



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 25 Meitheamh 2026

Thursday, 25 June 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell) i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

State Savings Schemes

1. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if there will be any public consultation prior to the launch of the savings and investment account scheme. [48238/26]

4. **Deputy Ken O'Flynn** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will provide an update on the proposed savings and investment account; the precise details of the scheme, including its design and proposed taxation treatment; and the timeline for publication of those details and for the production of any required legislation. [48371/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Minister's Department led a forum for stakeholders for representative bodies and policymakers in relation to the savings and investment accounts scheme under design. These voices, no doubt, have a role to play and a place in the discussion. A scheme of this scope, however, would traditionally have had a public consultation process, and that was not the case here. What engagement has there been with the public? What research has been done by the Minister or his Department on public views of how to design a savings and investment accounts scheme?

Tánaiste and Minister for Finance (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1 and 4 together.

I thank Deputy Doherty for his question. An Teachta O'Flynn also has a question. Ireland still does not have a sufficiently diversified savings and investment culture. This is something we largely agree on. Too much of people's hard-earned savings remains in low-yield deposits, where inflation can erode value over time. Deposit accounts are right for many people and for many needs but they cannot be the only practical option that we have available for many.

Investment in capital markets can offer households another path to long-term financial well-being, while also supporting growth and competitiveness in the wider economy.

In recognition of the importance of encouraging retail investment, the last budget provided for a reduction in the rate of taxation on returns from Irish and equivalent investment funds and Irish and certain foreign life assurance policies from 41% to 38%. That budget, however, also included a commitment to publish a roadmap for the taxation of retail investment, and set out an approach to simplify and adapt the tax framework to further support retail investment in Ireland. This arose from a key finding in the funds sector report 2030, which included an extensive public consultation. The starting point for this process, then, was that report. The funds review was then included as established Government policy and set out in the programme for Government.

There has been extensive public outreach on the proposed investment account policy. On 31 March, at the first annual savings and investment forum, I announced that my Department is currently working on the development of an investment account. This forum brought together key stakeholders from across the financial services sector, policymakers and, importantly, consumer representatives, including the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, to support the continued evolution of Ireland's investment landscape. Together with the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, I recently convened a representative cross-section of the funds and asset management sector. I also convened a consumer round table, which I think was this week, to discuss plans for the introduction of a new investment account.

I and my officials have held over 30 meetings to date in relation to the proposed investment account. These have included meetings with financial services firms, consumer representatives, the European Commission and other member states and jurisdictions which offer such accounts. Officials in my Department are currently developing policy options regarding the investment account framework which will form part of the deliberations for budget 2027. The aim is to legislate for the framework in 2026 and to allow accounts to be offered from 2027.

I say sincerely to Deputy Doherty and all the Deputies in the House that if there are other people who wish to feed into this process and who feel they have not had that opportunity, I ask them to please come forward. We have had extensive engagement. This has already been an elongated process. There was the public consultation as part of the funds review but we are very happy to hear from as many diverse voices as possible. While there has not been a formal public consultation process at this stage, and I take the Deputy's point, I am very happy to hear any further views that are required for that we could benefit from to feed into the process.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste is right in saying there has not been a public consultation in relation to this issue. The funds review was separate. It looked at the taxation aspect but did not argue for this type of savings and investment scheme.

Deputy Simon Harris: Sure.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That was not the consultation that was under review at that time. To tell the Minister the God's honest truth, we know very little because we are still in the dark in relation to what this scheme is going to look like. We are told it is going to be announced

on budget day. There has been no consultation with the public. There has been consultation with stakeholders, other groups, with very wealthy asset managers and so on. The Minister has had extensive meetings with asset managers, wealth managers, financial planners, digital platforms, banks and insurance firms but there has been no real engagement with the public. This is concerning, given that this is going to be a major scheme that will impact the public. We know from media reports that, for example, the largest asset management firm in the world, BlackRock, has had extensive meetings with the Department and Ministers. That type of extensive lobbying behind the scenes by some of the largest financial companies in the world raises legitimate questions about whether the public interest is being served. Why has there been no time for a public consultation when discussions have been going on behind closed doors with powerful financial interests for three years now, as we have learned from media reports?

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I thank the Tánaiste for his reply to both of us. I appreciate what the Tánaiste is saying. He has had 30 meetings, as he said. There are questions to be answered, however. While I agree with and welcome the entire scheme as it is important to get people, especially younger people saving and into that routine, it does need to be thrashed out by the Oireachtas. I suspect we may need legislation on it.

The questions I want to put to the Tánaiste, and I think these are the questions on everybody's lips, are: what exact tax rate and threshold will apply to this scheme and will the deemed disposal rule be scrapped? I think the deemed disposal rule is very unfair double taxation. I do not think we have had enough conversation around this aspect. If there has been a conversation around it, it certainly has not been published in respect of the 30 meetings behind closed doors. I am not being facetious in saying that.

We then have to look at the existing investors who have already put their moneys away, and whether tax penalties will apply to them and, if so, what they will be. There is also the question of whether the scheme will be open to investors who have existing accounts to move over to. I ask the Tánaiste to seriously look at what is done in the United Kingdom and how that tax system works very well to get people to open such accounts. I say this because I suspect we may have a problem if we just go with the old system of deemed disposal. It is not going to work and people are going to run away from it.

Deputy Simon Harris: I reject the assertion that the meetings take place behind closed doors. They are just meetings, the door is closed, but there are lots of people in the room. We have had meetings with the Central Bank, the European Commission, and the CCPC. That was a very public event and people will be well aware of it because it was covered widely in the media.

I do, however, take the point about getting this scheme right. I will make a few points. Obviously, this will definitely require legislation. The intention is to legislate for this in the finance Bill. There will, therefore, be ample time to properly scrutinise this proposal and, indeed, for the Deputy to have an input. I think that is important.

I take the point as well, although I disagree with it, in terms of how much we know about the scheme now. I would argue that we actually know more about this proposal now than we know about most budgetary measures because the budget last year gave a commitment to

consult and engage on rates of taxation. Finalising issues in respect of rates of tax and amounts that might be tax free are, as all Deputies will know, matters for a budget day.

By the way, I am happy, at an appropriate point in advance of the budget, to provide a briefing to the Opposition on our thinking on this scheme. We will have different views on this issue but I do hope we can fundamentally agree with the idea that we should be offering a variety of ways for people to save and invest.

As Deputy Doherty said, we have met with lots of banks and digital platforms because they are the people who we require to provide the accounts. I wanted them to be ready to open accounts in 2027.

On the point about broader investment, I agree with Deputy O'Flynn on this point. This is not an either-or situation. I passionately believe that we need personal investment accounts in Ireland like they have in lots of other European countries. This is not my idea. Many other countries have already done this, and my view is that we need to get on board. That will not, however, be enough in and of itself. There are anomalies in the taxation system, and I think deemed disposal is one. Again, all these issues are matters for budget day. Reducing the deemed disposal taxation rate from 41% to 38% misses the broader point, which is whether this measure is fulfilling the policy objective it was intended to fulfil. I am not so sure it is. If there is a need for anti-avoidance measures, is deemed disposal the correct way to go about it? I am not convinced it is, by the way. Do we have a better way, as an Oireachtas, to overhaul this provision?

On the specific example of the UK, I met the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what the UK is doing. I also met Swedish representatives on what that country has done, and representatives from a number of other countries.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We have discussed deemed disposal and how that could be changed, making sure it does not just benefit the ultra-rich and allow for the avoidance of tax on significant assets. There is a real question in relation to the public scrutiny of what is going on. The Minister said we know a lot but, in fairness, we do not. We do not know what the thresholds are going to be. We do not know what the rate is going to be. We do not know if there is going to be tax inside the investment. We do not know if it is going to be for investments in Ireland or investments internationally. There is a lot we do not know and there has been no public consultation. There is no opportunity for the public to actually formally feed in their views in relation to this proposal.

From the very start, we have said this scheme needs to meet two criteria. It needs to work for ordinary people. It cannot be a way for the rich to avoid tax and, effectively, get a tax cut. It also needs to have a public investment aspect. There are also, however, serious risks. The Central Bank warned about the bubble in artificial intelligence, AI, and inflated values in relation to some of the products in that area. Investment is not for everybody. Investment contains risks, so there are serious questions in relation to how this scheme will be designed and implemented, and it needs to have proper public scrutiny. I urge the Minister, therefore, to formally open a public consultation process to allow for ordinary people to give their views in relation to what is under consideration.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I thank the Tánaiste for his reply. I appreciate he is going to open consultation with, and have a briefing for, the Opposition. I think there will be a lot of support across the House for that. I again ask the Tánaiste to look at the UK's individual savings account, ISA, in respect of which a commitment has been given, in the wake of having met the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

There is a problem with taxation. At the moment, if a person invests €10,000, for example, and that person is being taxed on it every eight years, then the tax on that investment has already been paid. That is a serious anomaly. If I were a private citizen, I would probably be taking a challenge to the High Court regarding this issue because it does seem to be double or even triple taxation. What we are not taking into account is that the value of investments goes up and down. The other thing we are doing that also needs to be addressed is that if someone is a landlord and has a big mortgage, then they are being taxed on the rent they are receiving. Quite often, those landlords do not receive any of that rent because it is being paid directly to the mortgage lender. We need to close off those doors as well because it is unfair taxation.

Very often there are investment plans of 30 years that people have put together because they do not have a pension or a savings fund. I would like a broader conversation about this. I am happy to meet the Minister to give him a couple of ideas. This is not about challenging him; this is about getting the system right and getting people back saving again.

Deputy Simon Harris: I am happy to be challenged, and I will also be happy to meet because I do want to get this right. I really do because it is important. What we have done is laid out the principles. The details on specific rates of tax and the like would always be a matter for the budget. There is no Minister for Finance who announces tax rates in advance of the budget, as we all know; however, we have already made a number of clear, principled commitments on the design of the account. First, the obligation to ensure the tax is paid would lie with the account provider, not the person who opens the account. That is a game-changer in reducing complexity. Second, there would be an income-free threshold. Third, a person would pay one low flat rate of tax on anything above that threshold. Fourth, on Deputy Doherty's point, because this is not a scheme for the uber-wealthy, there will have to be a maximum amount that can be put into the account, either annually or over the lifetime period. Those are the four principles we have outlined.

The Deputy referred to the Central Bank. We are informed on this by the research of the Central Bank. The Central Bank carried out research called Retail Investor Participation in Ireland: Consumer Research and Analysis. It was published only last December. It examined and engaged with Irish households on how they save, invest and engage with financial markets. It shows that Irish households continue to rely heavily on traditional, low-risk saving habits, with 38% of all financial assets held in cash and bank deposits, a level significantly above the EU average. Direct investment in capital markets is very limited. Irish households hold just 2.3% of their financial assets in listed equities and debt securities. The EU average is 7.5%.

Irish retail investors also have a very distinct profile. They are more likely to be male and to be between the ages of 35 and 54, and are disproportionately drawn from higher-income, higher-educated ABC1 households. Some 73% are in employment and 65% hold higher education qualifications. Investors tend to be concentrated around the greater Dublin area. Therefore, there is not fair access today to investments. Lower-income people, people outside

the Dublin area and women are all less likely to invest than men of a certain age living in a certain part of the country. These are some of the challenges and I look forward to grappling with them.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: What about public consultation?

Deputy Simon Harris: We have had very significant public consultation. I reiterate today that if there is any group or body of groups, or set of individuals, with whom the Deputy would like further engagement, he should please let me know. I will provide him with a list of all the people who have been engaged with. I am also very happy to engage with the Opposition.

Central Bank of Ireland

2. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the steps he is taking to ensure that the Central Bank is acting in accordance with international law in relation to its role as the home state for the Israeli bond programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48495/26]

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Israel is still issuing war bonds across the EU and using the money to fund the genocide. While the role of approving these bonds has been moved to Luxembourg, Ireland remains the home member state for Israeli bonds. I am asking what steps the Minister is taking to ensure the Central Bank is acting in accordance with international law regarding its role as home member state for the Israeli bonds.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy O'Callaghan. As he will be aware, the Central Bank is the competent authority when it comes to the issuing of prospectus approval. It has informed me that it continues to keep under review its compliance with the applicable international legal and regulatory frameworks in relation to its mandates and engagements. Furthermore, the Central Bank, as the financial regulator, is independent in its functions from the Government, as is necessary in any well-functioning democracy.

The Governor of the Central Bank made the following clear in a reply to a letter from the Oireachtas finance committee on 24 November 2025:

The Central Bank is established by statute to fulfil legal responsibilities and obligations including in relation to the Prospectus Regulation. In carrying out these responsibilities we are at all times required to assess and understand the nature of our legal obligations and responsibilities. We do this on the basis of robust analysis relying on the legal expertise available to us. This takes the form of both internal legal and subject matter expertise and, where necessary and appropriate, of access to external legal advice.

We believe that further action – I believe the Deputy and I agree on this point – is necessary with respect to the EU's relationship with the State of Israel. This is why we are working with others to achieve co-ordinated action at EU level. Ireland will continue to call for and work for concrete EU action in response to the horrific Israeli breaches of human rights and democratic principles. This includes a call for a proposal to prohibit EU trade with Israeli settlements and to suspend the EU-Israel Association Agreement or, at a minimum, to suspend

the trade elements of the agreement, as previously proposed by the President of the European Commission. It is expected that the European Commission will bring forward options at the Foreign Affairs Council on 13 July, including on EU trade with Israeli settlements.

The last time Deputy O'Callaghan raised this issue with me here, I think at the last Question Time, I undertook to engage directly with the EU Commission on this matter. I do not believe we disagree on the fundamental issue, but we can agree or disagree on how to resolve it. My very clear view is that this requires EU action in terms of the regulation. I directed my officials to engage with the EU Commission. Department officials subsequently liaised with their counterparts. We drew attention to the work of the Oireachtas, in particular the Oireachtas joint committee's recommendations that the prospectus regulation be amended. This engagement reflected my view that the Commission needs to act on those findings. I also undertook that I would raise the matter directly with the EU Commissioner. I spoke to Commissioner Albuquerque on this issue at the last ECOFIN meeting. I have also written to her as recently as the last couple of days, and I will give the Deputy a copy of that letter.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I welcome any engagement the Minister has with the EU Commission on this but there are actions the Irish Government can take. It was very clear when the Central Bank officials were before the Oireachtas finance committee about a year ago that the bank was saying it would comply if there were any domestic law or instruction on this. Indeed, in the Minister's reply he spoke about the Central Bank following its legal obligations.

The key is that there are no national restrictive measures put in place by the Irish Government when it comes to this, and the Government could be doing that. Article 65.1(b) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union allows restrictions on grounds of public policy or public security. Clearly, there are public policy grounds here. The Irish Government has made its position clear in terms of recognising the State of Palestine, the submissions to the International Court of Justice and calling for EU action.

There is the ability for the Government to act and put legal restrictive measures in place on public policy grounds, and then the Central Bank would follow those. It is welcome that the Minister is engaging with the EU Commission, but who knows if anything concrete will ever actually come out of that? I am asking whether the Minister will take on board the measures called for by the Oireachtas joint committee for the Government to take action on restrictive grounds.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy. I have been very clear in my view on this. Our clear advice is that even if domestic legislation were passed, it would not allow for the Central Bank to refuse a prospectus where the requirements of the EU prospectus regulation have been met, including the standards of completeness, consistency and comprehensibility. We have to respect EU law and the Central Bank has to abide by it. In my view, EU law needs to change in relation to this. That is why I agree with the Oireachtas joint committee finding. After I directed my officials to engage with the Commission, the Deputy asked me whether I would directly engage. I did. I spoke to the Commissioner in the past week or two. I have written to the Commissioner in the last few days, outlining the very clear view of this Oireachtas that the prospectus regulation needs to be amended.

I intend to continue to pursue this actively. I also hope this could be considered as part of the EU Commission's set of proposals, which it is due to bring to the next Foreign Affairs Council meeting. I will also send the Deputy a copy of the letter and keep him informed of any further engagement. My honest view on the matter is that domestic legislation cannot trump EU law in determining what the Central Bank can and cannot do.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I support any engagement the Minister is having with the EU Commission on this. However, we have independent advice from the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers that Ireland could indeed take action to restrict Israeli bonds. It concludes that there is a case for unilateral Irish action on this if it is framed on public policy grounds. I have given the Minister the reasons it could be framed on such grounds, and I have also cited the relevant article of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

The Minister has options on this beyond EU-level engagement. It would be great if something positive came out of that, but he knows well that it may not because achieving consensus at European level is very difficult. The Government has options to take domestic restrictive measures that would mean the Central Bank would then have a legal basis for taking restrictive measures regarding the Israeli war bonds. Will the Minister take these? It is imperative that the Government act owing to the ongoing killing of Palestinian people in Gaza, and also in the West Bank. Will the Minister do that?

Deputy Simon Harris: I agree with the Deputy's analysis of the atrocities happening in Palestine and that the actions of the Israeli Government are in breach of international law and despicable. There is a genocide happening in Palestine. The only area we disagree on, or are teasing through, concerns what is legally possible. I will look again at the independent legal advice of the Office of Parliamentary Legal Advisers but I do not want to mislead the Oireachtas. It is the clear view in the advice I have that we cannot do anything domestically to trump the EU regulation. I am certainly not suggesting the Deputy is endeavouring to do this, but we cannot be saying we are standing by international law and then passing legislation here that we know would actually breach our own legal obligations. We cannot progress legislation if it will not work.

I am a bit more optimistic on action being taken at EU level. It has been far too slow. It has been appallingly slow. Ireland has been advocating for action for such a long time on a cross-party basis. There are options that the European Council of Ministers can take that require qualified majority voting instead of consensus, but I agree with the Deputy on consensus being unlikely. There is an onus on the Commission to make proposals for the next Foreign Affairs Council, where there are measures that could be taken by qualified majority and not just consensus.

Fuel Prices

3. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance to outline his approach to excise duty on fuel from the end of July. [48239/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am trying to get to the bottom of what the Minister's intentions are for excise duty. Last week, he passed the Finance Bill in the House, and that Bill will see

the price of diesel increased by 32 cent and the price of petrol increased by 27 cent. That is just a number of weeks away, on 1 August.

People are aghast at the idea that in the middle of a cost-of-living crisis prices would rise again. In some cases, prices will go up to €2 per litre, given where they are at the moment.

The Finance Bill is going through the Dáil. It will go through the Seanad and then become law. Can the Tánaiste rule out its taking effect on 1 August or is that still his thinking? People need a bit of clarity.

Deputy Simon Harris: I welcome the opportunity to try to provide some clarity. For people at home who are watching in, let us be clear what the current Finance Bill is doing. It is giving primary legislative underpinning to the financial resolution; no more, no less. We in this House voted through a financial resolution to reduce the excise duty on diesel, petrol and green diesel. If there is a large gap between a financial resolution and the standard annual budget, you have to bring forward primary legislation to underpin that; no more, no less. The legislation we are bringing forward now is on a *status quo* basis providing an underpinning to something that this Oireachtas voted on many weeks ago. In that way, it is slightly peculiar that it has to happen, but it has to happen legally.

The total estimated cost of the support measures that the Government has introduced thus far is over €750 million. People know what that meant. It meant reducing petrol, diesel and marked gas oil, MGO, from an excise point of view. It also meant the deferral of the May carbon tax increase on home heating oil fuels and MGO, as well as a reduction in the National Oil Reserves Agency, NORA, levy. We have also had the diesel rebate scheme for licensed road haulage and passenger transport operators, the fuel income support scheme to assist farmers and farm contractors and the road transporter support scheme to help the road transport sector. The fuel allowance was extended by four weeks.

I acknowledge and welcome the current reopening of the Strait of Hormuz. We have seen positive responses on the commodity markets, in that there has been a reduction in oil prices. I accept they are still higher than they were. There does remain, let us be truthful, significant uncertainty over details of the agreement. We have been here previously. Let us hope for a positive situation. I am conscious that the situation is evolving.

Brent crude, the global benchmark for oil prices, as of 23 June stood at approximately \$77 per barrel. This is down from a peak of approximately \$115 in early May, but still above prices of around \$70 per barrel recorded before the war. It is likely that there will continue to be disruption to supply chains and damage to energy infrastructure and it will, therefore, take some time for things to restore to pre-war levels.

We are continuing to monitor the situation closely and reserve the right to adjust our response. We have to get the balance right between solid budgetary management, which gives us an ability to respond in a timely manner, and making sure that people do not see some sort of immediate cliff-edge at the end of July. The Government will make a determination in the coming days.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am well aware of the legislation, the 1920s Act which requires financial resolutions to be put into primary legislation within four months. The reality is that

the Government last week voted against deferring the increase until budget day. As things currently stand in Irish tax law, diesel will go up by 32 cent and petrol will go up by 27 cent in August. The Dáil is only sitting for another three weeks. There are people and businesses, including hauliers, that have to plan. They are wondering about the contracts and commitments into which they are entering. They are thinking that because the cost of diesel is going up, prices must go up. There are contractors, construction workers, who are taking on jobs and do not know what the price will be. Will the Tánaiste rule out a 32-cent increase in the cost of diesel on 1 August? Is that his thinking at this point? Can he give some parameters? We know that things are fluid. We know that fuel prices are set by international energy prices, which themselves are reacting to geopolitical events. What I argued for initially was that there would be parameters there. For example, we could say that we would not want diesel to go above €1.80 or €1.85, or whatever. The law is saying that the cost will go up by 32 cent. That is worrying for people in the middle of this cost-of-living crisis.

Deputy Simon Harris: Let us not worry people unnecessarily. Let me be clear. There is legislation going through the Oireachtas now that is giving legislative underpinning to the reduction we put in place which is to end on 31 July. That has to happen. It is required legally. That is what it is doing; no more, no less.

There is another piece that it is important we say to people if we are concerned about them being worried, as the Deputy is. I am saying clearly that in the coming days, the Government will make a decision as to what happens post 31 July. It makes sense, and the Deputy can agree or disagree, to give it those coming days because the situation is fast evolving. It is, as the Deputy said, extraordinarily fluid. We need to monitor and make the best decisions. I will say, to be helpful, that I do not believe it is likely that there will be some sort of cliff-edge whereby everything will return to how it was before the packages. We have to think this through and see what is an appropriate and proportionate response beyond 31 July. The Government will make the decision in the coming days. As the Deputy said, this Oireachtas has approximately three weeks left and these decisions will be made in plenty of time to provide that clarity.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: First of all, that does not provide the clarity that is needed. This is not as simple as the Tánaiste said, which was that this was putting the resolution into primary legislation.

Deputy Simon Harris: It is.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It is not.

Deputy Simon Harris: It is.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Government voted against delaying this measure until budget day. It voted against not increasing costs on 1 August. That is what happened last week. The Tánaiste was not here, was he?

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy voted against cutting the excise, full stop.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Perhaps the Tánaiste was not here. Let us be clear: that was what the vote was last week. Amendments were put down to defer this measure until budget day for consideration so that these increases would not happen when the Dáil was on holidays. If the Government decides to increase the costs of petrol and diesel, even if it decides that they will only go up by 20 cent, we do not know what is going to happen the week prior to that and the Dáil will not be sitting. The sensible thing to do was to accept what Sinn Féin put forward and not to have prices going up in the middle of the summer when the Dáil is not even sitting. Defer it. I put that amendment down and the Government voted against it. The Labour Party and Social Democrats supported the Government in voting against it and I think that was absolutely wrong. I am now asking the Tánaiste to commit that we will not see price increases in the middle of the summer, not knowing where the geopolitical issue will be, whether the Strait of Hormuz will be open or whether retail prices will be €1.80, €1.60 or €1.50. We will have no idea. Will the Tánaiste give some clarity in that regard?

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The Deputy did not call for a vote on that amendment.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: There was a vote on the amendment.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: On amendment No. 1, there was not.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Sorry, Deputies, allow the Tánaiste.

Deputy Simon Harris: I do not want to interrupt the united Opposition. To be clear, there is only one Deputy currently in the Chamber who voted against the financial resolution to cut the excise duty in the first place. His name is Deputy Pearse Doherty. Let the Dáil record show that Deputies Cian O'Callaghan and Neville, the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach and I all voted to reduce the excise duty but Deputy Doherty decided not to because he wanted to play party politics. He is now deciding that he wants to unilaterally run the Government from the Opposition benches. We are clear that we are going to take decisions. The Deputy has been doing a great job of riling everybody up, worrying them and trying to encourage protest again. He wants to get them all going again. Angry Pearse is not going to work any more. We are going to take a rounded, informed decision based on the evidence available to us as to what the most appropriate thing is. I do not know whether the Deputy is heading off for a long summer break but I am around if there is a need to respond to anything during the summer.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Is the Dáil going to sit?

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy should not worry. The Government has-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Sorry, is the Dáil sitting on 1 August?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Deputy, allow the Tánaiste.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Government has an ability to respond. The Deputy knows that.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Perhaps the Tánaiste will clarify. Is the Dáil now going to sit? Is this the Government announcing that the Dáil will be sitting on 1 August to respond?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Deputy Doherty, please.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Is that what the Tánaiste is going to say?

Deputy Simon Harris: What I am announcing is that the days of the Deputy coming into this House and trying to shout people down and bully them are over. I am speaking and the Deputy stood up and interrupted me. The situation is very clear. Let the people at home who are worried about their bills know that there is plenty of time before this Dáil goes into recess to make informed, evidence-based decisions. This Government acted to help people while the Deputy played party politics to rile people up. It has not worked.

Question No. 4 taken with Question No. 1.

Tax Code

5. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance his views on the most appropriate way to deliver a fair tax package for workers that ensures an equitable distribution of the benefit. [48240/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: The Tánaiste has made it public that he plans to bring forward tax cuts in this year's budget after leaving workers worse off in last year's budget. That is according not only to Sinn Féin but also to the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI. In the election campaign, the Government parties promised to bring forward tax cuts every year and broke that promise to workers and families. The fact that workers were left worse off last year is why it is even more important that any tax package for workers is fair and works for all workers. Does the Tánaiste accept we need a fair tax package? How does he see that being achieved?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy for the question. The Programme for Government: Securing Ireland's Future contains specific undertakings with regard to personal income tax. It commits to implementing progressive changes in taxation if the economy remains strong, including indexing credits and bands to prevent an increase in the real burden of income tax while, in the event of an economic downturn or unexpected deterioration, there will be postponements to income tax credits or bands, as there were in budget 2021.

To ease the burden facing average and middle-income earners, over successive budgets the previous Government, of which I was a member, substantially increased the entry point to the higher rate of income tax for all earners by €8,700 or approximately 25%. The main credits have also increased by €350, or approximately 21%. In line with the Government policy of ensuring full-time workers on the minimum wage remain outside the charge to the top rates of universal social charge, USC, the ceiling of the 2% USC rate band was increased by €6,898, or 34%, from 2020 to 2025. Budgets 2024 and 2025 also cumulatively reduced the 4.5% rate of USC to 3%.

As the Deputy will be aware, Ireland has a progressive income tax system. It is estimated that in 2026 approximately one third of taxpayer units will be outside the income tax and USC net altogether and, therefore, due to the progressivity of our income tax system, account should be taken of this in any analysis or commentary.

A number of targeted measures were introduced in budget 2026, including mortgage interest tax relief, the rent tax credit and the 9% VAT rate on gas and electricity bills.

I published Ireland's medium-term plan last December with the Minister, Deputy Chambers. It sets out a binding path for net public spending for the lifetime of this Government.

In the coming weeks, the summer economic statement will be published, which will outline the parameters for budget 2027, including the size of the tax package. Following the summer economic statement, as part of the budget process, my Department will conduct distributional impact assessments to analyse the impact of budget measures on Irish households. We will use the ESRI's tax benefit microsimulation model, simulating welfare, income tax, childcare and health policies, SWITCH, to model proposed tax measures to ensure their fairness. However, it is our intention to have a personal income tax package in the budget. We will outline the size of the tax measures in the summer economic statement. I look forward to debating them on budget day.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: When Fine Gael has brought forward tax packages, they have always been two-tier tax packages, which means those on the higher end benefit more than those on the lower end. About half of the workforce benefits far more than the other half. A worker on €50,000 gets a tax cut multiple times larger than a worker on €40,000. I understand the challenges in adjusting tax bands and adjusting for inflation. It is not simple, but there are ways in which it is possible. For example, more focus on the USC and tax credits would make a far better impact for those on lower and middle incomes than simply dealing with the bands. Will the Tánaiste ensure that the half of workers who earn €44,000 or less get a fair tax package compared with people who earn €50,000, €90,000 or €300,000? The packages the Government has brought forward have been unfair in the past, in that the half of the workforce that earns less than that level of €44,000-----

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----got far less than they should have.

Deputy Simon Harris: I appreciate some of the Deputy's comments about the challenges that exist. We live in a country where one third of people pay no income tax or USC. When we talk about progressivity we have to acknowledge that fact. We can argue about whether it is a good or bad thing, but approximately one third do not pay any income tax or USC. That has to be factored into any comments on progressivity.

Second, the entry point to the higher rate of tax is still too low. I think it was €33,000 in 2015. It is now €44,000. It is still below the average. I look to colleagues in the Labour Party, including Deputy Nash. I have heard the comments of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, ICTU, on this. It might suit Deputy Doherty to say "Oh Fine Gael", but it is ICTU that says the entry point to the higher rate of tax needs to be looked at. IBEC makes that point too. We

need to make sure wage growth in the economy, and thank God we are seeing wages rise in the economy, does not get outstripped by the taxman taking all the benefit of it.

The detail of the package is entirely a matter for the Government to consider in the round. The Government has not decided it, but we should not dismiss - I am not sure the Deputy is doing so, in fairness - the threshold point.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am not dismissing anything. What I am saying is that the Government has consistently brought forward tax packages that are two-tier. For example, the Tánaiste talked about the entry point to the higher rate. If that is focused on instead of USC or tax credits, there will be winners and losers. The winners will be the half of the population who earn more than €44,000 and the losers will be those who earn less than €44,000. What is the better way?

When I talk to constituents who earn €60,000 and would benefit from an increase to the entry point to the higher band, they do not really care whether it is the entry point to the band, or USC or tax credits. All they care about and know is that they are paying too much tax for what they are getting back. They want more money in their pockets at the end of the week, better services and all that. The fairest way to do that is to make sure the Government does not spend a large portion of what is available for tax reductions just on the workers who earn more than €44,000. USC is the best way to make sure there is an impact for all people. We have said clearly in our policy-----

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----that the first €45,000 of income should be exempt from USC. That can be started in an emergency budget.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: It should be followed up in the October budget. These types of measures benefit all workers as opposed to a proposal that will benefit only some.

Deputy Simon Harris: Another Thursday, another emergency budget. We cannot keep having calls for emergency budgets and mini-budgets every week. Come on. We just cannot. Will the Deputy please read the analysis from the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council and the Central Bank? To look for another budget every week-----

Deputy Pearse Doherty: I am not looking for another budget. I am looking for one.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy is doing it again. The budget will be in around 100 days' time. We need to get into an annual budget cycle. We should have a good, decent, robust debate about what the best composition of that is. I look forward to that very much, but we have to stop with this idea of an emergency budget. We have to run the country in a sustainable way.

We should not look at how we assist people purely through the tax system. When the Deputy talks about lower income people, he leaves out of the analysis the social welfare system we have in place, the significant safety net it provides and the many supports some lower income families receive, including the working family payment and the largest increase received. There are people today, who are not wealthy people, who got up at a ridiculous hour in the morning, sat in horrific commuter traffic and are looking for a bit of a break too. They are annoyed, as are their trade union representatives and employers, at the entry point to the higher rate of tax being too low.

We have not made any decisions in the round on this, but we should not be getting into divide and conquer. There is a legitimate policy debate about the threshold at which the higher rate of tax is paid.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Of course there is a legitimate policy debate. That is what we are having.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy is dismissing it.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Now you are interrupting me.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): Tánaiste.

Deputy Simon Harris: Apologies.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: That is the debate we are having. The reality is that some people win out more than others. That is also the reality. Let us not pretend that does not exist.

What I am saying is the best way to deal with it is through the USC. The people who earn €60,000 or €70,000 would benefit along with the people who earn €30,000 or €40,000, rather than if the Government overly focuses on the bands. I am not saying it should dismiss doing anything with the bands, but every time it has brought forward a package, it has been in that regard. That is why we need a fair budget.

I could stand here and remind the Tánaiste of his campaigning. I campaign for an emergency budget, but not a different budget every day. People need a cost-of-living intervention right now. They cannot wait until 1 January for tax adjustments to happen. That is legitimate. Do not tell me what I can and cannot do. I represent people who are pushed to the pin of their collar because of the Government's decisions and broken promises. Does the Tánaiste want me to remind him of them? One was that the Government would deliver a tax package every year for workers. It broke that promise. Remember the time the Tánaiste and Fine Gael paraded around with placards saying, "We will abolish the USC". Remember the pictures of that. That is another broken promise. I could list all that out, but what this question is about is delivering a fair tax package for workers-----

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----to make sure the Government does not deliver the two-tier system it has previously-----

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: -----and to impress on the Tánaiste that the USC and tax credits are the best way to deliver a fair package.

Deputy Simon Harris: The good thing about this country is that we have elections. We had two recently and the Deputy went to Galway extensively - he was there a lot - and told people to send Fine Gael a message, back the Sinn Féin emergency budget and vote for the Sinn Féin candidate and Sinn Féin lost the election, badly. In Dublin Central, the Sinn Féin leader's constituency, it lost the election badly, because people do not believe in this sort of divisive politics, where only Sinn Féin represents hard-working people. Who the hell does Deputy Doherty think the rest of us represent? Who does he think Deputies Nash, Cian O'Callaghan, Ardagh, Neville and I represent? We were all elected to this place and we all represent people to the best of our abilities. The Deputy's angry man routine and dismissiveness of the bona fides of everyone else in this place is getting a bit tiresome at this stage. We are all doing our best.

We will deliver a budget this year that will have a personal income tax package. We took a series of other decisions last year. People will debate the merits and demerits of them. I am happy to debate them too. This year, there will be a personal income tax package. There will also be other ways of assisting people, through the social welfare system, the child poverty work around the working family payment and things like childcare. There are lots of steps we can take together. We have not made any decisions and I do not dismiss the idea of tax credits or USC or thresholds. I just do not accept the idea that the threshold idea is a bad one and I think the Deputy is open to considering that too.

Budget 2027

6. **Deputy Joe Neville** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if his Department plans to review the current tax bands in the upcoming budget; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48498/26]

Deputy Joe Neville: My question also relates to tax measures. I am conscious that one third of people luckily do not pay tax. We have been supportive of the most vulnerable in our society as well. Does the Department plan to review the current tax bands in the upcoming budget?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Neville for the question. The programme for Government contains commitments on personal income tax. We have been clear that if we saw a significant economic deterioration, we would not be able to proceed with personal income tax measures, but I am pleased to inform the House and the Deputy that we will be in a position this year to deliver a personal income tax package. It is more important, quite frankly, than it has been in a long time. The cost-of-living challenge cannot be dealt with solely through the social welfare system, though it is important.

We have had good engagement with the people who we used to call the social partners and the people we meet through the Labour Employer Economic Forum, LEEF. There is widespread recognition that tax can play a helpful role in trying to assist people. We have made significant progress on income tax bands over the years. I think it was in 2015 that people paid the higher rate of tax at around €33,000. In most budgets over the course of the last Government, the threshold was increased and it is now €44,000. It is still below the OECD average.

That is a slightly crude figure because when you take into account our PRSI system it changes it a bit, but our entry point to the higher rate of tax is still too low. We will decide as a Government the tax package in the round. The next step will be the publication of the summer economic statement next month. That will outline roughly how much we intend to spend on public services and public expenditure and how much of a tax package we intend to do. There will be a real focus on a personal income tax package. The argument about entry points and thresholds is compelling. I am not saying it is the only thing to look at doing but it is compelling. There are a lot of people who feel if they get a promotion, work a few extra hours or get a pay rise - there is wage growth in the economy - the taxman is taking too much of that money back off them, which is not fair.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Tánaiste very much for his reply. We all know that luckily the country is going really well economically and we are all benefiting. Wages are increasing with that and therefore more people are getting captured at earlier tax levels than they could and should be. That is why I brought up the bands specifically. I am obviously very conscious of the increases in costs for every household. We need to ensure the bands, given the increase in wages, do not function like a stealth tax that means more people get captured before they should, and indeed end up with less money than they began with. I am a chartered accountant who worked on payroll and discussed salaries with many people, so I know the challenges people face. In my capacity I had a meeting with the Central Bank this week and IFAC last week, which brought home to me the requirement for the tax changes we might need to put in place in the coming budget.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Neville very much. To be helpful, we will see the tax strategy group papers published in the coming weeks and there will be the annual income tax paper from that group, which will set out information on the adjustment of income tax standard bands, including the estimated cost to the Exchequer. These publications are all based on the Revenue ready reckoner and are useful for all of us in this House to determine the different costs of different things. Based on Revenue's post-budget 2026 ready reckoner it was estimated that a €1,000 increase in the standard rate income tax band would cost about €230 million in the first year, so that gives an indication. Revenue will shortly publish its pre-budget 2027 ready reckoner. That, the tax strategy group papers and the summer economic statement will provide us all with an understanding of the space available for a tax package. We will then decide as a Government what the appropriate composition of that personal income tax package is and unveil it on 6 October.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Tánaiste for his reply. He gave extra detail about a €1,000 increase in the band costing €230 million. It gives us information about, to use a phrase that

was used here previously, the fiscal space we have. That space is due to how the country has been well-managed economically by the Tánaiste, this Government and previous governments. I am also conscious of what someone who previously sat in the Tánaiste's seat said about supporting the people who get up early in the morning. That is something we really need to do too and increasing the bands would be of great benefit to those people. There are a lot of people who get up early, have their families and are busy. Obviously, people may be building a future for themselves outside their families. They are the people we really want to have the ability to support in the upcoming budget, through the Government's good governance. I look forward to that and to being in a position where we can do that.

Deputy Simon Harris: I agree with Deputy Neville. Sometimes, we have debates in this House on taxation measures versus spending measures but it is not an either-or situation. We can help people through the income tax system and we should, for all the reasons the Deputy outlined, and will do that. There are also other issues the public want to see us make progress on with respect to the structural costs they face in their lives, whether it is the cost of the energy bill, childcare, access to disability services or the cost of education. This budget will need to be viewed in the round and the people and the Opposition will view it that way. We should be trying to look at both the tax side and the spending side and seeing together how we can put in place real measures that help. As the Deputy says, they get called different things by different parties in different electoral cycles. Whether it is the squeezed middle or the people who get up early in the morning we are all know who we are trying to help; hard-working people who are doing their best and want to get ahead, not just get by. They need us to use all the levers on the spending side and the tax side to try to make those structural changes to the cost base they face.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Financial Services

7. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the action he is taking to tackle dark money in the Irish financial system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48197/26]

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: There is a significant issue with the amount of criminal money laundering going through Europe. There is €647 billion in crime proceeds washed through Europe every year. We have €5 trillion in domiciled investment funds hosted in Ireland. The Garda has warned of an explosion in the recruitment of money mules. What is the Government doing to address dark money? I am aware of the action plan but there are significant gaps in it I wish to highlight, including on enforcement. What is Government doing to address that?

Deputy Simon Harris: I genuinely look forward to any discussion of how we do better and do more on this area, which is really important and of growing concern. It is important to note responsibility for various aspects of legislation and policy on combating money laundering, countering the financing of terrorism and the financing of weapons of mass destruction falls

across a number of Departments, including mine as well the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration, among others.

Notwithstanding this whole-of-government approach, my Department has a number of distinct but intersecting roles. It has a central co-ordination function through the national anti-money laundering steering committee, which brings together relevant Departments, State agencies and the private sector self-regulatory bodies in the legal and accountancy professions. It also has responsibility for aspects of the relevant legislation, in particular the transposition of the sixth anti-money laundering directive, in partnership with the Department of justice. My Department also co-ordinates Ireland's participation in the Financial Action Task Force which develops global standards for combating money laundering, the financing of terrorism and the financing of weapons of mass destruction. The Financial Action Task Force conducts periodic independent peer-based evaluations of countries to assess both their compliance with the task force's standards and the effectiveness of the measures a country has taken to combat money laundering, terrorism financing and proliferation financing. Ireland's next mutual evaluation will be in 2027 and 2028. In other words, we will be externally viewed starting next year to assess how we are getting on with this area.

Over the last two years, my Department has managed the preparation of Ireland's latest national risk assessment, which the Minister, Deputy O'Callaghan, and I jointly launched last week. The assessment is detailed. It includes 20 sectoral risk assessments, 12 of which are in the financial services sector, and in turn provides a basis to help inform our policy, regulatory and operational priorities. This is accompanied by a detailed action plan comprising 30 measures, which are being progressed across Government and other relevant stakeholders. Officials in my Department will lead delivery of 11 of these. These actions include progressing key measures such as strengthening frameworks on terrorism, enhancing sanctions, improving beneficial ownership transparency, etc. We have committed to reporting progress on these actions every six months to Cabinet and publicly.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: As the Tánaiste said, there are 30 actions in the action plan but none of them address the chronic under-resourcing of enforcement. This has been flagged for years and we have a situation where billions and billions are being funnelled through Ireland. The Garda has a backlog of tens of thousands of money laundering cases waiting to be examined. The financial intelligence unit and the Garda National Economic Crime Bureau are grossly under-resourced. It is fine to have the action plan and the aspirations but we have tens of thousands of unexamined cases. It has been flagged that the area is chronically under-resourced but nowhere in the action plan does the Government commit to putting the resources into enforcement, so it does not add up to much. The resourcing of enforcement has to be looked at if the Government is going to take this area seriously. I have no reason to think it is not but if it does not put the resources into enforcement, then I can legitimately ask how serious it is about this.

Deputy Simon Harris: It is a fair point. We have published an action plan with the 30 actions and the reporting structure every six months as well. We have to ensure that is adequately resourced. There are associated resource implications that arise from changes to Ireland's anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism, AML-CFT, regime due to the sixth anti-money laundering directive and also increased requirements from the Anti-Money

Laundering Authority, AMLA. In recent Government discussions we highlighted some of these issues as well. Of course, these will have to form part of the annual Estimates process through engagement with the Department of public expenditure. In this context, law enforcement agencies, the Gambling Regulatory Authority of Ireland and the Companies Registration Office may also be in scope. We have literally just published the plan. There is a commitment to work across Government on it. Any additional resourcing can and will be considered in the context of the budget.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The other key gap is the national risk assessment identified serious issues and significant risks with regard to crypto assets, yet the action plan only has two measures on such assets and misses a whole range of risks.

It misses, for example, any scrutiny of peel chains where criminals break large crypto amounts into small, tiny transfers to hide the trail. It misses any analysis of unhosted crypto wallets that are not tied to any regulated provider making transparency harder to trace, as well as any mention of the use of crypto to buy high-value goods, which is a common laundering method. It is fine to have the action plan and references to crypto but key crypto issues identified in the national risk assessment plan are missing from the action plan altogether. Why are they missing? Why are they not being addressed? Is the Tánaiste not concerned about these things, which were seriously flagged in the national risk assessment? How come they are not reflected in the action plan? Why have them in the national risk assessment but not in the action plan? How did that happen and why?

Deputy Simon Harris: It is a fair point to which I will seek a decent answer for the Deputy. I will come back to him in writing on it. I am concerned about the issues relating to crypto and some of the issues the Deputy has highlighted. I will get specialist advice as to our level of satisfaction that the actions are robustly dealing with them, or not.

I am also concerned about other recent developments we have seen in this country, including the recent examination of developments that we saw around a recent by-election. I asked my officials to complete an analysis of the situation. There are discussions ongoing at an EU level to determine whether financial market regulation should apply to certain transactions. This is an area that we need to look at. There is no current evidence that any of this reported activity arose in this jurisdiction but the level of focus, with the greatest respect to the Dublin Central by-election, from forces outside our jurisdiction is a significant cause for concern.

This is a fast-evolving area in general. Our action plan is an honest effort to try to co-ordinate on it, but we also need to be humble in terms of any good or positive feedback that comes forward regarding areas we can look at further. I will engage with the Deputy in writing on crypto.

Banking Sector

8. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance the number of offers made for PTSB prior to the launch of the formal sales process and to outline the engagement with the executive management of PTSB regarding the offers. [48249/26]

Deputy Pearse Doherty: We have seen a number of media reports – I am sure the Tánaiste has read them – about when the Government was approached with offers in relation to PTSB, and when that was communicated to the executive management of the bank. Will the Tánaiste provide clarity to the Dáil and clear this issue up? How many offers were made for PTSB prior to the launch of the formal sale process? Will the Tánaiste outline the engagement with the executive management of PTSB regarding those offers, as well as the timeline?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Doherty for the question. The Department received a wide range of proposals in relation to the State's banking investments over the years, as the Deputy will be aware. As part of their normal functions, officials explore and assess such proposals.

On 5 September 2025, the Department received a non-binding and indicative proposal in writing from Centerbridge Partners to acquire the Minister's stake in PTSB. The Department was of the view that the indicative proposal undervalued the Minister's stake in PTSB and informed PTSB of its decision to reject the proposal. Following internal governance, the Department advised Centerbridge Partners that the proposal did not provide a basis for engagement. That was the offer. Indeed, it is the only one that I am aware of that took place in advance of the formal sale process.

Subsequently, the board of PTSB launched a formal sale process on 30 October 2025 which was, of course, public and open to all bona fide strategic and financial investors. It was conducted by PTSB in accordance with the Irish takeover rules. Centerbridge Partners was one of the parties in that formal sale process. The Department believes that the process was fair, transparent and offered the greatest opportunity to canvas broad interest from potential bidders. The formal sale process resulted in the board of PTSB recommending a cash offer from BAWAG to shareholders.

BAWAG has set out a long-term ownership approach, including maintaining a strong and resilient Irish banking franchise, investing in the business, retaining the headquarters in Dublin, a branch footprint and safeguarding existing employment rights and pension arrangements in line with applicable law. BAWAG has also indicated its intention to leverage its broader European expertise to strengthen the bank's competitiveness, including in areas such as SME banking, energy efficiency financing and operational integration. These stated intentions formed part of the overall assessment of the bid.

The State's investment in PTSB was made during the financial crisis to safeguard the stability of the banking system and protect depositors. Since then, PTSB has returned to profitability, increased its balance sheet scale and strengthened its capital ratios. A sale of the State's investment is consistent with the objectives of recovering taxpayer funds that were used to rescue the banks. Through a combination of fees, dividend income, the bank levy and disposal proceeds, the State has recovered around €4 billion from its investment in PTSB. On an overall basis, this means the State is around €1.3 billion above breakeven on its €29.4 billion investment in AIB, Bank of Ireland and PTSB from direct shareholding linked income and has recovered a further €1.8 billion from the banking sector since the introduction of the bank levy.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Maybe the Tánaiste will clarify that Centerbridge Partners only made one offer. I think he suggested it was on 5 September last year. The public and other

shareholders of PTSB are looking at this sale and wondering why we are selling off a public asset on the cheap. When something looks like a bad deal, there is extra scrutiny on the process, and that scrutiny has led to journalists and shareholders looking back.

The CEO of PTSB, on an investor call last September, denied three times that there had been any approach, interest or conversations with potential buyers. He insisted three times that there had been no interest. It appears, however, that the Tánaiste has confirmed there has been interest in the case. How is it possible that the CEO could not have been aware that the private equity firm Centerbridge Partners made offers, and that those offers were communicated to the bank? At what level was this communication from the Government to the bank? Has the Government resolved the issue of how the CEO was not informed of that, or that he informed investors this did not happen?

Deputy Simon Harris: I am informed by my Department that there was one non-binding, indicative proposal received on 5 September 2025 from Centerbridge Partners to acquire the stake in PTSB. When the indicative proposal was received by the Department, it was assessed. The view was rightly taken that it did not adequately reflect the value of the State's shareholding in PTSB. The proposal was not pursued and, instead, the formal sale process was subsequently undertaken by PTSB in an open, competitive and transparent manner, which allowed a range of potential investors to participate, including Centerbridge Partners. That was the correct approach. It resulted in a recommendation from the board of PTSB in relation to the offer from BAWAG. That has satisfied the Government's ultimate objectives in this regard.

I am, of course, aware of media reports. Indeed, I have read them. I respectfully say that these are questions for the CEO of PTSB. I have found him to be an excellent CEO who has done an excellent job. From my Department's point of view, I am happy to account to the Dáil in terms of the factual situation of that offer received on 5 September 2025.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: With respect, it is more than just an issue for the CEO of PTSB. We are the majority shareholder of the bank and the Tánaiste is the person who holds the share on behalf of the Irish people. There is a genuine question here. Regardless of whether we believe that this has been sold on the cheap, it is a deal worth €1.6 billion. It is not a small amount of money. We have a situation where the State, as the largest shareholder, knew there had been an offer. The bank knew there had been an offer. There was an investor call in which investors asked whether there was interest or an offer. We are being told that the executive management of the bank knew about the offer but the CEO did not. That needs to be investigated.

As the largest shareholder, we also need to know whether staff of the Department of Finance listened in to that investor call in September or reviewed the transcripts when they were published. I have those transcripts in front of me. We need to know what action they took when they heard the CEO deny that there had been any interest. When he was asked whether there was any interest, communication or offer, the CEO, on three occasions, told investor after investor there was none. It appears that is not true. We need to get to the point of who knew what when. How could the CEO of a bank that is selling €1.6 billion of assets mislead, it appears, investors in that call? It appears the Government has not really done anything to follow up on it.

Deputy Simon Harris: I truthfully do not know the answer as to whether officials in the Department of Finance were on that call or reviewed that transcript. I am happy to find that out for the Deputy. I truthfully do not know that. I also cannot account for why the CEO of the bank said that on an investor call. I genuinely believe that it made no material difference to the formal sale process and recovering taxpayers' money that was invested in PTSB. A full, transparent and open process was undertaken, which ultimately led to a board recommendation from PTSB. However, in the interest of transparency, if there is information that my Department can make available to the Deputy on the questions he asked, I am happy to do that and correspond with him in that regard.

Tax Reliefs

9. **Deputy John Connolly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance when he will be making a recommendation with regard to any further extension of the tax and excise changes introduced on foot of the Middle East war; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48378/26]

Deputy John Connolly: I observed the interaction earlier in the question session between the Tánaiste and Deputy Doherty on this same issue. I very much welcome that the Government is going to bring clarity to this over coming days. It is as I expected because from the outset of the conflict in the Middle East, the Government said that we would observe the impact of the conflict on prices in Ireland and take the appropriate measures at the appropriate time. We have always said that we must be conscious that this conflict could prolong into the winter. As the uncertainty and volatility continues, this is prudent.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Connolly for his question and his comments, and that is the approach the Government is trying to take. None of this is easy for households or for businesses. War has caused havoc in the world and it has caused a shock to the global economy. Ireland, as a small open economy, is not immune from that. There is no government in the wide earthly world that can insulate its people, even if it wishes to, from the impact of that but what we have said from day one consistently across Government is that we will be nimble and agile in trying to respond to the issue and that we will always keep things under review.

I often get asked, and I can understand why, whether I will agree to this or that for a period of time and what I have always tried to say is that sometimes we have stop, take stock and decide what the appropriate action to take is. In the next couple of days the Government will decide what is now the appropriate thing to do.

We put a very large package of support in place. It is in place until 31 July. It is true that petrol and diesel prices are now lower than when we brought that in. As for whether they are lower by the 32 cent, they are not. As for whether we need to try to avoid a cliff edge, we do. As for whether we also need to be responsible for public money, the taxpayers' money, to give ourselves options for the budget, etc., we do too. This is a balance that we have to get right.

All the current legislation going through the Dáil is simply giving legislative underpinning to decisions we took many weeks ago. We will then update that decision in terms of what excise looks like post-31 July. We will do that in the coming days. We will do it in plenty of

time, before this House goes into recess. We will seek to avoid any sudden cliff edge for families and businesses.

Deputy John Connolly: I welcome that and I very much welcome the fact the Tánaiste has forecast that we want to avoid a situation where there would be a cliff edge, where suddenly there would be a massive increase in price again, which would impact on households, in particular, and people who depend on their cars because, as we know, unfortunately, the transport system in many parts of the country is not at the capacity we would like to see and people are reliant on private transport. Obviously, the tax and excise changes on fuel have an impact.

I refer to the legislative work that would need to be done before the Dáil rises on 16 July. We must ensure people are assured that throughout the period the Dáil is in recess that we have made provision to ensure we avoid that cliff edge.

Deputy Simon Harris: It is a fair question. What I am saying is that it is not possible for somebody to absorb the full 32 cent. I get that point but I also have to balance that with the fact the Deputy, on behalf of his constituents, Deputy McCormack, on behalf of his, and all of us on behalf of ours, will be looking for things to be done in the budget too. I cannot ignore the fact that the price of oil is now falling and the fact the Strait of Hormuz is currently open. I cannot ignore the cost, in that on the way in today, I saw the cost of diesel is now below the cost of petrol. The situation is different factually to when we brought in the original package and we need to work our way through that in the coming days.

There is a number of different ways the Government can do that. It can decide to amend, at the appropriate point, the legislation going through the Dáil. That might be the most efficient way should the Government decide it wishes to take action. The Government can decide to bring forward further financial resolutions and the likes, too. The cleanest way might be that before the legislation passes through both Houses of the Oireachtas, the Government makes a determination but that involves a whole-of-government conversation which I am currently engaged in with colleagues.

Deputy John Connolly: The final clarity I would seek is in terms of the figure the Department of Finance has put out consistently about the full cost of these measures as being €750 million. Are we making provision, given the fact there may be consequences and there may be a necessity to extend these measures? The Tánaiste is talking about the prices having come down somewhat and maybe ameliorating the change but have we made provision? Are we contemplating what the full cost to the Exchequer might be if the necessity arises to continue these measures for an extended period, given the volatility that seems to exist in the conflict in the Middle East and the uncertainty it may continue to cause for some time? The Tánaiste is correct. All TDs will be coming to his Department with demands for the budget but I want to make sure the Department is fully aware of what this potential cost might be in terms of budget provision.

Deputy Simon Harris: It is a fair question. Thankfully, as a country, we have had an ability to bring in a very significant package, one of the largest packages in the European Union, without having to borrow for it. Our nearest neighbour, the UK, brought in a much smaller

package per head of population and had to go to the markets and borrow for it. I think it got charged approximately 5% for the luxury of that. The fiscal reserves we built up as a country - the surplus we are running in a growing economy - have enabled us to act but there is no consequence-free decision on expenditure either, as the Deputy and I both appreciate.

The current package has cost approximately €772 million. That is made up of €150 million for the original excise duties to the end of May; the €139 million when we decided to extend them to the end of July; €121 million from the further excise reductions we put on top of that; €22 million from the carbon tax deferral; €10 million for the diesel rebate; €40 million for the National Oil Reserves Agency, NORA, levy change; €70 million for the fuel allowance expansion; €120 million for the transport scheme; and €100 million for the agriculture scheme. That gets you to €772 million.

What we need to decide to do next needs careful consideration and a balanced approach to try to avoid that sudden cliff edge for people but also to try to be nimble and agile in our response. We will work through it all in the next few days.

Tax Reliefs

10. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance for an assessment of the full-year cost in 2027 of the reduction in VAT for the hospitality sector to 9%; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48323/26]

Deputy Ged Nash: The hospitality VAT rate cut will be introduced from 1 July, next Wednesday. Of course, we all know that for every tax cut there is a consequent cost for the taxpayer. Can the Tánaiste put on the record of the House his assessment of the full-year of this particular VAT cut?

Deputy Simon Harris: As the Deputy will be aware, the 9% VAT rate will be reintroduced for hairdressing services and for restaurant and catering services in the food-related hospitality sector from 1 July 2026. We have different views on this. I am very pleased that this is happening. The decision reflects the Government's commitment to supporting employment in sectors that are highly labour-intensive and form a key part of the domestic economy.

I am aware the Deputy and I have different views on it. In my view, it reflects a need that has been recognised in the programme for Government to support SMEs, especially those in the retail, tourism and hospitality sectors. The programme for Government notes the increased cost pressures on these sectors and states that the Government will bring forward measures that will entail changes to VAT.

The vast majority of businesses within this sector are small businesses. They are spread across the whole State. All of these businesses employ people whose jobs I and the Government are trying to protect and sustain in the time ahead and the most important thing at the moment in the global environment we live in is to protect and retain those jobs. The available Central Statistics Office, CSO, data for the food and catering and accommodation sectors indicate that over 99% are SMEs with over half of those businesses being microenterprises with less than ten employees.

The estimated full year cost for 2027 of the 9% VAT rate being applied to food and catering services is €633 million. The estimated cost of the hairdressing element is a further €48 million. The total full-year cost, to answer Deputy Nash's question, is estimated to be €681 million.

In making any decision in relation to VAT rates or other taxation measures, the Government must balance the costs of the measures against their impact. As outlined in last year's budget, the objective of the measure is to try to support businesses in services sectors, such as hospitality, who are facing increased cost pressures - they are even more increased now than at the time of the last budget. This measure is expected to support them and over 150,000 jobs they support and sustain across the country.

Deputy Ged Nash: The Tánaiste knows well and acknowledged that we have a difference of opinion on the best way in which we can support those jobs. I firmly believe, and I stand over the position, that this is not the best way to do that and is not the best way to allocate finite public resources in terms of supporting the subsectors of that sector that we are all concerned, that is, the small microenterprises that keep our towns and villages across the country going. In the Labour Party's view, the best way to do that is to target supports from the perspective of energy supports, training, staff retention and, indeed, a wholesale analysis and review of the commercial rates sector. We believe that is the best way to support those companies that we are all concerned about.

Of course, there is a consequence for every decision that we take. There was a limited amount of resources available for a tax package last year, and there will be this year and going forward. The impact of making this decision last year meant that there was no indexation of personal tax rates, bands and credits and the Tánaiste has put on the record that is something he wants to address this year. That comes, of course, at a cost too.

Deputy Simon Harris: While I vehemently disagree with the Deputy on this, and he vehemently disagrees with me on my position on it, I do not doubt his bona fides on it. Nobody, neither nor the Deputy, is suggesting that we have a monopoly on trying to support jobs. The Deputy wants to do it as do I. We all want to sustain employment. I accept that point but we have a difference of view on how to go about it.

I am very blunt and honest about this. I campaigned in an election and I stood in cafés, restaurants and hairdressers and I told people that if they voted for me and put my party back in government, we would pursue this measure, as did my coalition colleagues. We are now pursuing the measure. That is important. There is a democratic link, I suppose, to the programme that we offered people in the general election and the composition of this Government as well.

There is a cost. There is a cost to everything the Government does. There is a cost to not doing things too. I cannot misrepresent the previous budget. In fairness, we did not know about the war in Iran at the time of the previous budget but the pressure on these businesses has got even higher since then. The certainty we can provide the café owner, the restaurant owner and the hairdresser in our constituencies and communities that their VAT bill will, effectively, be permanently reduced from next week will, I genuinely believe, be a welcome relief to many of them.

10 o'clock

Deputy Ged Nash: Of course it will, and who would not want free money? However, that does not address the structural problems we have in the hospitality sector. We had a VAT rate cut of one form or another in place for the vast majority of the past 15 or 16 years. In fact, the Labour Party helped to introduce that back in 2011 to ensure we could generate some jobs in a sector that could quickly add them, and it absolutely did, as the evidence suggests. However, notwithstanding that there are subsets of the hospitality sector that are in difficulty, there is always churn in the sector more broadly. That is not me being callous about it; that is the reality of business. We cannot continue to permanently support the bottom line of every business. This is a place where we need to have hard conversations with businesses and workers about the finite resources we have. Is this the best way to use the resources we have?

We will have little change out of €2.5 billion between now and 2030 from this VAT cut. My only concern is whether this is the best use of public resources, given this is a sector that all the evidence suggests is, thankfully, adding jobs, not losing them.

Deputy Simon Harris: The Deputy would not be doing his job if he was not scrutinising the decisions we make; that is his job. I believe it is a good use of taxpayers' money because the cost of this needs to be seen alongside the amount of income tax and other taxes these businesses and their employees are going to create. When I go back to my community and constituency and go into the local café, I know they will feel some sense of relief that some Bill is coming down the line. What annoyed me a lot about the 9% VAT rate in the recent period, though not nearly as much as it annoyed people in the hospitality sector, was this constant annual anxiety of whether the Government would roll it over for another year. At least, we are providing certainty now for a landscape. I believe this is the appropriate rate at which VAT should be levied in these sectors. There is much talk about the hospitality sector. Hairdressing probably does not get mentioned as much, but it is also an important cost base. There are lots of people working in these sectors, including part time, and there will be lots of young people getting summer jobs working in them as well. The hospitality sector, by which I do not mean hairdressers, is disproportionately represented in rural communities and the CSO data shows that those are overwhelmingly SMEs. The Deputy and I have a difference of view, although there may not be any differences between us about where we want to get to. That is my position.

Insurance Industry

11. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance when the Cabinet subgroup on insurance reform will next meet; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48365/26]

Deputy Tony McCormack: The Tánaiste and I will know that the cost of insurance for families and businesses is probably one the biggest costs every year, be it car insurance, home insurance or general business insurance. Can the Tánaiste indicate when the Cabinet subgroup on insurance reform will next meet and will he make a statement on the matter?

Deputy Simon Harris: I can indeed. I thank Deputy McCormack for his question. I see there are a lot of students in the Public Gallery. I am not sure what school they are from, but they are very welcome. They picked a lovely sunny day to come into the Dáil. I thank them for being here and hope they enjoy their summer holidays, which are coming shortly.

As the Deputy will be aware, the programme for Government commits to maintaining the Cabinet committee subgroup on insurance reform to ensure insurance issues continue to receive strong attention, but also effective cross-government co-ordination. I chair that Cabinet subgroup, which meets on a regular basis to advance the action plan for insurance reform, but also to review progress made by each Minister in delivering his or her assigned actions. There is a responsibility on many Departments in this respect and the Cabinet committee provides us with an opportunity to bring people together.

The most recent meeting of the subgroup took place last month. Several priority actions have been set out in the action plan, which are focused on areas where the greatest impact on transparency, affordability and availability of insurance can be achieved. As part of this, a new motor insurance transparency code was launched on 2 March 2026. I thank my colleague, the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, for his work on that. The code is designed to enhance trust, clarity, transparency and understanding. The idea is that people should get, with their premium, a piece of paper explaining the breakdown, composition and rationale behind it.

Legislation to safeguard access to mortgage protection insurance for cancer survivors is also progressing through the Oireachtas. The Bill has passed through all Stages of Dáil Éireann and is making its way through Seanad Éireann. It is my intention, with the co-operation of everyone, that this be passed through the Oireachtas and signed into law this summer. This will be very important.

As the Deputy will be aware, this legislation builds on the voluntary code of practice that is currently in place and which was issued by Insurance Ireland in December 2023. The idea is that a cancer diagnosis should be disregarded, where the person has got through their cancer journey, for the purpose of mortgage protection. It sets out a reduction in the required remission period for cancer survivors from seven to five years, as well as an increase in the sum assured threshold from €500,000 to €650,000.

Work is also ongoing with the office to promote competition in the insurance market to enhance competition in the insurance market. We are also doing a lot of work on flood insurance and the flood insurance protection gap. The committee will meet again in formal session in September.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I welcome the Tánaiste's response and the work that has been undertaken on insurance reform in recent years. However, many businesses, sporting organisations, community groups and voluntary bodies continue to raise concerns with me and other TDs about the cost and availability of insurance. Will the Tánaiste specifically outline the key priorities the Cabinet subgroup will consider in its next meeting? Will it examine whether the savings arising from the reforms already introduced are being passed on through lower premiums? What further measures are under consideration to improve affordability?

Deputy Simon Harris: Deputy McCormack is right. We have introduced significant reform in this sector and we now need the industry to ensure the benefit of those reforms are passed onto the customer. We have seen some progress in some areas but, frankly, we have not seen enough. We are very carefully monitoring this in the Cabinet committee. We are often asked for a long list and told if we do A, B, C and D, the premiums will fall. However, as the Deputy rightly suggested, we need to show this is actually happening.

I am also conscious there needs to be greater transparency on this. The big priorities are seeing the motor insurance transparency code; passing the right to be forgotten Bill regarding cancer survivors; looking at the national claims information database regarding the cost of motor insurance and other trends; monitoring those trends in Ireland and internationally; making progress on the flood insurance gap; and, generally, driving delivery of our insurance reform agenda and the action plan for insurance reform out to 2029.

On foot of Deputy McCormack raising this issue, I will ask the Minister of State, Deputy Troy, to write to him with a comprehensive update on the delivery of that action plan. It might be of use to some of those organisations the Deputy mentioned.

Deputy Tony McCormack: Small businesses are particularly vulnerable to increases in insurance costs. Unlike larger firms, they often have limited purchasing power and little capacity to absorb significant increases in premiums. For many, insurance is now one of their largest operating costs. Will the Tánaiste outline whether the Cabinet subcommittee is considering any targeted measures to improve competition and affordability in the insurance market for small businesses, in particular the scope for additional reforms to ensure smaller enterprises benefit fully from the Government's insurance reform programme?

Deputy Simon Harris: This is a big area we are focusing on. I am conscious insurance costs are significant for all businesses, but they can have a disproportionate significance for smaller businesses, where a hike or an extra premium cost that was not expected could be the difference between viability or not. We have all met businesses in that place.

Attracting more competition into the market is very important and helpful, and we are actively seeing what can be done in that space. Obviously, those are commercial decisions but making sure we keep our environment correct so that it is good and transparent and, at the same time, competitive for people to come in is a key issue. We will continue to work very closely on the concerns of small businesses in this area. The Minister of State, Deputy Troy, will keep Deputy McCormack up to date.

Tax Exemptions

12. **Deputy Michael Cahill** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will be reviewing the group B and group C thresholds under capital acquisitions tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48383/26]

Deputy Michael Cahill: I raise again the issue of inheritance tax and the anomalies that exist for parents and their children, on one hand, and childless adults, their brothers, sisters, nieces and nephews, on the other.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Cahill for the question. This is an important issue on which I have had several meetings. Capital acquisitions tax, CAT, is a tax which applies to both gifts and inheritances, and is charged at a rate of 33%. For CAT purposes, the relationship between the person giving a gift or inheritance and the person who receives it determines the maximum amount, known as the group threshold, below which CAT does not arise. The group thresholds were most recently increased in budget 2025.

Deputy Cahill will remember the group A threshold increased to €400,000 from €335,000. This broadly applies to where the beneficiary is a child of the disponer. The group B threshold increased to €40,000 from €32,500. This threshold applies where the beneficiary is a brother, sister, niece, nephew or lineal ancestor or descendant of the disponer. The group C threshold increased to €20,000 from €16,250, with this threshold applying in all other cases.

Along with tax-free group thresholds, various reliefs and exemptions are available in relation to CAT, including agricultural relief, business relief, the small gift exemption, favourite niece or nephew relief and the dwelling house exemption. It is important from a tax policy perspective to maintain stability and certainty and to ensure that the CAT thresholds are appropriately set in the context of the range of reliefs available.

There is a significant associated cost with further changes to the group thresholds, whether it involves increasing thresholds or reforming the inheritance tax category system, for example, bringing those who are childless within the scope of the group A threshold. Department of Finance officials produced a tax strategy group paper last year which examined that as well. We will do this again as part of our tax strategy group papers this year, and publish information and costings.

I recognise the burden of this tax. I have had some good meetings with groups which are concerned about this. The Deputy should note that capital acquisitions tax group thresholds are kept under review annually through the finance Bill and annual budget.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I have raised this issue on a number of occasions. It is a huge issue and there are anomalies. We need to address this. Currently, children inheriting a family home from their parents are exempted from inheritance tax up to €400,000, which, considering the price of homes currently, is undoubtedly far too low. However, a major anomaly exists when it comes to childless couples and individuals, who often decide to leave their home and assets to their nieces and nephews, brothers and sisters. Unlike children inheriting from parents, nieces, nephews, brothers and sisters are only entitled to €40,000 tax-free, leaving them with a significant tax bill which often precludes these individuals from affording the property. At a time when this country is in the midst of a housing crisis, should we not be doing everything possible to ensure that families are able to afford to keep their homes, instead of penalising those who do not have children and those who are left assets by their uncles and aunts? I call on the Tánaiste, in his capacity as Minister for Finance, to reduce inheritance tax, which is charged at a flat rate of 33% of the value of assets exceeding specific relationship-based tax-free thresholds, and to significantly increase those thresholds, of €400,000 in the case of a son or daughter.

Deputy Simon Harris: I appreciate this is a serious issue which causes stress, strain and worry to many people. I have had much engagement with colleagues and groups about this and continue to do that. We keep all these issues under review as part of the finance Bill each year. The tax strategy group will again look at these issues this year. We will publish data, information and costings that can help to inform the debate in these Houses. The only thing I have to say, to be honest with people, is that some of these moves are quite expensive. We will have to decide as a collective, whatever the size of the total tax package in this budget is, which we will publish in the summer economic statement, how we divide that, with all of the competing demands regarding tax. I am aware of the burden that this places on people. There were significant increases in thresholds under the previous Government. I hope that we can make some progress on this over the course of this Government. Whether it is in this budget or other budgets is a matter for the Government to consider in the time ahead.

Deputy Michael Cahill: I believe we should separate the limit on the house from any other inheritance. The €40,000 cap in the case of a niece, nephew, brother or sister is absolutely ridiculous and discriminatory. In the upcoming budget, I propose that the Minister increase the €40,000 cap and we separate the house from the inheritance. The bands are less today than they were 15 or 16 years ago, as they were reduced during the recession. If the value of the house and any other assets is over €600,000, a son or daughter is liable for a €66,000 capital acquisition tax on the very same inheritance. A niece, nephew, brother or sister is liable for €184,8000. Our parents, grandparents and their parents before them worked extremely hard and paid their taxes to provide for their families and build family homes. The same applies to our uncles and aunts and their people before them. They too worked extremely hard and paid their taxes. I believe this issue needs to be addressed urgently. It is also a huge issue for the farming community and farm succession. It is a form of double taxation. I have a huge issue with it.

Deputy Simon Harris: Deputy Cahill certainly gives that very clear impression. I know this is a serious issue and I hear from colleagues on the Government and Opposition benches about it. I share some of that concern too. In the specific role that I hold, I have to be honest about balancing the competing demands. We will have a certain amount available for tax measures and we will have many things that different people want to do. Inheritance tax is one that is coming up. Personal income tax is also coming up. We will have to look at all of this in the round.

The Deputy and I have both been in government in the past, so we have made progress on this issue, including in the previous Dáil. This Government has four more budgets to deliver, so the next budget will be one of four. How we divide up the tax package and what we can or cannot do to reform CAT this year will have to be decided and informed by discussions we have about the priorities. I am not ruling anything out today. I know people who have concerns about this will also understand that it is a matter for 6 October, when we unveil the budget, from a tax and spending point of view. I will continue to engage with Deputy Cahill.

Universal Social Charge

13. **Deputy Catherine Callaghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance his plans for the reduction or abolition of USC in budget 2027; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48308/26]

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I ask the Minister his plans for the reduction or abolition of USC in budget 2027, in particular, if there is scope to reduce the USC that is payable on occupational pensions for people aged over 66.

Deputy Simon Harris: As I know Deputy Callaghan is aware, the programme for Government and our party manifesto commit to making progressive changes regarding income tax. The aim here is to make sure that people can keep some more of their own money. People in this country still feel that when they work hard, play by all the rules and then look at the slip at the end of the week or month and see the take-home pay figure, they are left struggling to get by, let alone get ahead. We want to make progress on that over the course of the next four budgets. There was not a personal income tax package in the previous budget. There will be one in this budget. I expect and hope there will be one in each of the next four budgets. Over the course of those four budgets, we can make real progress. In the previous Dáil, to give an example, we managed to get from a situation where people were paying the higher rate of tax at €33,000 and brought that up to the higher rate of tax being paid at €44,000. We also made some progress on the USC in the previous Dáil when we saw the middle rate of USC, of 4.5%, reduce by 1.5 percentage points to 3%.

About a third of people are not paying any income tax or USC, which we need to factor in too. When people talk about progressivity, we need to balance that. The USC is an individualised tax, which means that a person's liability for the tax is determined on the basis of his or her individual income or personal circumstances. It is therefore seen by some as a more sustainable charge than those it replaced, and it is applied at a lower rate on a wide base. The USC yield for last year was €5.6 billion. For this year, it is projected to be €5.9 billion, so there is a significant yield. What we decide to do on personal income tax, whether on income thresholds, tax credits or the USC, will be considered in the weeks ahead. The ultimate aim will be to see how we can most help people who are either working hard or the people who, as the Deputy recognised today, have worked hard with respect to their net income. We will consider all the options in the round.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: I acknowledge all the work that has been done to date. I am sure the Minister hears from his constituents as regularly as I do that the fact that the USC was first introduced in 2011 as a temporary measure but is still with us 15 years later has made this particular tax a point of contention. I absolutely acknowledge the reality that there are many major investments into public services and infrastructure projects across the country that were only possible because of this tax, which, as the Minister mentioned, will bring in €5.9 billion this year.

The medium-term fiscal and structural plan, which the Minister published in December, is a strong statement of the Government's intent and ambition to achieve key social and economic targets. Of course, it is essential that under this plan, our public finances remain stable, resilient and ready, which goes to the Minister's point that there is a need to decide how exactly we make changes in the upcoming budget. While the USC will play a key role in delivering on

this plan, I wonder, as we continue to experience a budget surplus, if there might be room to alleviate the pressure this tax places on certain sectors. For instance, would the Minister consider measures to increase the income disregard for USC or to reduce the amount payable on pension contributions at this time?

Deputy Simon Harris: I have to give the annoying answer that we will consider all of these matters in the budget. I do not want to rule anything in or out today, other than to say a couple of things. The Deputy is right to acknowledge the burden that people feel from taxation. She is also right to acknowledge, very fairly, the benefit that we see from the taxes that people pay. The USC is expected to bring in €5.9 billion this year. It would be a very different challenge if we did not have that almost €6 billion. The next staging post as regards the total amount available for tax measures will be the summer economic statement in July. That will outline how much we intend to put aside for tax measures. We can then start to have an informed debate about the best way to spend that money and the best policy options. In general, regarding the surplus, I am pleased to live in a country where we have an economic surplus. It comes with challenges, but it is much better to have a challenge than a deficit. I am conscious that some of that surplus is based on a temporary windfall tax and, therefore, a more appropriate use of it is to put it into our investment funds to deliver infrastructure and deal with future demographics.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: It is really hard to argue with that point of view. Above all, I know that the Government is dedicated to delivering on the commitments made in the programme for Government, which will work towards a fairer, more equal Ireland. One of the key components of the programme is a commitment to progressive changes to personal income tax, which I am glad the Minister has recognised will happen, and to ensure that, as we push forward and grow our economy, nobody is left behind.

In budget 2026, the Government lived up to those commitments. It is important that we note that. It raised the 2% USC tax band up to €28,700. This measure meant and means that a full-time worker on minimum wage will not be pushed into the higher 3% tax rate. That allows for a meaningful increase in take-home pay. Across the country and in my own constituency of Carlow-Kilkenny, there is an appetite for similar measures to be considered in this year's upcoming budget. Is further indexation planned?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Callaghan for acknowledging that there will be a personal income tax package. The aim is that it will deliver in line with the programme for Government commitments around progressive changes. We will look at the various options in the round. We will decide them on 6 October and will have plenty of opportunities to engage directly and to engage through this structure in advance of that. The point the Deputy made about the minimum wage increases not being gobbled up for low-income workers by USC is important. That is a principle that we have had for the last number of years and is certainly one that I would hope we could continue. There is another issue and I will say this honestly. Around a third of people are not paying any income tax or USC. I do not say that in a judgmental way but sometimes the some of the low-income workers we want to help have to be helped in ways other than the income tax system too. I said this earlier, but I really believe it. While I firmly believe a personal income tax package can play a role in assisting people with the cost of living

and we will have one, it will also need to be supplemented by what we can do on the spending side to reduce structural costs that families face in areas like childcare, an issue I know the Deputy is passionate about with the carers' allowance. We will see the carers' allowance income threshold increase next month as an example. We need to look at all of this in the round. I look forward to continued engagement in the time ahead.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy David Maxwell): We only have a few minutes left, but I will let Deputy Murphy ask his question and the Tánaiste reply.

Tax Code

14. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Finance if he will introduce a wealth tax in budget 2027; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48192/26]

Deputy Paul Murphy: Eleven Irish billionaires now own more than wealth than two thirds of the population. Half of the population owns less than 10% of the total wealth. It is time for a wealth tax. A wealth tax on the richest 1% could raise €9 billion. At a time when so many people are suffering in one of the richest countries in the world, is it not time to introduce one?

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank the Deputy. As he will be aware, wealth is already taxed in a number of ways in Ireland. These include capital gains tax, CGT, capital acquisitions tax, CAT and local property tax. Stamp duty also acts as a tax on wealth, including that charged on the acquisition of shares, stocks and marketable securities of Irish registered companies, and on the acquisition of property both residential and non-residential. The revenue raised from a wealth tax, regardless of the form it takes, may not be additional to that raised by the existing forms of wealth taxation, as the revenues from those taxes could be impacted by the introduction of a wealth tax.

In looking at the question of wealth taxes, the Commission on Taxation and Welfare's 2022 report identified challenges that would impede the implementation of a wealth tax. Its conclusion was that a new tax on net wealth should not be introduced without first attempting to substantially amend Ireland's existing taxes on capital and wealth. The commission argued that, as an alternative to introducing a new tax on wealth, CGT and CAT could be re-examined. These are existing taxes on wealth that have well-established but distinct bases and are well understood in their operation. A 2024 report by the Parliamentary Budget Office entitled "An Overview of Taxes on Wealth in Ireland" noted, among other things, that a specific wealth tax risks an increased concentration of overall tax receipts on a relatively small proportion of taxpayers. It proposed base-broadening measures to increase the number of taxpayers and to diversify revenue sources.

It is important to note that Ireland has one of the most progressive taxation systems and social transfers of any EU or OECD country, which contributes to the redistribution of income and the reduction of income inequality. In 2016, my Department worked with the ESRI to conduct a research project into the distribution of wealth in Ireland and the potential implications of a wealth tax. Recognising the passage of time that has elapsed since this research project was undertaken, the ESRI is currently conducting analysis under its joint research programme. This will include scenario and distributional analysis under a range of

wealth tax scenarios. A draft paper will be completed before the end of the year and I will consider the analysis in due course. I do not plan on introducing a wealth tax in budget 2027.

Deputy Paul Murphy: We heard this week from Barnardos that, in Ireland, one of the richest countries in the world, 30% of parents say they do not have enough food to feed their children. A total of 44% of parents - almost one in two parents - said they have to cut back themselves so that their kids have enough to eat. That is at one side of the pole of Irish capitalism. On the other side is the 11 billionaires who are richer than 66% of the population. Eleven people are richer than two thirds of the population put together - 3.5 million people. That is up from nine billionaires in 2024. The richest two billionaires have more wealth than the bottom 50%. That is an Irish expression of a global trend, where billionaire wealth grew three times faster in 2025 than the average annual rate of the previous five years. We now have the world's first trillionaire, although, because of the share prices, he may not be a trillionaire at this moment, but it speaks to the massive inequality. A wealth tax, a tax on assets of the multimillionaires and billionaires in this country, is one way to begin to tackle this inequality and to put money back into people's pockets.

Deputy Simon Harris: I thank Deputy Murphy for his contribution. I have already outlined the Commission on Taxation and Welfare's 2022 report and the issues that it suggested would impede the implementation of such a tax, as well as the Parliamentary Budget Office report from 2024. I have also outlined how we have one of the most progressive taxation systems and social transfer systems in the EU and the OECD and the research work being carried out by the ESRI. I have no doubt that this is an issue Deputy Murphy will return to again when we have a longer time to discuss it and engage.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Housing Policy

77. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to set out his response to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage's report on homelessness published on 18 June 2026. [48577/26]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: Last Thursday, the Oireachtas housing committee published an important report on homelessness. At the centre of that report is the call for the introduction of an emergency package of measures to prevent families and single people from becoming homeless, but also to get people out of emergency accommodation more quickly. Now that the Minister has had at least a week to consider the report, will he set out his initial response to its 14 recommendations? Will he let the House know whether it is his intention to bring forward an emergency response to finally get to grips with the ever-deepening homelessness crisis?

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy James Browne): Supporting individuals and families experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness is an absolute priority for me, my Department and Government. I welcome the committee's focus on this important area. Indeed, many of the recommendations put forward are addressed in our

new housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities, and are being progressed by my Department in collaboration with other Departments, local authorities and their service delivery partners.

The report calls for a greater focus on prevention. There are many prevention initiatives already under way in the Department and across government, including the provision of social and affordable housing, HAP and homeless HAP, and our strong tenancy protection legislation. I recognise that more needs to be done and a co-ordinated approach is required right across government. That is why a cross-departmental working group was established to drive the development of a prevention framework. The first draft of the framework is being considered by working group members and the framework will be in place this year.

The report also recognises the importance of a continued focus on measures to address youth homelessness and calls for the development of a child and family homelessness strategy. Again, work is well under way in these two important areas as committed to in the housing plan. I am establishing a standing sub-group of the national homeless action committee to ensure a continued focus on youth homelessness and my Department, in partnership with Department of the Taoiseach, will shortly publish a cross-departmental child and family homelessness action plan.

Many other actions are under way that speak to the recommendations in the report, including the development of the of the housing delivery action plans, a review of the housing assistance payment and the continued funding of the second-hand acquisition scheme, including tenant in situ acquisitions.

Ultimately, increased supply is key to addressing homelessness, meeting need and addressing the challenges in the housing market. The new housing plan aims to deliver 300,000 new homes in the period to 2030, including 72,000 social homes and 90,000 starter homes. This means 12,000 new social homes will be delivered on average each year to the end of 2030.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: It is simply not the case that the Minister's Department is already undertaking the key actions recommended in this report. If that were the case, we would not have wasted our time producing the report. Month on month, the number of adults, children, single people and pensioners falling into emergency accommodation is growing. That means the core recommendation of the report that we now need an emergency response seems to be ignored by the Government. There is an explicit call to fully reinstate the funding for social housing acquisitions, including for housing first and tenant in situ, and to remove the restrictions, something the Minister has set his face against, which is why the number of such acquisitions halved last year on the year before, resulting in many more people becoming homeless.

Crucially, the volume of social homes that is being delivered is not meeting the need. In fact, on the basis of the most recent summary of social housing needs assessments, it will take 55 years to clear current and emerging social housing need. People are waiting ten and sometimes 14 years plus. I would really encourage the Minister to put in place a plan because if he is to have any hope of ending long-term homelessness by 2030 there needs to be a plan with clear targets. That is not in place at the moment and that is why our committee has recommended the 14 points in last week's homelessness report.

Deputy James Browne: We take the report very seriously and are giving it very serious consideration. Many of the recommendations in it are already in place or are being put in place. We are treating this as an emergency. I have already outlined many of the measures we are taking to make sure we address the situation where we have a very high level of homelessness. One person in homelessness is one too many. We have a very high number in emergency accommodation - I acknowledge that. That is why we need to do even more. I am treating it as an emergency. We are putting in emergency measures to tackle homelessness. Ultimately, we have to drive supply; that is how we will address all the key issues for people who are finding themselves in emergency accommodation and State-supported living as a result of not being able to have somewhere to live. In terms of homelessness, we cannot deal with everybody as a single group. There are those who need more targeted measures. Those suffering from trauma, mental health or addiction issues need very particular supports and we are putting those in place as well.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: The report called for the Minister to extend the youth homelessness strategy out to 2030. My understanding is that despite the fact the strategy expired last year, there is no intention to extend it. Yes, the Minister is working on the child homelessness strategy but there is no sight of it. Will it be out this year? Is there a clear timeline? Can the Minister confirm that?

On the housing action delivery plans, it is still not clear whether that will specify not just the number of one, two and three beds but also, for example, very clear targets for every local authority for people with physical and intellectual disabilities as well as right-sizing requirements. More crucially, those plans will not be based on objective need because they will ignore about half of the gross social housing need in the functional areas of the local authorities. There is no talk from the Department about better co-ordinating and ensuring the Minister's counterparts in the Department of Health and the HSE provide the wraparound supports to sustain tenancies beyond where they currently are. Yes, the Minister or the Housing Agency is reviewing HAP limits but we have no idea where that is at. Of course, two key recommendations, namely, the need for at least consideration of the re-introduction of emergency ban on no-fault evictions and a referendum on the right to housing, are not on the Minister's agenda. Again I ask when will he introduce an emergency response, above and beyond what he is doing, to start seeing the homeless numbers fall?

Deputy James Browne: We are dealing with it as an emergency response. Last year, we saw a 20% increase in housing delivery overall and the highest number of social houses built in a single year in the history of the State. We are putting in record funding to address the housing crisis. Many of the measures highlighted in the report are already in the process of being implemented.

I would remind the Deputy that, in his own housing plan, he proposes winding down the tenant in situ scheme – something he conveniently forgets every time he raises that scheme.

Housing Policy

78. **Deputy Rory Hearne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will consider a ban on no-fault eviction in light of consecutive months of record-breaking

numbers of people and children in emergency accommodation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48048/26]

Deputy Rory Hearne: We are in a wave of evictions the likes of which the country has not seen since the Famine. There is such human misery going on. I am contacted daily by people facing eviction. These are elderly people, young people and families. It is absolutely scandalous. It is the highest rate of evictions. Since Deputy Browne became Minister, 27,000 households have been issued an eviction notice. Last week, the Tánaiste came in here and said the majority of tenants are covered by a no-fault eviction ban. Will the Minister correct the record and say the truth? The majority of tenants are not covered by a no-fault eviction ban. We need an emergency no-fault eviction ban to prevent this wave of human misery.

Deputy James Browne: The Deputy is very fond of referring to the Famine. The Famine was a genocide in this country. A million people died and a million people had to leave the country yet the Deputy makes a political football out of it and uses it to come in here to engage in cheap political point scoring. It is very hard to take him seriously when that is the level to which he descends in order to make a political point instead of making a coherent, informed policy point or argument.

We are putting in record funding to address the housing crisis in this country. That includes the homeless crisis and high rents. We have brought in some of the strongest, if not the strongest, tenancy measures to protect tenants in the history of the State and the Deputy voted against them. That is a fact. Tenants entering new tenancies will have the strongest tenancy rights in the history of this State. The majority of tenants will have a no-fault eviction ban.

Deputy Rory Hearne: They will. They do not currently.

Deputy James Browne: There will be much stronger tenant protections as well. For those who are in tenancies at the moment, both tenant and landlord entered into an agreement under what was the law at the time. They understood the law on both sides and they entered into a contract on that basis. That is the reason we are not making those changes.

The Deputy tries to have it both ways when he comes in here. He criticises the changes that were made and then he criticises that they not being applied to the past. As I said, we have brought in the strongest tenancy protection measures in the history of the State. They do apply to new tenancies. While notices to quit did peak, we saw a drop in March and I have no doubt that the drop will continue significantly.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Minister talks about me making a political football. It is an absolute disgrace. The reason I am pointing out that we have seen the highest rates of eviction since the Famine is because the Minister and this Government are completely out of touch with the human catastrophe going on right now. I do not believe that he does not see it in his own constituency. We know there was a case of evictions. I want to raise one particular case. May Kelly and her husband Michael were in touch with me. Michael is a double amputee - he had both legs amputated recently – and is a wheelchair user. He is facing eviction. They are an elderly couple who have been in their home for 20 years. They are appealing the decision from Wicklow County Council which is saying there is nothing it can do for them. They had an

income assessment in 2025 which said they were over the threshold for social housing. He is now retired. They are in absolute terror. Their notice to quit says they have to be out of their home by 10 December. Will the Minister look into this specific case and implement a ban immediately to ensure that no elderly couples are being evicted from their homes when they are in situations like this?

Deputy James Browne: I am not going to speak to an individual case but I am happy to look into the details of the case if the Deputy wants to provide me with them.

We had an eviction ban in this country before and supply just dropped off a cliff. An eviction ban sounds very favourable to those who are currently renting but it creates a cliff edge. What is the Deputy going to do in two or three years' time when he brings an end to his eviction ban? Supply will only go down in the meantime, as we have seen that in the past. Who will invest in delivering houses in this country when they know there are eviction bans in place? Nobody. The evidence is there that it is not going to happen.

As Minister for housing, I have to look at everything in terms of how I maximise supply. When I am looking at delivering housing it is to help those people who are renting but also to ensure that we have the supply for those people who are living at home who need somewhere to rent so that they can get out of their homes and have somewhere.

We have a shortage of homes in this country. That is what is driving the housing crisis, the homelessness crisis and the high rents in this country. When we get higher supply, those issues will be addressed but you cannot address them without it. That is certain.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Is it an emergency or is it not an emergency? It is not actually true that it is just about supply. These people are in homes. If the Minister put in place a ban on evictions, they could be kept in their homes until supply reaches the point where, if they are evicted, they will not be evicted into homelessness. Where are they going to be able to afford to rent? These are elderly people and other people in my constituency. Mothers with two children are contacting me in terror of being evicted and of not knowing where they are going to go. Couple after couple and family after family are in touch with me and I know they are in touch with politicians across this country. I cannot get my head around not just the Minister but the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste referring to people as "churn", and saying churn goes on. People are just evicted, and they will find somewhere else. These are real human lives. People are suffering and are being traumatised and, yes, it is about prioritising these people right now over corporate landlords who are saying they do not want an eviction ban. This is a human catastrophe, and the Minister is ignoring it at massive human cost.

Deputy James Browne: Nobody is ignoring it. We are putting record funding into solving the housing crisis. Almost one third of all the capital being spent by the State is going to be spent on solving the housing crisis. It is reflected in the decisions we are making. We are treating this as an emergency and putting those measures in place. Instead of constantly coming in here using emotive language and pretending he has a monopoly on compassion, the Deputy should focus on policy solutions. It would serve everybody better to solve the housing crisis.

Deputy Rory Hearne: His policies are not serving these people.

Housing Provision

79. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage for an update on his review of the income eligibility thresholds for social housing support. [48578/26]

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: As the Minister knows, a growing number of working people, as a result of very modest increases in their wages, are being removed from local authority social housing waiting lists when their means assessment comes under review. I know the Minister is looking at this matter and his party colleagues and backbenchers from Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are raising it with him regularly. Will he give us an update on the review of social housing income limits and some indication as to whether it is his intention to act on it this year?

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy for this question about income eligibility thresholds for social housing support. Applications for social housing support are assessed by the relevant local authority in accordance with the eligibility and needs criteria set down in section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the associated Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011, as amended. The 2011 regulations prescribe maximum net income limits for each local authority in different bands according to the area concerned, with income being defined and assessed according to a standard household means policy. The baseline income thresholds are €40,000, €35,000 and €30,000 for bands 1, 2 and 3, respectively. These thresholds are net income, which is gross household income less income tax, PRSI, universal social charge and additional superannuation contribution. Income is defined and assessed according to a standard household means policy, HMP. The policy provides for a range of income disregards and local authorities have discretion to disregard income that is once-off, temporary or short-term in nature, and which is outside the regular pattern of a person's annual income. The income bands are expressed in terms of a maximum net income threshold for a single-person household, with an allowance of 5% for each additional adult household member, subject to a maximum allowance under this category of 10%, and separately a 2.5% allowance for each child.

My Department has been examining the existing income limits in the context of current market and household income conditions, including the suitability or otherwise of the current framework, having regard to the significantly changed landscape since the standardised income limits were introduced. This includes examining the findings of research commissioned by my Department and this work is ongoing. I envisage that the analysis will be concluded shortly to facilitate a final determination on next steps. I am also keen to put in place a more structured and frequent process for the review of these limits going forward.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: There really is an urgency to progress and conclude the work of the Department. I strongly recommend in the first instance that there is an immediate increase in the income eligibility thresholds. I am strongly of the view, and I know the Minister is considering this, that beyond an immediate increase there needs to be a more rational system of linking those thresholds to an index, whether that is net household income or some other independent index, so the thresholds track that in real time. There is a need to look at the disregards, and whether carers' allowance, disability allowance and certain other payments

should continue to be assessed is a matter of some concern. There is also the issue of secondary earners. We increasingly have a case where adults are being forced to live at home because of the housing crisis. That is having significant impacts on eligibility. I also urge the Minister to look again at the three month look-back income assessment. It is far too rigid. When there are significant changes in circumstance you are not seeing those being taken account. Significant one-off payments can be but not changes of income circumstance or of employment and that is creating real difficulties.

Deputy James Browne: I agree with the Deputy. The situation for a long time has been that as social welfare or other family support payments increase, average household incomes increase, and the Department of housing rightly faces calls to increase the limits. We go through this process and there is the opposite of a cliff edge where the numbers all go up. I want to not only increase the limits but bring an end to that kind of process, so people and local authorities have a better understanding of where we are going rather than the process there to date, which is not satisfactory for anybody. My intention is to have this in the near future. I am finalising the proposals for it in order that we can get the limits increased and put a procedure in place, so it is not this constant position where we are depending on the Minister and the ability of the Department and of the workload to see whether or not increases will happen. It is not an appropriate way to deal with it.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I again stress the urgency of this. The longer this takes the more families will lose their position on the list. I am dealing with a family in my constituency. Both are working and have had a modest increase in their income. They are currently homeless and in emergency accommodation through no fault of their own. They were recently given an offer of council accommodation but in the income reassessment, they were marginally above the threshold. We have had it reviewed, and the local authority has acted completely in compliance with the eligibility threshold. Those people are not only going to lose their more than ten years on the list but they now have no exit out of emergency accommodation because they simply cannot afford private rents from their own income. I am sure when the Minister talks to his own backbenchers he will hear that these real live cases are happening everywhere.

There are three other issues I would ask the Minister to consider. The first is to completely get rid of band 3. There is simply no reason to have a third band. It is an out of date concept. There is an argument in the larger urban areas and their commuter belts to have a higher rate than a second band but I do not believe a third band is needed. I also urge the Minister to publish the research as soon as he can and, if possible, to engage with our committee, to not delay anything and to get the experience of committee members on the ground before he makes his final decision. Crucially, that decision needs to be made as soon as possible.

Deputy James Browne: I think we are very much in agreement on the general direction of where we need to go in relation to social housing threshold limits. The way I look at this is that there is a spectrum. Everybody needs to be able to get a home in their local community based on their needs. Whether that is purely private or with supports, affordable purchase, cost rental or social housing, it is about ensuring on that spectrum that people have not only an entitlement but availability so they can benefit and get a home in their local community. That

will be to the front of my mind in the coming weeks, and I look forward to hearing the views of the Oireachtas committee when we publish these changes.

Derelict Sites

80. **Deputy Conor Sheehan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps he will take to tackle dereliction in advance of the introduction of the new derelict property tax; his plans to mandate local authorities to collect the millions in outstanding derelict sites levies; when the Government will introduce its new Compulsory Purchase Order Bill 2025 with streamlined and strengthened CPO powers; if he will consider introducing compulsory sale orders to bring vacant and neglected homes back into the housing supply; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48496/26]

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I ask the Minister about the steps he and his Department will take to tackle dereliction in advance of the new derelict property tax and how he is going to mandate local authorities to collect the millions in outstanding derelict site levies in advance of that, and when the Government will introduce the new compulsory purchase order Bill. Will he examine the concept of compulsory sale orders to bring vacant and neglected homes back into use?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I thank the Deputy for the question. The Government's housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities, aims to ensure that the activities and resources used to address vacancy and dereliction are co-ordinated and effective, and that legislative powers are used proactively to tackle dereliction and vacancy. The derelict property tax announced in budget 2026 is intended to introduce legislation providing for the tax in the Finance Act 2026. When it comes into effect, the tax will replace the derelict sites levy and will be collected by the Revenue Commissioners. Derelict site levies that remain outstanding when the new tax is introduced will remain as charges on the property and will be the responsibility of each local authority to collect.

In the context of the measures we have introduced to tackle the scourge of vacancy and dereliction, the vacant property refurbishment grant provides up to €70,000 for the refurbishment of vacant and derelict properties for occupation as a principal private residence or for rental. The vacant property refurbishment grant has been expanded as of 1 April this year to include a new “above the shop” grant introduced to support property owners to bring these vacant upper floors over commercial units into use as homes. This provides unprecedented support of up to €135,000.

The CPO activation programme requires a proactive and systematic approach by local authorities to identifying vacant and derelict properties and engaging with owners to bring these properties back into use. This includes using their compulsory purchase powers under the Derelict Sites Act 1990 and the Housing Act 1966 when engagement with the owners of these properties is not successful. All 31 local authorities have full-time vacant homes officers and there is a range of schemes in place. The concept of a compulsory sale order has been examined by my Department and the Housing Agency. I will elaborate further in my follow-up response.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I thank the Minister of State for his response. There is €20.5 million in levies outstanding for derelict sites. I want to press the Government on what new measures there are and what it is going to do to make sure that local authorities collect that money, notwithstanding the new derelict property tax. I will also ask about the compulsory purchase order Bill. The Law Reform Commission gave very clear recommendations in 2023. When are we going to see that Bill?

Will the Minister of State confirm on the record that the derelict property tax will not be littered with exemptions? We have had cases before where measures like the derelict property tax were introduced, but they sound a lot better than they actually are because when they are finally introduced, they are littered with exemptions for this, that and the other.

Deputy John Cummins: As the Deputy knows, all local authorities in the country are independently operated. It is their responsibility, and their responsibility alone, to ensure they collect outstanding levies, particularly the derelict sites levies. They are charges on properties, so it often takes time for a property to be disposed of and for the levy to come in. However, it is absolutely their responsibility. We are committed to ensuring that we have the derelict property tax, which will be collected by Revenue, in place as early as possible.

Regarding the compulsory sale order, which the Deputy referenced in his initial contribution, the Department, in conjunction with the Housing Agency, has examined this matter in other jurisdictions. On the basis of that evaluation, it is not intended to progress that measure. The focus will remain on the derelict property tax and the use of CPO powers as the stick for individuals and property owners who have not availed of the many measures put in place by the Government.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: The reason I raised the issue of compulsory sale orders is that this is something the Scottish Government had in a 2018 land reform report, although it has not been implemented yet. I am raising it not so much with the idea that the compulsory sale order would be punitive, but for it to be another framework by which engagement can be sought with the owners of problematic sites.

I have two follow-up questions. What is the rationale for the derelict property tax to be applied to towns with a population of over 4,000, given that we have significant issues with rural dereliction? When will we see the compulsory purchase order Bill?

Deputy John Cummins: I am glad the Deputy mentioned Scotland because it is referenced in the report that has been done. As the Deputy knows, it has not been introduced in that jurisdiction. It is very difficult to get data on the effectiveness of this, although it has been examined.

Where local authorities are using the Derelict Sites Act to put derelict properties on the register, they have been successful in using their CPO powers. Other local authorities that have not been proactive in this space or have not put notices on properties seem to use the excuse, in my view, that there is an issue with CPO in this country. If that were the case, Limerick would not be able to CPO the number of properties that it has, nor my local authority or some of the other good, notable examples around the country. Where it is working, it is working

well. Where it is not working, I do not think it is as a result of deficiencies, but as a result of a lack of focus and co-ordinated effort by some local authorities in this space.

Water Services

81. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his Department will provide sufficient funding to Uisce Éireann to upgrade the wastewater systems in towns and villages within the wider Dublin commuter belt, which now includes Laois, where lands have been rezoned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48497/26]

Deputy Brian Stanley: There is a request, which I have no problem with, that local authorities in the wider Dublin catchment area zone land for a large increase in the population and the number of dwellings. That needs infrastructure. However, given the tight budgets that local authorities operate with, will funding be provided, particularly through Irish Water, for the infrastructure required for wastewater and water supply?

Deputy James Browne: I appreciate the Deputy's question on water supply, wastewater systems and Uisce Éireann. Both our water and wastewater systems require substantial and sustained investment over a number of investment cycles to bring them up to the standard and quality required of a modern service to provide people with the necessary supports, ensure growth and build resilience in the face of climate change.

My Department is delivering a sustainable funding path to further enhance the ongoing significant improvements in our public water and wastewater services. Since its inception, Uisce Éireann has ramped up capital delivery capability for water services and infrastructure from a mere €300 million in 2014 to €1.4 billion as part of budget 2026. Under the national development plan, the Government is supporting Uisce Éireann with a record allocation of €11.7 billion in funding out to 2030. This funding will support the delivery of the wide range of projects in our cities, towns and regions required for housing delivery, safeguarding public health and the environment and, crucially, providing the capacity required to address the housing crisis in this country. This investment will deliver significant improvements in our public water and wastewater services and support improved water supplies right across Ireland, as well as a range of programmes delivering improved water quality in our rivers, lakes and marine areas, thereby making a significant contribution to addressing Ireland's needs.

Uisce Éireann has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels. Therefore, the scope prioritisation and progression of individual projects are matters for Uisce Éireann, and are approved through its own internal governance structures. As Minister, I have no function in such matters. Uisce Éireann has established a dedicated team to deal with representations and queries from public representatives.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Where does the responsibility lie? It needs to be clearer. There was a policy decision by the Department to zone these extra lands. In the case of Laois, as the Minister knows, substantial extra lands have been zoned in the last two weeks for an increase

of over 8,000 houses, which will bring an increase of approximately 25% in the population in four or five years.

11 o'clock

They cannot all be in Portlaoise. I understand, and I support it to solve the housing crisis, that we need to strengthen villages and smaller towns to provide an option for people to live in a village structure where they are close to pubs, shops, community centres and schools. This means upgrading the water system. Uisce Éireann earmarked four villages in Laois for its small villages and towns scheme. One has been done in Ballyroan and I welcome this but those in Borris-in-Ossory, Ballinakill and Ballybrittas have not. They were all earmarked by Uisce Éireann. Somebody needs to intervene to tell Uisce Éireann that these need to be upgraded. In the case of Borris-in-Ossory, 160 extra houses are planned for extra land. There are 56 planned for Ballinakill and 437 for Graiguecullen. These cannot be provided without the infrastructure.

Deputy James Browne: Deputy Stanley makes an important point. We are asking local authorities to rezone a significant amount of land to deliver additional housing. I encourage local authorities to complete this process. I am not happy with the time that many local authorities are taking in what is a housing crisis. I do not believe many local authorities have been treating it as such with the delays in delivering additional zoned land, which is essential to deliver homes and solve the housing crisis in this country so the houses can get built.

In relation to villages, we have introduced developer-led infrastructure to allow developers to be able to provide wastewater facilities in our villages, which is absolutely crucial. Deputy Stanley rightly points out using over the shop units. Using existing services and regeneration in our towns are also crucial.

With regard to Borris-in-Ossory, as Deputy Stanley is aware, Uisce Éireann commenced works to upgrade the Borris-in-Ossory wastewater treatment plant to support future growth and development, with works beginning in March 2026. This is a €4.1 million investment that will benefit homes. The works are expected to be completed in autumn 2027.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I appreciate what the Minister has said about the ones being provided by developers. The Tánaiste in reply to me said a lot will be provided by developers. It is okay if this can be done but the Minister and I know that Uisce Éireann is reluctant to take in charge infrastructure provided by developers. I can show the Minister an example in Laois which has been held up because of this. There has been a lot of back-and-forth with Uisce Éireann, local authorities and the Department on this. As far as I am aware, according to the most recent information I have, that nut has not been cracked yet.

The cases of Graiguecullen, Borris-in-Ossory, where I welcome the progress, and Ballinakill are all in the red. They have been labelled as red by Uisce Éireann in terms of wastewater; in other words, no development can take place. The lands and the extra houses in each of these areas that I mentioned are in addition to what is already under construction or what is already zoned. We need to strengthen our villages and towns. We cannot put everybody in Portlaoise. The Minister and Minister of State who visited Laois know what is happening with private, public and local authority housebuilding. They saw the figures for zoning in the plan two

weeks ago. Laois is not behind the curve but we need input from the Government and Uisce Éireann.

Deputy James Browne: In terms of developer-led infrastructure, in any new process it will always be about who is going to be the first mover. When the first couple are delivered, others will see the pathway and move an awful lot more quickly. What we have said to Uisce Éireann, and it is doing this, is to work with local authorities and developers to try to get those first movers across the line as quickly as possible. This will then give confidence to other developers to follow suit. To be clear, these are not pilots - they are first movers. Any developer can move forward to provide these in local villages at the moment. That is happening with Uisce Éireann engaging with local authorities and developers. I am confident a number of these will come through. They have the support of the EPA. Deputy Stanley is right there is a reluctance in Uisce Éireann to take over legacy wastewater projects around the country, often because of the cost involved or legacy issues. These developer-led infrastructure projects have been worked out very carefully with the EPA and Uisce Éireann, which is why I believe there will be success and hand-holding at present to get the first few across the line.

Childcare Services

82. **Deputy Emer Currie** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage for an update on the review of the 2001 planning guidelines for local authorities on early learning and childcare settings in order to increase childcare supply; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48705/26]

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: I would like an update on the review of the 2001 planning guidelines for local authorities on early learning and childcare settings. It is 25 years since they were set out and a lot has changed in our society, in our childcare needs and in best practice for childcare. Will the Minister of State provide an update on the review of these guidelines?

Deputy John Cummins: I thank Deputy O'Connell and I also thank Deputy Currie for her work on this. The programme for Government sets out a number of priorities for Government on access to early learning and childcare services, including a commitment to review the 2001 childcare facilities guidelines for planning authorities to ensure childcare spaces are provided and put to use.

Further to the commencement of Part 3 of the Planning and Development Act 2024 in October 2025, provisions for national planning statements have been introduced to replace the provisions for ministerial guidelines issued under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000. The timing of the issuing of national planning statements is based on Government priorities.

The current childcare facilities guidelines for planning authorities, which remain in place until revoked or replaced by a new national planning statement, set out the methodology for calculating an adequate provision of childcare places and ensure consistency in the approach to the consideration of land use planning and development management aspects of childcare provision. These guidelines set out a guideline standard of one childcare facility providing for a minimum 20 childcare places per approximately 75 dwellings, as appropriate to the particular

circumstances of each development. Consideration of childcare facilities provision should be raised as early as possible in preplanning discussions for larger housing developments.

National policy objective 41 of the revised national planning framework 2025 also supports the strategic planning and alignment of planned population and employment growth with educational investment, and prioritises the timely delivery of childcare facilities and schools on well-located sites, within or close to existing built-up areas, to support the development of sustainable communities. I know this is an area of utmost importance and we are working with other Departments on a review of it.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: As the Minister of State may be aware, and no doubt he is, the cost and availability of childcare are two of the biggest issues in our society. It is certainly an issue in Deputy Currie's constituency and it is very much an issue in my constituency of Dublin Rathdown as well. We have lost 64 providers out of core funding and, in Dundrum, the wonderful provider Once Upon A Time has also withdrawn from core funding. This is causing increased pressure on the system and highlights the challenges in the system. These guidelines date back over 25 years. We need to update them and bring them in line with the needs and demands of our local communities. Children have grown, gone to college, graduated and are having children of their own but the same guidelines are still in place. They are no longer fit for purpose and we urgently need them revised.

Deputy John Cummins: I accept the points made by Deputy O'Connell. It is not just a matter of affordability but also of availability. As a new father who has started sending a child to crèche in recent weeks I certainly know this. I acknowledge that the guidelines that have been in place since 2001 were a legacy of that time, when provision was attached to development. It is a cost on development. We do need to move, as I outlined, under national policy objective 41 to where it is more planned. This would be in line with what we do for educational facilities whereby where we have an existing community in a built-up area or a new community that will be developing, we would plan at development plan stage for adequate provision in terms of site-specific locations for childcare facilities of scale and not smaller piecemeal facilities that are often unviable for providers to take on board.

Deputy Maeve O'Connell: I am glad to hear about the nature of the viability of facilities because, unfortunately, one of the issues that is occurring is that as developments are put in place they provide facilities for childcare but it is often an empty shell. It is not necessarily fit for purpose for that particular community. We also have the issue, particularly in already dense urban areas where apartment developments are going in, of increasing the level of the local population when we do not have the childcare spaces to meet the demand of the existing population.

In growing urban areas, in particular, having 20 childcare places per 75 homes is something we need to look at urgently. We certainly need to look at it in the short term and, in the long term, we need to build some type of flexibility into the system, an adaptation over time, if perhaps we do not need as many spaces in future. For now, we do need to be moving to a more realistic ratio of childcare places to homes as we increasingly urbanise.

Deputy John Cummins: The Department of Children, Disability and Equality has established a working group in this area. It is chaired by that Department, in conjunction with our Department and the Department of education. We are reviewing the situation, and all the various points made by Deputy O'Connell and Deputy Currie to me over a considerable period of time will be factored into this review. We are also reviewing development contribution schemes. This may have a role in how we address additional development in established areas. It may be more appropriate where a childcare facility is already operating, expansion is required and there is room for such expansion, that the more viable option may be to have such contributions supporting expansion of existing facilities rather than building smaller, unviable and piecemeal facilities. All these factors will be considered in the round. I thank the Deputy for her interest.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Housing Provision

83. **Deputy Joe Neville** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the housing projects that are currently under construction in Kildare North and those which are expected to commence before the end of 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48233/26]

106. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his response to the latest monthly housing commencement figures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48047/26]

169. **Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the total number of housing commencements in Dublin City Council and Fingal County Council in 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48187/26]

Deputy Joe Neville: My question concerns the key issue of housing and all the different types of infrastructure that go with it. I ask the Minister for the information on all the housing projects currently under construction in Kildare North and those expected to commence before the end of 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Deputy James Browne: I propose to take Questions Nos. 83, 106 and 169 together.

I thank Deputy Neville for raising an important question on housing projects currently under construction in Kildare North and those expected to commence before the end of 2026. My Department publishes data on residential commencement notices in each local authority every month. Commencement data shows commencement notices were lodged in respect of 2,099 new homes in May, more than double the 1,035 notices received in May last year. Commencement notices for 13,120 new homes were lodged from January to May this year, up 161% on the 5,033 notices received in the same period last year.

This progress is being mirrored across the country. In Fingal, some 1,623 commencement notices were lodged from January to May this year, over 11 times more than the same period

last year. In Dublin city, 1,047 commencement notices were lodged, on par with the corresponding period in 2025. In Kildare, 439 commencement notices were lodged from January to May this year, up 40% on the same period last year. While it is not possible to predict when developments with planning permission will commence on site, some 1,406 planning permissions for new homes have been granted in Kildare in the last 12 months, to the end of quarter 1 of 2026, conveying an increasingly stable pipeline.

Increasing the supply of new homes is critical to alleviating pressures in the housing market, helping to moderate price growth and ease affordability challenges across the country, ensuring everyone has a range of housing options available to them, whether they want to buy a house, rent one, or are in need of social housing. In this regard, supply has increased significantly over recent years. Over the last five years, to the end of quarter 1 of 2026, almost 153,000 new homes have been delivered. This compares with 85,262 in the previous five-year period and just 29,278 in the five years before that. Delivering Homes, Building Communities seeks to build on this, and significantly accelerate delivery of new homes by focusing on activating land and creating the optimal environment to encourage housing activity, including regulatory reform, tax incentives and the largest ever capital investment in the history of the State, with €275 billion invested in infrastructure over ten years through the national development plan.

The Government is already implementing a host of actions to boost delivery. The recently revised national planning framework is a major step forward in this regard and will help to increase capacity and accelerate homebuilding across the country, while the new housing activation office, HAO, will work to address infrastructure barriers to housing delivery as a matter of priority. The HAO is taking a proactive and targeted approach to increasing housing commencements by focusing on the early identification and resolution of infrastructure constraints that can delay development and by co-ordinating investment across key delivery partners.

As part of this work, the Government launched the €1 billion housing infrastructure investment fund, HIIF, in January 2026, which is managed by the HAO and designed to ensure that essential enabling infrastructure is in place to unlock housing land. Under call 1 of the fund, I approved 82 projects last week. These projects have the potential to unlock land to deliver 86,000 new homes, with capacity for a further 113,000 homes over time. These projects range from local activation measures in towns and cities to larger strategic investments capable of supporting housing delivery at scale. The announcement I made last week represents the first step in building a pipeline of housing enabling infrastructure to support communities and housing delivery for many years to come.

Looking ahead, the housing activation office is actively developing future calls under the HIIF, building on the success of call 1 and strengthening the focus on strategic land banks and new communities aligned with public transport, along with broadening the range of delivery partners. Additionally, the Planning and Development (Amendment Act) 2025 is essential legislation to deal with expiring planning permissions and to encourage activation of housing. An enhanced Land Development Authority, LDA, is working to deliver more private housing, as well as social, affordable and cost-rental houses.

Increasing the number of new apartments being constructed is an essential component of the Government's housing ambitions, given the compact growth priority in the national planning framework. The new plan has taken decisive action to reduce the overall cost of

apartment construction while increasing delivery in our urban areas. Budget 2026 introduced a suite of taxation measures aimed at stimulating the supply of new apartments, such as reducing the VAT rate on the sale of new apartments to 9%, and introducing an enhanced corporation tax deduction for apartment construction costs. My Department is also progressing the preparation of a draft national planning statement for the Government's consideration to replace the current apartment guidelines. The overall purpose is to strike an effective regulatory balance, ensuring that apartment development meets the needs of society in terms of standards and quality, while promoting an increased level of overall output. Sectoral feedback and preliminary data on planning permissions and commencements suggests that the sector is responding positively to the renewed environment for apartment delivery. My Department continues to systematically monitor investment, planning and commencement activity in apartments to examine the pipeline for new apartments and inform ongoing policy consideration in this area.

The programme for Government commitments relating to housing are well reflected in the new plan and, combined with the unprecedented level of investment the Government has committed, will bring about a very significant scale-up in the delivery of housing over the coming years, address the needs of the most vulnerable in our communities, make buying and renting homes more affordable and support the development of villages, towns and cities across the country.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Minister very much for his response. I will go through the specific statistics relating to County Kildare afterwards. I thank the Minister for the information.

I welcome the announcement last week from the housing activation office and the Minister's team. I also welcome the infrastructure we have in Kildare. The new bridge in Celbridge is an issue I raised when I was a county councillor in the context of the local area plan, and I have been pushing for the funding to be delivered since being elected to this House. It has now been delivered under the housing activation office. We also have the Maynooth outer orbital route, MOOR, the inner relief road in Naas and the roads in Confey. These projects are extremely welcome.

On the other hand, I am also conscious that we are struggling with Uisce Éireann, from the network perspective, to deliver water infrastructure. This is the case out around Prosperous, Robertstown, Leixlip, Celbridge and Maynooth, where we see regular burst water mains. While we are pushing for new houses, and I welcome that, at the same time, the infrastructure has to be able to meet that demand.

Deputy James Browne: I agree with the Deputy. I thank him and all his Government colleagues for ensuring that County Kildare got a substantial amount of funding under the housing infrastructure investment fund that will, critically from the perspective of my Department and that of the Government, unlock housing. It will also, no doubt, help to unlock key community services as well. As the Deputy will be aware six projects in Kildare were approved. These include part of the Newbridge southern outer orbital relief road, the Naas northwest quadrant and canal quarter in Naas, the Naas inner relief road, the Captain's Hill upgrade in Confey, Leixlip, the Celbridge-Hazelhatch mobility corridor, and phase 1 of the MOOR at Crewhill in Maynooth.

The Deputy is also right, however, in relation to water infrastructure. In approving these types of funding under the housing infrastructure investment fund, we are using the housing activation office where we have Uisce Éireann and the ESB.

We are ensuring coherence such that where roads funding has been made available, we also have the electricity supply, water supply and wastewater treatment capacity to ensure housing is delivered in these key areas.

Deputy Joe Neville: I thank the Minister. We are broadly aligned on infrastructure. The other key element of infrastructure is the social element, be it from a sporting perspective or related to the sports capital grants that will assist local sports clubs, and indeed local community groups, in which I am heavily involved.

Housing is about the delivery of infrastructure but also about the delivery of the associated strands, with which the Minister's team is currently heavily involved. Being from north Kildare and having been a councillor there for so long, it is the area I am most conscious of. The issue in Kildare speaks to many of the issues we all have, specifically on the eastern corridor but also in the growth areas in many major towns across the country.

The country is doing really well economically. It is very well run from a Government perspective, and we can see that. At the same time, however, we need to consider population growth and push, as the Minister is doing, towards further growth in housing and the infrastructure required.

Deputy James Browne: Again, I thank Deputy Neville for raising important issues in County Kildare, particularly north Kildare, with which he is most familiar. The key infrastructure projects announced under the housing infrastructure fund are critical. It is also about working with ESB Networks and Uisce Éireann to ensure all the required additional capacity is put in place so the community facilities raised by the Deputy, be they crèches, sports facilities, schools or healthcare facilities, can also be put in place. We must have a co-ordinated approach. We are very much doing that through the Housing Activation Office. That is very important.

Rental Sector

84. **Deputy Conor Sheehan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to introduce measures to reduce cost-rental rents; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47823/26]

Deputy Conor Sheehan: What are the Minister's plans to introduce measures to reduce cost-rental rents? Will he make a statement on this because cost-rental rents are too high and are locking thousands of people out of the rental market? The average rent for a three-bedroom house in Oscar Traynor Road is now €1,800. More and more applicants are being refused on affordability grounds. There are flaws in the model, which I will go into in my supplementary questions.

Deputy James Browne: I thank Deputy Sheehan for raising what is an important issue, namely, measures to reduce cost-rental rents. The cost-rental model was first introduced under

the plan Housing for All and it has been continued and significantly expanded under the new plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities. It is designed to provide secure, long-term homes for households on moderate incomes at rents that are significantly below private market levels.

The cost-rental support schemes in the new housing plan are key measures in seeking to address affordability challenges in the rental sector. This is why, under the new housing plan, the Government has committed to growing the provision of affordable cost-rental properties across the country.

What has been achieved in this area in the past number of years is significant. Cost-rental housing did not exist in this country five years ago. From a standing start in 2021, and because of the actions of this Government and the unprecedented level of funding provided in successive budgets, almost 6,000 new cost-rental homes had been delivered up to the end of last year and a substantial pipeline is currently in place. This is supporting people on moderate incomes who would otherwise struggle to afford rent to move into good quality homes at rents they can afford. It provides long-term security of tenure, provides a home and gives people who avail of the schemes a chance to plan for their future.

We are only getting started. I am not for one moment suggesting that we have done enough. We must do more. Clearly, we are not yet at the stage of supplying enough cost-rental homes to meet the demand. We have more work to do to ensure that units are made available at rental levels that remain affordable and sustainable. This remains a key challenge and one that is a priority for me and my Department.

While this is a real success story, I am not resting on my laurels. The homes that have already been delivered at heavy discounts to equivalent private rental market rates are meeting real demand, are incredibly popular and are providing much-needed secure and affordable homes in the rental sector. I am providing substantial funding to local authorities, the Land Development Agency and approved housing bodies to support cost-rental delivery. Since the introduction of the tenure in 2021, approximately €2.25 billion in departmental funding has been approved for cost-rental projects.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: I thank the Minister for his response. There are a couple of questions I want to ask. Has the Minister any plans in relation to all the fragmented subsidies that exist, like those related to the secure tenancy affordable rental investment scheme, STAR, and cost-rental equity loan, CREL, and the local authority funds. Does he have any plans to merge these?

I also want to ask about barriers to delivering cost rental at scale and whether consideration is being given to extending the repayment period of the CREL loan. This is something that has been raised with me by approved housing bodies, AHBs, because we have had incidents recently where some AHBs were pulling cost-rental developments. They are saying they are struggling because of the requirement for the rent to sit 25% below the market rate, yet rents are already high enough and need to come down.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy again for his question on cost rental. As I have already pointed out, approximately €2.25 billion in departmental funding has been approved

for cost-rental projects since 2021. In addition, significant loan financing is being made available through the State's Housing Finance Agency. Also, the reduction of VAT on new apartments to 9% under budget 2026 is playing an important role in reducing costs. All of these supports lower the net cost of delivery, enabling more cost-rental homes to be delivered and ensuring more affordable rents for tenants.

My Department's funding comprises non-repayable grants, equity investments and long-term loans at very low interest rates, which enable rents to be set below full cost recovery levels. As a result, cost-rental homes can be provided at rents that are significantly more affordable and considerably lower than comparable rents in the private market. Cost-rental homes provide a significant saving for the tenant, and I am aware that tenants who benefit are very appreciative of both the rents and the security of tenure the homes provide.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: To push back on that a bit, while cost-rental rents are somewhat lower, being on average about 30% lower than rents in the private rental market, they are still far too high. A market rent in Dublin of €2,300 still means €1,725 a month.

Will the Minister consider the length of time AHBs have to repay the CREL loan? That will answer some of the issues they have. Furthermore, will he consider decoupling our cost-rental model from the open market down the line and tying it entirely to underlying financial costs of delivery by amending the 2021 Act? When building costs and long-term maintenance rise, rents set at 25% below market rate cannot generate enough revenue to cover the actual cost of housing. This has forced bodies to scrap projects. We need to move away from the explicit linkage between initial cost rents and prevailing market rates.

Deputy James Browne: Again, I thank the Deputy for his question. If you have a pure cost model, you will have very significant variations in what the cost-rental rent will actually be. We have taken the approach of trying to ensure consistency below market rent values. A 30% discount below market rent value is a significant deduction, albeit in circumstances where rent is high, which I acknowledge. However, if we decouple and go purely with a cost model, based on the cost of providing the apartments, we could have apartments beside each other that could have very different rents based on very different costings. In some cases, there could be a reduction in the discount. That would provide a level of inconsistency and a lack of equity in the approach. That is where we have taken the view and approach we have taken, setting the rent based on the market rather than the cost inputs.

Rental Sector

85. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the measures he is taking to address rent increases in Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48101/26]

Deputy Pa Daly: What measures is the Minister taking to address rent increases in Kerry? We recently saw a three-bedroom house in the town of Tralee with an asking price of €2,400 per month.

In the public sector, increased rents are being asked for by local authorities. However, because services have been stripped from the local municipal district, in houses 11 to 16 in Mountain View in Balloonagh Estate in Tralee, sewage is backing up and coming into the houses and the local authority does not even have a jetting machine to allow it to address the issue. It is reliant on contractors who are coming in from other areas to address the issue. That is not fair when people are continuing to pay their rents.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy for his question about addressing rent increases in Kerry. As he will know, the key to solving the housing crisis, which includes homelessness and high rents, is through increased supply. That is why the Government is providing record funding towards the supply of homes. It is also why we are taking emergency measures to address the delivery of homes.

We are also taking other measures. As the Deputy will be aware, under the housing infrastructure investment fund, we announced significant funding for County Kerry only last week for additional housing. My understanding is that those projects are shovel ready and will be ready to move quickly. The Lohercannon distributor road, L6715 Ashgrove Road and link road directly unlock lands for 450 residential units and indirectly unlock a further 788 homes, with an indicative cost of under €10 million. The Killarney strategic links and new transport link between the N22 Killarney and bypass and the R876 Park Road directly unlock lands for 500 residential units and indirectly unlock a further 581 residential units, at an indicative cost band of €10 million to €20 million. This shows our commitment to Kerry and to delivering additional houses in the county, not just through funding housing delivery but also ensuring the infrastructure is put in place, working with the ESB and Uisce Éireann, to ensure that the other capacity measures go through with it.

Affordability is central to the Government's housing policy under Delivering Homes, Building Communities, which targets the delivery of 300,000 new homes by 2030, including 72,000 social homes and 90,000 affordable homes. The Government is committed to tackling high rents and ensuring an increase in the supply, as I say, of affordable, high-quality rental accommodation through continued significant capital investment, including cost-rental, affordable purchase and social homes, in a manner that respects the security of tenure for renters by ensuring equity and fairness for tenants and landlords. On the topic of the delivery of more social homes, last year we built the highest number in the history of the State. That also frees up properties in the rental market to help control prices.

Deputy Pa Daly: There might have been the highest number built in the history of the State, as the Minister said, but it happened at a time when the population was way higher than it was in the 1960s and 1950s. The Minister said the answer is to increase supply but, unfortunately, what we have seen is an awful lot of extra houses in Adamstown and on the quays in Dublin. The supply in County Kerry is way behind. The result is that renters in Kerry have seen increases in the region of €3,000 annually, which is a 26% jump. It is a body blow for people whose rents are increasing when, unfortunately, their wages are not increasing by the same amount to match those increases.

If current tenancy trends continue, the average tenancy will be three and a half years, with 25% of tenancies being new each year. The vast majority of renters in the private sector will be swept into this market reset. The problem is that people in County Kerry are on waiting

lists. They are waiting for supply for ten, 12 and sometimes 14 years. The town councils still have not been restored and the guaranteed increase in supply is not there. People are waiting and rents are increasing because supply is so low.

Deputy James Browne: I thank the Deputy. We are making significant funding available to increase the numbers of social and affordable housing. I encourage the Kerry local authority to maximise the use of the available funding to deliver social homes and affordable purchase homes across County Kerry. The Department will not be found wanting in supporting an increase in the supply of homes. The key to challenging high rents is, as I say, supply. That is not just the supply of private homes. We must also ensure that more social homes are built. As I say, that moves people who are availing of the housing assistance payment, HAP, for example, into social homes and frees up properties in the private rental market. That will help to address availability and affordability. All of these measures are interconnecting.

I am conscious that rents are too high. I am conscious that people are struggling to find properties to rent and that is why the Government is providing record funding to address the housing crisis not just on the east coast but in every county across this country.

Deputy Pa Daly: Unfortunately, I have not heard the Minister say anything about what needs to be done. Does the Government have any plans to cut rents? Has it plans to ban increases or protect the renters who are faced with big rent increases? The Minister has not mentioned anything about students. They are going to have to pay the market rent from September. That is another tax on their education. We all know that Munster Technological University, MTU, in Tralee and other colleges around the country do not have the power to borrow and are not building their own accommodation, which could be more affordable.

The Minister mentioned the affordable homes scheme but there are practically no affordable homes in Kerry. It is ridiculous to talk about the affordable homes scheme in Kerry because there are none. There was practically zero emergency accommodation in 2011 but there are now huge amounts, catering for approximately 14,000 or 15,000 people. Since the town councils were abolished, there has been a concentration of emergency accommodation in Tralee, which is creating an imbalance.

Everywhere that the Government has tried to address housing it has made a hames of it, for people starting off in life and those at the end of their days in nursing homes.

Deputy James Browne: We want Kerry County Council to provide more affordable purchase homes. The Department and Government would support it. Those homes are essential. I want everybody, across the spectrum, to be able to get the homes they need in their own local community, whether through private purchase, affordable homes or social housing. It is essential that everybody can access a home. Affordable purchase is essential for people who are on lower incomes but incomes that are above the social housing thresholds to be able to get that permanent home. I want the local authority in County Kerry to provide more affordable purchase. The Government is, as I say, providing record funding. We have built record numbers of social homes. We have also built a record number of cost-rental homes. All of this is about driving supply to address the crisis. Every home built helps to alleviate that, no matter what its tenure.

Housing Schemes

86. **Deputy Tom Brabazon** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his Department will increase funding for the local authorities financial contribution scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47945/26]

99. **Deputy Grace Boland** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps being taken to support the development of age-friendly housing within existing communities, allowing older people to remain close to family and services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [47608/26]

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I raise with the Minister the financial contribution scheme whereby local authorities acquire houses from over-60s at market value. In return, one third of the net proceeds of sale are given to the local authority and the senior citizens get a local authority unit and pay a differential rate on same. There are significant benefits for the economy and the overall housing situation. Those getting older who have empty nests get to offload significant responsibility and the cost of maintaining a house that has outgrown their needs. They usually move into a local authority senior citizens' unit which has the benefit of a liaison officer. Are there any plans to expand the scheme and put it on a statutory basis?

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I propose to take Questions Nos. 86 and 99 together.

I thank the Deputy for bringing up this important issue. I do not know if Deputy Boland is here.

The Government's new housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities, aims to deliver 300,000 new homes by the end of 2030, including 72,000 social homes and 90,000 affordable housing supports by the end of 2030. To achieve this, the largest ever housing budget in the history of the State has been secured in 2026, with in excess of €9 billion in capital funding through the Exchequer, the Land Development Agency and the Housing Finance Agency.

Delivering Homes, Building Communities includes measures which will increase delivery of housing for older people through increased delivery of social housing, increased delivery of more suitable homes, choice in private housing and increased choice to support voluntary rightsizing. Government is committed to increasing housing available to older people to facilitate ageing in place with dignity and independence, and to supporting rightsizing on a voluntary basis.

Delivering Homes, Building Communities also includes a commitment to develop an action plan on delivering housing for older people and this plan is currently under preparation. A number of local authorities are operating financial contribution schemes. However, these are non-statutory and there is no national scheme in place. In line with a commitment in the Delivering Homes, Building Communities, my Department is undertaking a review of the operation of existing local authority financial contribution schemes. Policy responses will be developed on foot of the findings of this review, which is currently under way.

The work under way at the moment is with the Housing Agency to advance a review of the financial contribution schemes operated by some local authorities.

As part of the Delivering Homes, Building Communities plan, which follows on from a commitment in the programme for Government, we have a specific action, that is, to review the operation of existing local authority financial contribution schemes. To advance that work, we have commissioned a body of work from the Housing Agency, which will specifically look at it. It will engage with the local authorities and come back to the Department with a report on this issue of financial contribution schemes.

Delivering Homes, Building Communities will also increase choice for older people who voluntarily right-size by advancing the availability of bridging finance to support right-sizing. As I already mentioned, this includes a review of the operation of existing local authority financial contribution schemes and supporting social housing tenants who wish to voluntarily right-size to more suitable accommodation. The Department is already progressing these actions to support older people who choose to voluntarily right-size, ensuring choice for older people seeking to move to more suitable accommodation or to right-size in place.

As part of the work being progressed, I am pleased to welcome the recent positive announcement by the Central Bank that it is amending the mortgage measures to exempt certain types of bridging loans from the loan-to-income limit that applies to lending for principal home purchases. This will assist in supporting voluntary right-sizing where older people choose to purchase a new home prior to concluding the sale of their existing home. I specifically met the Central Bank on a number of occasions with Department officials to ask it to look at this issue. It came back with this and I hope it will assist. In simple terms, if older people wish to move to a smaller, more suitable home of their choice and it becomes available prior to their home being sold, they will be able to apply to the banks for bridging finance and the issue of the loan to income ratio will not be a factor. It will be based on the asset and they will get the loan for up to 18 months, to allow them to move, if they wish to do so, on a voluntary basis.

From 2020 to 2025, the Department has provided almost €180 million of capital assistance scheme, CAS, funding for older people's housing, delivering a total of 592 units for older people, providing purpose designed, age-friendly homes. I look forward to Deputy Brabazon's response.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: The scheme, as the Minister of State said, is non-statutory and it operates erratically. It is subject to funding being available in local authorities. Sometimes it is available and sometimes it is not and it is difficult as a public representative to be able to advise constituents who are in the over-60 age bracket on this, when the availability of the funding is intermittent and in some cases non-existent.

We are in a housing emergency. We should be putting the scheme on a statutory basis and resourcing it so it is available throughout the year. This would have the effect of providing an increased supply of available housing to the market, which is the stated aim of the Government and the Minister of State's Department. Along with the local authority and AHB supply of senior citizens' accommodation with planning for retirement villages, this could free up significant numbers of houses for private and social housing. This would help young couples to acquire freed-up housing. Therefore, I urge that whatever measures are being taken be expedited.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank the Deputy for his considered response. It is a matter he has raised and is committed to. The measure is in the programme for Government. It is a specific action under delivering housing for older people. I committed to doing work on that even prior to the action plan being finalised. A review is currently under way by the Housing Agency on behalf of the Department of the financial contribution schemes operated by local authorities. It will interact with local authorities and, once the review has been completed, the policy response will be developed in response to the findings identified in the research. I want to do it on a structured basis. I note the points the Deputy raised. It is a priority in the older persons section of Delivering Homes, Building Communities to look at the issue the Deputy raised.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I thank the Minister of State. I welcome what he said but I ask him and his officials to light a fire under it and get it moving as quickly as possible so the new policy framework can be delivered as quickly as possible.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Once again, I thank the Deputy for his contribution. A body of work is under way, as I stated, following on from defined actions under housing for older people section of Delivering Homes, Building Communities. We have committed to a review of the operation of the existing local authority financial contribution schemes and to have it as a real, evidence-based, substantive body of work. We commissioned the Housing Agency to look at it in great depth. As the Deputy said, some local authorities have been operating such a scheme, some have not and we want to look at it in the round. When we receive that research from the Housing Agency, we will consider it in depth in the Department. There is a reason it is in the new housing plan. It is because we want to look at it.

Questions Nos. 87 to 90, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Housing Provision

91. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to confirm the number of housing completions in Cork in 2025; the number of homes completed to date in 2026 in Cork; the number expected to be completed by the end of 2026; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [48241/26]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan): I thank the Deputy for the question. It is good to see some focus on housing delivery in the rebel county. Increasing the supply of new homes is critical to alleviating pressures in the housing market, helping to moderate price growth and ease affordability challenges, ensuring everyone has a range of housing options available to them, whether they want to buy a house, rent one or are in need of social housing.

Data on new dwelling completions are published by the Central Statistics Office, CSO, on a quarterly basis. CSO data show overall housing delivery in Cork has significantly increased in recent years. Some 3,722 new homes were completed in Cork last year, an increase of 5% year-on-year and the highest annual delivery since the CSO data series began in 2011. This momentum continued into the first quarter of 2026, with 1,047 new homes completed, up 45%

year-on-year, and again the highest first quarter completion figure since the CSO data series began.

While the Department does not forecast new housing completions in any given year, delivery in 2026 is likely to be strong. The Department is monitoring any headwinds to ensure we buttress supply into 2027 and 2028 appropriately as new measures under Delivering Homes, Building Communities bed-in over 2026 to enable delivery of at least 300,000 new homes by 2030. We will do this by focusing on activating land and creating the optimal environment to encourage housing activity, including regulatory reform, tax incentives and the largest ever capital investment in the history of the State, with €275 billion invested in infrastructure over ten years through the national development plan.

The unprecedented level of investment the Government has committed will bring about a significant scale-up in the delivery of housing over the coming years, while also supporting the development of villages, towns and cities. While it is important to acknowledge the significant challenges ahead, it is equally important to highlight that a continued level of intensity of effort will be ongoing to reach the scale required to meet our shared goal of 300,000 new homes by 2030.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank the Minister of State. As the Minister of State will be aware, being from Cork, the reason I am raising this is that the number of new jobs being created in Cork is increasing every month and, therefore, the need for additional accommodation needs to be highlighted. We need to try to fast-track that housing. Cork City Council and Cork County Council are working hard with people making applications for housing and on developing and completing housing units.

In the areas outside the city, in the villages where there are challenges with sewage treatment, can some of those projects be fast-tracked so development can proceed? I am talking about such places as Courtbrack, Grenagh, Carrignavar, Glenville and Whitechurch. They cannot progress unless the services are available. What does the Department intend to do to highlight that issue?

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I thank the Deputy. He makes a valid point on employment in the county, and it is a key challenge. If you take not just the tech and pharmaceutical sectors but also CUH, which is such a big employer, many of the incredible team of nurses, doctors and other staff need access to housing. That is a challenge we have to address but we are doing so. There are key ways that the Minister in particular has directed travel in the last number of months. The city and county development plans are being reviewed at the moment and going through their public consultation phase. That needs to be accelerated so appropriate land can be zoned, and with that investment will come. The private sector is responding well to apartment buildings through the incentives there. Housing activation funding for Cork has been very generous.

On the question about villages and towns, Uisce Éireann, as far as I can see, is really building capacity and increasing investment in those villages and towns to deliver wastewater treatment.

Deputy Colm Burke: On the issue of sewage treatment in villages, we still do not have a clear plan from Irish Water as regards access to services, including water services. For instance, in Whitechurch lorry loads of water have to be brought in every day because there is a well servicing the housing units there and it is not able to deal with demand during the summer months. It is likewise with Courtbrack. There has been a boil water notice in place there since September of last year and there is no indication from Irish Water as to when that issue will be resolved. Again, the situation is that a well is servicing all the housing estates there. Is there any plan to have a direct link between the main water schemes in the city or county to service those areas?

Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan: I thank the Deputy again. He raises a very important and relevant point, especially for our smaller towns and villages. This is where, as I was saying at the end of my last contribution, the significant investment announced by the Minister of almost €12 billion under the national planning framework and national development plan will allow Uisce Éireann to build capacity with respect to personnel and the funding of major infrastructure projects as well. Outside that there is capacity and we have heard of recent developments on the developer-led infrastructure that will allow developers to put in place their own wastewater infrastructure, where appropriate or up to a certain number of houses. That is obviously to be done in close collaboration with the EPA to ensure there are no legacy issues there. That is an exciting development for a few reasons. It allows a lot of those villages and towns where wastewater treatment is at capacity to expand and see people move in, which is key.

Questions Nos. 92 to 98, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Question No. 99 taken with Question No. 86.

Questions Nos. 100 to 105, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Question No. 106 taken with Question No. 83.

Questions Nos. 107 to 114, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Local Authorities

115. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will take immediate steps to strengthen local democracy by reconstituting boroughs or corporations similar to the structures that once operated; and if he will consider Kilkenny city as a pilot project. [48286/26]

Deputy John McGuinness: I raise Kilkenny city and the status it has had since the 1609 charter, granted by King James, which established it as a city with a mayor. It survived Cromwell but it did not survive the recent local government legislation that reduced it from a city to a borough. That particular move has not worked fully for the citizens of Kilkenny city.

Deputy James Browne: I thank Deputy McGuinness for raising the very important issue of strengthening local democracy and also seeking the reconstitution of boroughs or corporations similar to the structures that existed previously. The Local Government Reform Act 2014

dissolved 80 town councils, which represented about 14% of the population, including Kilkenny Borough Council. A lot of these were their own separate legal entities and this gave significant strength and control to local authorities and also allowed people to have a very strong say in what was happening in their towns and cities. The previous town council system, it is alleged, also led to duplication in administration and electoral terms, something I think is questionable. Instead, the Act saw the introduction of 95 municipal districts representing 100% of the population in 25 of the 31 local authorities at sub-county level, while area committees would operate in the three city authorities of Cork, Dublin and Galway, and the three Dublin county authorities. These local areas, of course, are not councils. Each municipal district can include several towns and villages and their hinterlands, with local matters dealt with at a municipal district level and wider strategic issues decided at the county level. The result is an integrated administrative structure in each county that maximises operational efficiency while ensuring devolved decision-making throughout the county.

Nonetheless, the Deputy will be aware of my view and that of the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, that councillors have seen a reduction in their powers. We want to see a rebalancing of powers towards them to ensure they can hold the officials in our local authorities to account and can ensure their towns and cities are being delivered for in a fair and equitable manner. That is why the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and I established the local democracy task force, which was a key commitment in the programme for Government, in July 2025.

Deputy John McGuinness: If the Minister asks anyone in Kilkenny city or, I am sure, in his town of Wexford, he will be told the best structure of democracy they had - in Kilkenny's case since 1609 - was the corporation or the borough council. The stripping of that title is depriving people of a pride they had in that office, the office of mayor and the office of those who were elected to serve the citizens of, in this case, Kilkenny. I am asking the Minister to go back to the drawing board and to understand that a seven-person borough committee as part of Kilkenny County Council replacing the borough simply does not function and removes a huge positive connection between a city and its administration and the people they represent. It is not good enough that that would not be revisited and re-established.

Deputy James Browne: We have given this considerable consideration on the local democracy task force. The Deputy is right that my town lost its council and it diminished the representation at the time. The local government task force was established to build on the considerable body of work previously undertaken by the AILG - which represents councillors - the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and Seanad Éireann. The local democracy task force presented its final report to me on 4 March 2026 and the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and I will be bringing this to Government over the coming weeks. This will strengthen our local democracy and the powers of our local councillors.

Deputy John McGuinness: I wonder who the task force asked. I am aware it asked elected representatives, possibly, for their input and view but what about the people who are demanding it - the citizens we say we represent here? They are demanding something very different, not just accountability and transparency, which much be improved. They are asking for direct access to local democracy where decisions are made that affect their lives. They are asking for direct input through their public representatives about budgets that are passed, which also affect

their lives. They are asking that history be examined and that the place for the likes of Kilkenny city would be acknowledged and that the role it plays in the lives of the citizens of that city would be acknowledged. I hope when the Minister reviews that document he will review the public demand in Kilkenny for the status of a city. I hope he will also have an input in the decisions and reflect on what I have said.

Deputy James Browne: I agree that direct access to local democracy is absolutely essential and that is what the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, and I will be ensuring through the local democracy task force and our input. That connection will be reconnected through empowering our local councillors to hold the local officials to account. It will also mean that where representations are being made by local people, they can effect those changes and also be able to communicate those changes to people when they are happening.

12 o'clock

We are fully in alignment in terms of re-empowering our local democracy by giving direct access to local democracies, local people and local councillors. Myself and the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, will achieve this through the local democracy task force and the implementation plan that will follow.

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Written Answers are published on the Oireachtas website.

Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Sorca Clarke: The Tánaiste knows only too well the saga of Children's Health Ireland, CHI. Children with scoliosis and spina bifida were left waiting years for care. In many cases, they never received it. There were unapproved, non-medical springs implanted in children's backs, hundreds of unnecessary hip operations and mismanaged waiting lists. These are the so-called Crumlin orphans, children with complex needs who were ignored by the system and left with poor care. Promises were broken time and time again. There has been report after report showing mismanagement, a lack of transparency and our most vulnerable children being failed. Some reports have been published, some have been leaked but more are hidden or buried. Too often, families were the last to know, finding out through the media instead of from CHI. Broken promises have led to preventable deaths, lifelong harm, injury and disability. Trust between families, advocates and the system could not be lower. It is completely shattered.

The Tánaiste's own broken promise that no child would be left waiting more than four months for scoliosis surgery is a very painful memory for these families. There are still 30 children waiting longer than six months for surgery, and the waiting lists are just as long as they were a year ago. It is because of those litanies of failures that families and advocates demanded an independent statutory inquiry, something the Government agreed to. We hoped it would be child centred, that families would be equal partners and there would be no hiding place for wrongdoing. This is what families and advocates say they were promised by the Minister and the Tánaiste.

A group representing over 900 families affected by the scandals at CHI has raised serious concerns about the scoping exercise to determine the terms of reference. Despite promises from the Government that the truth and their children would be put first, advocates now say the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has not remained true to her word and the process thus far has been anything but child centred or based on the needs of the families involved. They say documents are being hidden from them and unpublished reports are to be excluded. They say they are being stonewalled by a Minister who has not responded to their concerns. Families and advocates want one thing: to uncover the truth of what happened to their children and make sure it never happens again. That is something we should all want. There should be no hiding places, no fear of what may come out and no resistance to working with families and advocates.

This inquiry must be about truth, accountability and transparency. Any fit-for-purpose inquiry must also fully include families. It must have their faith and confidence. We can have that child-centred inquiry. It is not beyond us to get this right but it means the Government must listen to these advocates who have campaigned tirelessly for over a decade for their children and shown us the way forward. The only way to build trust is to work genuinely and in collaboration, with full openness and no attempt to limit, conceal or control access to information. The only motive should be to support these families and their children to establish the facts. My question today is simple: will the Tánaiste listen to these families? Will he act on their concerns and make sure they can trust that this inquiry will not just become another broken promise?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Clarke for raising this important issue. At the outset, everyone on all sides of this House recognises the significant challenges, stress and worry that families face when they have a sick child, and the very significant challenges families face in relation to paediatric spinal services. There has been and continues to be ongoing additional investment in this area. A total of €30 million has been allocated to help tackle spinal waiting lists, including a ring-fenced theatre, additional orthopaedic surgeons, improved GP referral pathways and additional outpatient clinics. Indeed, I saw that a total of 556 patients attended Saturday clinics since the beginning of 2025. Opening up access at weekends is an important reform. When it comes to outpatients, we see now that the average wait time has fallen to 4.4 months, compared with 7.7 months in May one year previous. A total of 99.2% of patients are now waiting less than 12 months for their outpatient appointment. When we look at inpatients, 200 inpatient procedures have been completed so far this year and the average wait time has fallen from 5.3 months in May 2025 to 4.6 months in May of this year. The Deputy is entirely correct, however. The Minister and I, as well as everyone in the Government, knows there is a lot more that we want and need to do in this area.

There has been a number of concerning revelations over a sustained period of time in relation to CHI. That is why the Minister for Health, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has correctly taken the decision on the direction of travel in terms of replacing and subsuming CHI into the HSE. That is good from a governance point of view. It is an important step to take. The Minister has the full support of all in the Government in that regard. That is an important factor with regard to the issue of trust the Deputy raised. I accept that as well.

We have also seen recently the work the Minister and the former CEO of the HSE commissioned, whereby audits are to be carried out on waiting lists and concerns in this regard.

We saw that published very recently. One of the things that is most striking when reading those audits is the poor communication time and time again. We agree fully with the Deputy that, often, issues in the health service can be added to or amplified by poor communications and families not feeling that they are at the centre of the information flow. That is why I welcome the Minister's decision to ask CHI to put in place a patient co-ordinator. So much can be improved when there are good, open and transparent lines of communication. I think the Deputy referenced that in her question.

The Minister and I have had sustained engagement with advocate groups. The Government agreed to establish a scoping inquiry. It is important for that work to be carried out. The eminent Mr. Remy Farrell SC has been appointed to do that work. He has been engaging with families, advocacy groups and consultants. I know he wishes to conclude that work shortly. The Government will also want to balance that with making sure that everyone has the opportunity to have their say and engage with him. I encourage everyone to engage. I say that respectfully. We have appointed an eminent and serious senior legal figure, without prejudice, in order for people to engage in that process and have their views heard. That will play an important role in shaping the terms of reference and the next step.

We all want the same thing, Deputy. We all want a situation where we have an inquiry that can examine the issues that have arisen and, as the Deputy said, ensure they do not arise again. We all seek to build a health service that can serve the needs of all of our children. We have that structure in place. The Government is committed to it. Mr. Remy Farrell SC is very committed to doing a good job. I encourage everyone to take the opportunity to have their say and input. The Government will respond in kind.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: What I find striking is the letter from the spina bifida and hydrocephalus paediatric advocacy group that states clearly, "We feel we have no other option but to withdraw from this scoping exercise". I find that deeply concerning. Trust is not built on promises; it is built on keeping them. These families were promised a child-centred, codesigned inquiry. Today, they say very clearly that promise has been broken. If the Government has nothing to hide, then let it hide nothing, honour the commitments that were made to these families and publish every unpublished report.

Every document and every unanswered letter sends the same message to these families that protection of the system matters more than uncovering the truth. Give families access to all the Children's Health Ireland, CHI, reports so that they can at least engage effectively. Let them see what happened. Let them see the truth and how it is that this came about because otherwise the Tánaiste cannot say that this will never happen again. They want this to never happen again. It is not too late to do the right thing. This is one issue where the Tánaiste needs to hold to his promises.

The Tánaiste: To be clear, the Government is fulfilling its commitment to this House and the decision that it took to appoint Mr. Remy Farrell SC to carry out a scoping inquiry. There are a number of advocacy groups. There may be eight advocacy groups in this space in relation to children's paediatric spinal care and many are engaging with Mr. Farrell SC. I would encourage genuinely everybody to engage without prejudice to provide information, ask questions and raise concerns that they would like Mr. Farrell SC, as an independent external

senior legal figure, to consider and to report back to Government. That is a good way to proceed.

We also extended the terms of reference to include the hip dysplasia group. This is not a question of Government. This is a question of getting to the answers in terms of CHI, the legitimate and important issues that people have highlighted so that the Minister is then empowered to take the appropriate decisions that she wishes to take to deliver a world-class children's health service, with a new national children's hospital, with all the additional resources going into children's health and with the reforms that she is leading on and the benefits we are seeing now around those additional resources, such as the Saturday outpatient clinics and the likes. We want everybody to engage here in good faith with Mr. Farrell SC. We want to make progress on this.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Last week I raised with the Tánaiste serious concerns about breaches of the public-only consultant contract in the Rotunda, Cork University Maternity Hospital and University Hospital Galway. I acknowledge the excellent work done by my colleague, Deputy Rice, exposing these systemic breaches - breaches that pose a risk for public patients.

A quarter of all work carried out at Galway University Hospital lab comes from the private hospital, Bon Secours. This extra work is overwhelming the system to the point that samples are being outsourced to private labs. This is done at enormous expense to the taxpayer. Due a service level agreement between Bon Secours and University Hospital Galway, private work is being washed through the public system. The taxpayer picks up the bill.

I raised the significant and dangerous delays this is causing for public patients in the Dáil last week. A statement released by hospital management has since confirmed that there is a backlog of 3,449 samples waiting to be tested. These delays are not abstract. They involve people waiting for cancer diagnosis, people whose lives depend upon timely results, people who cannot afford to be pushed down a queue because 25% of the laboratory's workload is taken up by work from a private hospital.

These consistent delays resulted in the laboratory losing accreditation from the Irish National Accreditation Board. The lab does not meet nationally set guidelines for turnaround times despite the Trojan work of its dedicated staff. Galway University Hospital lab is one of the biggest in the country and in a major cancer centre and yet it has no official accreditation.

The Department of Health and HSE officials we in the Joint Committee on Health yesterday. The CEO of the HSE told my colleague, Deputy Rice, that they were completely unaware of the service level agreement between the hospitals. It is a remarkable statement from the very top of the health service. It raises serious questions about the scale of the issue and how many of these service level agreements are violating the public-only contract.

These contracts were signed in 2023 and were meant to be fully enforced by January of this year. Their entire purpose was to put an end to this kind of behaviour. Instead, we are discovering breach after breach and there is no evidence of any proactive monitoring from the Government to enforce this contract. My questions are: why has University Hospital Galway not immediately stopped this breach of the public-only contract? Is this happening in any other

labs across the country? What has the Government done to check? What system has been put in place to ensure full implementation of the public-only contract?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Callaghan for the question. I acknowledge this is an issue he has been rightly pursuing in this House for a period of time. The Deputy commended his colleague, Deputy Rice, the Cathaoirleach of the Oireachtas health committee. Deputy O'Callaghan will understand and appreciate I want to commend my colleague, the Minister for Health, because while I agree sometimes with Deputy O'Callaghan's analysis in terms of the destination we want to get to, it would be unfair to say that we have not seen an extraordinarily proactive approach from the Government since the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, took office. The Minister has shown very clearly to anybody down the back who did not hear that when you sign on the dotted line we expect you to do what you signed up to do.

The public-only contract holders are not permitted to engage in private practice within public hospitals. This position is unequivocal. There are to be no exemptions, no arrangements or no deviations. We would not accept it from anybody else working in the public service. If you sign a contract and you take the extra salary, you fulfil the terms of your contract. It is as simple as that. If you do not wish to sign the contract, that is also fine but you cannot have this each-way bet, as if to say, "I will sign the contract, take the extra salary, and make me pure but not just yet." That is very simple. It is the Government policy. The Minister intends to implement it in full. It is, largely speaking, the policy of the Oireachtas across parties because, of course, it originated from the work of Sláintecare.

I genuinely welcome, as does the Minister, the work being done at the Oireachtas health committee. It is helpful. It was very helpful in relation to the Rotunda. I believe, possibly next week, the committee may be due to see the Rotunda again and the HSE. That is a helpful opportunity for people who work for the public to outline the process that they are undertaking.

The Deputy used the word "violating". I can understand why but I would make the point that we are seeing the reform agenda being implemented here. What we are seeing now is getting to the phase of full implementation of the contract. I accept that the Government would have liked to have seen us at this point earlier. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, has prioritised this since taking office.

Shortly the Cabinet Committee on Health is meeting with the clinical directors in each of the regions - the top doctors who are paid additional salaries to make sure this happens. The Taoiseach, the Minister and I will want to hear directly what is happening. There are also a number of regional meetings taking place across the country.

We are not for turning on this. The Minister made that clear. We are extraordinarily serious about this and health policy set in this building and in Miesian Plaza on Baggot Street, not set anywhere else. I hope everybody now working in the health service understands that fully.

In relation to the specific issue in University Hospital Galway, the Deputy is right that there is an issue here. The issue here is there is a histology laboratory in Galway. It processes on average 13,200 samples per month. The lab has been recently experiencing periods where demand exceeded available staffing resources and this resulted in a backlog of samples. The HSE has confirmed that urgent referrals will always be priorities. Samples are processed according to clinical priority but it has also advised now that the long-standing service level

agreement that is in place with the local private hospital, the Bon Secours, to provide lab service is due to terminate this year. I think it may be due to terminate in September but it is certainly due to terminate this year. That is also an outworking of the reform agenda that the health service is currently undergoing.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: The question I am asking here is: what exactly is the system to monitor and ensure full implementation of the public-only contract? Clearly, there is a number of breaches around the country. They are arising one by one. What system has the Government in place to ensure this contract is being enforced?

In relation to Galway, the Tánaiste seems to be okay with the situation that this breach will continue for a number of months. The contract was signed. It was put in place in 2023 and meant to be fully enforced and fully implemented by January of this year. That has not happened. The breaches are continuing. Is the Tánaiste okay with them continuing until later this year? Should the public-only contract not be enforced now? Is the situation where the management of the hospital is telling consultants on the public-only contract to continue to do private work where they have a backlog and where people's tests are being delayed? People are not getting the results in a timely fashion. The lab has no longer got national accreditation because it is not meeting the targets. That is not acceptable. Does the Tánaiste agree that is not acceptable and the public-only contract needs to be adhered to now, not later in the year?

The Tánaiste: I fully agree with the Deputy. Let me be clear that the HSE has confirmed that any additional payments to consultants on that public-only consultant contract, POCC, contract relating to the service level agreement ceased at the start of the year. There are some consultants who do not work on a public-only consultant contract. It is important in winding down a long-standing arrangement and an agreement that that is done in a safe manner and that is the intention. However, it is ending because we are pursuing Sláintecare. We are pursuing the public-only consultant contract. We are creating a public health service. The Minister for Health does not have responsibility for private health. She has a responsibility for delivering a world-class public health service. That is what we all want to do.

There is a number of activities under way. We have had the HSE audit from the last year. We have had the Minister putting in her own regional structure, engaging on a three-monthly basis in terms of each region over and over again, and the progress we are making as well. The Minister has also asked everyone in this House for their support.

She is working in partnership with the committee, which is a formidable combination and that needs to continue. I and the Taoiseach fully support these efforts, as does all of Government, and we look forward to meeting with the regional clinical directors too.

On a positive note, we have seen benefits with the public-only consultant contract already, whether that is the cardiology clinics on a Saturday and Sunday in Connolly Hospital, a Saturday hub in St. Vincent's hospital, weekend consultant cover in Wexford General Hospital, a minimum of 26 consultants now rostered at weekends in University Hospital Waterford, and the progress in Kerry, St. James's and Mullingar hospitals. We are seeing the benefits. This is a reform agenda. It is one the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is going to drive and it will make a big difference. We want to work in support with everybody across this House to get to where we need to.

Deputy Ged Nash: "Isolated often at home, [my] child sees me constantly stressed and budgeting/worrying about bills and arrears and going without [the] basics." Those are the words of one parent from the Barnardos cost of living survey published this week. One in five families is cutting back on food due to the cost of living. Nearly half have skipped meals or reduced portions so their children would have enough to eat - in a rich country. Thirty per cent felt that at some point, they did not have enough food to feed their children. Some parents said, "Food for myself, I'm having to go without" and that the "Amount of food we buy had been significantly cut". I could go on.

Today, we have more bad news for families up and down the country. The ESRI has warned that food prices will rise even higher because of second-round effects from the Iran war. Families already struggling will be hit again with higher energy bills and higher grocery costs in the autumn and winter. As the Tánaiste will know, electricity bills are rapidly rising, with an 8% hike from Electric Ireland in July, which is an extra €140 a year on average family bills. Flogas plans to increase its prices by 10% and we have already seen PrepayPower up its prices in May. The Government has nothing to offer on energy costs, not since it bought its way in the last election.

I could ask the Tánaiste what the Government has done to ensure lower food, energy and grocery prices, but the truth is it is a big fat nothing. There has been lots of talk about competition and the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, CCPC, but nothing of substance has been done. Looking at last year's budget, we can recall what the Government did not do. There was no indexation of income taxes, no energy credits, no increase in children's allowance and there was a cut to one-off cost-of-living payments. PAYE workers and hard-working families were mogged - mogged by burger barons and the highly profitable hospitality sector.

The Tánaiste's Government made the choice to give them a VAT cut, and we know where the Tánaiste's focus has been for much of the past week. It has been on giving the red carpet treatment to influencers who came to the Department to talk to him about his wealth account plans. This contrasts with the carpeting received by PAYE workers in last year's budget. Let us not forget the endless reports and meandering to the media by various Ministers on inheritance tax cuts, when all the while parents are focused on feeding their children and making sure they do not go hungry.

Temperatures are rising, but so are prices. What will the Tánaiste do practically to help lower food prices? Next week, the lower VAT rate kicks in and tourists will be arriving from all around the world to eat in our restaurants, which is a good thing. We will have EU diplomats from across member states descending on Dublin and having their takeaway coffees. Families who can afford to might be going out to get a burger this summer, if the good weather continues. Will they be paying lower prices? Will the Tánaiste directly call on the hospitality sector to commit to passing on the VAT cuts he is about to introduce, through lower prices for customers across the country?

The Tánaiste: Deputy Nash really does not like burgers, but we will get to that in a second.

This Government has taken a number of actions in endeavouring to assist people. We should remind ourselves that in the country we live in, there are over 2.8 million people who got up

and went to work this morning - the highest number ever. Figures from the CSO show the average weekly wage is now over €1,000. Yes, we are living in a time of huge global uncertainty but, thank God, we have resources as a country to intervene. The Deputy asked what the Government did to assist people with fuel and the likes. We delivered the largest or second largest package in the entire European Union for direct assistance. This did not just help specific sectors, although it helped them too. It helped hauliers, farmers, farm contractors and people working in road transport. It helped everyone going to work who needs to put petrol or diesel in their car but it also, and I have made this point before, reduced inflation by 0.6% per month on what it would have been. The cost of food would have been 0.6% higher, from an inflationary point of view, in Dunnes, Tesco, SuperValu and shops in Louth, were it not for the package the Government put in place. That cannot be overlooked. That is not my view; it is the view of the chief economist and the economic analysis of the package we put in place.

We increased the fuel allowance and, next week, something else is happening that is not just VAT being reduced. The carer's allowance is being expanded. There will be thousands of carers receiving the reduced rate of the carer's allowance who might now qualify for the larger rate, and there will be some who do not currently get carer's allowance who will qualify for the first time ever. That is happening next week.

As the Deputy knows, we also introduced the largest ever increases in child support payments, with over 330,000 children benefiting from these increases. The national minimum wage has increased since 2020 by 40%, from €10.10 per day to today's rate of €14.15. We have also reduced people's VAT to 9% on gas and electricity bills. We have reduced college fees and brought in free hot school meals, free schoolbooks, free GP care for under-eights, and we have extended the back-to-school footwear and clothing allowance to preschool for the first time ever. This Government has taken several actions to help people.

However, the decision to reduce VAT in the hospitality sector is a very important one, and do not forget the hairdressers-----

Deputy Ged Nash: I did not.

The Tánaiste: -----with €48 million being the cost for hairdressers - the beard trimming. This will benefit. There are over 150,000 people working in the hospitality sector and, I will be very honest, this is not about reducing the cost of a cup of coffee. I am not going to lie to anybody here; it is not about that at all. This is about supporting employment. It is about saying to the coffee shop owner, restaurant owner and pub that might do a lunch in rural Ireland that we are helping them by reducing their tax bill because they are helping us in providing employment.

The Deputy mentioned the old beef barons or burger barons or whatever you call them. CSO data shows that 99% of those working in food catering and accommodation are SMEs, and half of those are microenterprises that have less than ten employees. This is an initiative that will disproportionately benefit rural and regional Ireland, small businesses and microenterprises. It is the right decision. I look forward to standing with coffee shop owners, café owners, hairdressers and restaurateurs to say we took this decision to support jobs.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

Deputy Ged Nash: I thank the Tánaiste for going through some of his greatest hits in recent years, but the question is what will be done for working people this year? The Tánaiste has acknowledged that as a result of the untargeted VAT cut for the hospitality sector, PAYE workers had to go without indexation last year, which means more of the money they earn this year - the small increase they get from their pay increase - will by and large go to the taxman. The Tánaiste said earlier in the House that this was wrong and the Government has to make up for that. However, with all the promises made over the past few weeks by various Ministers going through the media rounds, the tax package for this year seems to be already swallowed up.

The Tánaiste and I have a difference in opinion on how we can best support the small cafés and restaurants around the country that we need to support. This expensive blunt instrument is not the way to do it. The way to do it is to introduce targeted energy supports and reform the outdated commercial rate system to address some of the structural cost issues in our SMEs across this country. A blunt instrument like this that is costly and will disproportionately benefit franchises and big chains is not the way to do it.

The Tánaiste: I said to the Deputy earlier, and I am happy to say it again, that I do not doubt his bona fides or that of his party in wanting to support small businesses. I do not doubt that at all. We just have a different policy approach to this. I also made this point, and I will make it again, that we had an election. In that election, I stood in coffee shops, restaurants, pubs that served food and hotels, and I said to people that if they voted my party back into Government, and the Fianna Fáil party did the equivalent, we would reduce their VAT rate. It was a promise we made to people right across this country and is a promise we are delivering on - promise made, promise kept, promise delivered. It is a permanent reduction in costs and taxes on employment that specifically impacts regional and rural Ireland, small businesses and microenterprises.

The Deputy knows well what we are thinking of doing in the next budget. We will have the summer economic statement next month, which will outline the amount we will have for additional spending and will allocate the amount we will have for a tax package. There will also be a personal income tax package. I believe we need to look at the budget in the round. Tax can do some things, which it should. There are too many people paying the higher rate of tax at too low an entry point, but there are other things we can do on the spending side to structurally reduce costs families face, including workers. The Deputy referenced childcare, which would be an obvious area too. We will be going through the budget and looking at that. The summer economic statement will be the next chance we will have to take stock next month.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I thank the Tánaiste for that. I wish to welcome a group of students from Trinity going into their third year, who are accompanied by a very special member of Senator Sharon Keogan's family. I wish them well in their day here in Leinster House.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I am sure the Tánaiste will join me by offering his sympathies and the sympathies of the Government on the passing of Sr. Colette Hickey, who passed away at

the age of 108. She was the founder of Edel House Cork and the first winner of the 1993 Cork Person of the Year Award for the tremendous work she did for our city.

This week, we have reports in the press of 265 people aged 65 or older living in emergency accommodation. A total of 146 of them live in Dublin alone. These are men and women who should be well settled into their retirements, not sleeping in hostels and hubs. It is not long ago that I brought up in this House a case in Mallow in my constituency, where we have a lady approaching 80 years of age who has been placed in homeless accommodation far from her network, neighbours and everybody who she associated with through her lifetime. Unfortunately, that is not an isolated case. This is just one of the human faces of the figures that I have given this House.

It is not the first warning that this Government has received. In January, the Simon Communities of Ireland, working with the Simon Community Galway, published a report a report on homelessness in later life. It found that old age homelessness had doubled in the past five years. It found that the assumption of older people owning their own homes or being in secure tenancies was no longer a reflection of the reality of the State. More often, it struck me that many of these people are in private rented accommodation with rapidly rising rents, watching their own security that they spent a lifetime building disappear in front of their eyes. Uachtarán Connolly attended the launch of that report in Galway. She said it shines a spotlight on the growing number of older people experiencing homelessness, and particular attention should be given to the recommendations. When the President of Ireland says that this needs to be looked at, surely the Government and this House should pay attention to that.

The report sets out six clear costings in its policy recommendations, namely, stronger national leadership, better legal protections, increasing resources for homeless services, and a targeted strategy for expanding age-friendly housing. In fairness to it, that is not a radical ask. They are basic and achievable steps by any Government, I would have assumed. The report's authors said that Ireland has a window of opportunity to act before it becomes entrenched. Five months have passed since its launch and the numbers have not improved, as I laid out. The lady in Mallow is not the only one in homeless services, living at a homeless hub at the moment.

This is not being treated as a priority by the Government. We seem to have a problem in this State where we look at elderly people and think it is someone else's problem. How many of the six recommendations in that report has the Government adopted? Will it publish a timeline? Is the Minister for housing delivering on them? Has the report been welcomed by the Government publicly but shelved privately?

Deputy Simon Harris: I join Deputy O'Flynn in extending my sympathy to the friends, family and fellow sisters of Sr. Colette Hickey. What an incredible age and, indeed, an incredible life of service and impact on people, particularly in Cork. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a hanam dílis. I thank the Deputy for extending his sympathy to her in the House.

I thank Deputy O'Flynn for raising this issue. I do not dispute that it is serious. One reason we decided that for the very first time the Minister of State with responsibility for older people should be based in both the Department of Health and the Department of housing is the recognition that we cannot just have conversations about older people from a policy perspective in the Department of Health. We also need to have conversations about health and well-being in the context of housing. The Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, is committed to this agenda

and working extraordinarily hard on this. Compared with the previous one, the last census showed the scale of the challenge here. The Deputy is right to highlight that the number of people over the age of 65 renting had increased by a very significant amount.

There is a real policy issue here, which I do not doubt. That is why this year we will be producing a specific housing plan for older people. I will give the Deputy a flavour of some of the issues that we believe need to be addressed. Rightsizing is an important issue and the Department of Finance, with the Central Bank, has put in place a change to the bridging finance rules regarding access to mortgages, which is important for older people who need to rightsize for their own quality of life and health, and want to live in their own community. Not being prohibited by rigid mortgage rules is a positive development. It is why some of the tenancy protections are important, being able to provide six-year tenancies for people rather than the uncertainty we have had in our country before. That is why we also need to work specifically with older people on social housing targets for every local authority, and in the new plan, we will be. I do not say this to be critical of Cork. In fact, it is a positive. A city like Cork could really help to lead the way here by becoming a local authority that decides to set targets. There is nothing to stop any local authority from doing this today but we will be mandating it as part of our plan for every local authority to set targets for the number of older people's homes they will deliver each year. Any of us who have been involved in public life have seen what used to happen in the past, where small clusters or estates of homes used to be developed for older people and/or people with a disability. I am not being critical of anyone but that stopped for a while and we need to really revamp and rebuild that.

We need better data collection processes regarding older people. We need our local authorities to enhance delivery through improved site identification, working closer with the approved housing bodies too. We need to and will recognise in the plan the increasing number of older people renting in the private rented sector and examine those affordability challenges for older people approaching retirement in the sector and how we, as a Government, need to help to address those challenges. We will be back as soon as possible this year, with our housing plan for older people. We will encompass these issues in that.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: I am looking forward to meeting Valerie O'Sullivan, our city chief executive, and informing her that the Government will make moneys available for housing plans for older people. There is another elephant in the room which I want to make the Government aware of, that is, people who lost their houses back in the 2008 to 2009 period. They are now in rented accommodation and back on their feet. Some of them have restarted businesses. Some of them are back working but they are renting. A number of these people are rapidly approaching 65 now. I predict that there will be a tremendous increase in people approaching local authorities throughout the country, saying they can no longer afford the €2,300 rent and need to be on a local authority housing list. I predict that will be a huge problem facing this country. I do not think we are accounting for it, thinking about it, or planning for it. Losing your home in your 70s is not just a housing problem. It is a health, mobility and routine problem, and people certainly lose their dignity when they lose their home at that age.

Deputy Simon Harris: I largely agree with the Deputy's analysis. We are still seeing the scars of that financial crash, where people who lost their home at a certain age are now ageing. We have to be prepared. That is one of the reasons we are doing a specific body of work led by

the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, which will come to Government shortly. Alongside the reasons the Deputy pointed out, we are also seeing a significant increase in life expectancy, which is largely a good thing for society, but also a change in our demographics. We are expecting that the population aged over 85 will increase by over 140% in Ireland by 2040. There is very significant demographic churn. We are still one of the youngest populations in Europe but we are ageing fast. We are very committed to acting on this. We allocate a lot of money to local authorities. I would say respectfully that all of them need to start showing creativity with regard to the type of housing they are delivering, including homes for people with disabilities and homes for older people. Social housing is used as a kind of umbrella term. We need to start looking at the types of social housing that are required and that mixed tenure. I would be happy to meet Cork City Council about that at any time.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Barry Heneghan: As we are all in here in our suits, sitting on these leather chairs, the weather outside is gradually getting better, and people in my constituency will be going to the beach. Four young people from my constituency, 17-year-old Aoibheann Conlon, Laura Daly, and brothers Oisín and Gavin Weadick, Clontarf Sea Scouts, saved the life of a swimmer recently who was struggling to swim. I asked the Taoiseach to meet them and I am asking the Tánaiste if he will meet them because these young people represent an issue, the uncomfortable truth that they were better prepared than we were to save someone's life. We know we are going into the best weather. We have the data to show that it is coming. The current swimming period is set monthly by the councils.

When we know the weather is going to be good, we need to have lifeguards on the beach. Tragically, last month, there was the loss of the life of a teenager on Burrow Beach in Howth. There was not a lifeguard on duty as they are not funded. We need to have more reactive lifeguards across Ireland and to be better prepared.

There were 80 drownings in 2025 and there have already been 33 this year. The UK, a country with 12 times our population, recorded 193. That is not comparable. It is not acceptable but it is fixable. A thousand swimmers and families across my constituency signed a petition last year calling for better services. We have seen a lot of investment but we need more.

With water safety comes water quality. Yesterday we had statements on it. The issue is that the EPA's report is showing that urban wastewater incidences are frequent and are causing bathing water closures. We are relying on water testing that is days old. However, real-time monitoring is standard across Europe in countries like Denmark. We need to be proactive rather than reactive. That cannot be a political soundbite. It needs to be put into action.

Thousands of people will go to Howth this weekend. The Tánaiste saw the recent videos of people queuing outside the DART station. It was like they were queuing to see Santa. There was a giant line. I went in it myself. It took 40 minutes to get out of Howth.

While we are talking about beaches and preventative measures, I raise the issue of litter and dumping in Dublin Bay. An enforcement officer needs to be present on hot days. If someone can bring cans of Coke down to a beach, they need to be punished if they are littering on a

UNESCO heritage site. An enforcement officer needs to be on site who can give a fine. It is not acceptable when someone brings down rubbish to a protected area with endangered species and leaves it there without any consequences.

I hope that the Tánaiste will meet these heroes from my constituency but I also hope, ahead of the weather across Ireland, he will bring in proactive measures to fund councils and give preparation for these swimmers.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy for the work he is doing and for highlighting this. I welcome the people with us today and their heroic actions. I thank the Deputy for highlighting that too. I take seriously the point the Deputy made about lifeguards. I live on the coast as well, in Wicklow. In all weather, but particularly in this weather, people tend to flock to the beaches and flock to our seas. There is a legitimate issue around lifeguard numbers and the likes. I will certainly talk with Government colleagues in relation to that and I am happy to engage with the Deputy on it.

Dublin Bay is a beautiful place. I was at Raheny United last week. I met some young people in a coffee shop who said they were all friends with Deputy Barry Heneghan. I said "I know him." It was good to be out in the constituency with my colleague, Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí. Dublin Bay is one of our greatest natural amenities. I welcome the ongoing work by the Dublin Bay task force, chaired by Dublin City Council, aimed at improving the bathing water quality further. The Department of housing, along with Uisce Éireann and the local authorities, are now funding UCD's Acclimatize 2 project to carry out a study identifying and targeting pollution pressures as well. The Dublin Bay bathing water task force - that is quite a mouthful - will work closely with the research team in UCD as well.

I recognise the point the Deputy made that people are swimming outside the summer season. The bathing water quality amendment regulations were published to allow local authorities to define the bathing season in their own area, which was meant to be an important step forward as well.

I take the point on the issue of public transport. People will flock to an area like Howth. I know the Minister for Transport is working with the National Transport Authority, with Iarnród Éireann and with the Deputy to increase DART capacity and reliability. We want people to have confidence that they can choose public transport and not have to queue for a significant length of time.

I join the Deputy in remembering the young girl who tragically lost her life at Burrow Beach. Any such loss is absolutely heartbreaking. Everybody in this House extends their thoughts to that family and community.

There is more we can be doing in terms of amenities and the point the Deputy made around that. We talked about water quality but also the visitor experience and things like public toilets and changing facilities, so that people have a more enjoyable, healthier day but also that the local community, when so many visitors come in, feel the area can cope in terms of the right amenities being in place. A lot of the issues here involve different agencies and levels and involve a bit of joined-up thinking. This is the approach we are trying to take. Perhaps what the Deputy might like to do is to outline to us from this conversation the various issues in Dublin Bay. I will undertake to liaise with the relevant Ministers and agencies on the Deputy's

behalf to try to co-ordinate some of this response and come back to the Deputy and engage further.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I am delighted to outline my three key asks. I am delighted that the Tánaiste has asked. It is good to see he was in Raheny with Deputy Ó Muirí. Will the Government provide direct funding to DCC and Fingal County Council to extend lifeguarding cover? I was a swimming teacher for five years. I know I do not look like it now. This is something that we need to do. The summer is here and the warm weather is coming. Will he commit to real-time water quality testing? It is done in Denmark. As Deputy Ó Muirí will know, I am very fond of Denmark's energy system, but I am also fond of how they cleaned up the port and made it safe for swimmers.

Will the Tánaiste properly fund the Coast Guard and emergency services? These repair crews also worked hard this week when there was an issue on the northern DART line and they worked overnight. That is something that needs to be funded but ahead of this weekend, the Coast Guard team will be responding in Dublin Bay. These people are working with everything they have and they deserve proper resources. A total of 3,000 parts per million of E. coli in water is six times the safe amount. It is not acceptable for my constituents or anyone's constituents to be forced to swim in that water. Níl sé maith go leor. Le linn an ordú dianghlásála, bhí daoine ag athrú na rudaí a bhí á ndéanamh acu, cosúil le snámh agus na rudaí mar sin. Caithfidh an infheistíocht a chur isteach.

The Tánaiste: I do not want the Deputy getting the wrong idea that I went to Raheny and did not invite him. It was a Fine Gael members' coffee morning. I was not sure whether the Deputy was ready for that invitation.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: I was at a business event. I did meet one of the Tánaiste's colleagues though.

The Tánaiste: To balance my comments - what was the name of the-----

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: Conor.

The Tánaiste: I met Conor in a good coffee outfit outside Raheny United.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: It is called The Lab.

The Tánaiste: They were very pleased to see the 9% VAT rate coming in next week. They spoke fondly of the Deputy too.

The issues the Deputy raised are serious and I take them seriously. We are seeing bathing water quality continuing to be high overall nationally. Around 98% of our sites are meeting or exceeding the minimum standard. That is good. They are EPA figures. It does not take away from the Deputy's point in relation to Dublin Bay. The work of the Dublin Bay task force matters to all of us. I look forward to the outcome of that UCD research project, which is trying to identify the main causes of pollution here and what we can be doing more proactively

regarding that. I have huge respect for the work of the Coast Guard, as well as for the resourcing of it, including its facilities. I will certainly speak to the relevant Ministers on those three issues and ask that they come back to the Deputy.

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

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Today, the ESRI warned that food prices will go up again this autumn. Ordinary families are under real pressure. They are working hard but are still struggling to pay their bills. They are getting crucified by rent, childcare and insurance. Now they read that the basics in their presses are going to go up. It will not just be them. The ESRI also said that those on fixed incomes, such as pensioners, those on disability payments and low-paid workers will be hit the hardest. It is chipping away at people's quality of life. Does the Tánaiste accept that the delays and half-measures from the Government on fuel prices have made the situation worse? What action will he take to protect working families from another cost-of-living shock and ensure that there is real accountability and transparency in supermarket pricing and profits?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Clarke for raising the issue of the cost of living. I am slightly surprised she did because I was wondering cá bhfuil Mary Lou this week. I happened to see online that she is over in the United States at a Friends of Sinn Féin talk tonight. You can pay \$250 at 6 p.m. to be a champion for change and she will throw in a free T-shirt-----

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Is the Tánaiste following all the female TDs around or is it just Mary Lou?

The Tánaiste: Pardon me?

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Is the Tánaiste tracking the movements of all the female TDs or just Mary Lou?

The Tánaiste: No, I was just wondering where the Leader of the Opposition was.

Deputy James O'Connor: Sinn Féin is the only party raising money in America.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Can we stick to the question, please?

Deputy James O'Connor: From their Provo supporters.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: What a peculiar answer.

The Tánaiste: I was wondering where the Leader of the Opposition was this week-----

Deputy Sorca Clarke: The ESRI.

The Tánaiste: ----- to find out that when Sinn Féin is lecturing us in here in relation to the cost of living, it is charging \$250 and throwing in a free T-shirt at a fundraiser.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Food prices, Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: The leader of Sinn Féin should be in this House doing her job.

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Supermarkets here. Fuel prices here.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: That is not the purpose of the question. We will move to the next question.

The Tánaiste: The leader of Sinn Féin should be in this House instead of charging \$250. This Government has a proud track record when it comes to supporting people. The package we put in place, which Sinn Féin voted against, reduced the cost of diesel and petrol and-----

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Which will go up again on 1 August.

The Tánaiste: -----reduced inflation by 0.6%. We expanded the fuel allowance-----

Deputy Sorca Clarke: To families who do not earn enough.

The Tánaiste: -----with the largest or second largest package in the European Union, while Mary Lou is over charging people \$250 and-----

Deputy Sorca Clarke: Who else's diary does the Tánaiste follow?

The Tánaiste: ----- giving out free T-shirts.

Deputy Rory Hearne: The Dublin Simon Community's report this week showed a 20% increase in the number of women accessing its homeless services. We are in the midst of an unprecedented human catastrophe, with mass evictions taking place across this country. Families, children and the elderly are being evicted from their homes. A total of 30,000 households have been issued a notice to quit just in the last 18 months. One case I want to highlight is from the Tánaiste's own constituency. We were contacted by May Kelly and her husband, Michael, who have been renting in Wicklow for 20 years. They paid their rent on time every month. They are an elderly couple. Michael, who is 67, has been hospitalised and undergone three amputations. They have to vacate their home by December.

They have applied to the council but it has said they are over the limit. He is retired and now the council needs discretion to address their issue.

What kind of society are we becoming when a 67-year-old double amputee is being evicted and facing homelessness? Will the Tánaiste correct his statement from last week when he said the majority of tenants are covered by a no-fault evictions ban? That is not true. The majority

of 250,000 rental households who are not covered by the new measures are still at risk of eviction into homelessness.

The Tánaiste: As Deputy Hearne knows, because we discussed this at length when Sinn Féin raised this last week, my comments related to the new measures that were brought in and it is true that under the new measures new tenancies, the majority of people are covered on no-fault evictions.

Deputy Rory Hearne: Not the majority of existing tenants.

The Tánaiste: Obviously, measures you bring in are prospective. We brought in a whole package of measures in terms of longer tenancies, making sure the RPZ was nationalised and bringing in an effective no-fault eviction ban for the majority of new tenants as well.

I take very seriously the case the Deputy raised. I do not feel too comfortable about speaking about an individual case in the Dáil but if the Deputy wants to send me the details, or send them to my constituency office directly, I will work with Deputy Whitmore on this. We need to do better on that and I am happy to engage on it.

Deputy George Lawlor: The Tánaiste will recall a couple of weeks ago I raised the issue of the Glenmore static camera where 35,099 fines have been issued in 11 months. There are about 80 cameras across the country which are exactly the same. I have the results for the other ones and it makes for interesting reading: Carlow - 15,880; Mayo - 11,476; Cork - 3,369; Donegal - 2,925; Limerick - 1,051; Gorey - 1,150; and Galway - 397. Bear in mind 30,599 fines were issued from Glenmore, which raised €4.9 million. This is grossly unfair. The staggering and unexplained disparity in fines issued from one camera to the next makes enforcement look inconsistent and deeply unfair.

People have lost their licences, their insurance is up and they are receiving multiple penalty points because of the appalling signage. These are welcome and much-needed cameras. Nobody is arguing against that but people must be fairly treated. With 30,599 from one camera in south Kilkenny, something is wrong. People must be treated fairly. These fines must be rescinded and the penalty points rescinded also.

The Tánaiste: What people should do is slow down.

Deputy George Lawlor: There is problem.

The Tánaiste: I try to be constructive in this House.

Deputy George Lawlor: There were 397 in Galway.

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

The Tánaiste: The problem is lots of people are dying on our roads. I am serious about this. If the assertion is the camera is wrong-----

Deputy George Lawlor: Yes.

The Tánaiste: If the assertion is the camera is broken, then I would ask someone to please look into the broken camera. If the assertion is that people are speeding and should not be getting a fine, that is not it.

Deputy George Lawlor: Signage.

The Tánaiste: Can someone please check this? I am not responsible for the operation of cameras but if the camera is not working, it should be fixed. I presume the Department of Transport can look into that, or the gardaí. The broader issue here of these static cameras making sure our roads are safer is a really important one. If our cameras are catching people speeding, and penalty points or fines are being administered, that is Government road safety policy.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Last week a UK report showed that girls who receive the HPV vaccine in their early teens have an almost zero risk of dying from cervical cancer but at a time when the research shows there is a chance of actually eliminating cervical cancer, uptake rates of the vaccine in schools is actually falling all over the country. It is down to 63% of girls taking it up in the Dublin North West region. In January, the Minister for Health announced a HPV vaccine catch-up programme for fifth and sixth year students. This was a really positive step, which I warmly welcomed as chair of the cross-party group on cancer. However, there is still a gap. There is no new catch-up scheme for young adults who missed the vaccine in schools. It costs €200 a dose for them. The national immunisation advisory committee, NIAC, recommends the vaccine for those up to the age of 24 years. When will the Government bring forward a new HPV catch-up campaign for young adults, so they can benefit from this protection as well?

The Tánaiste: I acknowledge genuinely Deputy O'Gorman's long-standing commitment in relation to this. It is quite incredible that we have a vaccine in this country that can effectively eradicate a cancer that disproportionately impacts and kills young women in this country. Unfortunately, there have been campaigns, misinformation and disinformation. At times, not every Member of this House has supported the vaccine. I hope we have moved beyond those times because this is a vaccine that is highly safe and highly effective and everybody should support it.

I welcome the Deputy's thanks to the Minister for Health and the work she is doing on the catch-up programme. I know the priority here is to target the vaccine in the first instance at the age group where it is most effective - I think that is close to the age of 13 year - but we certainly do not rule out taking further actions; far from it. The Minister will continue to monitor this closely and I will keep in close contact with the Deputy on it.

Deputy Michael Collins: I want to raise a very serious concern coming directly from front-line healthcare staff, particularly our advanced nurse practitioners. There is growing alarm at a proposal within the Department of Health to break the long-established pay link between

advanced nurse practitioners, ANPs, and assistant directors of nursing, ADON. This is a link grounded in a Labour Court recommendation and one that recognises the level of responsibility involved. ANPs are highly trained masters-level technicians. They diagnose, prescribe and manage complex patient care every single day. In many areas, especially across rural Ireland, they are absolutely critical to keeping people out of overcrowded emergency departments and helping to reduce waiting lists. Yet, at a time when we desperately need more of these professionals, the Government is considering a move that would devalue the role and discourage experienced nurse from progressing into advanced practice. What kind of signal does this send to the profession? Will the Government now step back from the proposal and commit to protecting an established ANP-ADON pay link, so we can retain and grow this vital workforce?

The Tánaiste: The Deputy will be glad to know the Minister for Health thinks he is entirely right and, therefore, I do too. I know the Minister spoke to this at the INMO conference because the work being done by the ANPs is as the Deputy describes. It is a key part of the delivery of healthcare. It is keeping people out of our hospitals as well. It is a very valued role in the health service. We have a piece of work under way in the Government across a variety of Departments, liaising with our colleagues in the Department of public expenditure and reform. The Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, is fully committed to this as are we. We will keep the Deputy updated.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Another Thursday and another question on rare diseases. The Minister might want to answer this. Last Sunday, I was on my way to the Cork-Offaly match and I heard an interview between Paul Cunningham and a member of the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics, NCPE. To say I was very disappointed with what I heard would be an understatement. I raised it at the health committee yesterday with Department of Health officials and the HSE. The programme for Government is explicit. It contains a provision for an early access scheme. The Minister has said it is something she is going to progress over the lifetime of the Government. The political class has endorsed it, as has the Department of Health, but for some reason somebody on the NCPE thinks they can have a contrarian opinion. The last time I checked that person was a civil servant. He is supposed to serve the State and implement the policies this Government decides are worthy of implementation. If the Minister heard the interview, what is her opinion on it? If she has not, I encourage her to listen to it. Does she think it is appropriate that somebody would express an opinion contrary to what the Government has decided to do?

Minister for Health (Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill): I thank the Deputy. He is right. Not only is an early access programme a commitment in the programme for Government but my officials are already working on designing it and it will be implemented by the HSE. I also acknowledge the role of the NCPE and the independence that is important to preserve and protect. I appreciate radio interviews are one thing but we will strike a balance between protecting the independence and integrity of scientists and listening to them and ploughing on with Government policy that is well endorsed by this House.

Deputy Catherine Callaghan: With between 4,500 and 5,000 Irish teachers now teaching abroad, it is really important that we facilitate any teachers who would like to return home to

do so. I was recently contacted by a constituent who is teaching abroad and wants to return home but has raised serious concerns about how teaching experience is recognised on return which has a direct impact on their salary scales. There seems a clear inconsistency between primary teachers who often have their experience recognised while post-primary teachers do not. Likewise, experience is accepted by some schools but not in high-quality international schools that teach programmes like the international Baccalaureate. That means two teachers working side-by-side abroad can be treated very differently on their return with many forced to start again at the bottom of the salary scale despite their significant experience. This runs the risk of discouraging teachers who want to come home from coming home. Will the Tánaiste commit to reviewing this system to ensure a fair and consistent approach to the recognition of teaching experience?

The Tánaiste: As the Deputy said, there is an incremental credit scheme that does allow teachers to claim credit for other years of relevant service, whether within the EU or outside it. However, there are some issues the Deputy is right to raise in relation to schools which may not necessarily satisfy the current required criteria and then the service of the school cannot be considered towards that incremental credit.

I o'clock

The service of the school cannot then be considered toward that incremental credit. I think that is the nub of the issue we hear time and again. Through the Teachers Conciliation Council there is a subcommittee that looks at incremental credit. The teacher unions have now lodged a claim concerning the recognition of private post-primary teaching service outside the EU as well. The Department is examining this as part of the budgetary cycle. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to engage with the Deputy directly.

Deputy Seán Crowe: I raise the commitment in the programme for Government to reach a 19:1 student-teacher ratio in our primary schools. In my area, Scoil Maelruain national school was stripped of a teacher because the school was one student short for the coming year. This resulted in four classes being turned into three, with numbers of 29 and 30 students. This flies in the face of the commitment and pushes the class size to the limit. The Tánaiste knows that society and schools have changed. Children and pupils are more transient and not fixed to an area because of the housing crisis, through no fault of their own. This is placing stress on schools as regards class sizes because teachers are allocated for the year based on the rolls on a set day. Another school in my area lost out because Ukrainian families were moved to the west in the middle of September. This is practical stuff. Will the Government consider introducing flexibility in the allocation of teachers beyond the current cut-off of 30 September?

The Tánaiste: The Government is committed to continuing to reduce class sizes. We have seen a significant reduction in pupil-teacher ratios over the past several years. However, the Deputy is right to say it is not an exact science, and I will not pretend it is. It has to be at a point in time. There are opportunities for schools to appeal, put forward information with regard to special circumstances or show they expect that numbers will grow again in the following year. I am not sure it is entirely as blunt an instrument as might be suggested. However, I will ask the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to give consideration to the point the Deputy has made.

On the point about Ukrainians, we have tried to minimise the movement of Ukrainian students during the school year. It has not always been possible, but we are conscious of the fact that when kids are settled in a school it is important to try to minimise that disruption. I will ask the Minister to come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Brian Stanley: Family resource centres around the State do fantastic work but are under significant pressure due to rising costs and increasing demands on their services. The level of core funding is simply not keeping pace with their escalating overheads. Portlaoise and Mountmellick family resource centres are providing vital services to families that are making a real difference with services, including parenting support, youth intervention, early-year preschool services, counselling and a whole lot more. The centre in Harper's Lane in Portlaoise is providing 114 preschool places alone. However, without an increase in the forthcoming budget, family resource centres will be limited to crisis-driven reactive responses instead of more effective early interventions. The core operational budget for these centres is €180,000 per annum. It is simply not enough to pay three full-time staff. While I know there will be a lot of asks in the forthcoming budget, without these centres there will be a lot more costs. I ask the Tánaiste to ensure they receive a substantial increase in core funding.

The Tánaiste: I accept that the return on investment in family resource centres is extremely good. I met with the one in Greystones recently and the national organisation came to see me also. It is due to come to see me for a pre-budget meeting in the autumn as well. Being truthful, over the past number of years, we have been trying to balance core funding for existing centres with trying to fill in the map because there are quite a number of communities where there have not been family resource centres. My colleague, Deputy Carrigy, has been making the case for Longford for a significant period. There has been that balance between new centres and making sure we are adequately funding existing centres. We have to check we get that balance right. I look forward to meeting the national group and if the Deputy sends me details on Portlaoise and Mountmellick I will engage with him on it.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: This weekend, tens of thousands of people will march through the streets of Dublin for Dublin Pride. Dublin Pride is a really good party, but it is also a protest and a call for progress. Sadly, under the Tánaiste's leadership, we have not seen any progress. We are now consistently ranked 14th in Europe in terms of LGBT human rights and policy protections year after year. I will give one example, namely, the commitment to ban conversion therapy and conversion practices. It was included in the programme for Government in 2020 and recommitted to in 2025, but we have not seen progress. Research commissioned by the Government describes conversion therapy as traumatising, horrendous and anxiety provoking. One person said, "It left me with trauma, from which I am still attempting to heal, it destroyed my self worth ... and my health." The College of Psychiatry describes it as unethical, harmful and not supported by evidence. Eight other EU states have already legislated and six years after a commitment, we are still waiting. When are we going to get this legislation?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Rice. As he said, Pride is a celebration and a protest, but it is also a public statement of intent about the importance of quality and inclusion. When I was Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade I met all of our diplomats in Dublin Castle and made the point that we have to live up to our own values test, and our values test is simple. If you

are whispering something that you used to say loudly and proudly, you are not passing the Irish values test. There is a chilling effect at the moment. There are people who want us to shut up and be quiet about equality issues. We should not do that. Yesterday, I and the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, the Taoiseach, several other Government Ministers, including the Minister for equality, Deputy Foley, met with LGBTQI+ organisations in the Sycamore Room. We had a good conversation about the progress that had been made, particularly with section 232 of the assisted human reproduction Act, commenced by the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill in recent weeks. I share the Deputy's view and his description of conversion therapy. I am sorry I do not now have a direct answer to the question as to when that action will be taken, but I will engage with relevant Government colleagues and come back to him directly. We should seek to do this quickly together.

Deputy Albert Dolan: The Tánaiste will be well aware of the case of Carrabane National School in east Galway. I have no doubt that multiple representations have been made to him about it. While I do not expect him to have an answer today as to what the case is, I want to highlight the frustration that exists among the school community. Two months ago, I and all of the other public representatives in east Galway attended a public meeting at Carrabane National School. On the night, Councillor Moegie Maher had a letter from the Minister, Deputy Naughton, confirming that this project would break ground in 2026. We have now reached the summer and still have not heard the outcome of the tender process. All I ask is that the Tánaiste engage with the Minister, if possible, and revert to the Galway East representatives as to the status of Carrabane National School. I would be grateful for that.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Dolan. I will certainly do that and speak with the Minister, Deputy Naughton, about that issue today and come back to Deputy Dolan and the Galway East representatives. I know Councillor Moegie Maher well and I will be in trouble if I do not go back to him too. As the Deputy knows, we have made the decision to significantly increase the funding for the Department of education. We also made a significant capital allocation and may make more in the time ahead because a lot of schools are stuck in stage 2B and we want to move them on. I will certainly make sure we see progress on Carrabane National School, and I will talk to the Minister, Deputy Naughton, today.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: A childcare facility in Knocklyon in my constituency was recently taken over by a new provider, which was recently bought by a UK group in a deal worth €75 million. Since the facility was taken over, there have been numerous room closures. Parents have effectively been stranded without childcare with no notice. The services have taken away flexibility in terms of reduced hours over the summer or attending part time in after-school care. The services are getting worse because they are now being run in the interests of the owners' pockets, and parents are afraid that this facility will withdraw from core funding. Obviously, the fee freeze announced in June will not apply to providers that have withdrawn. Parents have no option but to pay because childcare spaces are so scarce in the area. What is the Government going to do for those parents who are genuinely suffering because of a commercialised and for-profit childcare model?

The Tánaiste: We will publish a roadmap on how we create the childcare system I think everybody in this House wants. We had a good meeting of the Cabinet committee on this in

recent weeks. Fees are one element, and we have a commitment to get to €200 per child per month in the lifetime of the Government. However, fees without access will only frustrate parents. We have increased the childcare budget to the largest ever, at €1.5 billion, which is up by 12% on last year. That is the highest ever level of State investment. I take the Deputy's point about private for-profit, but we are now seeing for the first time public money being used to deliver public facilities. The Deputy can expect to see that roadmap from the Government around budget time, where we need to move a number of things in parallel. The one that often gets attention is when are we getting to the €200. We are committed to getting to that in the lifetime of the Government, but we have to move the other streams alongside that, which I think is at the core of the Deputy's question. If he sends me the details of the Knocklyon case, I will have the Minister, Deputy Foley, come back to him.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: St. Vincent's special school in Lisnagry, County Limerick, has been without a routine dental service for months. It has been the bones of a year. The specialist dental post is still vacant. These are students who cannot tolerate routine dental examinations. There is a student who cannot attend school at the moment because she has large cavities in her back teeth, and she has to get these teeth removed. The waiting list for Nenagh is over a year. A lot of these children are on restricted diets. I have been in contact with the Minister's office about this.

If this situation is not resolved, the child could miss up to 18 months at school. She is not the only child at St. Vincent's who currently has these issues. Children with additional needs are being failed in many ways, but to see a child unable to attend school for up to 18 months due to a lack of dentistry is beyond comprehension.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I have not seen that individual representation. The Deputy might give me the name on my way out of the House, and I will take care of it this afternoon. The Deputy is right. We have a programme for a two-year intervention in HSE dental services to make sure that the broad child catch-up programme is happening in schools. Of equal importance is the specialist dental service, particularly for children with disabilities, and we will have a programme of additional surgeries to focus on that. I will be announcing that in the coming weeks. I have a little work to do yet with the Irish Dental Association, but I am very aware of that. If the Deputy gives me the details of the individual case, I will have it sorted.

Deputy James O'Connor: I raise the issue of the new community nursing unit in Youghal, a 60-bed unit comprising two 25-bed blocks and, in addition, a ten-bedroom dementia care unit. This is very much needed in Youghal as part of the renewal of our infrastructure, particularly the replacement of the Cois Abhainn building and also Youghal Community Hospital. I would like to ask about the business case. The Tánaiste and the Minister for Health are here representing the Government. Can they find out whether this is being completed? We were told it would go to tender for the award of a construction contract in the first half of 2026. As we are at the turn of the month, I would appreciate an update on the position for the coming months. I thank the Minister for her exceptional work and support regarding the local projects that have been advanced in recent months.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: We are trying to focus on stepdown facilities and community nursing units, and we will be opening units in Letterkenny and Sligo later in the year. I would push back on the situation in the south west at the moment. I notice there were people on trolleys in Cork University Hospital in recent days while there were vacant beds in Mallow. We have made a very significant investment to increase that from 37 beds to 96 beds, yet there were still vacant beds in Mallow while there were people on trolleys in Cork University Hospital. The Deputy will forgive me if I am not racing to advance additional infrastructure in the south west until they make sure they manage the resources they have more effectively.

Deputy Micheál Carrigy: The first meeting of the board of trustees of the new family resource centre in Longford takes place next Monday. I put on record my thanks to Veronica Brennan, the chair, and the rest of my fellow members of the steering committee who worked on this project for the last couple of years.

The Oireachtas Joint Committee on Drugs Use recently published its final report containing a wide-ranging series of recommendations on how Ireland should respond to drug use and addiction recovery, including proposals on decriminalisation, treatment services, prevention, family supports and community safety. Understandably, there will be different views on some of these recommendations. Will the Tánaiste outline how the Government intends to respond to the committee report?

The Tánaiste: I am delighted to hear of the progress with the family resource centre.

We need to be very careful here. Everybody wants to see people who have a drug addiction get access to healthcare - 100%. We are all very clear on that, and it has been the clear direction of travel in the Department of Health for many years. Everybody wants to see anybody who is involved in criminality and gangland criminality banged up, taken off our streets and met with the full rigour of the law. However, there is a group in the middle that we are not talking nearly enough about, and it is really annoying me. There is a group of people who are not addicted to drugs and not involved in gangland crime, but they are facilitating it by snorting coke, popping pills and smoking drugs. They are often in middle Ireland, or whatever we want to call middle Ireland. I do not support any idea that we would suggest that behaviour is appropriate. In my constituency or somewhere else, people might buy illegal drugs and not realise or care that they are funding absolute misery, criminality, threats to children's lives and everything else in other communities.

We need to be very careful here. We need to listen to the Garda and the Irish Medical Organisation. There are a number of complex issues. We will absolutely help people in relation to drug addiction, 100%, and absolutely lock up the gangland criminals. However, the gangland criminals exist because people are going around, taking illegal drugs and thinking it is a consequence-free activity, when it is bringing misery to many parts of society.

Deputy Conor D. McGuinness: I raise the situation of Kilrossanty National School in County Waterford. It is a rural DEIS school that is set to lose a teacher in September based on an enrolment snapshot taken at the end of last September that no longer reflects reality. The school had 102 pupils on that day in September 2025, but several more pupils joined the school

after that snapshot. It has 111 enrolled for the coming year, well above the threshold, yet it is still losing a teacher based on that snapshot. This will mean class sizes of up to 31 in multigrade groupings, including three classes in one room with one teacher, and that includes children with additional educational needs. The school has appealed.

This points to a wider problem. Across Waterford and the State, schools are under pressure, and rural schools are at risk. One has closed in County Waterford, others are overcrowded and many lack staff. Does the Tánaiste accept that relying on that one snapshot is not a good way to do business or make an assessment, and that the fixed reference date is no longer fit for purpose?

The Tánaiste: I accept that there can be rigidity, but I also balance that with the fact that there has to be some system in place. Is there a better way of doing it? I am open to considering that. I believe there are appeals mechanisms, and an understanding is meant to exist in the system. If the Deputy sends me the details of the school in his constituency, I will ask the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to come back to him.

Deputy Noel McCarthy: I speak today on behalf of the pupils, teachers and parents of Carrigtwohill school campus in east Cork. The three new school buildings, Carrigtwohill Community College, Scoil Chlíodhna and Scoil Mhuire Naofa, were opened in 2023. These schools have the most modern facilities but, unfortunately, do not have a green area for recreation. However, there is a green area immediately adjacent to the schools and owned by the Department of education. Planning permission has been granted by Cork County Council for an entrance and access way, but no works have yet taken place. While the scope of works and costs have been provided, the Department has recommended that a more cost-effective solution be considered. I am unsure why this could possibly be. As such, it cannot be guaranteed that the area will be made available by September, almost three years after the schools opened. I ask the Tánaiste to engage directly with the Minister and her Department to ensure this green area is made available as soon as possible for the September back-to-school period. These are great facilities. The issue is there to be resolved.

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. I know it is one he has been working on for some time. The Carrigtwohill school campus project is the largest single school building project ever undertaken by the Department of education, and it will serve a school community of about 2,400 pupils. The Department tells me that it has had a positive and productive engagement with the three schools and the patrons through all stages of the project, and it will continue to support the schools on the new school campus. The project was completed towards the end of 2023, with a 1,000-pupil post-primary school, Carrigtwohill Community School, and two 24-classroom primary schools, Carrigtwohill Community National School and Scoil Mhuire Naofa. It includes 14 classes and three projects for children with special educational needs, three general purpose, GP, areas, a PE hall and 13 ball courts in total.

I am aware of this issue of the lack of a green space, given that Deputy McCarthy has told me about it. I understand the school has now sought to use a green area that forms part of the site. It is not suitable as a formal playing pitch because it is an attenuation basin under the flood management system, but the Department wants to work with the schools to see if they can get it as an informal recreation space. I undertake to work intensively with Deputy

McCarthy and the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to try to get that in place for the new school year.

Deputy Peter 'Chap' Cleere: Like previous speakers, I raise the issue of teacher losses. I am asking for the intervention of the Tánaiste regarding Our Lady of Lourdes National School in Slieverue, County Kilkenny, where the incoming junior infants class for September 2026 is expected to consist of 34 children taught by a single teacher following the loss of a teaching post. The school has successfully operated smaller junior infants classes in recent years. As the Tánaiste knows, research consistently shows that the greatest benefits of smaller classes come in the very early years of education. Despite these concerns, the school's appeal to retain the teaching post was, unfortunately, unsuccessful. I ask the Tánaiste to urgently engage with the Department of education to review this decision and explore any available mechanism to retain or restore the teaching resource needed to support these children. Every reasonable effort should be made to ensure that 34 junior infants are not required to spend their first year of school in a single class. It is obviously a national issue because I am the third and fourth speaker to raise a similar issue today. The intervention and help of the Tánaiste would be much appreciated.

The Tánaiste: The Deputy is right. I always learn a lot, when I come in here on a Thursday, if a multitude of colleagues across the House are bringing up the same issue. I have to be blunt. We are increasing the number of teachers and SNAs working in our schools, we are increasing the number of schools that we have and we have a redeployment scheme in place. Obviously, we have to have criteria for the teaching allocations. That is all just true. We have seen the need to provide additional funding to the Department of education to meet a number of financial pressures that it has had. In relation to Our Lady of Lourdes National School, I will ask the Minister, Deputy Naughton, to provide guidance to the Deputy as to whether there are any other options or avenues open to that school. I will also ask her to come back to the Deputy directly.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.19 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.19 p.m. and resumed at 2 p.m.

2 o'clock

Development (Strategic Gas Reserve) Bill 2026: Second Stage

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Timmy Dooley): I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am pleased to address the House on Second Stage of the Development (Strategic Gas Reserve) Bill. As Deputies are aware, the main purpose of the Bill is to provide for a project-specific, bespoke consenting pathway for the strategic gas emergency reserve facility to be located at Cahiracon in County Clare. This will enable a development consent application to be submitted later this year, which is critical to achieving accelerated delivery of this project.

Before outlining the provisions of the Bill, I would like to speak on a number of key points relating to the development of the legislation. In March 2025, Government approved a State-

led strategic gas emergency reserve. This is critical to securing Ireland's energy systems as we continue to transition to indigenous, clean renewable energy. Crucially, the strategic gas emergency reserve will also ensure Ireland's compliance with EU standards and regulation. A strategic gas emergency reserve is a State-owned gas storage facility that will provide the resilience required to support our energy transition. This State-led strategic reserve will store LNG for use only in the event of a disruption to gas supplies to protect Ireland's citizens, economy and reputation from the possibility of energy curtailments. It is not intended for commercial use and will not act as a new entry point for gas into the system. The final design will be scoped to provide sufficient supply to protect household and business customers in the event of a major disruption to subsea gas pipelines. Gas Networks Ireland will ensure appropriate contractual arrangements are in place to refill the floating storage and regassification unit throughout an emergency situation to provide consistent gas supplies via the floating storage and regassification unit for the duration required.

The introduction of bespoke legislation was agreed following advice from the Office of the Attorney General's to reduce the uncertainty of the timelines regarding planning decisions and to facilitate the request from Government to expedite delivery of the project. The ongoing phased commencement of the Planning and Development Act 2024 at this time prevents the project benefiting from the required expedited decision timeframe to deliver this project. The conventional planning route under the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, has been fully considered and it is proposed to disapply it given the need for an expedited decision timeframe necessary to deliver this project.

The legislation will allow for the next stage of development for the strategic gas emergency reserve. It is intended to submit the development consent application by the end of 2026 in order to achieve an accelerated project delivery timeline. It is intended to bring forward a memo for Government later this year requesting permission to draft the strategic gas emergency reserve (operational) Bill to provide for the operation of the strategic gas emergency reserve. This will be the substantive Bill addressing provisions related to the operation, use and cost of the reserve as well as a number of policy matters previously raised by Oireachtas Members.

The Bill contains 7 Parts and 38 sections, and I will give a brief overview of it now. Part 1 contains four sections containing standard legislative provisions that cover the Short Title of the Bill, commencement procedures, definitions of terms used in the Bill, a regulation-making power, as well as enabling the expenses of the Minister to be paid out of moneys provided by the Oireachtas.

Part 2 contains three sections relating to what comes within the scope of designated development. Section 5 provides for what constitutes "designated development" for the purposes of development and use of a strategic gas emergency reserve to be located at Cahiracon in County Clare. Sections 6 and 7 provide that the Planning and Development Act 2000, the Planning and Development Act 2024, and Regulation 2 of the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 are disapplied in relation to designated development, to facilitate the alternative consenting process set out in the Bill.

Part 3 contains four sections relating to the seeking of approval to carry out designated development. It provides for a mechanism for pre-application consultation. The required contents of an application are specified as well as the requirement to give public notice of an application and details of the public consultation procedure. It sets out who may submit an

application for designated development under this procedure, being limited to Gas Networks Ireland or such other public bodies as may be prescribed.

Part 4 contains 17 sections relating to the environmental impact assessment and appropriate assessment procedures that will apply to an application for designated development. These assessments shall be carried out by An Coimisiún Pleanála within specified, accelerated timelines. It provides for a period of 18 weeks for a decision to be made by An Coimisiún Pleanála from receipt of an application to final decision. Time when An Coimisiún Pleanála is waiting for a return of further information by the applicant will be disregarded towards this overall time period.

Part 5 contains three sections relating to the determination of an application for approval to carry out designated development. Part 6 provides for miscellaneous provisions relating to designated development granted approval under this bespoke process. Section 15 of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 is disapplied to relevant bodies performing functions in relation to designated development. The Minister may also issue a direction to competent authorities responsible for the granting of relevant consents, to facilitate priority consenting of the project. The judicial review and access to justice provisions have been adapted from the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, retaining the well-tested framework that currently applies to a challenge to a planning decision in the courts.

Part 7 contains one section relating to a consequential amendment to the Environmental Protection Act 1992. I commend the Bill to the House and I look forward to the debate and the contributions from Members.

Deputy Pa Daly: Energy security is one of the most fundamental responsibilities of any Government. It is the promise we will be able to keep the lights on and keep the country's energy system powered. In this increasingly volatile world, we are trying to meet our energy needs but the Government has utterly failed. What we are presented with is a rushed and flawed solution that is in danger of shifting the financial burden for the Government's failures onto ordinary households. The Government is rushing through the legislation without time for proper democratic oversight or scrutiny. The deadline for Committee Stage amendments was yesterday before Second Stage had been read. This is not about guaranteeing Irish energy security but about managing the failure of the Government to invest properly in offshore wind and to make the necessary progress to ensuring energy independence and energy security.

Despite being warned of the dangers of this for years, Ireland continues to rely on imports for approximately 80% of energy requirements, making us the fourth most fossil fuel import-dependent economy in the EU. We import nearly all of our oil and gas and over 80% of natural gas. In addition, under Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael Ireland relies on fossil fuels to generate 81% of our energy requirements. This set-up was never going to deliver energy security. The risks were well flagged and vulnerabilities were well known, yet Fianna Fáil and fine Gael did not make any progression.

For years the Government has failed to properly invest in indigenous renewable energy, and it has admitted this, failing to build the resilience of sufficient system. Now ordinary people have to step up. Instead of fixing the structural issues, the Bill doubles down on the same approach locking us further into fossil fuel dependency and charging the public. It is a fundamental breach of trust and families and workers are already struggling under the weight

of the highest energy bills in Europe. We have more people owing on their bills for longer. They should not have to bankroll a Government that has failed to plan and invest and failed to protect our energy future.

The Government is supposed to act as a safety net for households and not the other way around. Ordinary people did not decide to leave Ireland dependent on imported gas, they did not fail to deliver on renewable energy and they certainly did not design an energy model that prioritises corporate demand over public need. Sinn Féin is clear there must be no increase in household energy bills to protect Ireland's energy security. Ordinary people must not foot the bill. We have introduced amendments to this effect and they go to the heart of fairness. We propose a legislative wording that prohibits the socialisation of costs across household and SME energy bills, which would mandate that the regulator carries out a full assessment of the impact on household bills and that the Minister would introduce measures to mitigate this.

I will turn to the changes the Bill proposes to our planning process. Unprecedented changes such as these require oversight, debate and scrutiny but the Minister of State has refused to engage on this. There are dangers associated with this potentially introducing further delays which could exacerbate the risks to Ireland's energy security.

If the public are being asked to consent, then the changes and impact must be made explicitly clear.

We wrote to the Minister of State and his officials to provide explicit clarification on the principal differences between the standard planning process for a strategic infrastructure development and-or a standard planning application under the Planning and Development Act 2024 and the Planning and Development Act 2000 and the alternative planning process as outlined. We have also requested this information be provided in advance of the remaining Stages, so that it can be properly scrutinised. I am waiting and hoping that it will be delivered before next Tuesday.

We have proposed an amendment to delete the disapplication of the planning Acts. Nobody here is arguing that Ireland's energy security should not be a priority. We have always said that it should be. Without those protections, however, we will never agree to rubberstamp any legislation to remove the safeguards without clarification and justification and robust safeguards. For example, this legislation fails to guarantee that the floating LNG facility will be explicitly and exclusively State-led. If it is truly strategic, then it should be State-led, publicly owned and delivered in the public interest. There should be no backdoor for commercial LNG. The legislation does state that Gas Networks Ireland, GNI, may apply to the Minister for approval but it does not explicitly rule out infrastructure being led by a commercial entity. Our amendments, therefore, will insist that any reserve should be fully State-led.

We are also moving to ensure that the reserve will only be used in genuine emergencies. We will define the reserve as for emergency use only, aligned with EU standards, and prevent its use for routine energy supply. Ongoing reporting will be required to ensure compliance. Without these protections, there is a real risk that the strategic reserve would become normalised and entrench gas dependency.

Our other amendments will ensure that such a facility is temporary, with a defined lifespan of ten years, subject to regular review every three years, has a decommissioning plan and is

accompanied by independent assessments of whether it is necessary or proportionate and the best available option. If this is an emergency measure, then it should not become a permanent fixture by default. There is concern across the board that this could happen.

We are also seeking to reverse one of the elements of this Bill, which is the potential sidelining of community engagement. Our amendment will require meaningful public consultation, including access to information, impact assessments and public hearings, because communities in County Clare must not be cut out of decisions that affect them so profoundly.

We are also insisting on honesty about what is driving the energy crisis. Our amendments will require an independent assessment of the impact of data centres on energy demand and an analysis of whether this demand is driving the need for this reserve. We cannot have a situation where households pay more because the structural drivers of rising demand are left unaddressed.

We believe this Bill is flawed, unfair, regressive and makes ordinary people shoulder the potential costs. It risks locking us into further fuel dependency and prioritises the wrong interest. Our amendments are about protection. They are to protect households from higher bills, protect the public interest and protect our energy future because the simple truth is that we cannot absorb any more costs. We need a different approach to drive down costs and put the needs of citizens first. We will be opposing this Bill, and I urge the House to support our amendments that put fairness, accountability and the public good back at the centre of our energy policy.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have been in government for over a decade. They have had years to secure our energy future, yet they have failed. They have squandered our renewable potential and left us dangerously overexposed to volatile international markets and geopolitical conflict. We saw this during the invasion of Ukraine, and we are seeing it again now. Families and workers are left paying extortionate energy bills because this Government refused to plan.

Now, in a panic, it is asking us to spend €1 billion to fix a crisis of its own making. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael cannot be trusted on energy security because they do not treat it as a public good; they treat it as a corporate commodity. Sinn Féin believes that the answer to Ireland's energy security must be State-led and guided by the public interest and not the corporate bottom line. This legislation is not fit for purpose. It disapplies the planning Act, strips local communities of their democratic rights and treats people with contempt. By removing normal planning safeguards, this Government is guaranteeing one thing: legal challenges and further delays.

The Bill rolls out the red carpet to commercial LNG. The 2023 energy security review recommended a State-led facility as a strategic reserve, and it set out specific conditions. This legislation ignores those conditions. It allows private commercial developers to bypass the rules to which everybody else must adhere. Why is this? It is to impress international developers and not to serve the Irish people. This Bill will hike up household bills. The estimated €60 million annual running costs will be socialised through a levy on energy bills. Ordinary workers and families are already struggling with the cost of living, and Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael want to add a new tax to their bills to pay for their failures. This is simply unacceptable.

The Government will tell us this is necessary for our N-1 gas reserve criteria but the reality is that we are in this position because this Government has failed to develop our indigenous renewable resources. Ireland has 640 GW of untapped offshore wind potential. How much of it has been delivered? The answer is zero. We actually have less now than we had 20 years ago, such is the level of incompetence.

The Government talks a big game but it is all hot air. Projects in the pipeline have not even broken ground. We are one of the most fossil fuel-dependent countries in Europe, importing 94% of our energy from fossil fuels. That is a strategic vulnerability, and this Government has entrenched it rather than fixed it. This move would further entrench it. Sinn Féin has a better vision. We want to achieve energy independence through renewables which are publicly-owned and community-owned, and serving the common good. We want to follow countries like Spain, Norway and Denmark, which insulated their citizens from crises through public investment.

If this facility must go ahead, then it must be strictly State-led, fully transparent and subject to democratic oversight. It must not be a backdoor for commercial LNG or an excuse to hike bills further. The State must lead and the people must come first.

Deputy Réada Cronin: This Bill is a damning indictment of this Government's failure to properly address our energy security, and this is absolutely essential in a functioning democracy. Two geopolitical events have landed and given us ample warning about the need for energy independence. Yet this is the Government's solution. It has done nothing else. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the American-Israeli war on Iran this year have shown us that we simply cannot continue to rely on imports to keep the lights on and our energy going. This is what is ultimately driving up the cost of our electricity bills, which are now the highest in Europe. A total of 80% of our energy is currently fuelled by imports. Realising that this is probably not the best way to guarantee energy security, the Government thinks this is a good idea to solve the problem. It is even more investment in fossil fuel and imported gas, and all to placate Trump. It is glaringly obvious to most people that the simple solution to our energy crisis issues is to invest in indigenous sources of energy, such as wind and solar, something that could have been ramped up immediately following the energy crisis in 2022. The Government failed to act then and this is the solution it has arrived at now.

The lack of intervention and meaningful attempts to try to get a handle on household bills means one in three is now in energy arrears. This is why Sinn Féin tabled amendments to the current Bill to ensure that ordinary people do not have to foot the bill for this daft attempt at protecting Ireland's energy security. It is the Government which has completely butchered our energy security. It is entirely its responsibility. Its solution is a double-edged sword, as proven by the two wars started by Russia and by America and Israel. Any form of gas that we import will be susceptible to market price shocks. An LNG terminal will be much the same. It will also further lock us into fossil fuel infrastructure and increase our emissions output.

This would come at a time when we are seeing some of the highest temperatures ever recorded. Just yesterday, France recorded its hottest day since records began in 1947, breaking the record of the previous day. As many as 40 people drowned in that country in the past few days as they tried to cool themselves down in the scorching heat. Today, we in Ireland expect to record historic highs in temperatures.

This must be a stark warning for us. We cannot keep going down the path of fossil fuels. Also, we cannot afford merely to develop our grid and ensure energy supply, as this Bill does, to keep data centres on stream.

As part of our amendments to the Bill, we ask that a fully independent assessment of the impact of data centres on energy demand and security be carried out. We cannot have a situation where households are asked to pay more, as they will be because of this Bill, while data centres suck up the energy that is vital to build the infrastructure we desperately need. As my colleague Deputy Pa Daly has previously outlined, we urge the Minister to consider the amendments put forward by Sinn Féin, support them and put the public good at the centre of our energy policy.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: The incredible weather we are seeing across Europe and its significance are not going to be lost on anybody. France has recorded its hottest day, at 44.3°C. Tragically, at least 18 heat-related deaths have been seen in France and dozens of people have drowned as they tried to cool off. The UK had its hottest June day on record this month, at 36.1°C. We have seen red heat warnings issued across Europe. Indeed, here in Ireland it would appear we are seeing our hottest day on record.

It is clear that climate change is not something that is coming. It is not something that is going to be presented to us in the future. Climate change is here. Days like today really need to be warning signs for the Government because it has a very big job to do. That is not just to ensure that, as a country, we can adapt to the climate change that we are experiencing but also to do everything it can to stop it from getting worse and to work internationally in that regard.

Unfortunately, what we have seen from this Government is a rowing back when it comes to climate action and climate-action ambition. We have seen a repeated failure to meet targets, and even a failure to lay out the list of policies that would meet our 51% legal reduction target. Not once has the climate action plan specified enough policies to meet our targets. This is not even about implementing them. I am referring to the Government setting out what policies we need. Never once has the current or previous Government spelt out enough policies. That in itself is a very stark illustration that the Government is not taking this seriously enough.

The LNG facility has not just come upon us in the last week or two, the last month or two or, indeed, the last year. This discussion is happening because the current and previous Governments have failed to come to grips with our energy security and to put in place measures that will assist us to become energy independent. This LNG facility is a sort of emergency solution because all the hard work has not been done.

We have seen delay after delay regarding much of the major infrastructure we would need in order to deal with our emissions, but also to have a very strong renewable energy system. We have less offshore wind energy now than 20 years ago. Twenty years ago, we were a world leader in offshore wind. We had the Arklow Bank but that has been decommissioned. We have had delays in respect of our interconnectors. As I have raised repeatedly, I do not believe the Government has done enough when it comes to solar energy to make households resilient and to support people in this regard. I do not believe the Government has focused enough on battery storage and its potential. Over the past number of weeks, we have heard from some experts at meetings of the climate committee on the huge potential of, and the technological advances that have been made when it comes to, battery storage. Yet we have not had a Government that

has focused on all those issues. Indeed, we have had a Government that has closed its eyes to the issue of demand management. At some stage, a tough decision is going to have to be made where we say we cannot afford to allow the continued incredible growth of large energy users like data centres, because that will ultimately make us more vulnerable when it comes to energy security. They are reliant on gas and they are pushing up our energy prices. They are the reason that we now apparently need the €1 billion LNG facility.

It is not to meet the needs of individual households or businesses, or people in hospitals or schools. It is not to meet those needs. The LNG facility is to ensure that if there is a problem with the interconnector or the gas line from Scotland, energy for the approximately 250 large corporates will be available. At some stage, we do have to start considering bringing our enterprise, climate and energy policies all together, because at the moment we are seeing far too much siloing of the issues.

The Government is in a position now where it is acknowledging there is a big problem, that we are at risk and that we need to come up with a solution. There are alternatives to what is being proposed. I really do not believe there has been enough examination of the alternatives. In the event that we lose connection with Scotland for a gas pipeline, which is highly unlikely but would be very problematic, what are the alternatives to the LNG facility? I really do not believe that has been given enough consideration.

I have spoken about demand management, battery storage, fast-tracking our interconnectors, district heating to provide heating to people, alternative fuels and requiring large corporates to have more alternative fuels on site. These have not been examined robustly enough. When I read through the energy security reports, it appears that the Government essentially got the answers it wanted from the questions put in the reviews. It is really important that the Government stall now. This is a major piece of infrastructure and it is costly. It will cost us €1 billion at least and it will be in place for many years. It will also be costly from an environmental perspective. The Minister of State needs to re-examine that. The Social Democrats have tabled amendments reflecting these views. We will be debating them when appropriate, but I ask that the Minister of State give serious consideration to looking at all the different pieces of the jigsaw and seeing whether there is a way that the various elements can be brought together to ensure we are energy resilient.

The other issue I want to raise with the Minister of State is one that very much surprised me. There is a general lack of trust in the Department and Government in this regard. I certainly was very sceptical and I was concerned that this legislation was a way of allowing for commercial LNG facilities to begin operating. When there was a pulling back on the fracked gas policy and when the Minister did not really engage on the planning issues in Shannon, my sense was that this was really a Trojan Horse to allow a commercial facility to operate. I do not know whether that is the case or not.

The one thing I have repeatedly raised with the Minister, and on which I have repeatedly received assurances from him, is that the LNG facility will be State-owned, State-led and not commercial, and that there will be sufficient guardrails in place to make sure that is the case.

I have had this back and forth with the Minister many times, as I did at committee. It has always been promised that it would be the case. I am worried as to why it was not mentioned in the Bill. The primary purpose of this LNG facility is to act as a risk-mitigation measure in

a very limited fashion that can only be done by the State, run and managed by the State, and is not to increase our gas usage. That usage is to be very controlled. If that is the purpose of the facility, this why is that not stated in the Bill? It is not mentioned at all. I am sure the Minister of State will understand that it sets off alarms. It says to me that this process cannot be trusted. Now, when the Department or anyone makes any statements or comes forward with any advice, solutions or evidence, I and others are going to be questioning it because there is a fear that it is not being transparent. That is why the energy security, as the Department is looking at all the other measures, is also important. We want a transparent process. We want to ensure that the people who will be footing the bill for this €1 billion know why this has gone in and know that the Government looked at all these other measures and decided they were not going to work. It must be transparent. It is important that the Government gets that done.

I would like to make a similar point. I am hugely worried about the disapplication of the birds and habitat directive. As I said, there has been a rowing back on a lot of climate legislation. There has been fear that there would be a similar rowing back on legislation to protect biodiversity. There has certainly been a movement in Europe to do that so I was disappointed to see that also being applied in this Bill. I was also very surprised to see it because during pre-legislative scrutiny, we were told at that stage that we will not be exempting this facility from the habitats directive. That is what we were told in committee. Yet, this Bill disapplies the birds and habitats directive. That again comes back to the lack of trust about what the motives are here. That is another important consideration.

We have been far too slow in ensuring that Ireland can exist as an independent energy State. We have relied far too heavily on other countries to do the heavy lifting for us. We have not been innovative enough. We have really been quite lazy when it comes to our energy security and independence, and ensuring that we have an energy system that people in this country can afford. The lived experience of the people at the moment is that that is not the case. Ireland has the highest electricity prices. An official from the Department was in talking about the issue recently. The official was stressing that we have done so well when it comes to our renewable energies. We have but what are we doing with them? We are funnelling them back into these large corporates. The benefits from the renewables are not being felt by individuals and that is a problem. We want our citizens, domestic users and small businesses to have faith that when we move to a fossil fuel-free future, they will not be left behind. That is not happening because they are actually being left behind. Not only are they being left behind, they are having to foot the bill. They are footing the bill for data centres. They are going to be footing the €1 billion bill for this LNG facility that is only there to ensure that 250 large energy users can continue to operate if there is problem with the pipeline. Domestic users will be footing that bill. That not only has problems from an equity perspective. It is also a problem from a social and community perspective. We cannot allow people to feel that they are being left behind by this transition and that the people who are gaining the benefit and are being prioritised by this Government are the big boys and the big players. We want everybody to be able to benefit and to enjoy lower electricity prices and warmer homes. We want them to be energy independent. We want them to be able to drive electric vehicles and have solar panels on their homes. When they do need to access electricity or energy from the grid, we must ensure it is there at an affordable price. Unfortunately, the Government is far away from that at the moment.

However, it is not too late. There is now an opportunity to pause things and bring in that review. If the Government is so convinced that this LNG facility is the only answer to this energy security risk, it needs to spell it out for people. It should do the analysis and let everybody see it because it is costly and, as I said, not just financially but environmentally.

Deputy John Clendennen: I welcome the Bill. It is legislation that we debated at length at the Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy. As a member of the committee, I can say that we had open and frank engagement. Objectively, our goals are to be independent, secure and affordable and to reduce our dependency on fossil fuels but we also need to ensure that we have a backup policy in place.

I listened to some of the criticism about other projects taking too long to deliver and that we talk about them too much. On the other hand, we now want to talk about them further. There was pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill. It was to a shorter timeframe but we must highlight and emphasise that this is an emergency, this is a temporary measure and we need to ensure its delivery. Fundamentally, there is a responsibility on the State to ensure that we have security around our energy and that is the objective here, while also being cognisant of our client obligations.

This Bill came about as part of 17 actions highlighted by the Department's 2023 strategy, Energy Security in Ireland to 2030. I recently attended an EirGrid strategy launch where its representatives said that during the Covid-19 pandemic, demand was not peaking and we did not have the same level of economic activity that would result in spikes. However, since we have exited the pandemic, there is that additional demand and additional focus required to ensure investment. Considering current global volatility and international conflicts, how they weaponise energy supplies and how fragile global markets can be, we must have our own independence. In that context, it is unacceptable not to act when we can see clearly where our vulnerabilities lie. To that end, I support the Bill and the intentions behind it. This is an insurance policy for the State.

We also have a temporary energy generation facility at Shannonbridge in my constituency to ensure that we do not see mass blackouts. We must be fair and open to the public at large that we need that backup plan and energy security. We need a contingency in place to plan for the worst.

In terms of independence, we are going in completely the opposite direction when we talk about interconnectors. We cannot depend solely on our neighbours for our energy supply. We must have independence. That is another reason it is so important that we ensure this Bill proceeds.

To be fair to the debate at the committee, one of the items we debated comprehensively in terms of the provisions in the Bill was how we would allow development or operation by a commercial operator. Those concerns have been listened to, despite the shorter timeframe for pre-legislative scrutiny. Only public bodies will be prescribed by the Minister in relation to this operation.

If this is truly to be a strategic reserve, we need to prepare for the worst-case scenario and it must stay within the confines of State control as a result. We are seeing growing demand and growing economic activity and we need to ensure we proceed with this strategic gas

emergency reserve in the form of the floating storage and regasification unit in Clare. It must be strictly an emergency reserve. It cannot become a backdoor for new commercial fossil fuel infrastructure, nor can it lead to an overall increase in our national gas consumption.

Our focus on the development of renewables must be steadfast. County Offaly has been to the fore. I hear other speakers here say we need to do more on renewables. Why do they not go back to look at their county development plans and outline more spatial areas for renewable development? That is what we did in Offaly and we have been successful with 30% of our landmass in the county. We are one of the highest producers of energy in the country. Rather than looking at national Government, Deputies should have a discussion at local government level to see how county development plans can be prepared and devised.

I cast my mind back to the national broadband plan and some of the commentary of the Opposition about that plan facing catastrophic failure and it being reckless to proceed with it. It is the same song with a different tune today. We need this. We need to ensure we remain competitive, that we see digital and tech advancements and that we keep our position on the global stage in attracting employment and making sure this is a good place to invest, work and live. This is not a decision of either-or when it comes to large energy users or homes. It has to be that they work concurrently and for the right reasons.

We cannot pause this. We have to proceed with it. It is an important Bill. It sends the right message that Ireland is working towards renewables, but is also working towards energy security. I commend the Minister of State on bringing the Bill to the House and look forward to seeing it pass.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I sincerely believe that from a climate perspective, this is perhaps the most regressive legislation produced by the Government. Any legislation or infrastructure that requires us to overturn a ban on fracked gas is just inherently bad for the climate.

I heard the Minister of State on "Morning Ireland" this morning and I sympathise with his desire to enhance our energy security, particularly in the current context. We all understand the vulnerabilities Ireland faces. We know the risks posed by geopolitical instability and our over-reliance on imported fossil fuels. Equally, we know the importance of ensuring households can heat their homes, hospitals can operate, businesses can function and that our entire energy system remains stable in times of crisis. None of us dispute that. Energy security matters, and there are lessons to be learned from the events of recent years when it comes to our energy system and energy security but it appears, based on this effort to import even more fossil fuel, that the Government is learning precisely the wrong lessons.

I would absolutely support genuine measures to strengthen Ireland's energy security. We raised these during pre-legislative scrutiny of this Bill. Other Deputies have raised them in this House today already. They include investment in renewables, energy storage, interconnection, demand management and grid improvements. This is the direction of travel we want to see, if we are serious about energy security and our climate commitments. Look at Spain. Following Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine, it rapidly scaled up investment in renewables and it is now largely insulated from the recent fossil fuel price shocks because it is not importing quite so much oil and gas. This is the sort of effort we want to see here and I would gladly support the Government in such efforts.

What I and the Labour Party cannot support is legislation that risks locking us into greater fossil fuel dependence, while simultaneously weakening planning safeguards, diluting climate accountability and concentrating an extraordinary amount of power in the hands of a Minister. It is frankly ludicrous that the plan the Government has landed on to strengthen our energy security is to import more harmful and increasingly volatile fossil fuels. I would have thought recent events might at least have given pause for thought. We were talking about having to ration oil and gas just a few months ago. The reality that is becoming increasingly apparent, and which the Government is refusing to accept, is that strengthening our energy security and continuing to rely on imported fossil fuels are incompatible.

As I have said on a number of occasions, the best and perhaps only way to genuinely secure our energy supply into the future is to urgently and significantly scale up our renewable generation and, importantly, our storage capacity. We have the potential to achieve genuine energy sovereignty and, crucially, we have the potential to do so from clean sources. The Minister of State could have brought forward a Bill that would inject much-needed urgency into the deployment of renewables, particularly offshore wind. He could have brought forward a Bill to speed up the necessary works that need to be done on our ports so they can handle offshore wind turbines, or he could have prioritised the long-awaited marine protected areas legislation to ensure the necessary environmental safeguards are in place. He would certainly have my support in doing so.

Instead of seeking to speed up the deployment of renewables, the Government is further entrenching expensive, harmful and unreliable fossil fuels in our system the supply of which, at the end of the day, is largely out of our control. We fundamentally cannot reduce our dependence on fossil fuels by importing more of them. This will lock us into fossil fuel use for decades and the infrastructure contemplated here - offshore moorings, the onshore terminal, pipeline connection to the existing gas network - represents capital investment with a multi-decade operational lifespan. There is a structural tension with statutory climate commitments that require a trajectory to net zero by 2050 and which include carbon budgets.

In our pre-legislative scrutiny report, the Oireachtas climate committee recommended a sunset clause be included in the Bill with a clear phase-out mechanism and explicit decommissioning requirements. All of that is absent. Sometimes I wonder why we bother. There is no sunset clause, no legislated end date and no statutory pathway towards closure of the facility. There is no requirement the facility cease operations once particular energy security or renewable generation benchmarks are met. While the Government presents this facility as a sort of temporary, emergency piece of infrastructure, there are virtually no safeguards against it becoming a permanent feature of our energy system. This is where the lack of trust in the Government's plans for this facility other Deputies have spoken about comes from. I and other members of the Opposition have submitted amendments to give effect to our pre-legislative scrutiny recommendations and I hope the Minister of State will genuinely consider these on Committee Stage.

The Minister of State is bringing forward this Bill on the back of an energy security review, but the landscape has changed completely since that review was carried. Even prior to the present fossil fuel crisis, during pre-legislative scrutiny, the committee heard extensive evidence suggesting the assumptions made when the review was conducted around demand, security risks, renewable deployment, storage technologies and so on, had evolved

considerably in the meantime and the committee report recommended a new review be carried out on that basis. That recommendation has also been ignored.

Let us talk about the cost. It has been estimated that the LNG terminal will cost just shy of €1 billion over the next decade. How will that be paid for? It will not be through higher prices levied against large energy users like data centres. Last week, the Labour Party brought forward a motion calling on the Government to make data centres pay their fair share, but it was voted down. Ordinary household bill payers, who are already being fleeced, will foot the bill for this. The committee made several recommendations on the cost burden of the facility. The first recommendation of the report says the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, should have to carry out an assessment of the impact on household bills and justify the socialisation of LNG costs across households and small businesses. There is also a recommendation that costs be weighted towards large energy users rather than households and another that an overall cost-benefit analysis be conducted. Again, none of these feature in the Bill. No protections for consumers against higher bills are included in the proposed law.

I would like to know whether any assessment has been carried out on the impact the recent crisis in the fuel markets has had on the Government's cost estimate. The European benchmark price for LNG soared by as much as 60% in the days following the start of Trump and Netanyahu's illegal war on Iran, after the shutdown of a major LNG facility in Qatar.

God knows when that war is actually going to come to an end and presumably the current extreme level of volatility is not priced into the previous cost estimate. The likelihood is the price we end up paying for this terminal over the next decade will far exceed €1 billion. This underscores the irresponsibility of going ahead with this proposal. We simply cannot secure our energy supply by further exposing ourselves to price shocks like this. We are already vulnerable to an increasingly unstable geopolitical arena and ordinary households and commuters are paying the price. Charging ahead with the introduction of even more fossil fuels to Ireland will only make matters worse.

One of the things that has frustrated me most in the conversation on energy security and this particular proposal is that energy insecurity and this LNG terminal are presented in binary terms as if it was a simple choice between building LNG infrastructure and energy insecurity, which I do not accept. There are alternatives, some of which I have mentioned, that strengthen security while simultaneously reducing emissions and that reduce our fossil fuel dependence rather than increase it. These alternatives have already been demonstrably successful elsewhere in Europe and I have already referred to Spain. It is incredibly frustrating this is being presented as our only option.

This Bill goes well beyond just being an energy security matter. It seeks to bypass not just our climate laws but also our planning laws which, funnily enough, were presented as the Minister's *magnum opus* in his previous brief. Sections 6 and 7 disapply both the Planning and Development Act of 2000 and the Planning and Development Act of 2024 to designated development carried out under an approval granted under section 29, which itself concentrates decision-making power in the hands of the Minister. Planning consent processes under those Acts would ordinarily require consideration of national planning policy, including the national planning framework and any climate-related material considerations. Their disapplication removes that layer of scrutiny entirely and channels decision-making exclusively to the Minister. We saw a similar arrangement in the passenger cap Bill earlier this week. It is true

An Coimisiún Pleanála has to carry out an environmental impact assessment and an appropriate assessment which the Minister must consider but he must also consider "the urgent need to ensure and protect the security of gas supply in the State". It is pretty obvious the latter will be given precedence.

Regrettably, despite the current extreme hot weather warnings and our abysmal record on decarbonisation, there is yet again no urgency when it comes to the climate. It is quite clear the only urgency the Government considers is facilitating more imported fossil fuels via an LNG terminal or essentially unrestricted additional flights from Dublin Airport. There is no real statutory requirement on the face of section 29 of the Bill for the Minister to give reasons for departing from, or accepting, environmental assessments beyond a few generalities. With this Bill the Government is trying to ram through approval of a hugely damaging piece of infrastructure by creating a bespoke planning route unavailable to other projects and certainly not ones that would benefit us from a climate and decarbonisation perspective. Like the passenger cap Bill, this is a significant departure from normal planning practice. It is a departure several stakeholders raised concerns about during pre-legislative scrutiny at the climate committee. Nobody is claiming our planning system is perfect - far from it - but public confidence depends on decisions being made through transparent and independent processes. When Government proposes to remove a project from the ordinary planning framework and place final authority directly in the hands of a Minister, it has a duty to demonstrate such extraordinary powers are absolutely necessary. I am not convinced it has done so.

The Bill goes further still. For the third time this term and the second time this week, the Government is proposing we abandon section 15 of the climate Act which requires public bodies to perform their functions in a manner consistent with national climate objectives and climate policy. Disapplying it removes a legally-operative constraint that would otherwise require those bodies to weigh climate considerations in discharging their statutory functions. This is a deliberative legislative choice to insulate the project from climate scrutiny at the decision-making level. By consistently disapplying section 15 when it is politically inconvenient, the Government is rendering it effectively meaningless but it exists for a reason. Climate and environmental considerations are not an optional extra. The climate crisis is quite literally existential and section 15 of the climate Act more generally is the legal framework through which we seek to meet our obligations. When Government starts carving out exemptions from climate legislation for fossil fuel infrastructure, it raises serious questions about the credibility of our commitment to our climate goals. If our obligations can be set aside whenever they become inconvenient, what confidence can the public have that climate legislation means what it says?

This issue featured prominently during pre-legislative scrutiny. Several witnesses voiced concerns about this provision, which will effectively deem LNG infrastructure compatible with our climate laws regardless of the emissions impact. Recommendation 13 of the pre-legislative scrutiny report stated "The Bill should explicitly state that the Strategic Gas Emergency Reserve will be required to comply with Section 15 obligations under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015". The Bill does the exact opposite. The recommendations in that report were agreed on a cross-party basis. There were some recommendations that did not make it in because we voted against them and the Government voted them down but this report was agreed across parties. To see it ignored so thoroughly is very depressing.

This is the second aggressively anti-climate Bill we have seen from this Government this week alone. The Government is telling people that taking climate change and our biodiversity crisis seriously was a luxury of a previous era and something that is now preventing progress. I fundamentally disagree with that line of thinking. The climate catastrophe facing us requires progress but it is a different kind of progress to the one this Government is currently offering. There is huge opportunity for our country in tackling our climate crisis. There are huge numbers of new jobs to be created, new industries to be established and new futures to be forged. This Government can and should be treating decarbonisation and our climate targets with the same urgency it is treating the delivery of this LNG reserve, the removal of the Dublin Airport cap and the provision of critical infrastructure.

The Government is going to guillotine debate on both this Bill and the Dublin Airport cap next week. In the Labour Party, we have a vision for a different kind of Ireland which is a fairer, better future-facing country but the proposals and Bills being put forward by this Government lack ambition for that different kind of Ireland and a different world. This Government is all about simply continuing the *status quo* and going back to doing things the same way we always have done, that is, captured by fossil fuel interests. Those of us who want this to change are called Luddites. The guardrails put in place by the previous Government to finally force this State and its governments to face up to our climate obligations are being systematically dismantled. I, the Labour Party and others in opposition will continue to push this Government to live up to its responsibilities and to give some hope to our future generations, who badly need it. We will be putting forward numerous amendments to this Bill and I look forward to debating them in the House in the limited time that is being given. I really hope the Government will take them seriously and integrate as many of them as possible into the legislation.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I am pleased to speak on this Bill, which I support. Recent events in the Middle East have underscored the necessity of this Bill. The energy crisis caused by the conflict in the Middle East has seen record price hikes but, more importantly, raised questions over Ireland's energy security. This is an issue that I have highlighted on several occasions in the House in this term and the previous one.

We are an island at the end of the European supply line. We have no meaningful buffer and no gas storage. We are the only country in the European Union in that position. When a shock comes, it reaches us very quickly and it hits hard, so this Bill matters to us. The State-led strategic gas reserve in the form of a floating storage and regasification unit to be located on the Shannon Estuary, is a sensible, welcome and necessary measure. It will provide backup for our electricity supply at moments of low renewable output and it gives us a cushion in the event of a serious disruption to supply. I particularly welcome that it is designed as a temporary, State-owned, emergency-only facility. The Minister repeatedly said this was the plan. The scaremongering and disinformation we have heard has been disappointing but not surprising. The proposed structure matters. It reduces the risk of stranded assets, does not stimulate additional gas demand and it is compatible with our binding climate targets. This is energy security and climate responsibility working together, not against one another.

I also welcome the accelerated consenting framework in the Bill. The conventional planning route would have delivered this around 2031 and we cannot wait until then. The bespoke process here retains the essentials, namely, the environmental impact assessment, the

appropriate assessment and public consultation, but within defined timelines. That is the right balance.

3 o'clock

That is the right balance. It reflects a Government that has learned the hard lesson that infrastructure delayed is, too often, infrastructure denied. I want to be clear that this reserve is a safety net. It is not a strategy. A reserve is what we draw down in an emergency. It is not what keeps the lights on year after year.

I will use my remaining time to speak about the bigger picture. If the recent crisis has taught us anything, it is that we need to be far more ambitious about our indigenous supply. Corrib, which has served us well, is reaching the end of its productive life. When it goes, our domestic gas production goes with it and our import dependency becomes near total at precisely the wrong moment. I have long argued, including during my time on the climate action committee in the previous Dáil, that we are dangerously exposed. I want to see us extend the productive life of the Corrib infrastructure where it is feasible and responsible to do so. The existing infrastructure off the Mayo coast is a national asset. There are indigenous prospects within tie-back range of it that could materially reduce our reliance on imported gas. That is gas that arrives with a carbon footprint many times higher than anything we would produce ourselves. It makes no environmental or strategic sense to shut down our cleaner production only to import dirtier gas through a single pipeline from another jurisdiction.

This is not a choice between fossil fuels and renewables; it is both, sequenced properly. I want to see us go faster on solar and far faster on offshore wind. The Minister of State is aware of my promotion of those renewables. Our offshore wind potential is among the best in Europe, but we have been far too slow to capture it. Ultimately, the renewable transition is the destination, but we will need a bridging supply to get there safely. We should be honest with people about that, rather than pretending otherwise.

I will mention households because all of this is abstract to families and households worried about heating bills. Oil prices have eased back in recent weeks from their crisis peak, and that relief must be passed on at the pump and on the bill. It cannot be absorbed quietly into margins. I ask the Minister of State to ensure the regulator and relevant authorities are watching this closely. Looking to the winter ahead, the Government must act to protect the most vulnerable. I ask that we increase the fuel allowance in the budget and seriously examine a further energy credit for households, particularly those in need. People have been through a challenging number of months and certain households will need support as we enter this winter.

With all that said, this is a Bill that is long overdue. The energy supply report that was published was referred to earlier. We have to use that as the basis. Any more time given to this will be time delayed to such a strategic infrastructural piece that this country needs.

Deputy Joe Neville: I support this important Bill. Often, Government TDs assume things will go ahead and Ministers will lead the charge, but it is important that we stand behind them and explain the benefits.

When I was a councillor, I saw infrastructure in small, local ways, such as local bridges, roads or maybe a burst water pipe. In here, however, we are looking at the national issues. Coming into the national Parliament, we are so much more conscious of what is going on

internationally. Deputy Devlin spoke about how energy has become key to the national conversation, but it is also key to the worldwide conversation. We often read about how energy is the key to national autonomy. If a country does not have access to energy, it is at risk of compromising its freedom. Obviously, I am not saying we are compromising our freedom but, at the same time, we need to ensure that we have opportunities for everyone. That is what this Bill is allowing us to do.

The Bill is not saying that we have to go in one specific direction. Rather, it is a part of a range of different targets and things we are putting in place to provide us with greater energy security. As Deputy Devlin outlined, it is not all about focusing on this specifically. This gives us the opportunity to seek other ways.

As someone who was a CFO of a solar energy company, I know the benefits of renewables. I would be the first to say that renewables are the way forward. I would put them on every roof in the country if I could. It is important to push for that, as well as ensuring we have offshore wind infrastructure. Those are important to do. In response to Deputy Ahern, no one on this side of the House is losing that focus. We are really focused on that. I can see that all across my party. At the same time, we are trying to put options and opportunities in place. It is about putting storage and back-up in place. Ultimately, we would all love it if we could just build wind farms and have it all done in the morning, with windmills outside our houses and everything solved, but it is honestly not as simplistic as that.

I listened patiently to Deputy Ahern for quite a long time. There is both good and bad in the different points he made. I agree with some of them and, obviously, I fundamentally disagree with others. I disagree with his description of the ethos on this side of the House. Ultimately, everyone in this Chamber wants what is best for the country and for the future of our children. We all want what is best for our families in many different ways, children or not. We are trying to secure their future. Deputy Tóibín will have different views, as will Deputy Cronin, but we are all coming here for the right reasons. We might have a different view of how those rules should be applied. Some say we should do less, while others say we should do more. I do not think anyone would be more aware of what the needs and requirements of the people in Clare are than the Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, who is sitting on the Front Bench. More than anyone else, he fundamentally knows the impact on the locality and, more importantly, the broad opportunities that exist in this situation.

To speak to the wider point, the infrastructure committee launched its latest report, a key part of which was the Critical Infrastructure Bill. The country and Government are doing well economically. No one needs me to say we are running budgets surpluses. We are an anomaly in the western world with the amount of money we have. We are very successful in that regard, but we must ensure we are investing it in infrastructure and the future of the country. This is one such step. I know Members might have a different view in this regard but if we do not put those templates in place, we will not be able to develop in the future. This is what this Bill is part of.

I want to make sure the Minister of State knows there is good support on this side of the House, rather than simply hearing the negative from the other side of the House. It is important we build that future because, ultimately, we are all here to do the best on behalf of the country. We may have slightly different ways of doing it but this is an important step towards energy security, which is a huge issue for the country. I welcome the opportunity to support the Bill.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: This is the second Bill I will discuss this week which will act to tear holes in our country's climate ambition. It is doing that on a week when we are seeing the realities of the scale of climate change across Europe, with heat impacting on so many countries and making life intolerable for millions of people. The irony of this is lost on the Government, which is rushing through this legislation and the airport cap legislation with the minimum of debate. I will focus on that before I get into the substantive discussion.

I have heard other Deputies eloquently advocate for this legislation. There are clear, different approaches and views in this regard, and that is fine. However, if that is the case, let us test it. This Bill and the Dublin Airport cap Bill will be discussed on Committee, Report and Remaining Stages for two hours each next week. I cannot recall seeing such important legislation rammed through this House with such little respect. I have put a set of amendments down on each of these Bills and other members of the Opposition have done likewise. There is a difference in approach between the Government and the Opposition. Let that be tested on Committee Stage. It could be done on Committee Stage next week. We all know what the end result will be, but this could be tested on Committee Stage next week and the Bill could then proceed to Report Stage the following week. It would still be done by the end of this year. It is deeply disrespectful, but also indicative of the lack of seriousness with which the Government treats these issues, that it is simply ramming this through the Dáil without the requisite opportunity to debate, amend or improve.

I will now turn to the legislation before us. My central issue with this Bill, the airport cap Bill and the Critical Infrastructure Bill is that all three seek a carve-out from the application of the climate action Act. With regard to this Bill, to be clear, no proposal to introduce new fossil fuel infrastructure into our country's energy mix should go ahead without a climate impact assessment.

That is exactly what section 33 of this Bill proposes to do. If an emergency reserve is needed, and it is a big "if", that "if" will be contingent on several factors. It will be contingent on how soon and how readily we can electrify our energy systems and support it with interconnection and support it with storage. Then it is critically important that a Bill that enables such a piece of infrastructure would take place within the framework of decarbonising our society. To do otherwise would create a situation where we develop a reserve which locks us in to further fossil fuel dependency well past its sale-by date. That, in my view, is what this proposal will do.

Every member of the Government who spoke on this said this is only for an emergency. If the Government is serious about that, let it help us achieve that by putting the relevant measures into this Bill, make sure it is time-bound and make sure it is compliant with our larger climate obligations in the Act and in the annual climate action plans. That is what would at least provide some element of reassurance that this is only emergency legislation. That could be done. I will be bringing forward amendments to allow that - other members of the Opposition will be doing the same - although they will not be accepted. That is why it is hard to hear this tale being spun that we are all in it together. There are two distinct views here about what this Bill could achieve and we will not even get the opportunity to tease that out over the next week.

Exempting fossil fuel infrastructure from the application of the climate Act sets a worrying precedent. It also makes a mockery of the efforts taking place all over the country, in

households and in businesses in wide-ranging sectors of the economy, to reduce our emissions. What is happening with this legislation, taken in conjunction with the Critical Infrastructure Bill 2026 passed by the Houses, is the Government is creating a situation where our climate targets will undergo death by a thousand exemptions. Let us remember that where we exempt sections of society or the economy from the application of the Act, other sections of society have to meet the difference in terms of emissions. Therefore, we are pushing the burden onto households, small businesses and other parts of the economy.

We are exempting this liquefied natural gas, LNG, terminal but for every other public body in Ireland, the commitment to national mitigation plans and to the adaptation frameworks and the transition objectives all are legally binding. They are not only guidelines; they are legally binding. That is what happened in the Act all of us, all parties represented here, voted for in 2021. Now we have a major fossil fuel project that has been planned to work outside of the country's climate law and that will inevitably lead to calls for other pieces of infrastructure to be excluded too. We see that with the airport cap and the Critical Infrastructure Bill.

If the climate law applies to everything except the most carbon intensive projects, essentially, it applies to nothing at all. That is what we are doing in the three pieces of legislation that will be passed in this House over these two months.

Without the right guardrails in place in this legislation, we are putting ourselves at risk of creating significant fossil fuel lock-in within our energy system and doubling down on a higher cost of fuel for families and for homes. LNG terminals do not store LNG for long periods of time. They have to be continually topped off because of the burn off of LNG, even when there is no emergency. This creates a continual demand for the LNG gas in the energy system, sending the exact opposite message to what we should be sending right now.

We know that long-term use of fossil fuels is incompatible with our 2050 targets, which should take priority. Even if the terminal is built for security today, and let us not forget it will not be built today but will be operational in 2030 at the earliest, the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, has recognised that LNG terminals will have to be phased out within ten-to-15 years. Then we will have this terminal as a stranded asset. It will become unusable and uneconomic. I note that this Bill does not require the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, CRU, to have a clear pathway to wind down and decommission the reserve while approving it, and that only adds to those risks.

If we are to have a gas reserve, it should entail the smallest possible amount for the shortest possible period of time with a clear exit strategy, all of which is underpinned by the mechanisms of the climate Act. The Bill we are debating today does none of those things. Instead, it leaves the use of LNG in our energy system as an open-ended question at a time when we know just how unreliable supplies of fossil fuels can be globally.

I will turn to that point of security of supply because that has been the central argument that the Government has put forward. I believe tying ourselves into LNG will do the opposite of providing security of energy supply in our country. We know that using LNG fails to deliver affordability. We saw the first day of the Iran war, the price of LNG shot up 46% in one single day. The world's largest LNG terminal, Ras Laffan, in Qatar, was closed on day two of the Iran conflict. Twenty per cent of the world's LNG comes from there. Much of the rest of the LNG comes from the United States, with all the risks of being dependent on the whims of the Trump

Administration and whoever follows him. We are tying our economy into a substance, a highly-polluting fossil fuel, that is unstable as to both its price and its availability. That is not energy security. What will deliver energy security for Ireland is producing our own renewable energy here at home and that should be our priority. That should be where the Government is fixing its time and where the Government is fixing the huge economic resources - €900 million - that this particular project will cost.

We should not be relying on other countries to produce our energy for us, such as using Qatari LNG or US fracked gas. We need our own energy so that we can make our own choices. The solution is to rapidly build onshore and offshore wind, develop our solar farms, put in place the energy interconnection systems that will tie us into other grids and ensure the energy we create here at times of high production from renewables is stored through rolling out battery storage at scale, and I raised this issue with the Taoiseach earlier this week.

When my party was in government, as part of the Government, we put in place the frameworks that would enable the roll-out of offshore wind. We went from a situation where there was only a skeleton crew of staff working in the Department of energy on the issue of offshore to creating a new offshore wind unit in the Department. We brought together a task force, bringing in industry so that it could engage with the Department in terms of the barriers that existed there. As part of that Government, we worked with Ministers in other Departments to set up Marine Area Regulatory Authority, MARA, to get the marine planning legislation passed. That Government was able to advance five major renewable energy auctions in 2023. Three years on, there is still not one of those feeding into the grid. At the same time, every time wind energy industry representatives comes into this House and talk to TDs, they say An Coimisiún Pleanála does not have enough staff to get the planning applications done in detail. The Minister, Deputy Chambers, will stand up and say that he doubled the number of staff in An Coimisiún Pleanála and he is not giving any more. That is the barrier the industry experts have cited to us in getting our offshore wind energy system online. The barriers are lack of staff in An Coimisiún Pleanála to undertake this scrutiny. It is not judicial reviews. It is not the climate Act. It is not environmental NGOs. It is a failure to address the substantive barriers to the delivery of offshore wind and of the wider electrification of our energy systems.

The Minister of State, Deputy Dooley, and I have spoken already about something small that will not change the world. In plug-in solar, even something small such as that, Ireland is behind because there is not that effort to bring those concerned, whether ESB Networks, EirGrid and the Irish standards authority, together to bring about a solution to allow more people enjoy lower cost energy from these solutions.

The Celtic interconnector, something that will guarantee significant energy security and enough electricity to support 450,000 households, is delayed by two years. These are the areas where the Government needs to focus. Instead, we have a grandiose project such as this.

We have Members on the backbenches touting nuclear fuel. We need to focus on the areas where we can actually deliver and have a track record but where there are clear barriers to the rapid delivery of the electrification of our energy networks. I wish the same passion and determination were put into the changes that would allow us to create our own energy in Ireland as have been put into driving forward this Bill and other Bills that undermine our climate obligations.

I will talk a little about the project itself because it is not going to deliver energy security in the short term. The best estimate we got in the committee was that it would take three and a half years - until 2030 - before this would be built, assuming there are no delays. There are few projects in this country where we can see that happening. It is going to cost €900 million in capital and running costs. This huge investment would pay for many of the solar panels Deputy Neville said he would love to see going up across the country.

We have to remember that by the time the terminal is open, climate targets will be higher, our carbon budget will be far more constrained and our reliance on fossil fuels should be declining, not growing. However, through this Bill and the facility that will be created under it, we will lock ourselves even further into a continued fossil fuel reliance, which could last for decades. This is completely misaligned with the climate goals the country agreed to. We should not be planning further fossil fuel energy infrastructure at the same time as we are trying to move away from fossil fuels as a core national policy. This creates a real risk that when this terminal is created, our energy goals and climate policies will have moved on. By 2030 and 2031, we will be in a different place. Hopefully, some of that wind power will be feeding into our system, but we will have invested €900 million in this infrastructure.

To take the example of Germany, in 2022, it invested €2.5 billion in LNG infrastructure. Since then, it has had to spend more than €4 billion extra in state aid to cover the losses, as these terminals' operating costs continue to rise. These rising costs can be attributed to Germany's decreased reliance on natural gas since the terminals were built. That question of having a stranded asset is not one that has been examined in sufficient detail. In years to come, there will be real questions raised about the wisdom of investing so much in a large piece of expensive infrastructure when our national policy is that we do not want to use this fuel any more.

This Bill is a clear effort to undermine and weaken our climate law, in combination with the other three Bills I referred to earlier. I passionately believe in energy security for this country. I remember my parents talking to me about the late 1970s and the oil crisis in that period. Four times in my time in Dáil Éireann, our country has been struck by dramatic energy security incidents, generated by the wars in Ukraine and Iran. Those energy crises have impacted on families and caused misery and financial hardship all over the country. I passionately believe in delivering security of supply, but I am not convinced by the argument the Government is bringing forward. Tying ourselves to a polluting fossil fuel that has seen its price spike and its availability shrink in each of these energy fuel crises is not the solution to our security of supply. Security of supply for energy in Ireland is delivered by making our own renewable energy here in Ireland. That is where the focus of this Government's action, legislation and investment needs to be. Very importantly, the Minister and his civil servants, in creating policy, need to focus on getting through the blockages in our system. The industry groups supporting the electrification of our nation's energy systems are trying to get through those blockages. However, they are not getting help because the focus is on work like such as this, namely, legislation that requires a huge amount of work and is locking us into a system and energy source we need to move away from.

I look forward to the opportunity to tease out in detail my objections and the objections of others to the Bill. I look forward to bringing forward meaningful solutions to some of the issues I have raised. I appeal to the Minister of State to speak to his colleague, the Minister of

State, Deputy Butler, about the time allocated to this Bill. It is not acceptable to have two hours for Committee, Report and Remaining stages. It does not do his or any of our arguments justice. This is an important matter, and it deserves more than two hours.

Deputy Barry Ward: I was going to say I welcome the Bill, but I do not welcome it; it is a necessary evil. Its purpose is to secure the provision of energy to this country in the long term, at a time when the provision of energy and resources to generate energy are tremendously volatile and precipitous in terms of our access to energy.

I listened to Deputy O'Gorman say security of supply should be achieved by domestic generation. I would fully agree with that statement, but for the fact that we are not capable of generating everything we need on this island. Thankfully, we have access to the UK electricity market through the North-South interconnector, and I look forward to accessing mainland Europe electricity in 2028, through the Celtic interconnector, a 575 km undersea cable that will connect us to Brittany. When that is completed, we will have access to the electricity there. That will be an important part of building energy security for this country.

Some of the electricity coming through the Celtic interconnector will come from electricity generated by nuclear power stations. I do not have a problem with that but I would distinguish myself from other Government backbenchers who were referred to earlier. I do not think nuclear is part of the solution to our problems here, by any stretch. For a start, the cost involved is enormous. Moreover, the time delivery for it is way beyond what we would need to put in clean solutions such as wind, solar and, hopefully, wave, which is not being used nearly enough. More importantly, the use of nuclear energy as a solution to the security of supply for Ireland would build up enormous problems for future generations, and I simply do not hold with that idea. I am not afraid of the conversation in that regard, but I do not think nuclear is part of the answer.

I understand why this Bill is being brought forward. As I said, I consider it to be a necessary evil. The reason for providing for an LNG terminal is to secure a supply of gas, if it is required and the supply of gas from elsewhere ceased. However, I am still not happy about that. For example, I am not happy that there are no guarantees in this legislation regarding fracked gas that might come here as LNG. There are not, and there cannot be, because it would create all kinds of other difficulties. It is, of course, important to build resilience into our system but I wonder if we will have missed the boat by the time we do so in 2030.

As of today, there is not a single operational offshore wind farm in this country. The Minister of State will agree that this is not just regrettable; it is disgraceful. I know the Arklow Bank wind farm has been decommissioned but may well come back into service in due course, with further applications and all the rest. I am aware of projects off the coast of my constituency. I welcome those and look forward to their operation but we are years away from seeing those generate electricity. We have other problems, including growing electricity demand. If the LNG terminal is not going to be available until 2030, as I understand it, that in itself creates a problem from the point of view of its real assistance in energy security for this country. I wonder about the efficacy of it in that regard.

There is always a balance to be struck to meet the requirements of the State. As bad as this might be, it would be a thousand times worse if, in a couple of years' time, there were rolling blackouts on our electricity grid or people were not able to avail of electricity for their homes

and businesses or, worse, for essential services. We must do everything we can, as a Government, State, country and body politic, to ensure we are putting in place resilience measures so that we can compensate if there is a problem in this regard.

Security of supply is central. We should be moving towards becoming energy independent. That should be the end point of all our energy goals. We have the natural resources to do it. We have the wind, and I am told we have the solar. Even though it might feel like it today, it does not feel like it on a cold Monday in November.

The point is that the natural resources exist and if we are to develop wave technology and other renewable technologies, we can do that. I recognise there is a long lead-in to that, which is far too long, in my opinion. The blocking and delays of offshore wind projects, which are even less problematic than onshore wind projects, are unacceptable. That is the kind of thing that we should target. If we are going to use a slot for controversial legislation, let us do it for that instead of creating an LNG terminal. However, I recognise the policy objective behind it.

There are other aspects of the Bill that I am a little unhappy with. The objections I have primarily relate to drafting. For example, at the end of the Bill, Part 7, section 38, creates a consequential amendment to the Environmental Protection Agency Act 1992. This is something that I say about legislation all the time. If we expect legislation to be readable by ordinary citizens, the amendment should be contained in the amending section. Section 38 states that a section of the 1992 Act is amended by replacing paragraph (b) with the following words, which is no use to anybody reading this Bill when it comes law. They then have to go and get the Environmental Protection Agency Act 1992 and read the two of them together to understand what this legislation is doing. It is a consistent disservice that we do in this House to the citizens of this country that we cannot, in amending a section, essentially repeal the old one and restate it in this Bill so that it is easily read by citizens. It would be an easy thing to do, yet we never, ever do it. This is, far and away, not the worst example. There have been more than a dozen Road Traffic (Amendment) Acts, for example. The 1961 Act, the primary Act, simply does not exist any more because it has been amended so many times, yet we have no consolidated Act. It is a point I make all the time because we would serve people much better if we were willing to actually engage with something that they could read.

The other drafting points I wanted to make relate to the judicial review provisions in section 35 and elsewhere. The test for leave for a judicial review is amended in section 35(6). There is no need for that. We should allow the courts to do their job. Judicial review is a constitutional right that citizens have. We should not water that down. If they want to challenge it, let them challenge it. It is the same with the cost provisions in section 37(1). Why on earth would we need to put a cost provision in? The courts are managing that for themselves.

Deputy Naoise Ó Muirí: As Ireland prepares to assume the Presidency of the European Union, the question of energy security has rarely been more urgent or relevant. While we are making real progress on the development of renewables, we must also recognise the vulnerabilities that remain in our system. With the risk of disruption to gas supply, whether through geopolitical instability or hybrid attack, our critical infrastructure underlying the need for a strategic gas emergency reserve, and I support that in principle. The recent global energy shocks have exposed just how fragile energy systems can be and how dependent we are on imported fuels. While the current crisis may have eased, with petrol and diesel prices coming

down at the pumps, it would be a mistake to assume that those risks have passed. The reality is that we are entering a more uncertain and volatile geopolitical environment and our domestic energy policy must reflect that.

The Joint Committee on Climate, Environment and Energy undertook pre-legislative scrutiny of the general scheme of this Bill. We heard from a range of witnesses and had a pretty thorough debate about the merits of the facility. The clear conclusions from that process were that while reducing gas demand and scaling up renewables would significantly strengthen our position, those measures alone are not sufficient to fully address the energy security risks that we face. Ultimately, a strategic gas emergency reserve, implemented on a transitional basis only, and used only in the event of supply disruption, represents the most immediate and cost-effective way to enhance Ireland's energy resilience. Importantly, the committee was also clear that this reserve must not distort the market or lead to increased gas consumption in Ireland. It is an energy security measure only and should solely be seen as a bridge to maintaining greater gas security and resilience. I urge the Minister of State that the Government recognise the importance of this and ensure that this legislation remains focused on that purpose alone, and there are clear measures for decommissioning the facility, and a sunset clause, on the basis that it will not be with us in the long term.

The debate also speaks to a more fundamental question about what energy mix we can expect to see in Ireland in the future. It is a topic that the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach knows comes up at the committee frequently. While we are rightly committed to a system predominantly powered by renewable energy, there will still be a need for dispatchable power. Renewable energy by its nature depends on the weather. While batteries are improving and can manage short-term changes in supply and demand, they do not and will not, in the short term, be able to sustain electricity supply over long periods. Yesterday at the committee, we discussed nuclear power. Lots of people have been getting very excited about nuclear power, but the hard reality, as we heard yesterday, is that it will be at least 2040 and most likely 2050 before we can get it. It is very expensive. We have no regulatory regime in Ireland and no legislation to support it. Much of the technology is unproven. Small modular reactors, SMRs, have been talked about for so long. There are 64 projects in various guises at the moment worldwide. Only two are in operation to demonstrate the technology. It is just not ready at the moment.

Investment in our grid will alleviate some of the issues relating to power, providing a level of flexibility and interconnection with other markets which currently does not exist. Plug-in solar, as the Cathaoirleach Gníomhach, Deputy Heneghan, has mentioned numerous times, and as mentioned by Deputy O'Gorman, is another thing we should do to distribute the load. Without these transformations, the ambition of a renewables-led system cannot be realised. However, even with the grid upgraded, Ireland will continue to require reliable, dispatchable baseload power. For the foreseeable future, that role will continue to be met primarily by gas. I wish it was different, but that is the reality. The strategic gas emergency reserve is a reflection of that reality. It is a pragmatic and necessary step to ensure that, in the event of a severe disruption, we have the capacity to protect households, businesses, and critical services.

When we looked at that issue, community groups came in from the environs where the facility is to be built. It is important that they are kept up to speed about what is happening. They have all sorts of concerns, from health to impact on the local community. It is important

that the Government engages with those communities and brings them along on this journey as this facility is developed.

Deputy Peadar Tóibín: Ireland's energy system is a mess at the moment. We have the highest domestic electricity prices in the whole European Union. We are enormously exposed to shocks. Our grid is falling apart at the moment. It is not able to handle the electricity that is coming onto the system at all. It has happened as a result, in large part, of an absence of investment since the crash. We have had infrastructure capital depreciation at an enormous rate, which has not been filled with investment, as a result, in large part, of the Minister's Government.

We need gas storage in Ireland. Ireland is the only country in the European Union without a gas storage facility. That leaves us significantly exposed to changes in the supply of gas and the price of gas too. This came to light in its most severe manner during the onset of the Ukraine war, when the supply of gas through most of Europe collapsed. We saw a massive increase in the cost of gas. This crisis continues today, with the war in Iran, a situation whereby a quick change in the Strait of Hormuz has had knock-on effects on the price of gas in this country. These are not aberrations. We are living in an unstable world and the locations of the production of gas are often the most unstable on the planet.

Obviously gas is really important in the pricing and supply of electricity, because we have a system in this country, the Government's system, whereby we have marginal pricing when it comes electricity. That means the price of electricity is dependent on the last unit of electricity that is produced. In this country, it is typically produced by gas. This dependency is not going anywhere soon, for a number of reasons. One is the slow increase in renewable energy, and another is that the Government is significantly increasing demand because it is lamping on serious numbers of data centres. At the moment, about 24% of all electricity consumed in the State is being consumed by data centres, an outlier in Europe, where typically 4% to 5% of electricity in other countries is consumed by data centres.

This means, no matter how much sustainable energy that we push onto the system, we are never going to reach the end because gas will always be necessary because the Government is increasing the demand for gas at a serious rate. Gas will play a role in the production of electricity for a long time to come. Even if that were not the case, we have a system that is highly unstable if we rely just upon renewable energy. There are many days when there is no wind or sun. You will always need a backup of gas-produced electricity. There is no doubt that we need a gas storage system in this country.

I want to talk about the infrastructure for a start. The infrastructure in this country is so poor it is incredible. We have bottlenecks and constraints, and it is leading to a significant dispatch down in terms of electricity providers. We are actually paying wind turbine companies to stop producing electricity at certain times because it cannot be accepted onto the system. Of course, that is an extra price for the end user. Then we are paying for the backup of the gas systems to come on as well during that particular time. We have a strange system now whereby every extra wind turbine that we add onto the system has a diminishing return in terms of value to the system. I am not saying that they do not have a value or that it is not beneficial, but each extra turbine is less beneficial because the system is not able to allow for those turbines to come along.

I am old enough to remember the oceans of bumf that used to come from the Government that used to say that Ireland would be the Saudi Arabia of sustainable energy development. The Minister of State must remember that himself. There used to be brochures upon brochures telling people that we were going to become net exporters in terms of electricity. What has actually happened? The opposite. We are significant net importers of electricity. That is going to increase. The more connections we plug in to the rest of Europe, the more electricity that we will import. One of the reasons for this is Government incompetence and Government lack of investment. I will give the House an example of Government incompetence. Over the last 15 years, the Government has had five international conferences on offshore wind energy. The Government has paid for five conferences and invited Ministers from all around the world and experts in companies to those five conferences on offshore wind energy. On the other side of the equation, how many wind turbines do we have offshore? Zero. We have had more conferences on offshore wind turbines in this country than we have offshore wind turbines. You could not make this up. If you were to create a comedy show to lampoon the Government's incapability to deliver energy, you would not have the creativity to contrast those two elements in the manner that they are there. There is such a problem in relation to this. This issue is getting worse. There are no offshore wind turbines at the moment. Many of the companies currently engaging in the system to become wind energy companies are actually disengaging now as a result.

We in Aontú believe we need to build renewable energy in this country. We want to see a far bigger element of the electricity production come from renewables. We want to see this country become energy secure. We talk a lot in this Chamber about food security. Energy security is as important as food security in this country. The more dependent we are on other countries, the more insecure we are. We believe that we need more microgeneration. More homes need to become self-sufficient in electricity. We need more rooftop production of electricity. The way to do that is to make sure that those solar systems are accessible to everybody. They are not accessible to everybody because the grants that are available are still far too small for low-income and middle-income families. We want to see more farmers get involved. Energy should be seen as a crop for farmers to be able to make a living from. Far more use should be made of sheds, land and biodigestion. I went to the headquarters of the Belgium electricity provider a number of years ago. We were looking at the grid system. They were looking at the grid and seeing a reduction in the grid over a number of years. I asked why the grid was reducing. They said that electricity would be locally generated in the future, that we are not going to have the necessity for the massive grids to transport electricity across the country and far more electricity will be microgenerated and locally generated.

Another aspect of this is a spatial element. A lot of the wind generation is happening in locations where the industry is not and, as a result, that creates the bottlenecks and difficulties getting the electricity to these locations. We should be developing industry into the areas where the electricity is coming from. It is very similar to the whole debate on taking water from the Parteen Basin to send to Dublin and add more of a population to Dublin rather than adding the population to Limerick, and, as a result, not having to move that resource so far in that area.

We want to see a healthy environment. We believe in a biodiverse environment. We want to see this country grow strongly in making sure that we have a healthier environment. We also need to make sure that there is human balance in that discussion. There are European laws, such as the habitats directive, which make it difficult for human beings to live in certain

parts of the country. The big problem in Enniscorthy at the moment is the floods. I love the pearl mussel. I want to see the pearl mussel to do well. Unfortunately, the pearl mussel is located right in the middle of Enniscorthy, which stops the building of these flood defences. As a result, Enniscorthy has flooded for the last 25 years. Midleton flood defences have waited 14 years for a planning application to be put in. One of the issues here is we have to have a realisation that human beings also share these locations. Laws that come from Europe, such as the habitats directive, need to take that into consideration too.

We also need to realise that one of the problems we have in energy production in Ireland is that we have the slowest planning, tendering, procurement, licensing and judicial reviews in the whole European Union. All of these tools necessary for the production of infrastructure are slower here than they are in most of the European Union. That is because of this Government's incompetence on those issues.

I have problems with this Bill that are important. LNG is likely to be the source of the gas storage. Fracked gas is a major element of LNG. Fracked gas is incredibly damaging for the locations from which it is fracked and it has a far higher emission rate in terms of methane, which is pushed out in the system too. Aontú is against fracked gas in Ireland. It would be hypocritical to support an energy solution that includes fracked gas from other parts of the world. I also believe that there has not been enough examination of the potential impact of the gas terminal on the communities in County Clare and their health. That is important. Local communities must have consent for the production of infrastructure. When I went to Belgium, I asked what the parameters and priorities were to plan for infrastructural projects for their electricity. Second on that list was the idea of community consent. Community consent is nowhere in the aspects of the development in Ireland. That lack of community consent and the lack of ability to achieve that community consent at the start slows down projects. The Minister of State will know that there is a Government plan to build a North-South interconnector for electricity. I was in short trousers when the Government came up with that idea. It is incredible. That project has been going on so long. It has gone through all the hoops and is still no closer to getting built. Why? Farmers along the curtilage of that particular route are refusing to allow the ESB and EirGrid onto their sites. They are not going to let them onto their sites. It is not going to get built as a result. The Government went bull-headed in relation to that particular project and, as a result, slow it down, instead of using the technology that is used between Aachen and Liège in relation to the movement of electricity, which is to underground it.

It is really important that community consent is worked out at the start.

At the back of all this is the issue of data centres. Data centres are significantly pushing up the price of electricity for individuals. It is causing problems with the energy system being on a knife-edge at all times. We need to stop data centres. They need to pay the same electricity costs as domestic households. That would do two things: it would decrease the price of electricity for domestic householders in Ireland and it would reduce the incentive for data centres to come here.

There is a lot in the process that we are yet to look at. We will wait until the committee has looked at the Bill. We probably disagree with many of the Opposition parties in that we believe we do need a gas storage system. Whether this is the gas storage system remains to be seen.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: It is funny, for all the talk about speaking rights, to see a lot of Opposition not turning up to speak. This is a giant infrastructure project. I am not here to wreck this Bill - energy has always been a priority for me, having studied it before I had the honour of being elected – but we really need to look at it. I understand we need energy security. If, God forbid, there was an issue with one of the interconnectors or there was an energy disaster, critical services, hospitals, homes and people who really need it would lose access to power. That needs to be addressed. A more accurate cost-benefit analysis of this project should be carried out and compared with the option of decentralising our grid with more distribution system operators, DSOs, energy sharing and battery storage. I welcome the recent announcements on storage and how it is being looked at. I held a meeting in the audiovisual room with Energy Storage Ireland which was attended by a lot of Deputies and Senators. It was looking at changing the current regulations in the area.

I second what a lot of Deputies have said about data centres paying the same price as domestic energy users. Possibly, they should pay more. One way they could reduce the cost would be by using on-site renewable-generated electricity. I hope my Bill will enable them and other high-energy users to do so.

The €900 million cost of building the facility could be put into more renewables or enabling people to use plug-in solar. I thank the Department for publishing the consultation on plug-in solar from 2024. I read the five reviews – I think it was EIA, Bord Gáis, ESB, EirGrid and ESNB and the Electricity Association – and a lot of them were very happy with it so I do not understand why the Department was saying it would be dangerous. The UK made a recent announcement on plug-in solar. We should run a pilot scheme and allow people in Fingal or Dublin City Council or any other county council with new-build social and affordable housing to have plug-in solar installed and show the savings to the State and the council through these systems. Some 3% or 4% of German electricity is generated from plug-in solar systems. That is no small feat for a system that can cost €300 or €400 from a Lidl or Aldi and the person can take it with them if they move. That is something that can really help. There is €900 million for this project. I know a plug-in solar system cannot power a hospital but an on-site best battery system which was charged up at night rate from the grid, stored for those emergencies at multiple locations in these systems, is another option we should be examining. We could also store HVOs for hospitals and use them for generators if there was to be an energy disaster. We are putting ourselves in a clear demand response. LNG cannot be stored for long periods in this system. It needs to be used. I welcome the work that has gone in by the Department. I also want to acknowledge EirGrid and ESB Networks - I generally do not do so but they do deserve some credit - as renewable sources supplied 49% of Ireland's electricity. I know the hard-working men and women in these companies are doing the best they can. Our grid was very old and they had to do everything they could but, as the Minister of State knows, in this House we rarely congratulate people. It is something we should do more in politics.

The CRU has approved up to €18.9 billion in green investment, which is a genuine step. However a recent article said it would not be able to take on external staff. It needs to take on external staff because it needs to be a regulator and to do its job. I welcome the engagement I have had with it and the Department.

I said I would not go over five minutes but now I have got going. Serious engineers are doing serious work. Deputy Tóibín mentioned the interconnectors. We are on an island which

is politically divided, sadly. That is something I would love to see change during my time in this House. When that happens we will have people in a single government on this island of Ireland. However, when it comes to the interconnectors, we are seeing repeated cases of nimbyism where local politicians object to an overhead cable. I understand Deputy Tóibín referred to undergrounding the cables but induction means it will not be viable for long distances. I understand that it might be used in parts and it might be brilliant in some cases. Farmers should have the right to ask for the cables to go underground on their land rather than above it.

We were told this reserve is needed to bring about energy independence but I would again ask how adding one more single point of failure brings more energy independence and security. Surely multiple points of failure would bring that? If, God forbid, there was an attack on our energy infrastructure, on one of the interconnectors, for example, surely having one large LNG terminal would make it a big bullseye for someone who wants to take out our energy infrastructure. Multiple underground energy storage units would be energy independence and security in my opinion. Maybe the Government is doing that and it just does not want me to say that on the record of the House.

On ports, Ireland has only 44 ha of planned offshore renewable energy space. Belfast has a backlog of bookings and is the only port suitable for large scale ORE. We are missing an opportunity. I have welcomed the investment into Cork Port many times and I also welcome the work the Department is doing with port marshalling to allow more investment into port.

I will have two amendments to the Bill which I look forward to discussing.

I have said before that Churchill tried before to limit coal coming into Ireland to force de Valera's hand. The UK Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, resigned recently. Looking at the polls, we do not know who will be in power in UK after the next election. Making our country dependent on an interconnector when we do not control the energy coming from the other side is not energy independence. I know this would but I am talking on the broader scheme. The Bill should be amended to include a clause to re-examine that.

I support the principle of the Bill. It is a necessary evil, as Deputy Ward said. A lot of work could have been done by a previous government, when the Green Party was in coalition, to prevent this. I can only do what I can do when I am in this House since my election. I ask the Minister and the Department to look at my amendments and consider the discussion I hope to have about the future-proofing of our grid.

I will ask once more about plug-in solar. I welcome that we are having discussion on it at the climate and energy committee. It is a quick fix, it is low cost and will save people in the constituency I represent money. I welcome the engagement the Minister of State and the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, have had.

That only took me eight minutes.

Minister of State at the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment (Deputy Timmy Dooley): In line with the Deputy's comments, I congratulate him on being so succinct in his points. He managed to do it in a relatively quick time.

I will make a number of general comments. We have had a good debate across a lot of areas, many of which are not part of or subject to this legislation. This Bill is the first stage in addressing the energy security deficit that we have.

4 o'clock

It is an enabling piece of legislation to allow for the procurement of the necessary permissions. It sets out a timely way to do that by setting aside certain pieces of existing legislation in order to get it done at the haste it needs to happen. Everybody recognises, and there has been a broad consensus, that we need energy security. Others have pivoted to saying what we should be doing is addressing the renewables issue, which of course we are. Bringing forward this piece of legislation in no way distracts from the Government's agenda to move towards and reach our climate change targets in relation to the reduction of CO2 emissions, the electrification of our economy and generation of that electricity from renewable resources within our own ambit. It is the right thing to do from a climate change perspective. It is the right thing to do from an energy security perspective. It is the right thing to do for our citizens and businesses into the future, from the perspective of competitiveness. It guarantees us costs. It allows us to reduce costs and not to be vulnerable to the kinds of shocks that everybody has talked about. I know we are in a political Chamber but if you strip away a lot of the politics, there is little between any of us in this House about where we need to go.

It is the case that we are all aligned on renewables but to get renewables at scale and reach the capacity to power our economy when the wind is not blowing or the sun is not shining, we need something else to power our electricity generation. We will require greater amounts of that as we move heating, transport and more components of our economy onto the grid and we need to invest in our grid. We are doing that. I know there is some criticism that we do not have any turbines in the water at the moment. We were ahead of others, and we have fallen behind for sure. However, the plans we have in place and the projects at different stages of permissions were not mentioned at all. We have to work them through, and we expect by 2031 or 2032 to have between 3 GW and 5 GW of electricity generated from offshore renewable sources. We are at about 8 GW on land at the minute, between solar and wind. That is a significant quantum of electricity.

The previous Government changed the strategy for the development of offshore renewables. Rather than having it being developer led, identifying sites and responding to various options, we now have a planned approach in place. The DMAP for an area off the south-east coast of Ireland has worked well. The bid went through last December. Some 900 MW of electricity has been procured and that is now working its way through the planning system. The State has derisked projects like that by capturing the subsea data and providing it to the bidders. There was a caustic comment about the number of conferences we have had. I have participated in those. I have travelled to encourage international developers to participate in those auctions. That is to the long-term benefit of Ireland. There is a recognition among the large companies that take on these projects that Ireland is a good place to invest, and they are following through on that. There were three or four bidders for the auction off the south-east coast. They are still interested in Ireland and there are three other opportunities in the same designated zone, which will be going to auction over the coming months and year. In addition, the State has undertaken a national designation for such sites, and we will have all of those sites identified by the end of 2027. That strategy is working towards our commitment out to 2040, so we will have identified

all the necessary sites to generate an additional 15 GW of electricity. That will far surpass our domestic demand. It opens up opportunities if we can get the right interconnectors in place. We have the Celtic one coming on board. The Minister, Deputy O'Brien, on behalf of the Government, recently signed a memorandum of understanding with Spain to look at the possibility of interconnection there too. We are travelling at significant pace and scale now to reach our renewable targets.

We are also developing a strategy for hydrogen because we identified that getting to 2050 and reaching net zero, particularly with regard to our electricity generation, will not be possible without hydrogen or some component thereof, be it ammonia or whatever. Ultimately, if we get to a point where we are able to use the electricity for the purpose of generating hydrogen at times where the demand is not on the grid, we will have effective storage of clean energy in a molecule format that can be stored. It will either be that or through ammonia, whatever is the safest method of doing it as technologies develop. That ensures you are not grounding electrons or doing dispatch downs.

Some seem to suggest, from a critical perspective, that the Government was not talking a strategic approach but of course we are. We are planning it now in a long-term strategic way, recognising where our targets are and what we have to achieve. In the here and now, today, and beyond 2030 as we head towards 2040, we will still need fossil fuels to fill that gap in our energy mix. It would be foolhardy of any administration of whatever hue in this House to somehow walk away from its responsibility to provide insofar as it can a back-up storage plan in the less likely but still possible event of some disruption to the two gas interconnectors out of Scotland. For years gone by, we were drawing a significant amount of our gas from the Corrib gas field. As that is petering out, and the level of gas coming from it is reducing significantly, we have to move on this. Frankly, I think we should have moved sooner. That would be my criticism. This should have been in place. We are doing it now. Others then suggested we were baking in or locking ourselves into fossil fuel infrastructure. Had we allowed some of the commercial operators who sought to do this to build a gas terminal, then yes we would be locking ourselves in. This is a mobile piece of kit. There will be some hardware on the ground but, in essence, it is a ship storing gas connected to our pipeline. When the Government gets to a point that it no longer requires that level of storage, the asset moves on.

A lot of questions were raised today that do not really relate to this Bill. This is just about the permission and setting aside certain elements of existing planning legislation to get the fast-tracked approach through. Another Bill will come forward later this year that will effectively be the operational component, and which will address the costs and the kinds of commitments that have been sought with regard to the length of time, usage, access for private capital and all of that. All of those elements will be in a later Bill. The issues were raised and there are amendments. I have had a quick look at them and have been briefed on a number of them. They are more likely to relate to the next Bill rather than this Bill. Some of the concepts and discussions we were having today and the issues raised have more application in the operational piece of legislation rather than just on the planning side. Deputy Whitmore raised a number of issues she was concerned were not in this Bill, and I want to assure her and many others that those elements will be addressed or, if they are not, Members can discuss them with us. We will happily look at them. I obviously make no commitment in advance of a piece of legislation

that has yet to be published. The heads of Bill probably still have to go to Government to clear but we have a broad plan here and we want to implement it.

Question put and declared carried.

Message from Select Committee

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Barry Heneghan): The Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade has completed its consideration of the Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill 2026 and has made no amendments thereto.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Barry Heneghan): 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 Shane Moynihan - To discuss delays in reimbursement under the cross-border healthcare directive.

Deputy Jen Cummins - To discuss the arts and humanities Research Ireland funding.

Deputy Tom Brabazon - To discuss the loss of staff at a school in Priorswood.

Deputy Malcolm Byrne - To discuss the development of Bunclody Community College, County Wexford.

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 Barry Ward - To discuss steps to ensure that LGBTQI+ people who are victims of hate-motivated incidents have confidence in reporting offences to An Garda Síochána.

Deputy Gary Gannon - To discuss the proposed reforms of the criminal legal aid system.

Deputies Seán Crowe, John Lahart, Paul Murphy and Ciarán Ahern - To discuss the timeline for completion of the Sancta Maria College school building and sports hall project.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke - To discuss the urgent need to address the deficit of playing pitches, playgrounds and public green space in Meath.

The matters raised by Deputies Jen Cummins; Darren O'Rourke; Seán Crowe, John Lahart, Paul Murphy and Ciarán Ahern; and Barry Ward have been selected for discussion

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Research Funding

Deputy Jen Cummins: I wish to raise the issue of the growing concern in Ireland's academic community with regard to the future of funding for arts, humanities and social science research under the new Research Ireland strategy. Before getting into the details, I note that I come from an arts background. My primary degree was in history, sociology and English, my next was in sociology and I have a doctorate in education, so I am clearly a little biased on this. I really feel the value of the arts, social sciences and humanities in terms of how we are as a country and how we conduct ourselves. That is not to say that I am anti-STEM at all. To balance that off, my husband works in that field, and my son is now doing it in college, so I think we can have a balanced conversation.

It is important that we are not pitting one thing against the other. That is the nub of the issue here. Research Ireland has a finite amount of money, and it can only fund a certain number of things, but value needs to be put on both STEM and the arts, humanities and social sciences. If we look at the background of this, I am bringing it forward because almost 2,000 academics from universities across the country wrote an open letter to *The Irish Times* expressing the concerns they have with regard to what Research Ireland's current direction appears to be, and that it is towards more industry-focused research, which they feel is undervaluing the arts, humanities and social sciences.

Of course, it is important that we have research that is able to grow the economy and that looks to the technological innovations we will need to have in the future. I have stood in this Chamber several times to talk about what we need from a science perspective because I am also the spokesperson for further and higher education, research, innovation and science - the shortest title of any spokesperson role, I would say. That is not to say that it only has to be that way. We need to make sure that when the industry is funding and leading what we want, it does not take over the other things that are necessary as well.

When people look at the arts and humanities, they think that they are just subjects that you do - they are nice but you will never get a job from that. I note there was a debate recently about getting rid of arts programmes, and I would argue absolutely against that. A lot of the time, when young people leave second level and go to third level, they do not know what they want to do, so a firm basis in general sciences, general arts or other more general degrees is beneficial for them to discover themselves.

To bring that back to the level of research, we need to be able to look, from a social scientific point of view, at what our future world is going to bring to us, what we need to know and what we know now about what is going to happen in the future, so we can build schools, homes and all of those things. That comes from social science. It is not just statistical analysis from a STEM perspective.

The fear of the Postgraduate Workers' Organisation, IFUT and others is that Research Ireland and the Department made these decisions and kind of let them know along the way how things were going to go. That is not consultation; that is just letting someone know. It is a concern that I also have. It is important when things are changing and evolving that people are

brought along, not just left to the side and told a couple of weeks beforehand that this is what the changes are going to be. There needs to be a right to be able to challenge that. That is why the open letter has happened.

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Kieran O'Donnell): I thank Deputy Cummins for raising this issue, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy James Lawless. I welcome the opportunity to update colleagues on how the arts, humanities, and social sciences will be supported through the Research Ireland strategy and the progress on implementation to date.

Research Ireland was established as the national research and innovation funding agency to promote and continue developing excellence in research across all disciplines, including arts, humanities and social sciences, AHSS. The new agency strategy was published in March of this year. The strategy names AHSS as a distinctive national strength, with a role across all three impact themes: talent, society and the economy. The strategy safeguards AHSS funding through a guaranteed minimum floor, which will ensure continuity of funding for AHSS at or above existing levels. No cuts are proposed to funding or to the number of places being funded by the agency.

The dedicated society impact theme commits to investment in strengthening capacity across the breadth of disciplines and enabling interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research to bring together diverse perspectives, expertise and cross-government support to tackle key societal challenges. The agency will be working to strengthen engagement and collaboration with wider research users and performers, such as not-for-profit organisations and charities, and the arts and culture sector, to drive and showcase greater benefit to society.

Basic, fundamental research is also firmly recognised and supported within Research Ireland's strategy. It has been a consistent goal of this Government to support fundamental and frontier research at all times, and this is set out strongly. There has been substantial consultation across the research system in developing the new strategy, and there is ongoing consultation on implementation. The agency has a remit to be more than a funder, and to also work in partnership across a more cohesive system with researchers, institutions and representative bodies to ensure that the strategy delivers for all disciplines. This work is ongoing. The agency also has a role in supporting higher education institutions in developing research and innovation strategies of their own.

A key action of the strategy is to review existing PhD funding programmes and develop an enhanced suite of programmes, with the ambition to make Ireland the leading location in Europe for PhD training, in partnership with the HEIs and the wider system. The agency is currently undertaking consultation on a proposed strategic institutional funding model, as an evolution of the Government of Ireland programme, which is intended to: reduce the administrative burden for students; provide more security and stability of funding across a course of research or study; address issues in relation to researchers accessing funding for materials or consumables, travel and networking funding; address maternity, paternity and adoptive leave supplements; and enhance long-term planning and institutional capability.

Since February 2026, Research Ireland has conducted more than 20 engagement sessions, including seven in-person AHSS-focused events across the country and two national webinars

attended by more than 700 participants. The senior leadership from the agency have met with research leaders and researchers across the country, and with the representative bodies.

The proposed new model would bring the agency funding model for these awards closer to international best practice. The agency funding portfolio is split almost evenly, and it is intended to maintain this balance across the programme plan and agency funding portfolio. Other calls funded or managed by the agency now available to AHSS researchers include: public service fellowships; challenge funding, which is open to all disciplines; and international calls, such as the Research Ireland-UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council joint call on creative industries.

The agency has prioritised growing investigator-led funding in planning, recognising the increasing demand for investigator-led research funding. The Minister, Deputy Lawless, is aware of these issues, and he met with representatives of the signatories earlier this week to examine the concerns raised. This has been a constructive and positive ongoing engagement, with insight from the research community informing the design of the new programme. There is consensus on what must be protected: excellence, transparency, mobility and disciplinary diversity.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I thank the Minister of State for his response. I appreciate it. I am very happy to hear that international best practice will be applied in this situation. I know from my engagement with PhD researchers that Ireland is not on a par with other countries throughout Europe or internationally. There are challenges with regard to the stipends, although I know they have increased over the past while. There is also the issue of employee status. I am speaking about PhD researchers as distinct from doctoral students, which I was myself. I am not talking about somebody who is a student but somebody who is a researcher. I am talking about a role advertised by an institution that states it wants a PhD researcher. With regard to their employment status, if they do tutorials or other work that needs to be protected for them.

The Minister of State briefly mentioned types of leave. It is very important this is embedded in the contract so they have the possibility of taking sick leave, annual leave or maternity leave. The future progression and careers of researchers afterwards can be precarious. It is very important to mention that when things are industry led or agency led, whether it is in the arts, humanities and social science or STEM, at all times this research has to be independent. Just because it is funded does not mean the research can be influenced by people looking for a particular outcome. Research has to have its independence. It needs to be verifiable and not just focused on only making more money.

I have mentioned previously that I do not think we should be using the word "talent" in our discourse. These are people who are researchers and who are valuable members of our community. We need to reduce the use of this word. I appreciate the Minister of State is reading from a script. I have mentioned it in the House previously and I want to say again that we should talk about "people" and not "talent". They are talented but I ask that the two words are used differently.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank Deputy Cummins for raising this important matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Lawless. He will ensure her contribution

will form part of the ongoing consultation. New opportunities are being created for AHSS through the Research Ireland strategy, supported by additional Government investment to deliver the strategy, including the development of the development of larger-scale initiatives. New opportunities have arisen for researchers through the newly established Global Talent Ireland and other strategic initiatives, such as the INSPIRE programme, to support infrastructure and the investigators programme.

The strategy commits Research Ireland to ongoing consultation and stakeholder partnership, including establishing a formal advisory council which will be predominantly comprised of academics. It will have representation across all disciplines with a focus on AHSS. The Minister, Deputy Lawless, looks forward to working with the agency on realising the ambitions of the new agency strategy for all disciplines, including AHSS, in the coming years. Deputy Cummins has raised particular points in respect of PhD students. It is obviously an area she is familiar with, having been one herself. These are matters that will be brought to the attention of the Department and the Minister.

Housing Policy

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the Ceann Comhairle's office for selecting this matter for debate. It is something I am very interested in and is something that communities across the State and in my constituency are very interested in. They struggle to understand why we cannot do better on it. It is about access to playing pitches, playgrounds and public green space. In my home county of Meath during the 20 years between 1996 and 2016 the population significantly increased and it continued in this vein until 2022, which is the latest census we have. There are thousands of houses but parks, playgrounds and public playing pitches did not materialise. The truth is that our communities were failed and continue to be failed. During the Celtic tiger developer-led construction and poor planning meant we got dense residential estates but zero public green space. The people of Meath lived up to their side of the agreement. They bought houses, raised families and built communities but local and central government failed to live up to their side.

The Minister of State in his response will likely point to the planning and development Acts, development plans, guidelines for planning authorities, the sustainable residential development and compact settlement guidelines and probably to other planning Acts because we have asked these questions previously. The fact of the matter is that it is not happening. The parks, pitches and playgrounds are not being delivered. The truth is when we ask who is responsible for making it happen we get pointed to somebody else or we get a blank response. We have a siloed planning system and communities right across the State - I am talking about my constituency of Meath East and I live in one of these communities - are being failed. We are being incredibly frustrated by the lack of progress. I am frustrated because this is an issue I am passionate about. It is one I have tried to make constructive contributions about but we are seeing no progress.

Along with colleagues, I launched Delivering Liveable Urban Spaces, Sinn Féin's policy document, alongside our proposal for a dedicated public park, green space and woodland fund, which we call Ciste Beithe. Our proposals are clear and practical and the Government should listen to them. We want the sequencing of developments, meaning playing pitches, parks, playgrounds and river walks must be delivered in tandem with houses and not put on the long

finger. We want funding ring-fenced from development levies and we want green and blue spaces placed on an elevated footing in our county development plans. Most importantly, we want the voice of local communities heard at every step, from design to planning to delivery. If implemented, these proposals would transform County Meath and every other county. They would help us to build communities and not just houses. They would ensure that our children have somewhere safe to play and they would give us a fighting chance of dealing with the policy failures of the past. There needs to be a policy change and a step change to empower local authorities as a matter of priority to deliver on this vital community infrastructure. Will this happen?

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I take this opportunity to thank Deputy O'Rourke for raising this important matter and providing me with an opportunity to update the House. I am taking this Topical Issue on behalf of Deputy James Browne, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Under the Planning and Development Act 2024 local authorities are obliged to prepare and adopt development plans that may make provision for the delivery of recreational facilities and amenities. While the making of a development plan is a reserved function of the elected members of each local authority under the Act, the development plan guidelines for planning authorities of 2022 set out that when making zoning decisions, consideration must be given to the future availability of, or the capacity to provide, supporting local community and amenity services and infrastructure, including recreation and sports facilities.

The sustainable residential development and compact settlements guidelines of 2024 indicate that planning authorities should plan for an integrated network of well-designed neighbourhoods that can meet day-to-day needs, including sporting needs, within a ten- to 15-minute walk of all homes. In the case of larger settlements, the residents of less central neighbourhoods should have the opportunity to travel by public transport, and other sustainable modes such as greenways, to access higher order services and amenities at more central and accessible locations. Section 7.3 of these guidelines sets out that every development plan should include an objective for a community, social and cultural infrastructure audit for areas that are likely to experience significant new development and should have a clear evidence-based rationale for future requirements in order to maximise the social return and community benefit generated by public investment by State agencies and others.

Policy and objective 5.1 of these guidelines states that statutory development plans should include an objective relating to the provision of public open space in new residential developments and in mixed-use developments that include a residential element. The requirement in the development plan shall be for public open space provision of not less than a minimum of 10% of net site area and not more than 15% of net site area, save in exceptional circumstances. Different minimum requirements within the 10% to 15% range may be set for different areas. The guidelines state that public open spaces should be designed to cater for a range of active and passive recreational needs, including play, physical activity, active travel, cultural uses and community gardens and allotments, as appropriate to the context.

The Deputy may be interested to note that Sport Ireland is a prescribed body for the purposes of plan-making in accordance with the Planning and Development (Prescribed Persons - Statutory Plans) Regulations 2025, SI 458 of 2025.

The Office of the Planning Regulator, OPR, is carrying out initial research into sporting facilities and the planning system. As part of this, it is liaising with Sport Ireland and other sporting bodies to examine how local authorities can more effectively plan for the provision of sports and recreational facilities for their communities. With regard to the delivery of such facilities, responsibility for Government policy on sport and the funding and function of Sport Ireland lies with my colleague, the Minister for Culture, Communications and Sport. In accordance with section 63(3) of the Local Government Act 2001, local authorities are independent in the performance of their functions.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I am aware of all that detail, and it actually spells out what the problem is. That is the current state of affairs and it is not working. The Minister of State knows this as well as I do. Anyone who is a public representative, and anyone who has an interest in sport, the outdoors or building communities, knows this is not happening at a local authority level or in county development plans. Too much is dependent on a deal being made between a local community and a local developer to provide a pitch as part of a housing development. It is a nonsense. Communities are being failed as a result. In many places, the community facilities never materialise because they are promised and when the houses are delivered, the developer has left. We have to get this right. Too many communities have been failed.

Along with Sinn Féin colleagues, I met representatives of the GAA. They spoke about the report published by the GAA, *No One Shouted Stop - Until Now: The GAA's Response to Ireland's Demographic Shift*. This is a document about rural depopulation and rural decline. It is also directly related to massive pressure in urban areas. The representatives spoke about the need for support for balanced rural development and its inclusion in planning policy frameworks. We need to strengthen frameworks. There was a reference to Britain having a 6-acre standard, which local authorities should deliver on. In regard to delivering facilities with the OPR, I welcome this aspect. There is a need to develop an all-island sporting facilities strategy, as is zoning for sport and recreation facilities, as well as funding for sport and recreation facilities.

There are two major issues. One is that the planning rules and guidelines need to be improved. We have 4,000 schools in the State, and there is an *ad hoc* arrangement for getting access to their sporting and green spaces. This needs to be addressed.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank Deputy O'Rourke again for raising this important matter, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy James Browne. In addition to the need to make provision for recreational facilities within statutory development plans, such facilities may also be funded by development contribution schemes, determined by elected members of each planning authority under section 48 of the Planning and Development Act 2000. Conditions attached to permissions requiring contributions to be made towards such schemes may include open spaces and recreational and community facilities.

The Planning and Development Act 2024 recognises that recreational facilities are best supported through meaningful public participation in local development planning and decision-making. Effective planning is not solely about technical assessments or infrastructure co-

ordination; it is also about ensuring communities have a genuine opportunity to shape the future of the places in which they live, work and raise their families.

The Act strengthens the importance of engagement at all stages of the planning process, from the preparation of development plans and local area plans to consultation on individual planning applications and broader regeneration initiatives. As the provisions of the 2024 Act are commenced, meaningful community participation will remain a central element of a modern, democratic and plan-led system that seeks to deliver sustainable development and an improved quality of life for communities across Ireland.

I note the points Deputy O'Rourke has raised. Dare I say it, but they are not just related to one Department. I have no doubt that he will be taking these up with those other Departments as well. I will bring the points the Deputy has raised here to the attention of the Minister, Deputy Browne, and the Department. I thank the Deputy again.

Schools Building Projects

Deputy Seán Crowe: I am joined by my constituency colleagues, from the Opposition and the Government, in relation to this issue. Sancta Maria College got approval for a new school gym and drama room back in 2001. That is 25 years, a quarter of a century, ago. Right now, the school has two half-built structures after the construction company went into liquidation eight years ago. Generations of students have come and gone without the facilities that were promised. Worse still, there are leaks in the roof and difficulties with the sewerage system.

The school has been waiting for more than a year now for a stage 2b report to be responded to by the Department of education. Without the Department's approval, the school cannot move to the tendering process and get the works back on track. The tender process takes long enough without the perpetual delays which dealing with the Department always entails. Will the Minister of State make a commitment to the pupils and teachers from Sancta Maria College that another generation of students will not pass through the school staring at a half-built extension?

Deputy John Lahart: I thank my colleagues for joining me in bringing this question forward. We do this sometimes in this Chamber. Sancta Maria College is unfinished business. It is an unfinished school. A school without a sports hall is not a school. A school without performance facilities and space and creative space and facilities is not a finished school either. It is what we can call an incomplete school or an uncompleted school, giving, essentially, an incomplete education to the girls who attend there and have attended there for a number of years.

What a school it is, when we look at the students, teachers, the principal, the board of management and the parents council. Through no fault of their own, a building, as was explained earlier, is unfinished and incomplete, yet the school still seems to max out in terms of the success and education it delivers. It remains, however, an incomplete school delivering an incomplete education.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: The issue of a school not having a sports hall is one very close to my heart because I went to the boys' school next door to Sancta Maria College, Coláiste Éanna, as

did Deputy Lahart. For my entire time there, we had no sports hall. It means the school cannot offer PE, which is so important for children's mental and physical health. Even in the time since a sports hall was completed in Coláiste Éanna, we can see that a basketball club has developed in the area. It is a case of if you build it, they will come. It is such an important asset, not just for the school but for the area too. As the other Deputies have said, this is something that has been completely out of the school's control. The building project started back in 2018. In 2020, during Covid, the developer, the builder, went bust. In the six years since then, nothing has happened. We now have a derelict site right beside a school. As Deputy Lahart said, we have an incomplete school with incomplete education, but we also have a fairly serious health and safety risk to the school community and the community at large. A small fire was started in that area. There are potential insurance issues for the school because of that. We are just looking for the school to get this building completed, as was promised 25 years ago, as Deputy Crowe said.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: I thank Deputies Crowe, Lahart and Ahern for raising this important matter on behalf of their constituents. I am taking it on behalf of the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, to outline to the Dáil the current position in relation to the school project for Sancta Maria College, Ballyroan, Rathfarnham, County Dublin.

The completion project for the school referred to by the Deputy is currently at stage 2b, architectural planning-detailed design. The brief is for a completion contract for refurbishment works and a sports hall, following termination of the original contract. The design team completed a stage 2b submission which is currently with the Department for review.

The 105 projects prioritised to proceed to tender and-or construction in 2026 and 2027 represent a first tranche of large-scale extension and modular projects. However, further tranches will be prioritised to proceed at a later stage over what is a five-year national development plan, NDP, with a total investment of €7.55 billion. The projects selected for the initial tranche were already at stage 3, tender stage, and the most urgent projects at stage 2b, detailed design, that had planning permission. Projects not already at this stage of readiness were not eligible for consideration for the initial tranche. The stage 2b projects selected to progress were identified as meeting the most urgent requirements from a special education, demographics or building condition perspective.

As part of planning ahead for the next tranche of projects to progress to tender, a Department-led prioritisation process will continue over the course of 2026 and 2027. This includes engagement with key stakeholders, and this has commenced recently. The Department-led energy and condition survey of the school estate, which will be finalised later in 2026, will provide an additional evidence base for assessing priorities. A next tranche of projects to proceed to tender is expected to be announced in 2027.

Engagement with individual schools will also continue and will include the consideration of issues such as any interim accommodation requirements and, in some cases, advancing enabling works to facilitate smooth progress to construction at a later stage.

It is important to note that the 105 projects on the initial NDP priority list represent a subset of the overall school building programme. In total, there are 260 to 300 projects under construction at any one time. Over the course of 2026, some 1,000 school projects of varying

scales will be under construction. In addition to large-scale extension and modular projects, the projects include climate action projects, summer works and repurposing of rooms for special education classes.

I will bring the specific point raised on behalf of the Deputies' constituents, and more particularly the pupils, staff, parents and wider community, to the attention of the Minister for Education and Youth, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, and her Department. I can see that this is something of great importance to the Deputies in their representational roles and particularly to the people they represent.

Deputy Seán Crowe: The big question we ask is why the school has not been prioritised. It is a half-finished school. The Minister of State has outlined the number of projects that are planned and the funding that is being allocated, but the question the parents, teachers and pupils are asking is, "Why not our school?" It is a fair question.

Children deserve the best and most modern facilities. We cannot live with a process that can last over 25 years. I again ask the Minister of State to go back to his ministerial colleagues and raise this. The school needs to be put on some list. What is happening is unfair and wrong and I do not think anyone could stand over it.

Deputy John Lahart: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, for that. I appreciate him bringing back our sentiments to the Minister. Before starting on a new project, why not finish the projects that are outstanding? What is happening is through no fault of the school itself. It is affecting how the school attracts students and how education is provided there. It is affecting enrolment and the school's ability to enrol. It is also affecting wider personal, physical, mental and well-being education. On top of that, the site is a building site. We really appreciate the Minister of State taking on board what we are saying, and we look forward to hearing from and engaging further with the Minister, Deputy Naughton, as the year goes on.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I thank the Minister of State for his comments. The project has been at stage 2B for a considerable period, for the last year in fact, and the school is just waiting to hear back from the Department. We know that another tranche of projects is going to be approved. As the Minister of State said, there will be new projects approved in early 2027. The school wants to know what it needs to do to ensure it is on the list for early 2027. If the Minister of State could arrange a meeting with the Department, it would be helpful. One of the issues the school is having is that it is just not getting anything back from the Department. Even facilitating some communication for the school and ensuring that it can do everything possible to ensure it is next in line for the next tranche would be helpful.

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell: Once again, the completion of the building project for Sancta Maria College in Ballyroan is a very important matter. It is currently at stage 2B, architectural planning and detailed design. The brief is a completion contract for refurbishment works and a sports hall, following termination of the original contract. The design team completed a stage 2B submission, which is currently with the Department for review.

As part of planning ahead for the next tranche of projects to progress to tender, a Department-led prioritisation process will continue over the course of 2026 and 2027. This

includes engagement with key stakeholders, and this has commenced recently. The Department-led energy and condition survey of the school estate, which will be finalised later in 2026, will provide an additional evidence base for assessing priorities. A next tranche of projects to proceed to tender is expected to be announced in 2027. In the Deputies' follow-up questions, they requested a meeting with the Department. I will take that up with the Minister. I have no doubt that the three experienced politicians raising this matter will follow up with correspondence, directly with the Department and Minister, seeking such a meeting on behalf of their constituents to progress the school building project.

Crime Prevention

Deputy Barry Ward: I thank the Minister for coming in to take this issue. It is important, particularly in this week of Pride, that we acknowledge there are still issues concerning the LGBT community and the confidence it might have in the prosecution of offences or the following up of allegations related to events that clearly have a hate motivation to them.

In June 2024, when I was a Senator, I raised an issue in the Seanad about two young men who were pursued through Phoenix Park with hammers and knives and who were very frightened, for understandable reasons, by an attack during which there were repeated shouts of homophobic slurs at them. I do not want to or expect the Minister to go into the details of that case because I do not know the status of the prosecution. People were brought before the courts in relation to the matter, and that is a matter for the courts. The point I wanted to make was that I raised that issue. I give credit to the gardaí involved for acting swiftly. Somebody was apprehended, and that will follow due course. The point I am making is that in Ireland of 2024, or indeed Ireland of 2026, the kind of thing I have described is still happening.

In 2024, there was still hate crime, hate speech or incitement to hatred legislation before these Houses that was due to become law. It was essentially watered down before it did and it has been abandoned.

There are those people who think it is acceptable to behave in a way that threatens and frightens members of a particular community, not for any good reason but simply because they are members of that community, and they think they can do that with impunity. Of course, we have incitement to hatred legislation dating back to the early 1990s, which we know is largely ineffective because there has only been a sum total of about 50 prosecutions under it. Of course it is an offence to intimidate somebody anyway. It is an offence to threaten somebody. There were ancillary offences in that prosecution that were not necessarily based on the hate crime element of it.

My understanding is that very often in these cases, when people are brought before the Garda for interview or brought before the courts to account for what they have done, they will say their action was not hate motivated and was not because the victims were members of the LGBT community, for example. My concern is that the law is not equipped to address the hate element properly. Listening to members of the LGBT community, I have noted that they are concerned that gardaí are either ill-equipped or unable to deal with these matters in a way that satisfies them that they are safe.

I know the Minister will agree that this is something we have to remedy. We cannot have a situation where ordinary, law-abiding, decent people are being persecuted by a tiny section of

society that has some misguided belief that it should or can pursue these people, as I say, not for any good reason but simply because of who they are and, in this instance, because of their sexual orientation. It cannot be allowed to continue. It must be stopped.

The reason I am raising this issue with the Minister is not just because this is Pride Week, although it is and so it is appropriate. I would really like him to set out the steps his Department is putting in place to give confidence to the LGBT community, and to show them in a concrete manner that we are serious as a body politic about tackling this issue and sending out a message to anybody who thinks he or she can behave this way that it will not be tolerated, that there will be prosecutions, that there will be serious consequences from the courts, and that the Minister is satisfied that An Garda Síochána and the criminal court system have everything they need to prosecute these offences, hold people to account and mete out the appropriate punishments that will be effective in stopping this kind of behaviour.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I thank Deputy Ward for raising this issue. It is appropriate that he raises it during Pride week. Part of the reason we have Pride week is not just for the purpose of people being able openly to celebrate their sexuality, but also to recognise that historically people who were gay were suppressed and were not able to express their sexuality within society in the way that other people could do. It is therefore very appropriate that Deputy Ward has raised this issue. I should also inform the House that I have just come from the Seanad, where I am very pleased to say that Committee Stage of the Criminal Law, Civil Law and Defence (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2026 has passed. It included, as the Deputy knows, and because he spoke very much in favour of it, a disregard scheme that is going to disregard historic convictions made against persons because of their sexuality.

It is shocking that any previous generation or the current generation would seek to discriminate against a person because of an inherent characteristic, whether it is their race or religion, or, in this context, their sexual orientation.

Not just from what the Deputy has said but from gay friends speaking to me, I am concerned about the fact that we seem to be regressing when it comes to abusive comments being made about individuals who are gay. In many instances, that emanates from individuals who are youths or children. As the Deputy and I know, it is founded upon ignorance and prejudice. In terms of the laws that are in place, however, the primary focus of concern the Deputy has raised is around what laws are there and whether I am satisfied with what the Department and the Garda can do where that abuse becomes physically threatening, incites violence or leads to the commission of violence. As the Deputy knows, in 2024, the Criminal Justice (Hate Offences) Act was commenced. It was commenced at the end of 2024 and has put in place a separate statutory provision which provides that if somebody is convicted of an offence such as assault which is motivated by hate, as in the instance of somebody being assaulted because they were gay, that will result in an increased tariff that can be imposed by the court when that person is being sentenced. I very much welcome that legislation. We need to give it time to bed in. The Deputy will be aware that we are seeing circumstances where the hate factor is being taken into account by the courts or during the course of the prosecutions. That is one thing that is being done.

More important than that is the resources of An Garda Síochána. Historically, the Garda, like many other police forces around the world, may not have been sufficiently sensitive to these types of offences or may not have recognised that they are offences that are motivated by hate. I must say that has now changed. The Garda now has approximately 666 diversity officers. They are very well informed. They recognise the need to ensure there is greater protection for individuals, such as gay people, who find themselves being subjected to a criminal assault. I am satisfied with the resources that are in place.

The Deputy also mentioned hate speech. We have incitement to hatred legislation in place and I believe it is sufficient. I also believe, however, that the origin of this prejudice and discrimination is ignorance. We need to educate people more about the inappropriateness of condemning, criticising or abusing people because of an inherent characteristic such as their human sexuality. There is a broader body of work that needs to be done outside of the criminal justice system, as I am sure the Deputy appreciates.

Deputy Barry Ward: I thank the Minister and appreciate the acknowledgment that this behaviour is ongoing. It is important to say clearly that there is a problem. I also appreciate what the Minister said about the legislation that was passed and commenced in 2024. However, I am not convinced that it is sufficient. What it does is to give greater discretion to a judge to consider a particular hate element to be an aggravating factor. There is certainly a part of me that would have thought it should not have been necessary to put that into law. I do not know, for example, what training is being provided to judges to deal with hate aspects of crimes that come before them for sentence.

My big problem is that we had much stronger hate legislation with the Bill that was before these Houses. It was watered down in amendments on subsequent Stages. There is not really the provision of a hate crime. It is probably unfair to ask the Minister on the hoof the number of prosecutions that involved an increased tariff on sentence because of a hate element. I do not know if the Minister would have those figures to hand. However, that is a matter we should be looking at because if it is the case that it is a very small number, that is a demonstration that legislation that is now on the Statute Book and has been operational for 18 months is not being effectively used to tackle these things. Of course, we have to give it time but an analysis after 18 months gives us a reasonable assessment of whether the legislation is being used.

I also acknowledge what the Minister said about disregard scheme. I absolutely agree with that, and it is overdue, but it is not relevant to this discussion. Of course we send out the message to people but the real issue in this Topical Issue I am raising with the Minister is that a lot of people who are members of the LGBT community either do not feel safe or feel that when something happens to them, which is demonstrably motivated by hate, there is not an adequate response from the system. That is something we have to tackle because if we fail to do so, it creates a much greater problem.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the Deputy. It is worthwhile having this debate and discussion. My own view, as Minister for justice, is that An Garda Síochána, which is responsible for investigating the types of criminal offences to which the Deputy referred, is vigilant and aware of ensuring thorough investigations in respect of crimes that are motivated by hate. We see that in respect of people who are gay. We see it in respect of people because of their race. Once somebody assaults another person or commits a crime against that person,

there must be an absolute commitment by An Garda Síochána to ensure that the crime is thoroughly investigated.

I regret to say that many crimes such as these in Ireland are motivated by the ignorance and prejudice of the attacker. It is difficult to determine the best way to reduce and respond to ignorance and prejudice in any society. The criminal justice system obviously plays a necessary role and I believe by having the hate offences legislation in place, we have that criminal justice response. The policing response is also necessary. When you look at the fact that we have 666 diversity officers, and the Garda takes these offences extremely seriously, it shows there is a policing response to it. Ultimately, the most significant response will be ensuring that people who are drowned in prejudice realise their prejudice emanates from a position and a place of ignorance. We all have a responsibility to try to emphasise again and again that discrimination, harassment or criminal attacks upon individuals because of inherent characteristics, such as their sexuality, is wholly unacceptable. Once that is explained to people, and it should be repeatedly explained to them because they need to be educated about it, there will be a positive response. I assure the Deputy that there is a vigilant legislative and policing response to these heinous crimes.

Civil Liability (Child Sexual Abuse Proceedings Against Unincorporated Bodies of Persons) Bill 2025: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Ivana Bacik: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

I am delighted to be moving the Second Reading motion for this important Bill. I am particularly moved to be doing so today in the presence of some important visitors in the Gallery. I acknowledge the presence in particular of Mr. William Gorry of the Residential Institutions Survivors' Network and Mr. David Ryan. I also acknowledge Mr. Ryan's late brother, Mr. Mark Ryan. They did so much between them to expose the reality of abuse in schools. I also acknowledge Ms Deirdre Kenny, CEO of One in Four. I acknowledge those visitors. I should also say that I have been working with many other survivors and their families. Many have come forward to me over recent days and many are watching the debate on this Bill on Oireachtas TV.

I will begin by saluting the courage of all those survivors who have spoken out, disclosed and shone a light on a dark and shameful chapter in the history of this country in highlighting the reality of their lived experience of abuse as children. Indeed, I acknowledge the many survivors who cannot speak out for other reasons and who continue to suffer. We all think of them and what they have endured.

It is in that context that I am glad to be moving the Second Reading of this Bill. If passed, it will be an Act to facilitate the bringing of child sexual abuse proceedings against unincorporated bodies of persons. It seeks to enable such a body to pay damages arising from such proceedings and from the assets of an associated trust, to extend the limitation period arising from claims of child sexual abuse and to provide for connected matters. This Bill creates what I have been referring to as an "unblocking mechanism". Its purpose is to unblock the process of seeking redress from religious bodies and associated lay-run trusts. It would facilitate the bringing of child sexual abuse proceedings against unincorporated bodies of

persons, notably religious orders, and would empower survivors to recover damages arising from such proceedings, not only from the orders but also from the assets of an associated trust in certain circumstances. It would extend the limitation period provided for by the Statute of Limitations in respect of civil proceedings arising from claims of child sexual abuse.

5 o'clock

This is a Bill I have been working on for some years. In a previous life as a practising barrister, I represented many survivors of abuse before what was then known as the Residential Institutions Redress Board, which operated in the 1990s into the 2000s, as the Minister will be aware. These were proceedings arising out of abuse perpetrated, in most cases, against children in industrial schools. I will never forget hearing about the experiences of the survivors I represented, the utterly chilling accounts of the terrible abuse they suffered at the hands of both religious and lay figures employed in industrial schools, many of which were run by religious orders. The experiences were shocking. Desperate damage, harm and hurt were caused to many people. Individuals spoke to me of suicidal ideation as a result of their childhood experiences, of their ongoing difficulties in sustaining relationships and of their fears of passing on the effects of the trauma they had suffered to their children. At the time, it was important that the State made attempts to ensure redress.

The Minister will recall, as I do, the difficulties with the Woods cap on the amount of redress to be paid by the religious orders in the 2002 deal. Quite apart from that cap, however, the scheme was also flawed in other ways, and victims were retraumatised by being dragged through lengthy and unnecessarily adversarial proceedings. In the context of the 2002 Woods deal and subsequent attempts to secure contributions to redress from religious orders, we have seen successive Governments - the State - bearing the vast bulk of the cost of redress. Of course, the State remains responsible. Religious orders were also responsible, but they have got away with paying nothing like their fair share. The Woods deal applied a cap of €128 million. The total cost of the Residential Institutional Redress Board scheme is now estimated at €1.5 billion.

I am working with a number of survivors groups to improve the State's response to dealing with the awful legacy of church-State collusion against some of the most vulnerable members of Irish society, particularly children. I am also working with groups like the Residential Institutions Survivor's Network, which I have spoken about and on behalf of which I recently wrote to the Taoiseach and the Ministers for education and Social Protection. That group has identified a litany of flaws in current State redress schemes and schemes to support victims. Survivors are often retraumatised by their exclusion through application of apparently arbitrary rules, inadequate redress processes or simply by unduly bureaucratic and insufficiently compassionate responses such as a helpline that does not deal in a compassionate and kind way with survivors who contact it. That is the kind of basic thing the State should be getting right.

We heard this week from 19 of the women who were abused by Leo Hickey in Dunderrow National School but who were excluded from redress schemes, so there is a great deal to do to ensure that the State's response to the legacy of child abuse is survivor led and that the State is kind and compassionate in its approach to those who are now adults but who were abused as children. Much of the work to deliver justice has also been stymied by the religious orders by means of obfuscation, delaying tactics and the deployment of entirely legal but unethical devices which have the effect of them avoiding paying their share of redress.

The Bill stems from my desire to do right by survivors. It is my belief and that of the Labour Party that no organisation, church or State, should be able to hide from or escape accountability. For many years, we have been aware of the practice whereby religious orders have shifted their assets into lay-run trusts that have no legal liability to survivors. The orders which have the liability have much fewer trusts that can be targeted. I hasten to add that the legislation I am proposing is not limited to religious orders. It would apply to all unincorporated bodies, including sports clubs, political parties and so on. Clearly, what we are seeking to address is the deployment of what we might refer to as lawfare, that is, legal tactics deployed with a detrimental effect. Such tactics are used by religious orders in particular. The orders are using the law to frustrate the efforts of those seeking redress for terrible damage inflicted on them in childhood. Lay-run trusts that hold the assets bear no legal liability and, therefore, the State lacks leverage when it seeks to recover a proportion of redress from the religious orders.

I spoke about the 2002 deal, but there have been numerous attempts since then by the State to recover a share of compensation or redress from the religious orders. There have been attempts to secure voluntary contributions from the religious orders. There was Sheila Nunan's process, but none of these processes have delivered anything like the share of redress we would expect from religious orders that are serious about meeting obligations.

Religious orders must answer serious ethical questions about how they have engaged with the State and with survivors of abuse. One of the first moral lessons any of us teach our children, regardless of faith, relates to the need for honesty when we have done wrong and the need to step up, admit we have done wrong and ensure accountability. We cannot say the response of religious orders to historical sex abuse of children has embodied that principle. These are sneaky tactics being used by institutions that purport to show moral leadership in our society. Appeals to the moral duties of religious orders have clearly not worked. I refer to the processes we have seen over the years in which religious orders have not stepped up.

A recent study in *The Sunday Times* estimated that €755 million in compensation to victims of abuse is still outstanding from religious orders. Meanwhile, EY compiled a recent study, which I understand was commissioned by the Minister's Department, which found that a sample of religious orders hold €1.3 billion in assets. The money is there and the assets are there, and we are talking about the most heinous of crimes perpetrated against children. It seems that religious orders are displaying more concern for their reputations and the bottom line than they are for victims. It is the job of the Government and legislators to make sure that religious orders cannot continue to deploy this indefensible practice.

I brought forward this Bill - I have spoken about it in the House on several occasions - in an attempt to be constructive and to ensure we do our bit to make sure that religious orders pay their share. I welcome that the Government has established a high-level interdepartmental group to advise it in respect of the funding of future redress claims in the same way that I welcomed the establishment of the commission of investigation into abuse in schools. It will be quite a long process before the commission reports, and we have heard that the interdepartmental group's report is not due until May 2027. I welcomed the Taoiseach's confirmation on Tuesday that he will make efforts to bring forward the date of the of the interdepartmental group's report, because May 2027 is a long way off. Survivors who have waited decades for justice should not be kept waiting any longer than is absolutely necessary.

That is why, while I welcomed the commitment by the Taoiseach to bring forward the date of the publication of the group's report, I was disappointed to hear him say that the Government will seek to impose a six-month delay on the Second Stage reading of this Bill. Not only am I disappointed, I do not understand it. I published this Bill years ago. It has been nearly two years since I was told that the previous Government had referred it to the Attorney General's office for consideration. I introduced the Bill on First Stage in December, and the Taoiseach has said it aligns with Government priorities. The Tánaiste spoke just this week about the need to ensure that religious orders pay their share. Why does the Government need to delay the Second Stage reading for a further six months?

We in the Labour Party are happy to work with the Minister and his team to scrutinise the Bill in order to make sure that it passes muster and that the mechanisms in it to ensure accountability of religious orders and associated trusts are watertight. We are happy to accept amendments and to work with the Minister to see the Bill become law, but we do not believe another six months will be required before it can move to the Committee Stage.

I asked the Minister previously about bringing forward a Bill like this. He indicated that he would wait for recommendations from the Law Reform Commission. He will see that in the explanatory memorandum of our Bill, we refer to the consultation paper on unincorporated associations published previously by the Law Reform Commission. The report is still awaited, but we have used the consultation paper and what has been done already in drafting this Bill and can see no reason – legal or political – for the kind of can-kicking that a six-month delay represents.

I return to the matter of the courage of survivors. Over decades, extraordinarily brave people have come forward to expose this dark chapter. That disclosure comes at a personal cost. Survivors should not have to go public with their stories in order to see action taken. They should not have to go public only to be told to wait longer for recognition. The Dunderrow women spoke of abuse in respect of which a conviction was secured in 1998, yet they are still waiting for redress. Survivors have spoken out to ensure that the State will confront the appalling abuse perpetrated against them and other children in schools and institutions, many of which were run by religious orders.

We want to do more than praise and pay tribute to survivors. We want to ensure that they get justice. In many cases, survivors have tried to pursue justice through the courts but have found themselves thwarted by legal structures that frustrate accountability and that obstruct the taking of legal action through the use of unincorporated associations. There is no justification for seeking a further six-month delay.

We simply cannot support that and we will be challenging that attempt, if indeed that is what the Minister will propose.

I mentioned the 19 women who have come forward in the past few days to speak about their abuse in Dunderrow National School. We have also recently heard other terrible accounts of abuse of children in the past. We were reminded of this with the death last week of the notorious abuser Bill Kenneally. We were reminded by the RTÉ documentary that highlighted the appalling decades perpetrated by Eamonn Cooke upon his victims and we heard this week of the conviction in the North of Jeffrey Donaldson. Again and again these stories of the abuse of power against children have exposed a deep trauma that exists in Irish society. We are all

aware that when the commission of investigation reports - I think it is not due to until 2030 - it will provide another indication of the huge extent of the abuse that was perpetrated against children.

Fortunately, we have reformed procedures and processes and Ireland and Irish schools and institutions are much safer now. We have made this society safer for children but we must accept there is unfinished business. One such piece of unfinished is the shortfall in compensation left unpaid by religious organisations that have cash and property assets running into the billions. We are asking the Minister to do the right thing and ensure we can see this Bill go through to the next Stage. We will work with him through Committee and Report Stages to get it into law. It aligns with Government priorities, will not cost the State a cent and will indeed facilitate leverage for the State in negotiations with the religious orders where currently there is no mechanism to ensure they can be made to pay compensation. This will provide such a mechanism and that is why I speak of it as an unblocking mechanism. I am asking the Minister to do right by survivors and to pass this Bill rather than delaying it for a further six months.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I move amendment No. 1:

To delete all words after "That" and substitute the following:

"Dáil Éireann resolves that the Civil Liability (Child Sexual Abuse Proceedings Against Unincorporated Bodies of Persons) Bill 2025 be deemed to be read a second time this day six months, to allow for the consideration of the legal and policy implications of the Bill's provisions to be undertaken."

I thank Deputy Bacik for introducing this Bill. Like her I welcome to the Public Gallery William Gorry, David Ryan and Deirdre Kenny. At the end of her contribution, Deputy Bacik referred to survivors and it is appropriate we, as legislators, recognise the very significant impact survivors can have on policy and legislation through their bravery in coming forward and providing further information in respect of the trauma they went through. Sometimes I do not think survivors and victims of crime recognise the impact and influence they have. They may not realise how influential they are when it comes to the consequences of their narratives but Deputy Bacik will agree with me when I say it is hugely influential from the point of view of legislators. I assure them also that from the point of view of a Minister, policy is very much affected by the narratives I hear from victims of crime and survivors of sexual abuse.

As Deputy Bacik indicated, her Bill seeks to facilitate civil proceedings in respect of child sexual abuse cases against unincorporated bodies, such as religious orders, and to facilitate the recovery of damages awarded from any such body, including from any trusts associated with it. It also seeks - and this is a more complicated provision - to provide for a one-year window outside the normal limitation period provided for in the Statute of Limitations to enable any proceedings to which the Bill would apply to be brought within 12 months, if enacted. That latter provision is a significant one, as I am sure the Deputy appreciates, and is part of the reason there is a necessity for me to seek a six-month adjournment prior to the Bill moving to the next Stage. In fairness to the Deputy, I think she acknowledges most religious orders select a nominee to represent them in child sexual abuse cases but, unfortunately, this is not always the case. The refusal of some religious orders, or, indeed, any unincorporated bodies, to co-

operate with or contribute to previous redress schemes is a matter of considerable trauma and distress for survivors of sexual abuse and their families. It is a difficult and concerning aspect of this awful legacy. I assure the House the Government and I share the dissatisfaction expressed by the Deputy about this issue and I also wish to inform the House this Government is actively looking at possible avenues to ensure those responsible for the running of the schools where sexual abuse occurred are accountable.

In that regard, I will give a brief overview of the work currently being undertaken in this area. A commission of investigation into the handling of historical child sexual abuse in schools has been established following the publication of the report of a scoping inquiry by Mary O'Toole SC in September 2024. That is an example of the impact survivors have had on policy-making because it was as a result of the documentary made by RTÉ, inspired by the experience of David and the late Mark Ryan, that the aforementioned scoping inquiry was established, leading in turn to the establishment of a commission of investigation. The commission, which is chaired by Mr. Justice Michael MacGrath, is independent in the performance of its functions and is currently in its establishment phase undertaking essential preparatory work. The task of the inquiry is huge. Four commissioners have been appointed to join the chair in leading the work of the commission, namely, Ms Justice Mary Ellen Ring, Mr. Roddy Bourke, Ms Michele Clarke and Mr. Kieran McGrath.

The report of the interdepartmental group established to advise the Minister and the Government on the recommendations of the scoping inquiry was published in July 2025. This report was cognisant of the views of survivors in relation to redress as a measure of accountability. Recommendation 2 of that scoping inquiry stated consideration should be given by the Government to establishing a redress scheme for survivors of historical sexual abuse in day and boarding schools run by the religious orders. Not only was that recommendation given consideration by Government but we abided by it and followed it and as a result we have the commission of investigation in place. The interdepartmental group recognised consideration of a redress scheme may have far-reaching implications and advised a further phase of more detailed work was required to ensure Government is fully informed in any decision it may take. In considering this recommendation, an interdepartmental subgroup of the interdepartmental group was set up in November 2025 to examine the complex issues in establishing such a scheme, including how it might be funded. This subgroup comprises representatives from several Government Departments, State agencies and representatives from the Office of the Attorney General. The purpose of the work of this group is to examine and evaluate key legal and other potential measures to require that those responsible for schools where sexual abuse occurred meet their redress obligations to survivors. This is with a view to informing Government of its findings on possible mechanisms for redress. The subgroup aims to report to the Minister for Education and Youth, and subsequently Government, by May 2027. As Deputies can imagine, the issues to be considered in this area are extremely difficult and time-consuming. This work includes consideration of complicated administrative, legal, financial and other mechanisms, including how any potential scheme might be appropriately funded by those responsible. It also includes examination of international approaches to redress, including models in Ireland, other common law and EU jurisdictions.

The underlying aims of Deputy Bacik's Bill align in part with the matters currently being considered by the interdepartmental subgroup. Many of these complex legal, policy and operational considerations are relevant to those contained in the Bill. Given the intricate and

challenging nature of these issues, many aspects of this Bill raise legal and constitutional considerations which must be thoroughly examined and approved by the Office of the Attorney General. By way of illustration, the Bill raises complex issues in respect of the apportionment of liability on unincorporated bodies, measures regarding the associated trusts of unincorporated bodies and trusts formerly associated with an unincorporated body. The area of unincorporated bodies and associations is exceptionally complex in law. To that end, in 2022 the Law Reform Commission published a consultation paper entitled *Liability of Clubs, Societies and other Unincorporated Associations*. It sought submissions from the public. The report of the Law Reform Commission will be important to the development of the law in this area.

To give the House a sense of how complex the issues regarding unincorporated bodies are, my Department understands that the Law Reform Commission's report will not be published before early 2028.

The Bill provides for the nomination of a proper defendant by an unincorporated body or, if no such nomination is forthcoming, for the court to appoint a proper defendant. The reason Deputy Bacik has included this is that if there is a legal person who can be sued, whether it is a corporate identity or an individual, that is the appropriate way to go. Unfortunately, in the case of an unincorporated body or a loose association of people, it is difficult to sue that identity unless a representative name is provided. In most instances, as I said, unincorporated bodies that are defendants or intended defendants will provide a representative name. However, as Deputy Bacik is aware, that is not always the case. It places a litigant who wants to institute proceedings in a difficult position if they are not given a representative name that can be used as the representative defendant in any proceedings. The effect is that people's proceedings are delayed and they may have to go through a complicated court application based on no statutory regime to grant them authority from the court to issue proceedings against an individual who may be identified by the court. The advantage of Deputy Bacik's Bill, if enacted, is that there would be a statutory mechanism that sets out a procedure for how the court can nominate or identify a person who will be the nominated defendant for the purpose of proceedings.

The Bill provides for the nomination of a proper defendant by an unincorporated body or, if no such nomination is forthcoming for the court, to appoint a proper defendant. The apportionment of direct liability on individuals, who have no knowledge of an allegation or may not have been associated with the relevant body at the time of the alleged harm, raises serious issues regarding constitutionality and fair procedures that must be thoroughly examined.

It is easier in circumstances where a partnership is being sued. While it itself is an unincorporated identity, if a partnership of solicitors or accountants needs to be sued, the appropriate mechanism is to name all of the partners. There can only be a limited number. However, the difficulty that arises, which is inspiring Deputy Bacik's Bill, is when it comes to an identity such as a religious order. To be frank, it is implausible to try to institute proceedings against every single member of that religious order, particularly when there is a requirement for the purpose of proceedings that court papers, whether plenary summons or statements of claim, are served on each defendant. It is clearly the case that there is a huge advantage in having a statutory mechanism available that allows the court to nominate an appropriate individual as the nominated defendant.

It is also important to point out, however, as I mentioned earlier, that the Bill raises practical and legal concerns regarding prospective knowledge of awards of damages and issues in relation to the retrospective effect of the legislation, including for cases already initiated and live before the courts.

More importantly, the Bill proposes a one-year window outside the limitation period provided for in the Statute of Limitations to enable any proceedings to which the Bill applies to be brought within 12 months of its enactment. It would also appear to revive expired causes of action. Reform of the Statute of Limitations would have implications for the State, not just the cohort identified in the Bill. In effect, one of the complicating and complex issues raised and provided for in Deputy Bacik's Bill is that cases that are, at present, statute-barred would no longer be statute-barred in certain circumstances because of this one-year extension provided to the statute, pursuant to the terms of this Bill. As Deputy Bacik will appreciate, this is a complex legal and constitutional issue. Given the legal policy and constitutional complexity of the issues contained in the Bill and those currently being examined by the interdepartmental subgroup, the views of the Office of the Attorney General were sought again. It indicated that there are significant and complex policy and legal issues that require further in-depth analysis.

Deputy Bacik inquired what the reason is for a six-month timed amendment. For the purpose of individuals in the Gallery, a timed amendment means there is a vote on the Second Stage of the Bill, and I am proposing a timed amendment of six months. The effect of that will mean that the legislation will pass Second Stage on the 25 December 2026. It puts a time period on it and ensures that Second Stage will be passed. While that time will pass quickly, it provides my Department and the Office of the Attorney General with an opportunity to consider the complex legal issues identified here. I know Deputy Bacik will be anxious to ensure that this legislation proceeds promptly. Certainly, it will pass Second Stage by the end of the year. During that period, I will have an opportunity to secure further advice from the Office of the Attorney General and internally within my Department. I was the person who proposed at government on Tuesday that we have a timed amendment. In general, as colleagues will know, timed amendments generally operate for a period of a year but I sought six months in this instance. Having that time period will enable me to get the necessary advice that I require. I assure Deputy Bacik that if there are mechanisms to advance her legislation, I will have no difficulty in advancing them or adopting the Bill and trying to reformulate it if some changes are needed.

I conclude by saying that I brought the memorandum to Government seeking approval for this Bill be read a Second Time on this day six months to allow for consideration of the legal and policy implications of provisions of the Bill. I confirm this was endorsed by Cabinet. I thank Deputy Bacik and commend her on the legislation. I recognise its importance. Although this measure may only be necessary in limited circumstances, it is nonetheless a statutory provision that should be in place to enable people to bring proceedings.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: I begin by saying how proud I am that the Labour Party and my colleague, Deputy Bacik, are bringing forward this Bill today. I also welcome the visitors to the Public Gallery. This is a Bill about fairness, accountability and justice. It is a Bill that is rooted in the bravery of survivors who have refused to be silent and simply roll over and take whatever paltry offers come their way.

This country's history during the last century was, for far too many of its citizens, one of abuse and failure. We are all too aware of the many revelations that have emerged and continue to emerge in recent decades. We have all heard the horrific stories of what was inflicted on innocent children and women behind the high walls of religious institutions in cities, towns and villages across this island. We will never know the real extent of the lives destroyed by institutional abuse during those dark decades. There is a moral obligation on this State and us, as legislators, sitting in our national Parliament to do by right by survivors. Successive governments have recognised that moral imperative. That is what led to the redress schemes that followed the Ryan report, the report on the mother and baby and county homes and other reports. Many of those schemes have been deeply flawed and have, at times, retraumatised victims and their families. Indeed, my wife, Maeve O'Rourke, and her colleagues in Justice for Magdalenes Research and the Clann Project have been to the forefront in advocating for justice for survivors of Magdalene laundries and mother and baby homes. They advocate for redress schemes that are not exclusionary and that live up to the promises of the reports and recommendations that proceeded them.

The redress schemes introduced have at least showed an understanding on the part of the State that there was a wrong to be righted. The attitude, meanwhile, of certain religious orders has fallen short of that. We have seen the reports of mixed engagement from religious orders on redress. We have heard the stories right from the mouths of the brave survivors who have had to go through the difficult retraumatising experience of the courts to get the redress they are owed. We know that many of the orders that facilitated, enabled and covered up child sexual abuse for years and years continue to hide behind the legal fiction of lay-run trusts to escape accountability for the horrors they caused.

There is a veil of fog around the financial affairs of these orders that is troubling. The total value of assets held by religious congregations, orders and institutions is unknown, despite a number of official processes that sought to estimate these resources. After the mother and baby homes report was published, negotiations with eight religious bodies involved in those institutions sought to secure financial contributions.

Only two organisations responded to requests for specific financial information and five did not offer any contribution. We know these are wealthy organisations. An analysis of the financial returns provided by a sample group of religious congregations to the Charities Regulator has shown that collectively they have had approximately €1.3 billion in cash and other assets.

What we are really talking about here is impunity. These are wealthy, powerful groups of people who protected abusers in their ranks and now protect themselves from the consequences. I have to say, having gone to one of their schools, the Christian Brothers, CBs, are notorious. It seems that as a policy they do not nominate a defendant to a court case. They use their unincorporated status to avoid accountability. It is sickening to see.

This Bill is about saying, "No more." We should not have to accept this. Survivors should not have to accept it. We clearly cannot rely on any spirit of Christian charity from these orders. It is time to get tough and to get survivors the redress they deserve. We can start to legislate for that here this evening if the Government chooses to support this important Bill. The Bill will enable the recovery of damages from these religious orders and the lay-run trusts into which they have moved their assets. No longer will the grubby practice of lay-run trusts

shielding orders from providing redress be possible. In short, it would deliver accountability at last.

I welcome some of the comments made by the Minister and the encouraging noises from the Taoiseach earlier this week about Deputy Bacik's Bill and how it aligns with Government priorities. This day six months will obviously be Christmas Day. I put it to the Minister that in deferring the Bill for six months, he is acting as the anti-Santa. He is delaying justice. I appreciate it is a complex issue but we have been talking about this for a long time. I urge the Minister to put all his resources into getting the complex legal issues at the heart of this Bill sorted as quickly as possible, and deliver accountability and justice for survivors at long last who just cannot keep waiting.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this Bill and thank Deputy Bacik and the Labour Party for bringing it forward. Sinn Féin supports this legislation and any step towards ensuring that survivors of institutional abuse can finally access the justice they have been denied for so long. I welcome the visitors to the Gallery.

For decades, survivors have shown immense courage in their fight for recognition and redress. They have campaigned tirelessly to break the silence of a shameful chapter in our history. Sinn Féin has consistently stood with them, as we did when we brought forward amendments to the Supports for Survivors of Residential Institutional Abuse Bill to provide for a contributory State pension, a full Health (Amendment) Act, HAA, medical card and other supports to reflect the intergenerational trauma suffered. Another amendment I proposed at that time was commensurate compensation from religious orders, that "Within 6 months of the passing of this Act, the Minister shall prepare a comprehensive plan to deliver commensurate compensation from Religious Orders, this to include a consideration of every avenue of recourse and a timeline of engagements and actions, in pursuit of the public good.". That was an amendment that we proposed, but the Government had other plans. Those plans serve only to delay and deny.

I listened to the Minister. I do not know if he was going for a record in terms of mentioning the word "complex" in one Dáil statement. I am not legally qualified. I think I am the first person to speak on this so far who is not legally qualified. I recognise that these issues are complex but when I hear complexity, I hear a bureaucratic governmental language that serves only to delay. Let us act with haste here and pursue these issues aggressively to deliver justice. That is not to do a disservice to the complexity of them at all.

The Bill before us is a direct response to repeated failures by the State to compel religious orders and other unincorporated bodies to pay their fair share. It is a further stain on this Government that it has taken so long to act. Successive Administrations have failed to hold these institutions accountable, leaving survivors to navigate a labyrinth of legal obstacles while religious orders engaged in legal and financial manoeuvring to shield their assets, which, I believe, is a deliberate conscious decision on their part.

The core of this Bill is about ending that evasion. It will allow civil proceedings to be brought directly against unincorporated bodies and remove the absurd legal barrier that has prevented survivors from suing organisations directly. Importantly, it provides a mechanism to access the assets of associated trusts, preventing orders from hiding behind complex structures to avoid their responsibilities. This aligns with Sinn Féin's stated position that

everything must be on the table, including legal action and the seizure of assets, to ensure these institutions, orders and organisations contribute to redress.

For too long, the Government has offered only tea and sympathy. The State has failed survivors in their early years and has continued to fail them in their later years. Today, we have a chance to right a wrong. The Government should allow this Bill to progress, with no six-month delay. If there are technical concerns, they can be addressed in committee. What cannot be countenanced is further obstruction or delay. It is incumbent on the Government to facilitate the Bill's scrutiny through the relevant Oireachtas sectoral committee. This is a reasonable request.

The interdepartmental group, IDG, is examining redress for historical sexual abuse in schools. In recent responses to me, the Minister for education said that the IDG is examining the mechanisms that can be brought to bear to ensure that any future redress scheme is appropriately funded by those who were responsible for the schools where child sexual abuse took place. These mechanisms may include any administrative, legal, financial or other processes that can assist Government in its consideration of the issue of redress and how any scheme to be considered might be funded by those responsible for schools where sexual abuse occurred.

We do not know what will come of this review but time is of the essence and we cannot countenance any unnecessary delay. Most importantly, this cannot be a case of tinkering at the edges. This has to be ambitious and aggressive in its pursuit of what is right; that those who perpetrated these harms are held accountable. It is a matter of justice.

Any future redress scheme must be funded properly by those responsible and this Bill is a helpful tool to achieve that. I urge all sides of the House to support its passage.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: First of all, I thank my colleague and party leader, Deputy Bacik, for bringing this Bill forward. I also welcome the visitors to the Gallery.

This Bill is timely for two reasons. It is timely because it addresses one of the most disgusting and hideous aspects of our shameful past, namely, the abuse perpetuated by religious orders and facilitated by the State. Many religious orders hold substantial wealth, particularly in terms of property and land, yet many refuse to engage and refuse to pay compensation for the horrendous damage they inflicted on poor innocent undeserving people. This Bill is also timely because in the week in which it has come up for debate, we have seen the conviction of two vile paedophiles who were two men in positions of authority and influence - Leo Hickey and Jeffrey Donaldson.

For decades, the State has grappled with the dark, painful and deeply stained legacy of institutional abuse. We have sat in this Chamber and listened to statements. We have listened to apologies and we have all read reports. We read the reports into the mother and baby homes. Some of us read the Ryan report. Time and again, we have seen brave courageous survivors stand up, recount their deepest traumas and ask this country to do one simple thing, which is to get them accountability. Yet, on many occasions they have been met with a State redress scheme that is cold, bureaucratic, adversarial and forces them to repeatedly prove they are not lying.

If the State's failures are cause for deep concern, the utter moral bankruptcy of certain religious orders is worse. We need to call this out for what it is. This is a masterclass in corporate evasion by institutions that claim they are Christian, but whose actions, in reality, are anything but.

Culpable religious orders are actively dodging their responsibilities. They are using grubby, dirty, cynical legal tactics to place their vast wealth and considerable assets completely out of reach. They move properties and millions of euro into lay-run trusts, drawing a legal curtain between their riches and money, and the victims they broke, bruised and failed - vulnerable people who were, in many cases, in their care. The recent scoping inquiry noted "mixed engagement" from the orders on redress. In my view, "mixed" is a laughable term to use. It is almost a euphemism for literally whacking the door shut on survivors.

We cannot continue the same failed approach of asking religious orders to, effectively, appeal to their better nature. That approach has failed us for nearly 30 years. It is time for the State to force their hand. I want to read an excerpt from an email I received from a constituent of mine who is a survivor of Sean Ross Abbey, which outlines eloquently the core of the issue:

If the State truly understood the lifelong damage caused to women and children by mother and baby homes, it would never have designed the redress scheme as it did. Women entered these institutions at one of the most vulnerable times in their lives, and many arrived frightened, alone and ashamed, often having already been rejected by their families and communities. Instead of compassion, proper maternity care and support, women in Sean Ross Abbey experienced fear, humiliation and inadequate care. Women have spoken about being left in pain during childbirth and being told to offer up their suffering for their sins. Many mothers left these institutions without their babies. Many children grew up not knowing who they were, where they came from or why they had been separated from their mothers.

This trauma did not end when the doors of these institutions closed because women and children continue to live with the physical and emotional consequences today, and many still require counselling and support decades later. No amount of money can compensate mothers and children for the trauma, abuse and lifelong consequences of what happened in mother and baby homes. However, the State has effectively decided what that suffering is worth. The redress scheme tells its own story, with the arbitrary cut-offs and medical card eligibility issues once again reducing lifelong trauma and its consequences to a simple calculation of days. Recently, two survivors successfully challenged their exclusion from the redress scheme through the courts. The Government's response was not to accept these decisions; it was to appeal. Only weeks after the Minister stood in the Dáil and apologised to survivors, the State is once again forcing survivors through the courts. Survivors are looking for justice, for accountability and for religious orders to pay what they owe.

It is shocking that in 2026, mothers out there who are survivors of these institutions have no clue - and may never have a clue - where their dead children are buried. When survivors consistently seek answers about what happened, information remains unavailable and important questions remained unanswered. Apologies have been made, reports have been published and legislation has been introduced, but for many people time is running out. I note with deep disappointment the Minister of State's amendment providing for a six-month time delay, because some of these survivors may not have six months. The Bill my colleague has

introduced provides the legal teeth to break through these trusts and recover the damage that is rightfully owed to survivors. No survivor should have to resort to dragging themselves through an adversarial court system to fight for their dignity. If an institution facilitated, enabled and covered up the horrific sexual abuse of children, that institution must pay what is owed. We have given the Minister of State a mechanism to act; please use it.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: Hear, hear.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I thank Deputy Bacik and the Labour Party for this Bill. I welcome the visitors to the Public Gallery. I am sure it is not easy for them to listen to the back and forth on something that should be an easy and straightforward thing to do. The Social Democrats welcome this Bill. We are disappointed in the Government for the six-month delay. As has been said, perhaps some people do not have six months, and have waited a very long time for redress.

As I have listened to this debate, it has struck me how many debates are had in this Chamber on this topic. I am sure previous speakers have said this already, but when people contact me to tell me what happened to them as a child, it is absolutely horrific to read the words, to hear people on the phone and to try to understand what a child experienced at the hands of an adult in this country. I am also absolutely certain this is not historic. I know we are talking about historic at present, but this is going on now.

The reality is that they were alone as children. They were scared and vulnerable, but we do not seem to be able to understand that. When that person receives redress, that does not mean it wipes away the pain, the hurt and everything that happened to them as a child. Redress does not wipe that away. It is not an erasure, but a recognition that the wrongs that happened to that child were not and are not acceptable. It does not take away the pain, but it is a recognition.

Going back for a moment, "RTÉ Investigates" had a very interesting documentary, which I am sure people have seen, that explained very clearly how the religious orders use these unincorporated bodies to hide their assets. To be very clear, these religious orders are still running schools. They are called something different; they are not called the Christian brothers but something else. They are still running schools, and have all these unincorporated bodies and resources.

At the time of several redress schemes, the religious orders said they did not have the money to contribute as much to them. They did not have the money, yet over a 35-year period they sold 800 properties. They got rid of them; they had the money, so they were able to generate it. We were talking about dereliction earlier this week. The Department of education owns a huge amount of vacant properties that would have come originally through religious orders, so there are plenty of resources. However, these are organisations that successfully hid paedophiles in every nook and cranny of every institution and educational building. They were able to hide them so well, and now they are hiding in every nook and cranny any piece of property, cash or resources they have so that they do not have to feed back into the redress system. That is their responsibility. Yes, it is the responsibility of the State, but it is the responsibility of the people who perpetrated these horrific crimes on children to pay for that.

The "RTÉ Investigates" documentary reported that there were members of the Christian brothers organisation who were not only paedophiles, but were also responsible for setting up the structures and making sure the resources were not able to be used. That is something that came as a shock to many people. This is a State failure, but we cannot pass the buck to others. We need to ensure mechanisms of the State are able to reach into those orders and get behind the red tape.

It is fixable. I suppose I am a little frustrated because if you think if there is a problem, you fix it. There is a solution here; Deputy Bacik is giving a very clear and easy solution. We are able to tackle these unincorporated bodies. I had somebody contact me by email - I am not going to give his name because I do not have permission - who told me he has to sue 120 Christian brothers. That is in the High Court. It is not acceptable to hide behind this. For people who maybe do not understand, trauma has a way of incorporating every part of your body - sorry for the pun there. It takes over your whole body and mind. To be able to deal with sexual abuse trauma and then have to navigate a system that is set against you is absolutely cruel and is totally avoidable.

Going back to the survivors for a minute, it is utterly heartbreaking. I keep saying "heartbreaking". I am a mother. I have children. I keep thinking of how the survivors were failed, but we are continuing to fail them. We keep coming back in here, talking about it, proposing things and then delaying it. I do not understand why we are delaying it. Maybe that is how survivors feel. They do not understand why so many barriers and blockages have to be put in their way, when the State is saying it sees them, hears them and will do redress, but it will only do redress if they lived in the mother and baby homes for more than six months. I do not understand what the difference is between living there for five minutes or six months. It is a trauma that continues for the rest of their lives. How do you measure those things?

When we stood in this Chamber, when Helen McEntee was Minister for Education, and discussed what would happen with regard to sexual abuse in schools in Ireland, so many people said that had to be a trauma-focused, survivor-focused way of approaching it. It needs to allow people to speak, not to speak, to find a space and to not be retraumatising, yet here we are again, having this conversation, and there will be a delay. The Government has said several times, on so many Bills over the last year, that the Opposition never comes up with any solutions and only criticises it. The Labour Party is giving an excellent solution here, yet the Government's new thing, and I say new as if I have been here for years when I have not, seems to be to put a delay on things. I ask the Government to please not do that. It is unfair to the victims, the survivors and those people who suffered in our schools. When education and health is outsourced to organisations, that does not mean the responsibility for it can be outsourced.

The State has had to pay a significant amount of money in redress, and rightly so. The religious orders, the other organisations and other unincorporated bodies, of which there are so many that I will not be able to name them all, need to be able to pay back and should be paying back, but they are not, because they are smart and they are moving their money around. Maybe this is possible because maybe a really rich organisation is able to move its money around, and I am just naive. What I am not naive about is the fact that people who have been educated in this country and have been in institutions deserve better, and we have to try better. The Government needs to catch up with the rest of us with regard to empathy and a trauma-informed

way of looking at things, because this is not it, and putting that delay on this Bill is a disgrace. I would like the Minister of State, Deputy O'Donnell, to take that back to Government and ask Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and all the other people who make up the Government to please discuss it. We are now looking at a situation where there is a solution which will help people. It will never ever wipe away the pain that those children, now adults, have endured, but it may do something to help, and it will perhaps be less traumatising and less retraumatising.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Gabhaim buíochas le gach duine a labhair ar an ábhar tábhachtach seo. I commend Deputy Bacik on bringing this Bill before the House. I acknowledge those survivors and welcome them to the Chamber. They worked to raise awareness of this issue, often at considerable personal cost, long before it reached the floor of Dáil Éireann. This issue was brought to light because of the litigation strategy adopted by the leadership of the Congregation of Christian Brothers, as mentioned by other Deputies who have spoken before me. While the current leadership may not be directly responsible for the acts or the abuse themselves, they are undoubtedly accountable for how they choose to respond to that legacy. Their choices have had a direct and profound adverse impact on victims and survivors, not only in the past but continuing right up to this present day. I welcome again the survivors this afternoon. This Chamber cannot even begin to comprehend how distressing it is for them to have to deal with this order's leadership.

In late 2022, this matter was referred to the Law Reform Commission. I would appreciate if the Minister of State could update the House on whether there has been any commission progress to address the legal loophole whereby unincorporated bodies are not obliged to nominate a person to accept service of legal proceedings on behalf of their organisation. Like Deputy O'Rourke, I am not from a legal background. For context, in 2017, the leadership of the Christian Brothers order chose to introduce a litigation strategy that has had the effect of obstructing survivors' access to our civil courts. This is secondary abuse. Survivors speak of years trapped in procedural disputes, unable to progress their cases. They describe being suspended in a legal limbo that delays healing, impedes meaningful engagement with therapy and causes ongoing retraumatisation.

Survivors describe the litigation strategy as a continuing exercise of power and control over their lives. For many, it echoes the powerlessness that they experienced as children when they were abused by members of that same order. Survivors are often isolated and initially were not aware that their treatment was part of a broad litigation strategy. They campaigned tirelessly to raise public awareness and provided evidence, examined in the mentioned and award-winning 2023 "RTÉ Investigates" documentary. That programme revealed the litigation strategy, the extent of which we all know now. It brought national attention to the efforts being made by the Christian Brothers order to prevent survivors from pursuing their claims through civil courts.

In seeking symbolic justice, survivors also commenced a campaign to rescind the freedom of Drogheda, previously awarded to an individual who, in 2017, presided over the introduction by his order of this litigation strategy. This message was difficult to articulate as the freedom recipient was not directly responsible for those acts of primary harm, and some public representatives spread misinformation and many refused to listen and to allow survivors to express their views. Numerous individuals and organisations, including One In Four, publicly supported the campaign and articulated the legitimate concerns underpinning it.

In order to engage with public representatives, survivors of childhood abuse, rape, and torture, whom this Bill is designed to support, experienced little empathy or compassion, blanket refusals to engage, abusive text messages directed at supporters, and complicity by some public representatives as lawful motions were removed or interfered with by non-elected actors. There were extremely hurtful personalised attacks and misinformed victim-blaming in local as well as social media, and conflicts of interest resulting in victims of rape being refused the service they were entitled to by a rape crisis centre, for which Cuan, Ireland's statutory agency for tackling sexual violence, was notified.

Arguments being made in media that it was the choice of survivors to be subjected to the religious orders' abusive litigation strategies were akin to 1970s and 1980s Ireland. Public representatives revealed and exercised deference to powerful religious leaders whose choices continue to harm victims. Most hurtful of all was that many public representatives ignored or refused to hear the harm which this choice of litigation strategy was causing. Seventeen victims who travelled to Drogheda to meet public representatives, paid for a meeting room, gave nine days' notice and paid for uneaten sandwiches at that meeting were largely ignored by those invited. Most of them did not even have the courtesy to RSVP and the request was very basic. The survivors wanted to be listened to and treated with dignity. I regret to say that most of these experiences involved elected representatives of the Labour Party at local, national and European level.

6 o'clock

However, it would be wrong to suggest this problem was confined to one political party. This reflected a broader systematic and political failure rather than a series of isolated incidents. I understand that these concerns were brought to the attention of Deputy Bacik in 2023 and 2024, including requests that concerns regarding the conduct of certain representatives were to be examined, but no responses were forthcoming. These events occurred in 2023 and are relevant to the forthcoming Commission of Investigation into the Handling of Historical Child Sexual Abuse in Schools. If survivors feel unable to secure a hearing from elected representatives today, it is understandable some may be fearful participating in the State process tomorrow. I therefore ask Deputy Bacik to meet these survivors and listen to their experiences. The survivors request that One in Four support them in this meeting.

This legislation can mark a new chapter. I commend Deputy Bacik again. Survivors are grateful to her for bringing forward this Bill. They acknowledge her past work with survivors and believe that she will be willing to bring transparency, learning and accountability.

Survivors have asked me to put on the Dáil record their eternal appreciation for the broadcast journalism of Michael Reade. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis. Without Michael's extraordinary work ethic and his compassion, they believe that we will not be debating this Bill today. I look forward to engaging with this Bill on Committee Stage and subsequent Stages.

Minister for Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Jim O'Callaghan): I apologise, as I had to step out for a number of minutes to meet a group that I had a long-standing arrangement with. I thank Deputy Bacik again for putting forward this legislation. As I indicated earlier on, it is important legislation that aligns with Government policy but there are areas in respect of it that I need to give consideration to. I also want to speak in general about how we get justice. It is important from the point of view of survivors that we emphasise

and recognise that justice in Ireland can only be delivered through the courts. The courts are there to deliver justice. In the first instance, when people are survivors of sexual abuse or rape, the first port of call, hopefully, is a criminal court where the perpetrator of the heinous crime can be held to account. That is the primary way that liability and criminal responsibility is apportioned and individuals can be held liable before criminal courts for their heinous crimes and attacks upon survivors. In order for that to occur, however, it involves a significant amount of effort on the part of the person who makes the complaint and proceeds and pursues the claim through the courts. We all saw it recently in terms of what happened in another jurisdiction north of the Border recently when you look at the process that had to be gone through in order for the complainants in that trial to achieve justice before the criminal courts.

The criminal courts are where justice is provided in terms of the apportionment of criminal liability. However, justice can be delivered and administered through the civil courts. That is the mechanism that this legislation seeks to engage with. Even though an individual may be criminally responsible for the heinous act of sexual assault or rape, there may also be others associated with that individual who have a broader responsibility and a fiduciary duty that results in them have a liability for the actions of that person. That is why, in so many instances, in situations that arise where people are abused and assaulted by persons who are part of an institution, that institution can be held liable if it can be established that the institution did not take the necessary steps to protect individuals who are vulnerable, such as schoolchildren, who are within the responsibility of the person who carried out the criminal act. That is why, in many instances, it is necessary and appropriate for people to institute proceedings in the civil courts against unincorporated bodies that have a responsibility and liability for the actions of an individual.

I know Deputy Bacik is not saying this, but there are many times when people do things on their own and the entity has no responsibility for it. If a member of a political party does something on their own without anyone within the political party being aware of it, the political party should not have responsibility for it. Where there are circumstances which are apparent that the unincorporated body is aware of the actions of the individual or has reports made to them about the dangerous actions of the individual and they do nothing about it, or, even worse, they move the person elsewhere in the knowledge that these serious allegations have been made, in that context, there is a liability before the civil courts that will fall upon the unincorporated body. In those instances, victims who come before the civil courts who want to institute proceedings should be able to institute those proceedings in a readily accessible manner.

The purpose of this legislation is to ensure that in circumstances where the unincorporated entity will not give a representative's name or will not nominate an individual to be a representative defendant, the court should step in by directing an individual who will be the nominated representative and defendant. The reason that is a form of justice is that justice does provide that damages are a remedy that are to be payable by a wrongdoer in respect of the offences that were committed by that wrongdoer or for which that entity is responsible for. I will conclude by recognising the important role that survivors play in terms of legislation. I have no doubt that this legislation was inspired by the narrative of survivors. I will be back here considering these matter in the Houses in due course.

Deputy Ivana Bacik: In the first instance, I thank my own Labour colleagues, Deputies Ahern and Sheehan, and the representatives and speakers from other parties who supported this important Bill. I thank the Minister for his engagement on the Bill too. Listening carefully to what he said, he spoke in encouraging terms about the principle behind the Bill. He spoke about the need for people to be able to access the courts and secure redress in a readily accessible manner. He spoke earlier with great clarity about the current difficulties that arise for anyone who seeks to pursue an unincorporated association through the courts. Indeed, Deputy Cummins gave a pertinent example of somebody seeking to pursue the Christian Brothers. Deputy Ahern referred to the Christian Brothers too and having to name 120 individual members. That is the difficulty. The Christian Brothers, through the establishment of the lay-run trust, the Edmund Rice Schools Trust, divested a great deal of assets into that lay-run trust. That is precisely the mechanism that we are seeking to address in this Bill. I thank all of those survivors with whom I have spoken and who have been so courageous in coming forward over the years to disclose about the impact of abuse upon them. I thank the Minister for acknowledging the impact survivors can have on shaping policy. We are seeing that with the debate today on this Bill. It is important to acknowledge.

Deputy O'Rourke commented that the Minister used the word "complex" quite a number of times. The Minister used it again in his response. I am disappointed that this is used as the device to justify the six-month delay. I was disappointed also to hear the Minister's reference to the likely publication date of that long-awaited Law Reform Commission report into unincorporated associations. I think the Minister said it is not due until early 2028. That will be six years after the consultation paper was published. My concern is that will then become another - the Minister was referencing it today - pre-emptive delaying device and that, in fact, the Minister will not be able to support any Bill until after that date. He did not indicate that the interdepartmental group report might be brought forward. The Taoiseach indicated on Tuesday in his response to me that this publication date would not be as late as May 2027 and that it might be earlier. I would welcome some clarity on that. I can speak to the Minister afterward about that.

I want to come back to that point of complexity. Yes, there are complex matters here, but, at its core, this is straightforward. We are talking about a mechanism or legal tactic being used by religious orders. I have referred to it previously as a sort of "developer's wife" tactic, where the religious order bears the liability, as typically a male developer would.

It transfers its assets into the lay-run trust as the developer would have transferred assets to their spouse - in a gendered way, typically to the wife - and the owner of the assets is therefore beyond the reach of legal accountability, given that the spouse does not have the liability whereas the person liable no longer possesses the assets. That is the simplest way to describe what this mechanism is. Our Bill is a way of getting around that and lifting the veil, lifting the obstruction and making it easier to sue because, as the Minister said himself, and I made a note of his word, it is implausible currently that you have to sue every member of a religious order in order to pursue religious orders as unincorporated associations. I should say I have some experience: I was taken to the courts as a student union officer, indeed threatened with prison, many years ago for providing women with information on abortion but we were pursued as individuals through the courts because we were officers of an unincorporated association and the union could not be sued as a students' union at the time. Therefore, I am well aware of the mechanisms behind this. Our Bill is very carefully drafted to make sure that it only applies in

narrow circumstances. Under section 2, which sets out the circumstances where the legal curtain can be lifted, the wrongdoer is a member of the unincorporated association and the plaintiff was sexually abused as a child. Section 5 sets out how the court appoints the proper defendant. I thought the Minister quoted approvingly the device we put in here. We have set out very careful criteria for when an associated trust can be pursued. Therefore, the Bill is carefully drafted and narrowly focused.

The Minister put particular focus on section 8 and the lifting of the proviso around the Statute of Limitations and indicated that that was particularly complex. I acknowledge that, and I acknowledge that we are looking to provide for a sort of retrospective effect. That, of course, has consequences, but I am very happy along with Labour colleagues and, I think, colleagues across the Opposition to work with the Minister and the Attorney General's office to address any issues in this regard on Committee Stage.

The Minister proposes to defer this until Christmas Day, which Deputy Ahern described as the anti-Santa approach, although it is more like a Scrooge approach really. My concern is that that will delay our ability to confer with the Attorney General or move to Committee Stage. No doubt we will then be told to wait until May 2027 for the IDG report and then to wait until early 2028 for the Law Reform Commission report. That is just delaying justice and delaying redress for survivors. That is really important because it will mean that survivors will continue to face obstacles and obstructions in looking to pursue religious orders through the courts, because they will have to go through this crazy process where you have to name all the individuals, the orders may or may not provide the nominated name and so on. Survivors should not have to go to court.

The other purpose of the Bill is to provide a leverage for the State in negotiating with the religious orders to get the fair share of redress paid. Currently, State bodies, and the Department of education in particular, are at a huge disadvantage in seeking orders to come forward and pay their share, as Sheila Nunan discovered. Deputy Sheehan referred to the difficulties and complexity in trying to get the religious orders to come forward. I think the language used was "a mixed response" from religious orders when they were asked to make voluntary contributions to the State. It was mixed because the State has no sanction. The State cannot say to religious orders that if they do not pay up voluntarily, then it will compel them, as there is currently no power of compulsion.

At its core, this Bill is simple. It is about trying to unblock the current obstructions that lie in the way of pursuing religious orders. It is about lifting an obstruction to justice for survivors. So many survivors have come forward and asked that this Bill be progressed and that we see a speedier and more urgent response from the Government. Just yesterday, I heard from a mother whose son, who is non-verbal, was physically and sexually abused while in the care of a particular religious order. She asked what prospect there was for non-verbal children. That is a specific question and one of many that have been put to me. I submitted a parliamentary question on that particular issue. There are many heartbreaking stories of the distress, trauma, deep hurt and damage, and life-long consequences of abuse upon many survivors yet there is a failure to be able to secure accountability from the religious orders that were responsible in many cases.

Others have referred rightly to the bigger picture here, that being, the immense power that the church and religious orders wielded for many decades through the State, and the sort of

shadow welfare state that the Catholic church operated in running industrial schools, mother and baby homes, Magdalen institutions and many other institutions in which vulnerable persons, women and children primarily, were incarcerated for many shameful decades. The church and the religious orders continue to wield enormous power in our education system through the patronage model. Ninety percent of our primary schools are still under the patronage of the Catholic church and the religious orders, so that power remains. This Bill is one small attempt to get behind the power and the wealth, let us name it, of these religious institutions. The report that others and I referenced earlier noted €1.3 billion of assets held in cash and property by eight religious orders. That is an enormous sum of money. It should be accessible to survivors of abuse and to State bodies that are seeking to do right now by survivors whom they failed for so long.

This Bill is aligned with stated Government policy and priorities in seeking to pursue and make accountable religious orders that have escaped accountability for far too long. The scale of this is astounding.

I welcomed earlier the movements made on the commission of investigation into abuse in schools but look at the scoping inquiry of 2024. What does it tell us? There were 2,400 allegations of abuse in 308 schools, with more than a quarter originating in facilities for children with special needs. It is absolutely shocking. There were 884 alleged abusers in 42 religious orders. We only know what is the tip of the iceberg. We have relied so much on the bravery of individual survivors to come forward but clearly there is an enormous mountain of undisclosed trauma that is still there among many people who were abused. Listen to the accounts from Dunderrow and those women who are still reliving the trauma of being abused in a systematic, calculated fashion by Leo Hickey. That is the sort of trauma that we are now beginning to uncover. As the oppressive Catholic church doctrine is lifting from the laws of the State, and the Minister reminded us about that with the disregard law this week, which we welcome, we know now how much we have to do to do right by survivors. This Bill represents just one way that we can do right by survivors. I urge the Minister to drop the six-month delay. We have to oppose it. We want to see this Bill pass into law as swiftly as possible to do right by survivors.

Amendment put.

An Ceann Comhairle: In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until next week's division time.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 6.38 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 30 Meitheamh 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 6.38 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 30 June 2026.