTMA in addition to the resolution unit.”.

I also raised this with the Minister of State on Committee Stage. The bumper salary of the CEO of NAMA has turned into an ongoing saga and nobody wants to answer questions on it. The Government's fingerprints is all over this because, obviously, it wanted that individual to end up being in a wee cosy job it has earmarked for him as the housing tsar but that all fell asunder as well.

We have been stonewalled on this for months. Information should be available to the public as to whether the NAMA CEO is going to keep his €430,000 salary when he returns to the NTMA. That is a salary he has as a result of him being the CEO of NAMA. It was never intended for him to return from NAMA because the Government wanted him as the housing tsar until that fell apart, when the public was outraged that he would be paid so much to do what is essentially the Minister's job.

When that fell through, the section in the heads of the Bill that said all staff of NAMA, when it was wound up, would be transferred to the resolution unit of the NTMA to handle the residual activity was taken out of the legislation when it was published. We all know that the NAMA CEO will return to the NTMA but not to the resolution unit. What we do not know is whether he is going to keep his salary despite no longer being a CEO. What we also do not know if there is an existing vacancy at senior management team level or if that job is going to be created for him. What we are missing here is transparency, and I believe it is a disgrace in regard to transparency.

There should be no reason for secrecy or hidden information in this regard. We are talking about how public money is spent and how the Government is refusing to answer questions and has gone to great lengths to hide it from any real oversight. We are winding up NAMA. The Government produced legislation to say that everybody, including the CEO, was supposed to go into the resolution unit but it did not tell us at the time it published that legislation that it had another plan for the CEO. It wanted to second him and make him the housing tsar with a huge salary because it wanted its Minister, who was not up to the job, to have a dig-out from a housing tsar. Now, when that fell apart, the Government has had to create a new system and it will not give us any information on it.

This is not on because it is public money at the end of the day. The NAMA CEO is now going to go into a senior role in the NTMA. Is it being created for him? Is there a vacancy? Is one being created to justify him keeping a salary of €430,000? I have no idea because the Government will not give us the information and it is a scandal, in my view. It is a murky ending that is all too fitting for the role NAMA has played in our society.

Between Committee and Report Stages - because these questions were asked of him on Committee Stage - he should now know this information and he should put it on the public record in the House. I would be happy to hear that there is a vacancy with a reduced salary, that he will be taking that up, and that the Minister of State is transparent in giving us the criteria or the salary range. However, if it is just more stonewalling, what are we on the Opposition benches or the general public supposed to conclude from all of that? That is why we have tabled the amendment, which makes it clear that it is not acceptable that the Minister of State has made these types of arrangements and that we have within six months a report laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas detailing all the transfer of staff from NAMA to the NTMA, providing information on salary and whether any existing vacancies were filled or new positions created within the NTMA, in addition to the resolution unit.

Outside of all that, we do not need the report. What we need is just a bit of transparency and a bit of upfrontness from the Government. It was because of all this dodgy cageyness and not being transparent with the public that the Government's plans for the CEO of NAMA fell through. It created a wee job for him, somebody the public perceived as an insider who was already in a well-paid position. That is no disrespect to the individual himself but the Government created the situation and put him in that situation.

9 o'clock

Now, the Minister of State is in a position where he is not being transparent. We do not know where the CEO is going. We do not know if there is a job being created. We do not know if a vacancy exists within the NTMA. This is all basic information that should be said in public. It should be said that there is a vacancy at senior management level in the NTMA, the salary range is between €150,000 and €250,000 for those types of management roles, and that is where he is going in because he was seconded from it. That would bring transparency to this situation or it might be a case, because I do not know, that a position is being created for the CEO, he will retain his salary of €400,000 or maybe he will take a wee cut of €50,000 - he will still be on €380,000 - and we are creating a job for him because the job does not exist, but he was not supposed to go there because the job the Government had for him fell through because he has handled it arseways. Therefore, will the Minister of State please tell us what is happening with the CEO of NAMA?

Deputy Robert Troy: I will respond to the amendment that was put down, which relates to the transfer of staff, not one individual staff member. I thank Deputy Doherty for bringing forward this amendment which proposes to amend the legislation to require us reporting on staff from NAMA to the NTMA, including salary information.

As outlined on Committee Stage, the legislation does not include any provisions relating to the transfer of staff from NAMA to the NTMA. The general scheme of the Bill, published in 2024, had included a standard provision to provide for the transfer of staff, reflecting precedents in other similar legislation. However, following further engagement with NAMA and the NTMA, it became clear that no statutory mechanism is necessary in this case. This is because NAMA does not employ staff in its own right. All individuals working in NAMA have always been employees of the NTMA assigned to perform NAMA functions. Accordingly, there is no transfer of employment arising from the dissolution of NAMA and therefore the premise of the transfer of staff does not arise in fact or in law. In practical terms, a small number of

staff will be assigned to a dedicated unit within the NTMA to manage the limited residual work that will remain following NAMA's dissolution. This is not a new statutory structure but a functional unit operating within the NTMA's existing operational governance and resourcing framework. The roles within the unit are aligned with the completion of the residual work and the work itself is simply being integrated into the ongoing operations of the NTMA. When operational, the unit's eight staff are expected to comprise a head of unit, two finance professionals, two operational professionals, two better case managers and one legal professional. The head of the unit will report to the NTMA's chief financial and operating officer and the unit will be supported by the NTMA's wider operational platform including IT, compliance, human resources and facilities. No additional stand-alone corporate infrastructure is required.

It is also important to recognise the broader organisational context. The NTMA is a large established State body with approximately 688 employees at the end of 2025, excluding those assigned to NAMA. While the dissolution of NAMA is a significant step reflecting the fact that it has largely concluded its operational work, the assignment of a small number of staff to a specific function within the NTMA is an internal organisational matter. While the Deputy does not specifically refer to the position of chief executive officer in his amendment, he does in his contribution. I again note that this role will cease on the dissolution of NAMA as the legislative basis for the position is repealed. The current CEO has been a permanent employee of the NTMA operating in a senior executive role before NAMA's establishment. He will transition within the organisation under his existing contractual framework. This does not involve a new appointment but reflects the normal reassignment of an NTMA employee following organisational change. As with all NTMA staff, matters relating to assignments, roles and individual contractual terms are managed within the agency. Neither the Tánaiste, as Minister for Finance, or I have any role in such arrangements.

Turning to the remuneration, the NTMA operates within an established statutory and governance framework. It complies fully with the code of practise for the governance of State bodies and provides transparency through its annual report, including the publication of employee remuneration in bands of €25,000, beginning with those earning in excess of €50,000. This ensures appropriate public accountability at an aggregate level. It would not be appropriate to publish salary information relating to individual employees. Such information constitutes personal data and is subject to contractual confidentiality and data protection requirements. Staff assigned to the resolution unit will be captured within the existing NTMA reporting arrangements in the same manner as staff across all other functional areas of the NTMA. More broadly, the NTMA is an established State body with its own statutory functions, governance structures and accountability arrangements. Decisions related to staffing, organisational structure and the allocation of roles within the agency are matters for the NTMA itself operating within that framework. In that context, the additional reporting requirements proposed in this amendment are neither necessary nor proportionate. The amendment is predicated on a transfer of staff that does not arise as all NAMA staff are employed by the NTMA and there is no transfer of staff under the legislation. The information sought is also already either publicly available at an appropriate level of aggregation or relates to matters that are governed within NTMA's existing oversight and confidentiality framework. For these reasons, I am not in the position to accept the amendment.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: For the reasons that we are no wiser after the five-minute contribution from the Minister of State in relation to whether the CEO of NAMA is going to go into the NTMA on €430,000, whether there is going to be a vacancy there or whether a job is going to be created, I will press the amendment because, obviously, no light has been shone by the Minister of State on this issue.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): Is the amendment being pressed?

Deputy Robert Troy: I would like to come in.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): The Minister of State may go ahead.

Deputy Robert Troy: I would make the point that the current CEO of NAMA had been a permanent employee of the NTMA since before NAMA's establishment. The NAMA CEO position will cease on the dissolution of NAMA. At that point, he will continue as an NTMA employee under his existing employment framework and individual contract. This does not involve a new appointment or, indeed, any special arrangement but reflects his ongoing status as an NTMA employee. He has not been newly appointed or accommodated. Rather, his role is changing following the dissolution of NAMA, and any future role he takes within the organisation is a matter for the current CEO of the NTMA and he will report within the NTMA structure. He will not be the Accounting Officer. He will not be the CEO of the NTMA. As with all staff, his contractual rights as an employee continue to apply. Matters relating to individual contracts are the responsibility of the CEO and the NTMA and are not determined by the Minister. Neither I, as Minister of State, or, indeed, the senior Minister have any role in individual contractual terms and conditions or assignments within the NTMA. The CEO of the NTMA is appointed through an open competitive process and is accountable to the Committee of Public Accounts and the staff underneath him are accountable to the CEO.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I still have no more answers from what the Minister of State said. We still do not know what the salary scale is going to be, whether the job at senior level has been created, whether he is going to keep his €430,000 or whether the contract he has at the minute will actually be remuneration, which entitles him not just to €430,000 but a bonus of a portion of that. I think it is about 25% on an annual basis. In fairness, he has never accepted it to my knowledge. I stand to be corrected, but that is the case. Therefore, because we have no information and we are asking to wind up an agency where the individual will transfer, I am pressing the amendment. It is ridiculous that we do not have this information. It will come out sometime.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): Okay. So, the amendment is being pressed.

Deputy Robert Troy: We will have to wait for the publication of the annual report.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It will not come out in the annual report because as the Minister of State said, he is not an Accounting Officer. Therefore, we will never have-----

Deputy Robert Troy: In an aggregated-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: There is never a responsibility for him to publish what he is getting.

Deputy Robert Troy: In an aggregated format.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: He could go into the NTMA and he could be paid €1 million and we would never know.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): The debate is finished. I am going to put the amendment. The question is that the amendment-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Hold on, with respect, the proposer of the amendment has three opportunities. I only took two. I am the only person who has a third opportunity. Is that okay?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): Okay. Proceed.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Let me make the point again.

This information will never come to light under the reporting, in the way the Minister of State suggests, because the former CEO of NAMA will not be an accounting officer. As CEO of NAMA, he had to disclose his wages, but now that he is going back into the NTMA, he does not. He is not an accounting officer, so it will not be reported. The issue here is that hypothetically he could be going back in on a million quid and we would never know. We would never know he would be paid that amount of money. We would have to deduce it was him, somebody else or whoever. The Minister of State is asking us to support legislation that is the transfer of his position into the NTMA. As I have said, the Minister of State has had two opportunities to address this issue. He has failed to address it. He has failed to tell us whether it is a new position or whether it is a position that is in vacancy. Again, if the Minister of State told me that there was a vacancy at senior management level and that the range of those senior management levels was X and Y, that would bring the issue to the conclusion. There is a huge issue around this here because this is somebody the Department never wanted to go into the NTMA. It wanted him to be the housing tsar on a huge salary. That fell through and now the Minister of State is not being transparent. I press the amendment.

Amendment put and declared lost.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I move amendment No. 3:

In page 8, after line 34, to insert the following:

“Report on NAMA managed properties

10. The Minister shall, within 6 months of the passing of this Act, lay a report before both Houses of the Oireachtas that provides a table outlining all NAMA managed properties, their value at the time of their sale, compared to their current or most recent valuation.”.

Amendment put and declared lost.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): We move on to amendment No. 4 in the name of the Minister. It arises out of committee proceedings. Amendments Nos. 4 to 8, inclusive, are related and may be discussed together.

Deputy Robert Troy: I move amendment No. 4:

In page 17, to delete lines 35 to 43, and in page 18, to delete lines 1 and 2 and substitute the following:

“ ‘residual NAMA matter’ means any asset, liability, right, cause of action, entitlement or obligation of any nature or kind, or legal proceedings, that immediately before the dissolution day was an asset, liability, right, cause of action, entitlement or obligation of any nature or kind of, or relating to, NAMA or a NAMA group entity and, in the case of legal proceedings, were legal proceedings to which NAMA or a NAMA group entity was a party or which were otherwise relating to NAMA or a NAMA group entity, and which on and after the dissolution day is an asset, liability, right, cause of action, entitlement or obligation of, or relating to, the Agency or a subsidiary of the Agency, as the case may be, or, in the case of legal proceedings, are legal proceedings to which the Agency or a subsidiary of the Agency is a party or which are otherwise relating to the Agency or a subsidiary of the Agency, as the case may be;”.

I flagged on Committee Stage that I intended to introduce a small number of amendments to Part 4 of the Bill on behalf of the Minister for Finance. These amendments are technical in nature and are designed to ensure clarity and consistency in the drafting of the legislation. As Deputies will be aware, the Bill provides for the orderly wind-down of NAMA and for the transfer of any residual matters to the NTMA for management to completion, including the continuation of any ongoing proceedings. The Bill also facilitates the conclusion of the IBRC special liquidation, with provision for any remaining residual matters to transfer to the NTMA for management to completion by way of transfer agreement entered into between the relevant parties. A key element of that process is ensuring the seamless continuation of any outstanding matters, including ongoing legal proceedings, with provision for the substitution of the NTMA in place of NAMA and the IBRC as appropriate in such proceedings, along with the continuation of associated rights and obligations. In that context, the amendments being brought relate to the terminology used in Part 4 and ensure clarity and consistency in how references to proceedings are expressed across the relevant positions. This is simply to ensure that the provisions operate clearly and consistently in practice. These amendments are purely technical in nature and do not alter the underlying policy intent of the Bill in any way. The policy remains unchanged, namely to ensure the effective transfer of residual functions, assets, liabilities and legal matters to the NTMA, and to allow those matters to be brought to an orderly conclusion. I therefore commend these amendments to the House.

Amendment agreed to.

Deputy Robert Troy: I move amendment No. 5:

In page 20, line 2, after “proceedings” to insert “of any nature or kind (including legal proceedings)”.

Amendment agreed to.

Deputy Robert Troy: I move amendment No. 6:

In page 27, line 36, after “to” where it firstly occurs to insert “legal”.

Amendment agreed to.

Deputy Robert Troy: I move amendment No. 7:

In page 28, line 12, after “any” to insert “legal”.

Amendment agreed to.

Deputy Robert Troy: I move amendment No. 8:

In page 28, lines 25 to 27, to delete all words from and including “in” in line 25 down to and including “matters” in line 27 and substitute “, in relation to any relevant residual matter”.

Amendment agreed to.

Bill, as amended, received for final consideration and passed.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Cathal Crowe): We will now proceed to the voting block. I thank Members.

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

The following motion was moved by Deputy Jim O'Callaghan on Tuesday, 23 June 2026:

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.

- (Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration)

Debate resumed on 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."

- (Deputy Matt Carthy)

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding the Offences Against the State Act. On Tuesday, 23 June 2026, on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 68; Níl, 79; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Aird, William.	
Bacik, Ivana.	Ardagh, Catherine.	
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.	
Coppinger, Ruth.	Byrne, Thomas.	
Cronin, Réada.	Cahill, Michael.	
Crowe, Seán.	Callaghan, Catherine.	
Cullinane, David.	Calleary, Dara.	
Cummins, Jen.	Canney, Seán.	
Daly, Pa.	Carrigy, Micheál.	
Devine, Máire.	Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.	
Doherty, Pearse.	Chambers, Jack.	
Donnelly, Paul.	Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.	
Ellis, Dessie.	Clendennen, John.	
Ennis, Daniel.	Connolly, John.	
Farrelly, Aidan.	Cooney, Joe.	
Farrell, Mairéad.	Crowe, Cathal.	
Gannon, Gary.	Cummins, John.	
Gibney, Sinéad.	Daly, Martin.	
Graves, Ann.	Dempsey, Aisling.	
Guirke, Johnny.	Devlin, Cormac.	
Hayes, Eoin.	Dillon, Alan.	
Healy, Seamus.	Dolan, Albert.	
Hearne, Rory.	Dooley, Timmy.	
Kelly, Alan.	Feighan, Frankie.	
Kenny, Eoghan.	Fleming, Sean.	
Kenny, Martin.	Foley, Norma.	
Lawless, Paul.	Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	
Lawlor, George.	Geoghegan, James.	
Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	Harkin, Marian.	

McGettigan, Donna.	Heneghan, Barry.	
McGuinness, Conor D.	Heydon, Martin.	
Mitchell, Denise.	Higgins, Emer.	
Murphy, Paul.	Keogh, Keira.	
Mythen, Johnny.	Kyne, Seán.	
Nash, Ged.	Lahart, John.	
Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	Lowry, Michael.	
Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	Maxwell, David.	
O'Callaghan, Cian.	McAuliffe, Paul.	
O'Donoghue, Richard.	McCarthy, Noel.	
O'Donoghue, Robert.	McConalogue, Charlie.	
O'Flynn, Ken.	McCormack, Tony.	
O'Hara, Louis.	McEntee, Helen.	
O'Reilly, Louise.	McGrath, Séamus.	
O'Rourke, Darren.	McGreehan, Erin.	
Ó Broin, Eoin.	Moran, Kevin Boxer.	
Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.	Moynihan, Aindrias.	
Ó Murchú, Ruairí.	Moynihan, Michael.	
Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.	Moynihan, Shane.	
Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.	Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.	
Quaide, Liam.	Murphy, Michael.	
Quinlivan, Maurice.	Naughton, Hildegard.	
Rice, Pádraig.	Neville, Joe.	
Sheehan, Conor.	O'Connell, Maeve.	
Sherlock, Marie.	O'Connor, James.	
Stanley, Brian.	O'Dea, Willie.	
Tóibín, Peadar.	O'Donnell, Kieran.	
Wall, Mark.	O'Meara, Ryan.	
Ward, Charles.	O'Shea, John Paul.	
Ward, Mark.	O'Sullivan, Christopher.	
	O'Sullivan, Pádraig.	
	Ó Cearúil, Naoise.	
	Ó Feargháil, Seán.	
	Ó Muirí, Naoise.	
	Richmond, Neale.	
	Roche, Peter.	
	Scanlon, Eamon.	
	Smith, Brendan.	
	Timmins, Edward.	
	Toole, Gillian.	
	Troy, Robert.	

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Pádraig Mac Lochlainn and Denise Mitchell; Níl, Deputies Mary Butler and John Clendennen.

Amendment declared lost.

Motion agreed to.

The following motion was moved by Deputy Jim O'Callaghan on Tuesday, 23 June 2026:

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.

- (Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration)

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to the motion regarding the Criminal Justice (Amendment) Act 2009. On Tuesday, 23 June 2026, on the question, "That motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Question put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 100; Níl, 11; Staon, 36.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Ahern, Ciarán.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	Bennett, Cathy.
Aird, William.	Collins, Michael.	Brady, John.
Ardagh, Catherine.	Coppinger, Ruth.	Buckley, Pat.
Bacik, Ivana.	Healy, Seamus.	Byrne, Joanna.
Brabazon, Tom.	Lawless, Paul.	Carthy, Matt.
Brennan, Brian.	Murphy, Paul.	Clarke, Sorca.
Brennan, Shay.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.
Brophy, Colm.	O'Flynn, Ken.	Cronin, Réada.
Browne, James.	Stanley, Brian.	Crowe, Seán.
Burke, Colm.	Tóibín, Peadar.	Cullinane, David.
Butler, Mary.	Ward, Charles.	Daly, Pa.
Butterly, Paula.		Devine, Máire.
Buttimer, Jerry.		Doherty, Pearse.
Byrne, Malcolm.		Donnelly, Paul.
Byrne, Thomas.		Ellis, Dessie.
Cahill, Michael.		Farrell, Mairéad.
Cairns, Holly.		Graves, Ann.
Callaghan, Catherine.		Guirke, Johnny.
Calleary, Dara.		Kenny, Martin.
Canney, Seán.		Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.
Carrigy, Micheál.		McGettigan, Donna.
Carroll MacNeill, Jennifer.		McGuinness, Conor D.
Chambers, Jack.		Mitchell, Denise.
Cleere, Peter 'Chap'.		Mythen, Johnny.
Clendennen, John.		Newsome Drennan, Natasha.
Connolly, John.		Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.
Cooney, Joe.		O'Hara, Louis.
Crowe, Cathal.		O'Reilly, Louise.
Cummins, Jen.		O'Rourke, Darren.
Cummins, John.		Ó Broin, Eoin.
Daly, Martin.		Ó Laoghaire, Donnchadh.
Dempsey, Aisling.		Ó Murchú, Ruairí.

Devlin, Cormac.		Ó Snodaigh, Aengus.
Dillon, Alan.		Ó Súilleabháin, Fionntán.
Dolan, Albert.		Quinlivan, Maurice.
Dooley, Timmy.		Ward, Mark.
Ennis, Daniel.		
Farrelly, Aidan.		
Feighan, Frankie.		
Fleming, Sean.		
Foley, Norma.		
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.		
Gannon, Gary.		
Geoghegan, James.		
Gibney, Sinéad.		
Harkin, Marian.		
Hayes, Eoin.		
Hearne, Rory.		
Heneghan, Barry.		
Heydon, Martin.		
Higgins, Emer.		
Kelly, Alan.		
Kenny, Eoghan.		
Keogh, Keira.		
Kyne, Seán.		
Lahart, John.		
Lawlor, George.		
Lowry, Michael.		
Maxwell, David.		
McAuliffe, Paul.		
McCarthy, Noel.		
McConalogue, Charlie.		
McCormack, Tony.		
McEntee, Helen.		
McGrath, Séamus.		
McGreehan, Erin.		
Moran, Kevin Boxer.		
Moynihan, Aindrias.		
Moynihan, Michael.		
Moynihan, Shane.		
Murnane O'Connor, Jennifer.		
Murphy, Michael.		
Nash, Ged.		
Naughton, Hildegard.		
Neville, Joe.		
O'Callaghan, Cian.		
O'Connell, Maeve.		
O'Connor, James.		
O'Dea, Willie.		
O'Donnell, Kieran.		

O'Donoghue, Robert.		
O'Meara, Ryan.		
O'Shea, John Paul.		
O'Sullivan, Christopher.		
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Quaide, Liam.		
Rice, Pádraig.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Sheehan, Conor.		
Sherlock, Marie.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		
Wall, Mark.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and John Clendennen; Níl, Deputies Paul Murphy and Richard Boyd Barrett.

Question declared carried.

**State Responsibility for Foundation Retention Risk in Defective Concrete Homes:
Motion (Resumed) [Private Members]**

The following motion was moved by Deputy Charles Ward on Wednesday, 24 June 2026:

That Dáil Éireann:

notes that:

- thousands of homeowners affected by defective concrete have spent years living with uncertainty regarding the safety of their homes, the adequacy of available remediation options and the long-term security of their families;
- many affected families have experienced repeated changes in engineering advice, evolving scientific understanding and revisions to the redress scheme throughout that period;
- for homeowners undertaking remediation works, decisions regarding whether existing foundations should be retained or replaced are among the most significant and irreversible choices they will make;
- the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant Scheme permits the retention of existing foundations in affected dwellings in accordance with the updated National Standards Authority of Ireland I.S. (Irish Standard) 465:2026;

- research underpinning I.S. 465:2026 has identified pyrrhotite and other sulphide minerals in the concrete foundations of affected homes, with evidence of oxidation and early-stage internal sulphate attack in some cases;
- the scientific basis underpinning I.S. 465:2026 remains limited in duration, scale and longitudinal evidence, and does not conclusively establish long-term foundation performance;
- as a result, I.S. 465:2026 operates in circumstances of acknowledged material scientific uncertainty regarding long-term structural durability; and
- affected homeowners are being required to make decisions about retaining or remediating foundations in conditions of that uncertainty, with significant financial, legal and psychological consequences;

recognises that:

- the State is relying on I.S. 465:2026 as the governing technical standard for remediation decisions, despite acknowledged scientific uncertainty in its underpinning evidence;
- where the State adopts a Standard in conditions of uncertainty, it must bear responsibility for managing resulting long-term structural risk and not transfer it to individual homeowners;
- homeowners should not be exposed to future liability or repeated remediation costs arising from limitations in the scientific evidence base underpinning the Standard; and
- in circumstances where failure mechanisms may be latent, progressive and not fully observable within assessment timeframes, policy must err decisively on the side of homeowner protection; and

calls on the Government to:

- commission an independent international review of the scientific basis of I.S. 465:2026, with specific focus on sulphide-related deterioration mechanisms in foundation concrete and their long-term behaviour;
- publish in full the evidential basis, assumptions and uncertainty ranges used to justify foundation retention under I.S. 465:2026;
- amend the operation of the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant Scheme to ensure that no homeowner is required to retain foundations where there is material engineering uncertainty regarding long-term durability;
- provide an explicit entitlement for homeowners to opt for full foundation replacement where reasonable doubt exists as to future performance;
- ensure that responsibility for residual long-term structural risk arising from application of I.S. 465:2026 remains with the State and not individual homeowners; and

— report to Dáil Éireann within six months on the implementation of these measures and on any revision required to I.S. 465:2026 in light of emerging scientific evidence.

Debate resumed on amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "Dáil Éireann" and substitute the following:

"notes that:

— the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant Scheme (DCB Scheme), which provides grants to help those affected by defective concrete blocks to remediate their homes, is underpinned by the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 (2022 Act);

— over 3,500 homeowners are now at various stages of the DCB Scheme, and will be supported with grants for 100 per cent of eligible expenditure up to a maximum cap of €462,000 per household, and this represents a 10 per cent increase in the maximum cap since the DCB Scheme launched in 2023;

— more than €336 million has been spent on the DCB Scheme to date, with a commitment to more than doubling the level of funding for 2026 to €175 million, and to continue higher investment levels over the entire period of the National Development Plan 2026-2030;

— the DCB Scheme is actively helping homeowners to rebuild their homes, allowing them to move on with their lives;

— over 500 homes have been fully remediated to date, with approximately 750 more currently at various stages of construction;

— additional counties continue to be added to the DCB Scheme, clearly showing the Government's commitment to help all those affected by the legacy defects caused by defective blocks;

— the legislation refers to I.S. (Irish Standard) 465:2018, the Standard which provides for the assessment, testing and categorisation of damaged buildings incorporating concrete blocks containing certain deleterious material, which was published in November 2018, and the 2018 version of the Standard did not require any testing of foundations as there has never been any evidence of damage to foundations, and the DCB Scheme and the underpinning legislation make no provision for such testing;

— in November 2021, as Ireland's official standards body, the National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI) was tasked by the Government with a special review of the concrete Standard, this review started in March 2022, and has been conducted by the TC 63 Concrete Blocks Committee of the NSAI, membership of this Committee included representatives of the concrete industry, Engineers Ireland, the Geological Survey Ireland, homeowner action groups, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Housing Agency; and

— a new revised Standard, I.S. 465:2026, was recently published by the NSAI on 2nd June, 2026, and the revised Standard is based on new research in the area, it entails quite significant changes from the previous Standard in that, under the new Standard,

almost all houses with defective concrete blocks would be demolished, and furthermore, the Standard provides for the testing of the foundations of each house in case they may be found to be affected at some point in the future, notwithstanding that there are no current cases of damage to foundations; and

agrees that:

— aspects of the changes entailed by the new Standard require detailed consideration in terms of the DCB Scheme, and could entail significant financial implications for the State if adopted under the DCB Scheme;

— the 2022 Act requires that the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage shall, on the publication of the revised Standard, undertake a review of the legislation, the Act also requires that, not later than three months after the completion of the review, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage shall make a report to each House of the Oireachtas of their findings and conclusions resulting from the review, and it is intended that this formal review of the DCB Scheme will be initiated by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage shortly;

— existing DCB Scheme participants who have already received their determination under I.S. 465:2018 will have the choice to continue with their works;

— the review will focus, as per the provisions of Section 51 of the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022, on the operation of the Act in the first instance, with all matters relating to the introduction of I.S. 465:2026 and its interaction with the DCB Scheme being considered as part of the review, and this will include the matter of foundations; and

— the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage will consider all implications of the new I.S. 465:2026, and make recommendations to the Government on any proposed changes to the DCB Scheme as soon as possible."

- (Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage)

An Ceann Comhairle: I must now deal with a postponed division relating to State responsibility for foundation retention risk in defective concrete homes. On Tuesday, 23 June 2026, on the question, "That the amendment to the motion be agreed to", a division was claimed and in accordance with Standing Order 85(2), that division must be taken now.

Amendment put:

The Dáil divided: Tá, 79; Níl, 68; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brennan, Brian.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Shay.	Brady, John.	
Brophy, Colm.	Buckley, Pat.	
Browne, James.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Burke, Colm.	Cairns, Holly.	

Butler, Mary.	Carthy, Matt.	
Butterly, Paula.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Collins, Michael.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cronin, Réada.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Crowe, Seán.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cullinane, David.	
Canney, Seán.	Cummins, Jen.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	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.	
Daly, Martin.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Graves, Ann.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Dillon, Alan.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dolan, Albert.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Hearne, Rory.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kelly, Alan.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Foley, Norma.	Kenny, Martin.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Lawless, Paul.	
Geoghegan, James.	Lawlor, George.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Heydon, Martin.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Higgins, Emer.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Keogh, Keira.	Murphy, Paul.	
Kyne, Seán.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lahart, John.	Nash, Ged.	
Lowry, Michael.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Maxwell, David.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
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, Hildegard.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Neville, Joe.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Connor, James.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Stanley, Brian.	
O'Donnell, Kieran.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and John Clendennen; Níl, Deputies Charles Ward and Pádraig Mac Lochlainn.

Amendment declared carried.

Question put: "That the motion, as amended, be agreed to"

The Dáil divided: Tá, 79; Níl, 68; Staon, 0.		
Tá	Níl	Staon
Aird, William.	Ahern, Ciarán.	
Ardagh, Catherine.	Bacik, Ivana.	
Brabazon, Tom.	Bennett, Cathy.	
Brennan, Brian.	Boyd Barrett, Richard.	
Brennan, Shay.	Brady, John.	
Brophy, Colm.	Buckley, Pat.	
Browne, James.	Byrne, Joanna.	
Burke, Colm.	Cairns, Holly.	
Butler, Mary.	Carthy, Matt.	
Butterly, Paula.	Clarke, Sorca.	
Buttimer, Jerry.	Collins, Michael.	
Byrne, Malcolm.	Conway-Walsh, Rose.	
Byrne, Thomas.	Coppinger, Ruth.	
Cahill, Michael.	Cronin, Réada.	
Callaghan, Catherine.	Crowe, Seán.	
Calleary, Dara.	Cullinane, David.	

Canney, Seán.	Cummins, Jen.	
Carrigy, Micheál.	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.	
Daly, Martin.	Gibney, Sinéad.	
Dempsey, Aisling.	Graves, Ann.	
Devlin, Cormac.	Guirke, Johnny.	
Dillon, Alan.	Hayes, Eoin.	
Dolan, Albert.	Healy, Seamus.	
Dooley, Timmy.	Hearne, Rory.	
Feighan, Frankie.	Kelly, Alan.	
Fleming, Sean.	Kenny, Eoghan.	
Foley, Norma.	Kenny, Martin.	
Gallagher, Pat the Cope.	Lawless, Paul.	
Geoghegan, James.	Lawlor, George.	
Harkin, Marian.	Mac Lochlainn, Pádraig.	
Heneghan, Barry.	McGettigan, Donna.	
Heydon, Martin.	McGuinness, Conor D.	
Higgins, Emer.	Mitchell, Denise.	
Keogh, Keira.	Murphy, Paul.	
Kyne, Seán.	Mythen, Johnny.	
Lahart, John.	Nash, Ged.	
Lowry, Michael.	Newsome Drennan, Natasha.	
Maxwell, David.	Ní Raghallaigh, Shónagh.	
McAuliffe, Paul.	O'Callaghan, Cian.	
McCarthy, Noel.	O'Donoghue, Richard.	
McConalogue, Charlie.	O'Donoghue, Robert.	
McCormack, Tony.	O'Flynn, Ken.	
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, Hildegard.	Quinlivan, Maurice.	
Neville, Joe.	Rice, Pádraig.	
O'Connell, Maeve.	Sheehan, Conor.	
O'Connor, James.	Sherlock, Marie.	
O'Dea, Willie.	Stanley, Brian.	

O'Donnell, Kieran.	Tóibín, Peadar.	
O'Meara, Ryan.	Wall, Mark.	
O'Shea, John Paul.	Ward, Charles.	
O'Sullivan, Christopher.	Ward, Mark.	
O'Sullivan, Pádraig.		
Ó Cearúil, Naoise.		
Ó Fearghaíl, Seán.		
Ó Muirí, Naoise.		
Richmond, Neale.		
Roche, Peter.		
Scanlon, Eamon.		
Smith, Brendan.		
Timmins, Edward.		
Toole, Gillian.		
Troy, Robert.		

Tellers: Tá, Deputies Mary Butler and John Clendennen; Níl, Deputies Charles Ward and Pádraig Mac Lochlainn.

Question declared carried.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 9.47 p.m. go dtí 8.47 a.m., Déardaoin, an 25 Meitheamh 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 9.47 p.m. until 8.47 a.m. on Thursday, 25 June 2026.