



DÍOSPÓIREACHTAÍ PARLAIMINTE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

DÁIL ÉIREANN

TUAIRISC OIFIGIÚIL—Neamhcheartaithe
(OFFICIAL REPORT—Unrevised)

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DÁIL ÉIREANN

Déardaoin, 2 Iúil 2026

Thursday, 2 July 2026

Chuaigh an Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan) i gceannas ar 8.47 a.m.

Paidir agus Machnamh.

Prayer and Reflection.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Humanitarian Aid

1. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade her views on the humanitarian crisis in Cuba; her views on whether the blockade of Cuba needs to be ended; the steps she is taking to alleviate the crisis; the steps being taken to ensure humanitarian aid is provided to Cuba; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50708/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: At the outset, and on a separate manner, I take the opportunity to condemn strikes on Kyiv last night resulting in the loss of over a dozen citizens, and perhaps more. It is another example of the war of aggression that is taking an enormous human toll.

The first question I have is in relation to the blockade of Cuba. The humanitarian situation there escalates by the day. The impact that it is having on the ordinary people of Cuba, particularly children and those who are sick, is profound. Clearly, a resolution is needed. The Government needs to make statements.

Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Helen McEntee): I, too, condemn the attacks last night. It makes it all the more important - in terms of our focus and priority during the Presidency - to ensure that we do everything possible, not just to support Ukraine but also to maintain pressure on Russia. That is something we very much communicated and engaged directly on with President Zelenskyy yesterday.

I thank the Deputy for raising this question. As a country, we are monitoring the humanitarian situation in Cuba.

I very much echo the UN Secretary General's concern at the growing humanitarian crisis in the country. Our position on the embargo imposed by the United States on Cuba is long-

standing and clear. We have consistently voted for UN resolutions calling for the ending of the embargo, most recently last October at the UN General Assembly. Restricting the flow of basic goods, and particularly fuel, to Cuba heightens the suffering of ordinary Cubans. The Deputy's colleague discussed this last night. Due to the lack of fuel, we can see the impact it is having on the ability of farmers to be able to tillage, plough and deliver food. The impact that is then having on cities and people more generally is becoming more profound and something that we are extremely concerned about.

Ireland provides ongoing humanitarian assistance directly to Cuba through funding to global positioned humanitarian funds, which work with local partners to deliver assistance. These include the United Nation's central emergency response fund, the International Federation of Red Cross, IFRC, and the Red Crescent Societies' disaster relief emergency fund and the START Network. In the past year, the central emergency response fund has allocated €6.4 million to UN agencies in Cuba. The IFRC has allocated €1 million and the START Network has allocated €270,000 to Care International for its work in Cuba. Ireland has also committed €100,000 through the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations to support Cuba to build capacity and develop a strategy to respond efficiently to extreme events, such as hurricanes. Ireland will continue to engage with its humanitarian partners to assess needs.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Like other issues, the humanitarian aid is necessary but more than that, a political solution is needed. It is clear that US sanctions are pushing the people of Cuba to the brink. Children are dying because doctors cannot access essential medicine and supplies. This is not just what I have said but UN human rights chief, Mr. Volker Türk, and the UN have called the immediate lifting of the United State's sanctions against Cuba. Mr. Türk said, "The fuel restrictions imposed since early 2026 and the recent tightening of sanctions, taken together, are directly harming Cubans, especially the most vulnerable." The daily blackouts are now exceeding 20 hours. Conditions are rapidly deteriorating. The UN Human Rights Office has cited frightening figures. Infant mortality has doubled to 9.9% per 1,000 births. Childhood cancer survival rates have fallen from 85% to 65% and essential medicines are available at only 30% of normal supply levels. The key point is that although the Government is voting for these resolutions, how is it raising this in international forums to ensure movement?

Deputy Helen McEntee: As time previously did not allow, I wish to stress that the European Commission is providing financial support. For all the reasons the Deputy outlined, it is important that humanitarian aid and support is provided. There is €2 million in aid in response to the crisis currently. That follows €4 million of EU funding approved as a regional allocation to the Caribbean, which was primarily allocated to the response in Cuba. In 2025, almost €6 million was provided for disaster preparedness and emergency response. A twin approach is needed. As the Deputy said, it is about providing that direct humanitarian assistance but also making sure this does not fall off the political or international agendas. I understand Cuba has requested an additional debate at the UN General Assembly on 7 July next week due to the escalation of measures that have been taken by the US in recent months, as well as threats of military action. While this is strictly procedural and it is to vote on whether there will be a further debate on this, we will be voting in favour on 7 July that we would have a wider discussion on this, so we can discuss and assess the current humanitarian situation and that we can use our position within the UN and our voice to call for this type of embargo and these

types of sanctions to be lifted. As the Deputy said and we all agree, the main people who are suffering here are civilians and citizens who cannot access medicines, cannot get food to those who need it and cannot go about their daily business in the way the Deputy or I can.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: While there are commitments in terms of humanitarian aid, the difficulty is that the current blockade means that even with access to cash, the international payment systems have, to a substantial degree, been blocked off and, indeed, supply of energy is not being facilitated. Countries that would have previously supplied energy, including Mexico and so on, have now substituted to other forms of aids but, ultimately, the fuel is not getting through and, therefore, the system is grinding to a halt. Deputy Farrell said last night that there is food rotting in the fields because there is not the energy to harvest it. Ultimately, as well as cash, there is a need to ensure there is the ability for Cuba to receive energy, fuel, petrol and gas. At the end of the day, the international community has broadly taken a clear enough position with some exceptions. Ultimately, it is the United States that is responsible for this blockade. Has the Minister directly raised her concern in relation to this issue with representatives from the United States Government ?

Deputy Helen McEntee: There are two things here. We need to make sure the European and international community are very clear in our view and position on this. Ireland has been very clear and taken a very clear position. Over a number of years, although we are discussing the fact things have escalated further, we have had ongoing dialogue and contact with the US on a range of international issues. That includes Cuba. We have relayed and conveyed our concerns directly with them. We have communicated our position on the US embargo, the impact of the embargo and the international response to the humanitarian crisis but also the importance of maintaining diplomatic engagement. Earlier on this year, there was progress made between the Cuban Government and the US. However, that then shifted and changed. This continuing approach has not changed. What we want to do is ensure that the dialogue and the structure are there. We have an EU-Cuba political dialogue and co-operation agreement. There are some calls for that to be reviewed or changed. We need to look at the structure that is there now. We need to engage directly with that government.

There have been concerns around human rights, democracy, government concerns and how we work directly with the government to address those concerns while at the same time engaging directly with the US. This is about dialogue. The only way this is going to be resolved is through dialogue and through the US engaging directly with Cuba but also the Cuban Government addressing and responding to some of the significant challenges that been identified by the international community. Our position through that co-operation agreement should be to ramp up and enhance that dialogue and engagement, particularly at a time where we are seeing devastating consequences for many people because of the sanctions or the blockade that has been imposed.

Question No. 2 taken with Written Answers.

Foreign Conflicts

3. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade her views on the war in Sudan and on the Government's position on same, in particular the need to

ensure access to appropriate aid; her position on the continuing concerning flow of weapons into the country; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50709/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: We have often discussed the appalling conflict in Sudan - the greatest humanitarian crisis on the planet at this moment in time. Millions of people are displaced and hundreds of thousands have been killed. It is a situation that continues to escalate, particularly now in the Kordofan and Blue Nile states. There is a need to address the humanitarian crisis and to ensure the protection of civilians and humanitarian workers. Ultimately, what is required also is pressure to ensure that the ongoing flow of weapons, which continues to this day, and finance in relation to fuelling this conflict are addressed. It is important that this be a priority in terms of this theme of the Presidency.

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Neale Richmond): I thank the Deputy for consistently raising this issue in questions and debates and shining a light on what is the greatest humanitarian disaster currently happening on this planet.

The conflict in Sudan continues to have a devastating impact on the Sudanese people, particularly women and children. I am particularly alarmed by the Rapid Support Forces' offensive of the city of El Obeid. Following their appalling attacks in El Fasher last year, there is a grave risk of the RSF committing further mass atrocities. The warring parties must adhere to their obligations under international human rights and humanitarian law, including the protection of civilians and humanitarian workers. Civilians must be able to leave the city safely and all parties must ensure rapid, unimpeded and sustained humanitarian access.

On 23 June, the Minister, Deputy McEntee, signed a joint ministerial statement from Ireland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and the UK on the situation in El Obeid. The Ministers stressed that external support continues to sustain the conflict and called on those fuelling the conflict to cease. Those with influence must exercise it now to avoid further bloodshed. Ireland also continues to advocate for the expansion of the UN embargo to the whole country. The critical issue of humanitarian access and the need to remove bureaucratic obstacles to aid are at the heart of Ireland's diplomatic engagement on Sudan. I attended the International Sudan Conference in Berlin on 15 April. The EU and its member states, including Ireland, pledged over €812 million in humanitarian assistance to support the people in Sudan and to respond to the regional refugee crisis. Ireland will significantly increase our humanitarian assistance this year from over €14.3 million provided in 2025 to €21 million this year. Our funding will be channelled through trusted partners to reach the most vulnerable.

9 o'clock

On 12 June, we launched a call for proposals from Irish agency partners working on the ground in hard-to-reach areas in Sudan. My Government colleagues and I are determined to ensure that this devastating crisis is not sidelined or forgotten. We will continue to ensure a sustained focus on Sudan during our Presidency.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: I am glad the Minister of State referenced El-Obeid. The moment in which the world paid most attention to Sudan was at the end of the siege of El Fasher when RSF arrived into that city and literally struck people down in the street with machetes. It was the kind of slaughter that was redolent of what happened in Rwanda. Tens

of thousands of people were killed. It is difficult to get a clear sense of the loss of life, but it was absolutely enormous. Unfortunately, the world has begun to look away again at a time when, potentially, we face the same type of circumstances at El-Obeid. The latter is a significant city. Hundreds of thousands of people live there, many of whom are already internally displaced. Many of them may have left places such as El Fasher. It is vitally important to do whatever we can do to put pressure on to prevent a recurrence. I have referenced the role of the United Arab Emirates, UAE. The UAE is not the only country involved, but it is clearly a crucial one in terms of the supply of weapons to those involved in this conflict. That needs to be called out at both an Irish and a European level.

Deputy Neale Richmond: In reference to El-Obeid, on 19 June, Fr. Youhanna Al-Amin, a Roman Catholic priest, was killed in an attack on Holy Cross parish church. On the same date, in another attack on an office and warehouse of a partner organisation of Trócaire in South Kordofan, a guard working for the organisation was killed and a colleague wounded. The warehouse, which contained UNICEF medical and nutrition supplies, was looted. Trócaire is an organisation familiar to all of us. We know that the work of Trócaire takes place on a worldwide basis; it is not just located in Maynooth.

The depravity that happened in El Fasher and to which the Deputy referred is unfortunately spreading. We see that in terms of what is happening at El-Obeid. We also see the continuing need for a strong humanitarian response, which Ireland certainly has not been found wanting on, the need to expand the UN embargo, which we have talked about before, and the need to consistently raise this matter with partners.

I note the Deputy's reference to the UAE. As he knows, I have raised that matter with the Minister a number of times. I raised it with the Ambassador again just yesterday. I will continue to raise it.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Minister of State might have seen a very troubling report in *The Guardian* in recent weeks regarding Nathaniel Raymond, an American human rights investigator from Yale University, who alleged that representatives of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in Britain told him there was significant private pressure from the UAE which meant that the UK would not publicly divulge information linking Ethiopia and the Emirates to support for the RSF, which was responsible for the atrocities in El Fasher, and that there had been an attempt to downplay the scale of death and human rights abuses. Obviously, I have no way of establishing the this, but the concern is that similar pressure and reticence exists across countries within the EU. I asked the Minister of State, and he has broadly agreed, that during its Presidency, Ireland needs to continue to raise this issue. Does he sense any movement or any greater willingness on the part of European countries to ensure that greater pressure will be exerted, particularly in the context of the supply of arms?

Deputy Neale Richmond: Absolutely. Let us not mince our words. What is occurring in Sudan is the worst humanitarian disaster on the planet. There are acts of pure depravity being perpetrated. Rape is being used as a weapon of war on a scale that has not been seen for a long time. The Irish Government is absolutely committed to continuing to keeping Sudan at the top of the agenda. We have done this consistently at European Council meetings. We have done

this through the UN, particularly at the UN General Assembly high-level week. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, has included it as an item for the upcoming Foreign Affairs Council meeting. I raised it at the most recent meeting of the development ministers. It will be discussed at the informal meeting of development ministers to be held in Dublin in October.

Unfortunately, Sudan is often a forgotten crisis for too many people. We know how what is happening is spreading across to the entire region and of the sheer scale of the numbers of those affected. Hundreds of thousands of people who have died, millions are being displaced and millions are facing hunger. This crisis is simply too grave and too big for Ireland not to use every diplomatic tool at its disposal to continue to highlight what is happening and to continue to exert pressure.

Humanitarian Aid

4. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade her views on the need for an immediate ceasefire in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda, which is urgently required to prevent the Ebola outbreak spreading further and taking more lives; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50710/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Democratic Republic of Congo has suffered incredible humanitarian situations, conflict and atrocities over the course of several decades. Millions of people have been killed in war. Unfortunately, on the back of multiple wars, civil wars and invasions, we are now seeing a deadly Ebola outbreak that is spreading quickly and that is also affecting Rwanda. This is all happening against the backdrop of the conflict to which I refer. Does the Minister of State agree that there is a need for a ceasefire in order to ensure that there can be humanitarian approach to mitigating the impact of the Ebola outbreak on the region?

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am very grateful to Deputy Ó Laoghaire for raising this issue. The Government remains deeply concerned by the security situation in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Some progress has been made in the peace process facilitated by the United States, Qatar and the African Union, but the situation remains a matter for very serious concern. We join calls on all parties to respect ceasefire agreements and engage in a process to attain a sustainable peace. All sides must respect their obligations under international humanitarian law and ensure unhindered humanitarian access. These are critical factors in enabling an effective response to the Ebola outbreak in the eastern part of Democratic Republic of Congo.

In the context of the Ebola outbreak, to date far in 2026, Ireland has provided €3 million for the WHO general programme of work. A sum of €2 million has been approved for the WHO contingency fund for emergencies, which released €3.3 million to support government responses in Democratic Republic of Congo and, crucially, Uganda. Ireland's NGO partners have also drawn down contingency funding and accessed items from our humanitarian stockpiles. Democratic Republic of Congo is one of the top recipients of Irish humanitarian funding. Between 2020 and 2025, Ireland contributed over €30 million in humanitarian assistance for Democratic Republic of Congo.

The Minister, Deputy McEntee, discussed the conflict and the Ebola outbreak with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Democratic Republic of Congo, Ms Thérèse Kayikwamba Wagner, during her visit to Ireland in May

Ireland recognises the importance of the EU's voice being heard in respect of this grave security and humanitarian situation. We support efforts to agree further EU action to respond to the crisis. EU Humanitarian Commissioner, Hadja Lahbib, visited the region in February for meetings regarding the conflict and in June to discuss the Ebola outbreak. Again, we will closely follow these issues during our Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The scale of death and suffering in recent decades in the Congo has been very under-reported. Some estimates suggest that about 6 million people have died since 1998 due to conflict. Conflict in the region has rarely been in abeyance, but it spikes during certain periods. The conflict currently is between the Congolese Government and the Rwandan-backed M23 rebel group. It is primarily taking place in Kivu state in the east of the country and in surrounding regions.

Ebola is a horrific and highly transmissible disease. It has already claimed hundreds of lives. It will claim thousands of lives if it continues to spread. The concern is that it will escalate further and that, as a result of the conflict, the authorities will struggle to get to grips with it. Will the Minister of State outline the Department's assessment of the current situation in terms of the outbreak and the extent to which the conflict is adding to it?

Deputy Neale Richmond: We can all agree that the history of this part of Africa, from the pillaging days of King Leopold, to the decades after, to the time when Irish peacekeepers lost their lives there and to the days of Zaire and beyond, has been absolutely horrendous and has been marred by conflict, disease and cruelty. To be quite frank, there was cruelty on the part of western partners as well as domestic actors. Unfortunately, this is the latest chapter of a very vicious conflict that is compounding the escalation of an outbreak of a disease that many people cannot fathom the severity of.

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control assesses the infection risk for people living in Ireland and elsewhere in the EU to be very low. However, as of 28 June, Democratic Republic of Congo had reported 1,274 confirmed cases, including 360 deaths. In Uganda, 20 confirmed cases have been reported, including deaths. One confirmed case was reported in France on 24 June. This outbreak continues to spread.

The deteriorating condition of health systems due to the removal of development assistance is certainly having a serious impact and gives rise very real concern, not just on the part of the Irish Government but also among many of our partners. The CEOs of Oxfam Ireland and Trócaire have written about this very recently.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: That brings me to my next question. In his reply to the previous question on Sudan, the Minister referred Trócaire's connection to Sudan. Is he aware of any Irish aid agencies which, either directly or through sister organisations, have a presence in Congo and whether they are affected by or involved in this in any respect? The violence that is currently happening has displaced hundreds of thousands of people and forced them to leave their homes. Obviously, that is disrupting access health care. Humanitarian workers and

officials need access to provide that support now more than ever. A ceasefire is a medical necessity and is urgently needed in order to support the provision of life-saving care, protect health workers and strengthen security, especially in hard-to-reach areas like the Ituri province and other remote areas.

We are asking the Irish Government to do all it can at diplomatic level and through the EU to make all efforts to ensure that an immediate ceasefire is brought about. Is there an Irish connection with or presence of any kind in the region.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am very grateful to the Deputy for referring to the very real Irish connection, not just with Democratic Republic of Congo but also with the wider region, including Uganda and neighbouring countries that are often responsible for many of the impacts of these crises, be they conflicts or humanitarian crises. There are over 2,000 Irish citizens in the broader region. Most of them work in the aid sector. Trócaire has a significant presence there. The CEO of Trócaire was due to travel there until very recently. He was in Rwanda during the Easter period. Oxfam has a very real presence in Democratic Republic of Congo as well. It is one of Ireland's largest humanitarian partners outside of our programme countries. Within Irish Aid, we have a very strong history of working in this region.

I referenced the role of Irish peacekeepers - missionaries also played a part - over the period. This is a conflict and a humanitarian disaster that we absolutely will continue to keep to the fore at European level, at bilateral level and, more broadly, through our work with the United Nations.

Question No. 5 taken with Written Answers.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Question No. 6 taken with Written Answers.

Middle East

7. **Deputy Roderic O'Gorman** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if she will reconsider the exclusion of services from the Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill 2026; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50194/26]

8. **Deputy Barry Heneghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the specific progress that has been made following Ireland's calls at EU level to suspend the trade elements of the EU-Israel Association Agreement and to prohibit trade with Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories; the further diplomatic initiatives Ireland intends to pursue to strengthen the protection of Palestinian civilians in the occupied West Bank; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50178/26]

20. **Deputy Joe Neville** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to outline the timeframe after the introduction of Control of Economic Activity (Occupied Territories) Bill

2018; when Ireland will see the effects of the Bill; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50268/26]

38. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to provide an update on recent engagement at EU level on the EU-Israel agreement and the Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill 2026; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [49807/26]

60. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade her plans to end trade in services with the occupied Palestinian territories and bring Ireland in line with the International Court of Justice, ICJ, ruling; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50248/26]

65. **Deputy Louis O'Hara** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade to provide an update on the Israeli Settlements (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill 2025; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [48950/26]

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): The questions in this grouping are in the names of Deputies O'Gorman, Heneghan, Gould, Neville, Ó Murchu, Gibney, and O'Hara. We will start with Deputy O'Gorman and then see who turns up.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: As this House prepares to consider Report Stage amendments to the Government's version of the occupied territories Bill, with the Green Party and other Opposition parties seeking to include services within the Bill's ambit, is it not time for the Government to be frank and admit that the barrier to the inclusion of services is not a legal one but, rather, is based on a political decision taken by the Government?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I propose to take Questions Nos. 7, 8, 20, 38, 60 and 65 together.

I thank the Deputies for tabling these questions. The Government approved the text of the Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Prohibition of Importation of Goods) Bill 2026 on 26 May. The Bill was published on 29 May and was introduced in Dáil Éireann on 10 June. It is very much my intention that the legislation will complete the parliamentary approval process by the summer recess. I thank Deputies for working with me to ensure that we achieve that outcome. I am very conscious of the strength of not just interest but the feeling and the desire among members of this House when it comes to this Bill and what it is that we all want to achieve. I think we are all united by a desire to take action in response to the actions by the current Israeli Government that breach human rights and the unilateral actions that completely undermine the viability of the two-state solution. This has been evident during the debate in this House and when Committee Stage was debated at two meetings of the select committee last week. We will debate the Bill further next week and the following week.

The Bill fulfils our commitment as set out in the programme for Government. Most importantly, it will contribute positively to our compliance with our international legal obligations. This was identified in the ICJ's advisory opinion of 2024 in which it very clearly stated that obligation on states to take steps to prevent trade or investment relations that assist

in maintaining the illegal situation created by Israel in the occupied Palestinian territories. There are now almost 1 million illegal settlers in the occupied territories. These are not small villages or settlements, as we often think. There are almost 1 million people that have been placed illegally in settlements. This is absolutely impacting any possibility of a future two-state solution.

On the issue of services, I have set out, most recently on Committee Stage last week, that the Government has a responsibility to ensure that any legislation introduced is legally sustainable, enforceable in practice and capable of withstanding challenge. I was asked last week who would possibly challenge legislation like this. The answer is that simply anybody can. There is an obligation to ensure that any legislation that I or this Government introduce is not open to challenge immediately. This is particularly relevant in relation to services.

The Government sought and received advice from the Attorney General regarding the legal permissibility of an EU member state introducing restrictions relating to trade and services with a third country or a territory. There are two principal issues in relation to services, namely the legal basis under EU law and the practical challenges relating to the implementation and overall enforcement of this legislation. In the case of goods, a public policy exemption exists within the relevant EU framework governing imports. This was highlighted in the ICJ's ruling in 2024. It allows member states to adopt restrictions for public policy reasons. However, there is no equivalent broad public policy basis in EU law in relation to external trade in services.

Trade in services also differs fundamentally from trade in goods. Services are digital, they cross borders, they are intangible in nature and operate across multiple legal and regulatory frameworks, creating significant implementation and enforcement challenges. Introducing legislation that lacks clarity as to how it may be implemented or enforced is not something that Government does. We need to be conscious of that.

The Government must also ensure also that measures adopted are not only politically meaningful but also legally defensible and practically enforceable, as I have said. For those reasons, the Government's approach is to proceed with measures that can effectively be implemented and sustained in practice. I have made no secret of saying that we have also taken into account the possible implications for our own economy here, but that is not the main factor. I want to be very clear on that. We have had clear directions or indications from the US and other states. However, that would apply to any legislation being brought forward. I am very clearly bringing forward legislation. I want to ensure that this is enacted before the summer recess. Most importantly, I want to ensure that we can fulfil our ICJ commitments more broadly by ensuring that the EU moves as one.

I believe that the EU has not done enough and I do not believe that we have been strong enough in our response. That needs to change so I have been advocating for a number of months now that the Commission would bring forward stronger proposals than those on the table, but also proposals that we know might actually pass a vote. The suspension of the EU-Israel Association Agreement was proposed by the Commission last year. Unfortunately, there was very clearly not a consensus, which is what is needed to vote specifically to suspend the agreement. What I and my counterparts from a number of member states have advocated for is that there should be a ban on trade within the illegal occupied territories. This is something that can be voted on through the Trade Council, by means of qualified majority voting, QMV. For those who are not aware, QMV requires 55% of the overall population of the voting

member states. Depending on what way states vote, it can differ depending on the matter being voted on.

I advocated for the Commission to bring forward these proposals and am pleased to say that at the most recent Foreign Affairs Council meeting, a commitment was finally given by the Commission to bring forward proposals before the next meeting. For our first Foreign Affairs Council as President of the EU Council the Commission has agreed to bring forward proposals, which we will discuss, and my objective is that we would debate them.

The reason services are not included in the legislation is because the legal basis is not the same as that relating to goods, and how it would be implemented is not clear. All of us believe that for the EU as a whole to respond collectively, we would legally have that basis. It would also have a greater effect in actually changing the Israeli Government's actions. Ultimately, that is what we are trying to achieve here. Whether it is recognising Palestine, whether it is the case that we are taking with South Africa in respect of the genocide, whether it is the work we have been doing to provide support in respect of the humanitarian catastrophe or whether it is the situation in Lebanon and the West Bank that we have raised time and again, everything that we are doing is to change the actions of the Israeli Government. The Israeli Government is heading in one direction and one direction only. By taking action at EU level, we will have a greater impact. That is the objective.

I fully appreciate the position of all Deputies present. I feel as strongly as they and other Deputies do about this matter, having visited the region and spoken to so many people and families on the Israel-Gaza border - I was not able to get into Gaza when I visited - who were on the outside and who wanted to get back in to see family and friends. I also spoke to those delivering aid and food.

The situation on the ground is not acceptable. It is not acceptable that the EU has not responded in a strong enough way. That is why we need the EU to respond collectively, which is what I have been advocating for while at the same time tabling the legislation that is going through the Houses.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: The Minister spoke about the House being united by a desire to act, and that is true, but it is united by a desire to act effectively. The deep concern is that what is being proposed and what we will be voting on next week is not effective. When the Attorney General's original advice came in July 2024 on foot of the ICJ opinion on Frances Black's Bill, no distinction was made between goods and services in that detailed piece of legal advice. That distinction only arose in the programme for Government that was signed in January 2025.

The argument that there is a public policy justification to limit goods but not services does not stand up. There is a clear provision within EU law where member states can make decisions in relation to third states on foot of public policy. That distinction does not stand up and is not based within case law. It is a weak argument and deeply unconvincing, and we will investigate it further next week.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I have to agree with Deputy O'Gorman. Everyone in this House accepts the fact that Israel has been involved in genocidal and criminal actions that are

unforgivable, whether we are talking about Gaza or the continuation of huge settlements that will break any possibility of a future Palestinian state. I have stated it many times that this is obviously what Benjamin Netanyahu wants to do. Sometimes, there can be an over-focus on Smotrich and Ben-Gvir. They are who they are and what they are, but he is the guy who put them in government.

The fact is that it is hard to see not including services in the occupied territories Bill, OTB, as being anything other than a sop to some of the pressure from America. We have to follow it further. In relation to the EU-Israel Association Agreement, will there be a vote at the Foreign Affairs Council? Will we be able to deal with the trade element of the EU-Israel Association Agreement, which is beneficial to Israel and utterly disgraceful at this point in time? I accept that the Government has been forcing this issue, but we need to see action.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I disagree with Deputy O'Gorman when he says that it is not effective because over the last number of months, I have seen a number of member states advocating for a stronger response. Last year, when there had not been any kind of a ceasefire, more member states had started to change their positions, and that is why we had the suspension of the association agreement put on the table by the Commission as a possible option for member states to vote on. At that stage, a ceasefire was agreed, but we all agree that the ceasefire is somewhat in name only. While it has provided some relief, there are still people being killed every day and the humanitarian catastrophe has continued to worsen.

The effect it is having is that a number of other member states are now bringing forward legislation. I regularly engage with my colleague from the Netherlands. My colleague from Belgium is bringing forward legislation and we know that Spain has. Slovenia was on that path, but with a new Government, it is unfortunately now moving in the opposite direction. Norway is also bringing forward legislation. All of this, and the response from the Commission, is having an effect.

While not bringing forward legislation, other members states are asking me about what we are doing and engaging with us on what we are doing and bringing forward. It is building momentum, and that is the objective here. When we were recognising the State of Palestine, we said that we wanted to do it with other member states because it would have a greater impact. The same approach is being applied here and that is why we have taken this decision now.

In terms of the legal basis, the 2024 ruling had not taken place at the time. Since then, it has given ground to the public policy argument when it comes to goods. Deputies can say that they do not believe that, but if it were the case that the US was the only reason that we were not doing this, then we would not be bringing forward legislation, full stop, because the US has been very clear that it does not support any legislation. That is not what I am doing here and not what the Government has agreed to do. We are taking a twin-track approach to this. We are bringing forward our legislation, which sets out a clear message that we do not agree with and are completely opposed to the Israeli Government and its actions, that we are working to comply with the ICJ ruling, and that we fully comply with it by making sure that Europe responds in whole.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: In her first set of remarks, the Minister said that there was a clear indication from the US in terms of its opposition to what we are doing, even the more minor approach that the Government is taking in the Bill. It is important to remember that, as well as changing in Europe, opinion is changing in the United States. This matter is not a fixed matter any more. You cannot win a primary in the Democratic Party now if you get funding from the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, AIPAC, and if you take a pro-Israel line. We saw a long-standing congresswoman lose in Colorado earlier this week because she was seen as too closely aligned. Even in the Republican Party, things are changing as well.

My concern is that this Government is allowing fear of Trump's position on Israel to dictate our approach to the OTB. In many ways, the Government is fighting yesterday's war, and it is going to allow a weaker piece of legislation through this House on foot of that.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What we are looking for is quite simple, namely, that the occupied territories Bill be as strong as it can, which obviously includes services. Given what Israel has done and continues to do, be it in Palestine or Lebanon - those who want a greater Israel seem to be at the forefront of politics there at this point in time - we can all see that it is a matter of us ensuring that we play our part.

It is good to see that others who should have moved faster are now moving or considering moving. That is what we have always spoken about. We talk about apartheid and Mary Manning, and we all accept that what was technically a small move by not handling South African goods and forcing it on Dunnes Stores and then others changed things because it was part of a wider movement. However, we need to see an occupied territories Bill that is as strong as possible and that we take as many people as possible from across Europe and beyond with us.

I want an update on where the Minister sees the EU-Israel Association Agreement, which is a blemish on the European Union as we take up the Council Presidency. It is vital that there be movement there and that we play our part in maximising the chances of dealing with it, even if it is only with the trade element.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I want to outline where we are at the moment. The Commission already has a proposal on the table that would suspend the EU-Israel Association Agreement. That was put on the table last year, but it has never been voted on. This is a vote that would require unanimity within the Foreign Affairs Council and, being honest, I do not believe there is that unanimity. There are a number of member states that have clearly said that they will not vote for this. That does not stop me or Ireland continuing to advocate for a vote on this or for member states to vote to suspend the association agreement.

We have also advocated for the trade element of the association agreement to be suspended at the very least. This would be far more significant than anything we, on an individual basis, would be able to do to impact and change the Israeli Government's actions. It would impact billions of euro worth of trade, and this is something that I advocated for.

What is also not on the table is a banning of goods within the occupied territories. I have been advocating, as other colleagues have, for this particular proposal to be put on the table for member states to vote on. This is a vote that could be put forward at the Trade Council because

it is a trade matter. At our last Foreign Affairs Council meeting, the EU legal services gave us a clear legal direction that this was possible. There had been suggestions that we could not vote on this in terms of trade because of different reasons.

The EU legal services have been very clear that this is possible and that we could vote to suspend trade in the occupied territories. Following that discussion, I, along with at least 17 member states, if not more, asked the Commission to bring further proposals beyond the one that was currently on the table, which we know does not have a consensus. That includes the banning of trade in the occupied territories. The Commission gave a clear commitment that it would put forward proposals before the next Council meeting, which is on 13 July and is the first meeting that we will chair as President. I expect that we will get those proposals before then. There is no point in us getting them at the meeting when we have not had a chance to look at them, examine them and debate them ourselves, even within my Department and within the Government.

It is my ambition that we will be prioritising this during our Presidency, and I have spoken extensively to Kaja Kallas, the High Representative, about it. At every single Foreign Affairs Council, this will be on the agenda. We want to make sure that progress is made during our term and that we take stronger action. I cannot say this enough. I do not believe the EU has been strong enough on this. I do not believe that we have taken strong enough action. I believe that while we all agree that the only peaceful resolution for Israelis and Palestinians, and for the wider region, is the prospect of a two-state solution, that is becoming less and less likely the more we allow the Israeli Government to introduce illegal settlements into the occupied territories. I am advocating for this. I hope that by the next meeting, we will be able to take a stance or position on this.

Sports Events

9. Deputy Thomas Gould asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade whether she has held any meetings on the Ireland-Israel match. [49388/26]

Deputy Thomas Gould: I believe these games should not go ahead. There has been a call to stop the games. The Palestinians have said that there should be a ban on all sporting engagements with Israel. There should be an outright boycott until such time as the people of Palestine are given the freedom, respect and rights they deserve.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue, which follows on from the discussion I have just had with Deputies O’Gorman and Ó Murchú. National governing bodies, NGBs, of sport and international sporting federations, including the FAI, are independent, autonomous bodies responsible for the governance of their own sports, including the organisation of sporting fixtures. The Government and Sport Ireland have no role in determining or supporting the organisation of such fixtures, and I have not had meetings to discuss Israel-Ireland soccer matches. We respect the decision made by the FAI and will continue to work closely with it, through the Minister for sport, and engage with it on any matters of concern.

Of course, we continue to have significant concerns about the worsening humanitarian situation in Gaza, with intolerable conditions that are only getting worse. Israel must immediately remove restrictions on aid access and facilitate essential supplies and services to reach people across the Gaza Strip. More broadly, it must completely cease the actions it is taking in the West Bank and Lebanon. We are deeply concerned by the sharply deteriorating situation in the West Bank, in particular the massive expansion of settlements and the rampant and escalating settler violence, which continues in an atmosphere of impunity.

Our voice has been consistent in our calls for appropriate actions in response to Israeli breaches of human rights and democratic principles, and we are trying to use all the tools at our disposal - political, legal and diplomatic - to advocate for peace, accountability and an end to the Israeli Government's devastating policies in Gaza and the West Bank. In addition to supporting an EU-wide prohibition on trade, our long-standing position is that the EU-Israel Association Agreement should be suspended or, at a minimum, that the trade elements should be suspended. A number of member states have called for stronger collective EU action. I welcome the commitment by the Commission to bring forward a list of options for consideration at the July Foreign Affairs Council, which will take place on 13 July.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Minister said that Sport Ireland and the Government had no part to play. That is not accurate. In 1999, the then Government put off a match against Yugoslavia. The precedent has been set, and the Government should step in. It is very unfair of the Government to put all the blame on the FAI and let it carry the can. The FAI has previously made clear its position on playing matches with Israel, but now it has been pushed into a corner. The manager of the team has said: "[I]t's unfair for the players to be in this position and us to be in this position." Seamus Coleman, one of the longest serving and most decorated Irish footballers, a man who leads by example, said:

My views are very clear on the fact that Nathan and the younger players, and Ireland, the fans, the manager, it should not have landed on our toes to answer questions about this. It should have been dealt with above us

Deputy Helen McEntee: The Deputy is right in that sense, but "above us" is talking about UEFA. I fully accept that the FAI has pressed for the exclusion of Israel from UEFA, and it is its right to do so. However, there is a lack of consensus among UEFA members beyond that and, indeed, among international sporting bodies more generally in relation to the exclusion of Israel from international sporting competitions. Similar to the Council, where there is a very clear view from a number of member states, including Ireland, that we need to take stronger action and go as far as suspending the EU-Israel Association Agreement, there are other member states that do not agree with that. For that reason, we have not been able to reach a consensus.

I know that other countries, such as Russia and Belarus, have been excluded from international sporting events, but this is because there was a consensus among the international sporting bodies. I believe it is for the organisations, working with their parent bodies and the international organisations, to raise concerns and to be able to discuss this and vote on it. What is very clear, though, is that there is no consensus.

I believe views and positions are changing, given what we see from the Israeli Government with the introduction of the death penalty, which is very clearly targeting Palestinians; the worsening humanitarian situation; and the continuing escalation of settler violence. Even with the discussions on the ceasefire in Lebanon, there is clearly still activity happening on the ground, where citizens are not able to return home. I believe that things are changing and that the view of many countries, including the US, as we have heard, is shifting. However, we cannot as a Government tell UEFA or the other sporting organisations what they should be doing. I fully respect and take into account the position of our own sporting organisations and the view that they have expressed. I fully support their actions.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I will finish the quote from Seamus Coleman when speaking to Tony O'Donoghue of RTÉ. He said: "I am a dad, I am a husband, I've got a heart, I know the difference between right and wrong." The Minister said that the decision was with the FAI, not the Government. It is not. Deputy McEntee is the Minister. She is in the Government. It is up to the Government to make the decision and to take it away from the players and the FAI. A precedent has been set, but it should happen even if there was no precedent.

The Minister mentioned Russia and Belarus. That shows the double standards. She said that we had to have agreement between all of the other countries. No, we do not. The Irish Government needs to say "No". We are against genocide. We are against people in the West Bank being driven from their homes and murdered. As the Minister said in response to a previous question, there are over 1 million illegal settlers in the West Bank. There is a genocide in Gaza that continues to this day, with over 70,000 people killed, yet we are waiting for consensus. Consensus from who? The Israeli Government has so much power in its lobby that there will never be consensus. Ireland needs to lead the way. Ireland needs to say that these games must stop, and all games with Israel must stop. We should not be involved in any sport or any economics. We should say to them that unless the genocide stops and the Palestinians are given their rights, Ireland will not take part with Israel. We should do everything to ensure that no other European country, or any country in the world, does that.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Ireland has led. The Deputy might not agree with me, he might not believe that, but Ireland has led and we are leading. I would say that the FAI is leading in that regard as well. It has made its position very clear, and I support the position that it has taken. I support the views that it has, but that is the position it has taken. It is not the position that UEFA as a whole has taken. It is not for the Irish Government to decide what matches happen, where they happen or whether they are cancelled or otherwise.

That is a decision taken by the governing bodies. My colleague, the Minister for sport, will continue to engage with those bodies and organisations. Our objective as a Government is to make sure that the action we take at Government, Council and European levels has the effect we all want. Of course we oppose genocide. Any suggestion to the contrary is so off the mark-

Deputy Thomas Gould: I did not say that.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Of course we oppose genocide and what is happening on the ground. I do not think we can be any clearer about what is happening. We have joined the

South African case. There is a court process and international legal process when it comes to recognising genocide. We have joined that because we believe that is clearly the right thing to do. One only has to look at the UN report on children, which was very clear that children were being targeted. We want to ensure that the actions of the Israeli Government are changed and we do everything we can in that regard.

I have made my view on the position taken by the FAI very clear. There is no consensus at European level that would ban or stop Israel from competing in these games. It is then a decision as to whether our teams would pull out. It is not for me as Minister to tell a team that it should not play or what it should do. That has to be a decision taken by the sporting body and players in the organisation.

Irish Prisoners Abroad

10. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade whether she is aware of very serious concerns about the fairness of the prosecution and trial of an Irish citizen (details supplied); whether she has raised concerns with the German Government; whether she will send an observer to the trial; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50321/26]

11. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade further to exchanges with this Deputy in Dail Éireann on 21 May 2026 with regard to the trial of a person (details supplied), the measures that have been put in place to ensure the fair oversight of the trial; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50271/26]

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: Daniel Tatlow-Devally faces trial in Germany due to allegedly being on the site of a German subsidiary of an Israeli arms manufacture, Elbit Systems, and allegedly damaging property. I raised this issue with the Minister's predecessor. The conditions of the trial and detention are of huge concern, not only to Mr. Tatlow-Devally, but also his co-defendants. He is subject to 23-hour lock-ins, has been denied phone calls with his family and has limited access to lawyers. There is huge concern about the safety and fairness of the trial and the conditions of detention. It is important that the Government be vocal on it.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I propose to take Questions Nos. 10 and 11 together.

This matter has been raised on a number of occasions by the Deputy and other colleagues. At the outset, I assure the Deputies that my colleagues across our consular teams and I are closely following the case and engaging with Mr. Tatlow-Devally and his family on a regular basis. My Department, in particular our Consulate General in Munich, supported by our embassy in Berlin and the consular directorate in Dublin, has been providing consular assistance since September 2025 when we were first notified of the case. Furthermore, I have raised this issue directly with the State Secretary at the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, Dr. Thomas Steffen, when I met him in May.

A dedicated consular officer in the Consulate General in Munich has been assigned to provide consular assistance and support Mr. Tatlow-Devally and his family. Staff in the

consulate, including the consul general and deputy consul general, have undertaken six consular visits to him in prison. The most recent visit was earlier this week on Tuesday, 30 June. These visits are an important opportunity to assess the conditions of the detention. I fully appreciate that the prison has a 23-hour lock-up. It is the same for all prisoners in the prison. At the same time, that is a substantial amount of time. The visits provide an opportunity for Mr. Tatlow-Devally when meeting with our team to raise any concerns about his treatment with us.

In turn, we have kept his family informed about these visits and remain in direct contact with them. I am not aware that he has been denied phone calls with his family. My last understanding was that there had been regular engagement and opportunity for engagement. Officials in the consular directorate of my Department and Munich are working to facilitate a visit to Mr. Tatlow-Devally by a number of Deputies. We have been advocating for and supporting him in whatever way we can in respect of engagement not just with the family, but also with others who wish to visit. We are liaising with the relevant German authorities with a view to obtaining the necessary visit permissions and will engage directly with Deputies in that regard. The decision as to whether to permit visits is one for the German authorities. It has been made clear to us that this is something that should be possible. We hope this would be followed through on.

My Department will continue to provide all appropriate consular assistance to Mr. Tatlow-Devally and his family. As I previously outlined, the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations defines the parameters of consular assistance in international law, which is, in turn, reflected in my Department and our consular assistance charter. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and its embassies and consulates are precluded from intervening in the judicial and legal process of another country. However, when a citizen is on trial abroad, their rights and interests have to be represented, including by their defence lawyers, as I know is the case in this instance.

A number of trial dates have been set for the coming weeks. The last time we spoke about this in the House, dates had not been set and there was concern about that. Two hearings have taken place this week and further hearings are scheduled for tomorrow, 3 July. There will be subsequent hearings on 22, 24, 27 and 29 July. There are further dates out to January 2027.

My officials will of course continue to follow developments very closely. I have asked that they continue to keep me updated while ensuring that regular engagement continues with Mr. Tatlow-Devally and his family, whom I appreciate are under huge stress.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: At the heart of this is an increasing trend, not just in Germany, but in other countries as well, of using legislation initially intended for organised crime to prosecute climate activists and Palestine activists and, in several respects, dampen down political criticism and protests. There is a similar situation in Britain with regard to Palestine Action. When the relevant legislation was introduced 15 years ago, people raised concerns and asked whether it could be used to prosecute Greenpeace and so on. Those concerns were dismissed out of hand by the Ministers at the time. Lo and behold, political organisations are now being targeted by that legislation. We see the same here.

The conditions in which Mr. Tatlow-Devally is being held are not acceptable. I am sure the Minister will agree with that. There is a knee-jerk assumption that European countries will have fair trials, and that is fine - that is the baseline assumption in these institutions. At the end

of the day, there is a concern about a fair trial. The Minister said she had raised this matter with the state secretary. What response was she given? What is Germany going to do to ensure there is a fair trial and decent conditions in advance of that?

Deputy Paul Murphy: All of the evidence suggests that an Irish citizen, Daniel Tatlow-Devally, along with four others, is being denied a fair trial by another European state. I believe the Minister has a letter from a senior counsel. The letter refers to the fact that no audio recording of what is happening is permitted or provided by the court, there is no official stenographer, and the defendants cannot bring their own stenographer and have been refused permission to engage a professional note-taker. The letter went on to say that interpretations were electronically transmitted to the accused in a way that prevented their representatives and the court from hearing what was being said and that these communications were not merely secretive and kept from lawyers during the hearing, but were not recorded, so they could never be subsequently checked by anyone. The letter also stated that there was no way for prosecution or defence lawyers, the court, human rights monitors or the Government to check for translation accuracy and no way for the defence to correct mistakes at any time. There are limitations in terms of the communication of the defendants with their lawyers. At the very least, will the Government send legal observers to the trial tomorrow and on 22 July? The State needs to be represented there to observe what is happening to an Irish citizen.

Deputy Helen McEntee: Deputy Ó Laoghaire will appreciate that it is not appropriate for me to comment on the type of legislation or charges that are being taken in another member state. We expect that any other European country would follow fair procedures and rules. That has to be a given and is exactly what I have raised directly with my colleague.

Concerns have been raised with us. In terms of the response, my colleague, the Minister, has said he would engage and relay our concerns or raise the fact that we had raised this particular issue. I appreciate that the conditions in the prison are strict. The rules apply to all prisoners, not just the individual whom Deputies have mentioned or those who were arrested with him. They are all confined to their cells for 23 hours a day. I am told he has access to a gym, prison library and reading materials, as well as there being televisions in prisoners' rooms. I appreciate that this is not an ideal scenario for anybody, but he is in a prison and the conditions are strict and apply to everybody.

I am very clear that we are keeping a very clear focus on the trial and engage regularly with the family. Our consular teams have also regularly engaged with Mr. Tatlow-Devally to make sure that the conditions he has been kept in our, insofar as is possible, are appropriate.

Obviously, when someone is in prison, there will be strict conditions applying, but we want to ensure he is being treated in the most humane and fairest way possible. That engagement will continue.

In terms of legal representation, any issues that may be raised directly relating to the trial are a matter for the legal team to raise. That is what is happening and there is a legal team working to support Daniel. I am keeping a close eye on the situation and have asked my officials to engage regularly with me on it as the trial, which is only starting, proceeds. We will continue to keep in regular contact with the legal team.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: The Minister said all prisoners experience the same conditions. In regard to telephone calls, I outlined my understanding of the situation. If it is not the case, I accept that. My understanding is that calls are constrained in terms of times when they can happen and there have been occasions when they have been denied. I will double-check that.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I am happy to get back to the Deputy on that if it is the case.

Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire: We can engage in correspondence. I might be mistaken but that is my understanding of the situation.

In relation to prison conditions and the situation for other prisoners, the question is for what reason those other prisoners are detained. Is it appropriate that Daniel Tatlow-Devally and his co-defendants are in a prison of this kind for damaging property? That is fundamentally the charge at hand but it has escalated because the authorities are using legislation that was intended for use against organised crime. That is the context, and the question is whether his detention under those conditions is appropriate.

The Minister said it needs to be a given that there be a fair trial. So many things hinge on that assumption. The question of whether countries have a fair trial system is part of the assessment process for new EU member states. Many regulations hinge upon it. However, what if it is not a given? That is the fundamental point. That is why having a State representative in place to monitor the trial is important. Will the Minister agree to that?

Deputy Paul Murphy: Fundamentally, I do not accept that the denial of the right of an Irish citizen to a fair trial is a matter just for his or her legal team. I just do not accept that. It is a concern of the State if an Irish citizen is, in effect, being railroaded through a show trial. The State needs to be represented by an observer at that trial to see what is happening. Deputy Boyd Barrett has been organising a delegation of representatives to go there on 22 July. Deputies Farrell and Duncan Smith are going, as are Lynn Boylan MEP and Senator Stephenson. I hope others will join them.

However, the State itself, and the Minister, need to be represented there in an observer capacity. The senior counsel I mentioned states in the letter I referenced:

It does not strike me from what I have seen that the trial is in conformity with either EU law or the European Convention on Human Rights. Obviously, the Government can take a different view but I do not see how that view can be properly formed other than on the basis of a first-hand observation since there is no independent record being created of what is happening. We need observers for the Irish State on the next occasions.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I stress again that it is not appropriate for me as Minister to suggest or dictate where somebody should be detained. I appreciate that people have a view on the prison this individual is in and the conditions under which he is being kept. It is the same situation for all prisoners in that particular prison. It is not for me or anybody here to dictate or decide whether somebody is appropriately placed or otherwise, and nor is it appropriate to comment on the type of legislation under which the person is being charged.

If there is a sense or a view that the trial is not being conducted appropriately, we will respond accordingly. My officials, whom I have asked to engage directly with me on this, are keeping a very close eye on the situation. We are engaging directly with Daniel and his family. As we know, he has direct engagement with his legal team on this matter and a trial is due to start soon. I will monitor the situation and engage directly with my officials on it as things progress.

EU Membership

12. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the actions she will take to expedite EU membership for Ukraine and Moldova; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50086/26]

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: In congratulating the Minister as she embarks on our six-month Presidency of the European Council of Ministers, my question seeks to establish what she feels can be done to expedite Ukrainian and Moldovan membership of the EU. I ask this while welcoming the fact President Zelenskyy was front and centre at the celebrations of Ireland's accession to the Presidency yesterday. However, we must remember that Moldova cannot be left behind.

Deputy Helen McEntee: I acknowledge the colleagues who attended the opening ceremony yesterday. I hope President Zelenskyy's presence has shown not just our own citizens but the rest of Europe and the world that we fully support Ukraine and intend, through our Presidency, to do everything we can to continue that support and to put pressure on Russia. That includes supporting Ukraine on its accession path. I believe, as I think we all believe, that it is the only trajectory for Ukraine. The country is already defending every single one of us in its defence of itself. In so many ways, Ukraine is already part of our European community. It is about making sure we do everything we can to support the process for enlargement. We had that discussion at our bilateral meeting with President Zelenskyy. We discussed a number of things but particularly Ukraine's accession and how we can work towards that over the next six months.

Enlargement is a priority for us during our Presidency. We all know the benefits Ireland has experienced from membership. It is important that we support through the accession process other countries that want to join the European community and the EU. Moldova and Ukraine are two of the current candidate countries. They both applied for membership in 2022 and opened accession negotiations in 2024. Last year's European Commission annual enlargement report indicated that Moldova made the most one-year progress of all candidates during the reporting period. The same report described Ukraine's progress as remarkable. The Commission has confirmed that both countries are technically ready to open all the negotiating clusters.

It was very welcome that the first clusters opened for both Ukraine and Moldova two weeks ago. I acknowledge our colleagues in Cyprus and the work they have done to ensure that progress was made. From my visit to Ukraine earlier this year and from meeting representatives of Moldova, I am conscious of the very serious efforts both countries have been

making to meet the challenge of aligning their laws with the EU acquis under unprecedented circumstances.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: It is no wonder that Cyprus would be very sensitive to territorial integrity. As the Minister said, Ireland is committed to facilitating the opening of all remaining negotiating clusters with Ukraine and Moldova in the next six months. Enlargement is a merit-based process and, as recognised by the Commission, both Moldova and Ukraine have met the technical conditions for the opening of negotiations.

However, there were reports last week that, faced with renewed resistance from Hungary, the EU has been forced to change its plans and now aims to unblock two, rather than five, accession clusters with Ukraine and Moldova before the summer break. The suggestion is that the Union has scaled back its ambitions for Ukraine's accession talks and is now targeting the opening of just two negotiating clusters, not five, in July. That would be regrettable. The Minister fully appreciates how vital progress is to Ukraine in the context of the current conflict. She will also appreciate how equally vital it is to Moldova, which really reminds me of Ireland in the 1950s, that it not be isolated, that it move forward in tandem with Ukraine and that its membership be actively expedited.

Deputy Helen McEntee: As I was saying, great efforts have been made by both countries, particularly by Ukraine in what are unimaginable conditions, to make the changes they are making. That is why we want to support them in the best way we can. It is why, when I was in Ukraine earlier this year, I met with civil society groups that are playing a key role in advocating for and bringing forward those changes as quickly as possible.

The Deputy rightly pointed out some of the challenges we will face. For some time, under the Government of Viktor Orbán, we had significant challenges in reaching consensus to move forward on a number of supports for Ukraine, not least the €90 billion loan that was previously agreed by the Council leaders. That blockage has been removed and, thanks to the new Government under Péter Magyar, we have had the opening of the first round of clusters. Unfortunately, a potential blockage or issue has now emerged in regard to the opening of the remaining clusters. We are ambitious to open all five during our Presidency. That might not be straightforward but it just needs engagement and political dialogue. We need to work closely with all 26 member states to make sure issues of concern can be addressed and that we work towards opening all the remaining clusters.

I would, of course, like to see both countries moving together. They started this process together and they have worked together on getting to where they are now. We want to work closely with both of them in order to open the remaining clusters.

10 o'clock

As we all know, once the clusters are opened that is the start of another process and obviously that takes time as well.

Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil: I think we are disappointed that the new government in Hungary is still causing some difficulties. I appreciate the need for sensitive negotiations with that new government so that it bring Hungary fully in line with European values, which would be very

much supportive of this integration. The other matter is that there is a new government in Moldova, which has worked assiduously and has achieved great progress in preparing for EU membership. The issue of Transnistria, the occupied territory there, is a problem. Will the Minister assure us that she is and her fellow foreign ministers are conscious of this? Will she assure us that by continuing the occupation of Transnistria, the Russians are not going to be enabled to in some way frustrate the progress of Moldova moving towards full EU membership?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I am very conscious of the issue the Deputy has raised. Unfortunately, when we look at any of the countries on their path towards accession, nothing is straightforward for any country. Unfortunately, there are issues with individual member states and issues among those accession countries as well that still need to be resolved. That is why it takes as long as it does for a lot of countries. When I was in this role in European affairs ten years ago we were talking about Montenegro, Albania and other countries nearly being there. Now, ten years on, we hope to get Montenegro over the line later this year. We are working on the accession treaty. We hold the pen now for the next six months. We hope to close as many chapters as we can with Albania. Obviously, with Moldova and Ukraine we want to make as much progress as possible. We do have to work in consensus, and with all other countries to address concerns they may have, while at the same time supporting progress on the ground. Just because clusters have not opened, it does not mean the governments of Ukraine and Moldova cannot continue to make the reforms, whether in rule of law, civil areas and other areas, that need to happen, so that they are as ready as they can be. We will work to open as many of the clusters as we can, if not all of them, during our Presidency, and we will do that through consensus, working with all 26 member states and working closely with Moldova and Ukraine.

In terms of what this means for them, it is absolutely essential. In terms of our overall security and sending a very clear message to Russia that we fully support Ukraine and that it is part of our community, this is an important step in the process as well.

Northern Ireland

13. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the actions she will take to improve the all-island economy and bring forward a united Ireland. [49389/26]

Deputy Neale Richmond: I thank Deputy Gould sincerely for bringing forward this very timely issue. Supporting the all-island economy is a priority for the Government. This continues to grow, with figures for cross-Border trade now at over €17.2 billion. The institutions of the Good Friday Agreement help us co-operate with and understand one another, North and South, east and west, for the benefit of all the citizens of these islands. Since the restoration of the institutions in 2024, the North-South Ministerial Council has met 49 times across different formats to facilitate practical North-South co-operation in a breadth of areas. The Department of foreign affairs also continues to engage with business and stakeholders on North-South issues.

The all-island economy is also supported by the Windsor Framework, which protects the gains of the Good Friday Agreement and provides certainty for people and businesses across

the island of Ireland. It ensures that Northern Ireland retains access to the EU's Single Market for goods, and, crucially, avoids a hard border on the island of Ireland. The Government also invests in the all-island economy through the shared island initiative which is enhancing co-operation, connection, and mutual understanding. Since 2020, over € 1 billion has been allocated to a range of major cross-Border projects and programmes. Last week, the Government announced €377 million in shared-island funding, including for major infrastructure investments in transport, energy and health. The shared island initiative engages with all communities and traditions to build consensus around a shared future, regardless of whatever shape future constitutional change may take on the island, or between these islands.

The Government has always stated that in the event of a future referendum, within the consent provisions of the Good Friday Agreement, it will make all necessary preparations in accordance with the terms of the Constitution and the principles and procedures of the agreement. I look forward to working through some of these issues with the Deputy over the next few minutes.

Deputy Thomas Gould: The Minister of State spoke about all the necessary preparations if there is to be a referendum. It is nearly 30 years since the Good Friday Agreement. Now is the time to honour and commemorate the 30th anniversary by having these conversations. While I welcome Fine Gael's announcement about a blueprint for a unified Ireland, it is not a united Ireland. I recognise, however, it is a step in the conversation. Bringing forward a united Ireland is not just Sinn Féin's job; it is the job of all political parties and none. It is the job of all aspects of society to come forward with solutions. We want to engage with everyone - with unionists, loyalists, people of all different faiths and different politicians on the whole island. To move forward with a referendum on a united Ireland, we need to have the citizens' assembly. We are asking the Government to bring this forward. We will have Private Members' business in the Dáil next week and that will be a vital part of it. We are asking to engage with all members of the Government to bring that forward.

Deputy Neale Richmond: I will try to answer this as much politically as well as from a departmental and ministerial point of view. I acknowledge the Deputy's comments in relation to the Tánaiste's announcement in recent days. The name of my party is Fine Gael, or The United Ireland Party. I have been speaking about this for my entire political career. I go back to Dr. Garret FitzGerald's book *Towards a New Ireland* from 1972 and his work on bringing about an Anglo-Irish Agreement over 40 years ago that gave Dublin a say. I participated at many meetings of Ireland's Future. Just last week our former party leader and iar-Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, spoke at an SDLP conference, which was very well attended.

I do not disagree with the principle of a citizens' assembly. I believe that we will not oppose the Sinn Féin Private Members' business next week. There were two motions in the last calendar year in the Seanad and the Dáil that the Government did not oppose.

I believe a citizens' assembly should be held after the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has deemed that a poll is necessary. In that window, where the Secretary of State says a poll is needed and before that happens, we should have the citizens' assembly. We would use the workings of that citizens' assembly to make sure that when people go to vote in the referendum, there are two clear objectives. I am not looking to be confrontational or political about it but I fear that if we had a citizens' assembly now, there would 50% attendance and we

would not have the richness of conversation as opposed having a citizens' assembly where people knew there would be a legally binding referendum and a vote. People would play their part and would know what they were voting on. That is my opinion on it but I would welcome a conversation on it, if that makes sense.

Deputy Thomas Gould: Our Private Members' business next week will move forward the conversation on unity. It will provide that the Taoiseach publish a Green Paper on the means of consultation with the people on the entire island. This would mean the Government setting out ideas on our vision for health, education, public service and the economy. What it would really mean would be the Government outlining the steps we would see for a united Ireland and what it would mean to people, North and South. We are not trying to impose this on people. We are trying to start a conversation and we want people to engage.

I hear what the Minister of State is saying in relation to waiting for the Secretary of State but if we were to wait on the British, we would not be where we are now. We need to move forward, not in an adversarial way but to lead. This needs to be led by the Government. I hope the Secretary of State will come forward but if we are waiting for the British to announce a poll and then react, that is too late. We need to be working in advance. If we work in advance and have these conversations, we hopefully will bring people together.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Thank you, Deputy.

Deputy Thomas Gould: I will finish on this. I know we will never get everyone to agree but if everyone feels they have been listened to and they are part of the conversation, they may think there is an opportunity to move forward. I believe the vast majority of people want a united Ireland.

Deputy Neale Richmond: Just to clarify, it is not a matter of waiting for someone. It is the terms of the Good Friday Agreement. Ultimately, the responsibility to deem whether a border poll is necessary lies with the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. That is just a legal fact. Deputy Gould and I might not like it but we cannot fight it. It is not a matter of waiting. In my opinion, it is a period to use those two years to learn from the lessons of Brexit and the Scottish independence referendum and identify the issues.

I look forward to speaking on Sinn Féin's Private Members' Bill next week from both a personal point of view and a ministerial point of view. The conversation has long since started - we all know that - but since the post-Brexit years it has stepped into a very different space for a lot of individuals on this island, who perhaps were not at that stage and have been facilitated in more non-confrontational aspects to do that. From my party's point of view, that is certainly what we want to bring forward. Our vision of unity will probably be different from Deputy Gould's vision of unity but that is okay, and that is something people need to realise in due course.

To go back to the key point of the all-island economy and the here and now, that is where the Government has the immediate responsibility to develop those very tangible links such as when Senator Conor Murphy, as the then Minister for the Economy of Northern Ireland, and I

set up the first all-island trade mission. These are the sort of things we need to work on in the here and now.

Question No. 14 taken with Written Answers.

Overseas Development Aid

15. **Deputy Aisling Dempsey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade for an update on Irish aid to Nepal; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50097/26]

56. **Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if more Irish aid will be provided to Nepal, especially to areas impacted by leprosy; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50087/26]

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: I have just returned from a visit to Nepal. It was my second visit to that absolutely wonderful country. However, it is a country afflicted by dire poverty, where 20% of the population live below the poverty line. We have seen in March of this year the election of a new Government that promises to bring radical change to a country where there has been an unsettled political situation for quite some time. It strikes me that Nepal is one country where leprosy still exists as an indication of real and dire poverty. What can we do to help?

Deputy Neale Richmond: I am very grateful to Deputy Ó Fearghaíl for raising an issue and a country that, perhaps, never receives the sort of attention it deserves.

The Government's international development programme, Irish Aid, works globally to support the furthest behind first, focusing the major part of our official development assistance on the world's least developed countries. Nepal is classified as a least developed country. We have a number of multi-annual commitments in place for assistance in Nepal, and funding levels are expected to stay largely stable for the duration of these commitments.

Through the main funding mechanism for Irish-based international development organisations, Ireland's civil society partnership for a better world, we are providing €270,000 annually for Action Aid Ireland's work in Nepal. This work addresses the structural causes of gender-based violence, promotes women's empowerment and leadership and helps address the impact of climate change.

Through the civil society fund, we are providing €300,000 to support the work of smaller Irish organisations active in Nepal. These include the Irish Red Cross, the Nepal Leprosy Trust and the Social and Health Education Project. I have met two of those in very recent months when we brought the organisations specifically working on leprosy together at the Irish Aid offices in Limerick. Their projects focus on promoting social inclusion as well as improving health and well-being for the most vulnerable, including people affected by leprosy. Capacity-strengthening supports are also provided.

Through our partnership with Mísian Cara, which supports missionaries working to empower those left furthest behind, Ireland also provides support to education. In 2025, just under €94,000 in Irish Aid funding was allocated by Mísian Cara for projects seeking to

address school dropout rates among marginalised communities and children with disabilities in one of the most isolated districts of Nepal, as well as providing education on non-communicable diseases.

Through the embassy in New Delhi, which is accredited to Nepal, support was also provided to five smaller projects. These were focused on empowering people with disabilities, mental health, women and girls, and promotion of local economic growth through environmentally sustainable work. In 2025, total development assistance to Nepal through these channels amounted to €700,000.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: I thank the Minister of State for his response and sincere interest in this matter. It struck me when looking at this that 2,300 people migrate from Nepal every single day and 30% of the GDP of the country comes from remittances. There has been political chaos for a long time in a country populated by people of incredible dignity, who have an interest in education, who are committed to progress and peace, and there is a serenity about the people of Nepal that is quite something to behold.

Balendra Shah is the new Prime Minister. He is a young man of 36 years of age and a former mayor of Kathmandu. He promises to bring change but he will need support from countries like Ireland. Turning to our Presidency, I would appeal to see Ireland play a leading role during the course of our Presidency in encouraging Europe to do more.

Deputy Neale Richmond: It is really important to mention that over the last number of years Nepal has, unfortunately, been the victim of a number of very serious natural disasters. In 2023, a 5.7 magnitude earthquake struck, killing 153 people and injuring 400, at which time Ireland, through the Red Cross and Red Crescent, contributed to an EU aid package of €2 million. In April 2015, a more devastating earthquake of 7.2 magnitude struck just north west of Kathmandu. It was the worst in 80 years and over 8,700 people died. In response, Ireland directly provided €1.6 million in humanitarian response.

I note the Deputy's comment that, following very real youth protests and what was a sort of Gen z movement, we saw in March the election of 275 members and a new Prime Minister, a man younger than me, from the national independent party. I actually met his predecessor this week last year in Seville. The undertaking, regardless of who the leadership comprises in Nepal, is that Ireland will continue to be a partner at a bilateral level and also, crucially, at a European level and there is a great opportunity for that in due course.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghail: I am delighted to see the Minister of State has such a sense of youth about himself. The thing that struck me as well about that recent election, when I was there to participate in a training programme organised by INTER PARES for new parliamentarians, was the huge number of young people, even younger than the Minister of State, who have been elected to that new parliament. The deputy speaker of the parliament is a 25-year-old lady who has never held any political office before.

To go back to my original question, can we please use our good offices to create some sort of system within Europe whereby Europe offers more genuine support to this wonderful country to help it make the progress that it is capable of making but which it needs support in achieving? Let us remember that this country still has the plague of leprosy in its diverse

communities. They are living in the Himalayas, in valleys and mountains and in very dispersed locations. Can we please, through Europe, do more to help?

Deputy Neale Richmond: This will bring me to a broader section but I want to very much keep Nepal in the mind's eye because it is a key partner of the EU and one of the main areas where the EU provides supports is in the area of good governance, which would be of great support to the new, young parliament. Deputy Ó Fearghaíl described issues in relation to migration, remittances and poverty. There are over 3,000 Nepalese citizens here in the Republic and only 40 Irish citizens in Nepal, who are mainly doing voluntary and missionary work in the aid sector.

It comes back to the whole area of development co-operation, which is an area completely under attack. We are living at a time when the EU and its member states represent over 50% of global development co-operation and if we throw in Britain and Norway, that rises to two thirds. That is due not just to the decision of the United States but to many other actors and that is having a direct consequence. Over the next number of months, there is a real weight on the shoulders of Ireland to develop huge progress on agreeing an EU budget, the multi-annual financial framework. Key to that is making sure that the ring-fenced commitment to development co-operation and humanitarian aid is supported and that that, in turn, will support countries like Nepal.

Middle East

16. **Deputy Sinéad Gibney** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade her Department's position on the findings of the UN independent international commission of inquiry that Israel continues to commit genocide by targeting children in Gaza; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50251/26]

40. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade her views on the findings of a UN commission of inquiry to the effect that Israel has deliberately targeted children in the ongoing genocide against Palestinians and that Israeli military operations have continued to cause “unprecedented death, injury and trauma” to Palestinian children; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [50285/26]

Deputy Sinéad Gibney: Despite Palestine fading somewhat from the headlines, the UN independent international commission of inquiry has found that Israel continues to commit genocide in Gaza by targeting children. All states have a positive duty to act to prevent and stop genocide, so what is the Department doing in reaction to this report and its findings?

Deputy Helen McEntee: I propose to take Questions Nos. 16 and 40 together.

Like the Deputy and everybody else who has seen this report or heard about what it contains, I am beyond concerned. The elements and the findings of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory are absolutely appalling. I stress that because I know there have been attempts to suggest that this is some kind of targeted job, that there is an attempt here to undermine the Israeli Government or the Israel Defense Forces, IDF, or that facts have been made up. This is a completely independent inquiry on the

Palestinian territory. It is the first such commission of inquiry report to focus specifically on children and it adds new evidence and analysis to previous reports. It is a significant piece of work and something we take extremely seriously. I want to stress that. I think all member states do and all countries should take it extremely seriously.

As I said, the findings are disturbing, in particular the finding that the Israel Defense Forces have deliberately targeted children. We have all probably seen footage or clips or heard accounts from doctors in particular, where there are children coming in with very specific injuries and where the view is very clear that they have been targeted directly. Importantly, and more horrifically, it suggests that post ceasefire, this action is still happening. It is absolutely devastating and has to be investigated further. We would fully support any further investigation by the UN or any other independent commission of inquiry in this regard.

Israel must respect international and humanitarian law, and this report very clearly shows that it is not doing so. Clear obligations exist, as set out under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. They must be adhered to. All state parties have to uphold the rights of children in armed conflict and this report very clearly says that is not the case. The report was the focus of a side event on 26 June hosted by the Palestinian mission in Geneva with Save the Children during the ongoing session of the Human Rights Council. We co-sponsored this event alongside Spain and South Africa.

The commission of genocide is ultimately a matter of law that must be determined by a court or a judicial body. South Africa has taken the case. I mentioned earlier that under the Genocide Convention, we have filed a declaration of intervention in that case specifically with the ICJ. We continue to follow the case very closely. We have also filed a detailed written submission with the ICJ as part of the advisory proceedings concerning the obligations of Israel in relation to the UN and other international organisations, as well as states, in the occupied Palestinian territories. We have vocally and consistently called for appropriate actions in response to Israeli breaches of human rights and democratic principles. We use all the tools at our disposal - political, legal and diplomatic - to advocate for peace, accountability and an end to the Israeli Government's devastating policies in Gaza and the West Bank. We fully support accountability for Israel's egregious breaches of international law.

To that effect, I have made it very clear in my engagement on this matter - and not just with the EU High Representative, Ms Kaja Kallas - that during our Presidency, this matter will remain firmly on the agenda. This is a matter in respect of which I believe the EU needs to do more. Our credibility is completely at stake, if not already somewhat on the floor, regarding this matter. We need to be stronger in responding to what are very clear international human rights violations. There is a report here that says children are being specifically targeted in a conflict and in a post-conflict environment. If this does not make other countries stand up and listen, then I am not sure what else will.

I have no doubt that at the meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council which Ireland will host as part of its Presidency on 13 July other member states will reference this. It is something I will be strongly highlighting in our discussion with the Commission, when it brings forward - and I am assured it will have them before that meeting - proposals on how the EU could potentially respond collectively to what is happening. I know it is specific to the West Bank but, as far as I am concerned, any of the actions we take are in response to the West Bank, the situation in Lebanon, the disastrous humanitarian situation in Gaza and all of these reports that

suggest what we thought and somewhat knew was happening prior to the ceasefire is unfortunately still happening on the ground.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): Unfortunately, we are out of time. That concludes oral questions to the Minister for foreign affairs.

Teachtaireacht ó Roghchoiste - Message from Select Committee

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Conor Sheehan): The Select Committee on Enterprise, Tourism and Employment has completed its consideration of the Industrial Development (Amendment) and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill 2026 and has made no amendments thereto.

Ceisteanna ar Sonraíodh Uain Dóibh - Priority Questions

Technological Universities

81. **Deputy Donna McGettigan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to carry out a full review of the technological universities to ensure that they are reaching the targets set out for them when they were established. [49642/26]

Deputy Donna McGettigan: Will the Minister carry out a full review of technological universities to ensure that they are reaching the targets set out for them when they were established?

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy James Lawless): Advancing the technological university, TU, and institute of technology, IoT, sector is a major priority for Government, and for me. This is evidenced by significant targeted investment over many years and demonstrates our commitment to balanced regional development, building research and innovation capacity and with it, Ireland's global competitiveness, all while increasing access to university education for more students and delivering it on a regional basis as the TUs are doing.

My Department has provided extensive funding and support to aid the TUs that are undergoing extensive and complex transformation programmes. Most recently, I announced allocations of up to €65.8 million under the targeted enhancement fund, TEF, to support the continued transformation and strategic development of higher education institutions in the technological sector and publicly funded specialist colleges. That TEF funding is to enhance that offering in terms of capabilities and everything from information technology, IT, systems to project management and human resources management, and make sure they are fully strengthened and given the capacity-building supports they require.

At this point, legacy management structures in the IoTs, have transitioned to new cross-campus executive university management structures in four of the five TUs. The predecessors

in the IoTs have been amalgamated into cross-campus executive teams. The final one, South East Technological University, SETU, is in transition and is currently being assessed. These roles are critical in supporting the TUs to deliver the strategic missions.

Additionally, I expect to see further progression now that I have sanctioned a new professor grade for TUs, which I secured Cabinet approval for just last December. That will support the TUs in their engagement, education, research and innovation capacities. I have also distributed over €223 million in capital funding to the sector across a variety of programmes over the past term, and I continue to work on the metrics under the TU Act, working towards the ambitions to make sure they are an absolute success.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I am not sure if the Minister is familiar with the recent report published by two Munster Technological University researchers. When asked if Irish TUs are failing, they concluded that the Irish TU project has been characterised by financial pressure, the death of regional provision in higher education, mission drift and confused policymaking, and that it has failed to meet any key targets. I acknowledge a lot of this was carried out before the Department of further and higher education was even established but it is still important to reflect on the success or failure of the concept.

Reading the report, the Higher Education Authority, HEA, was set on forcing IoT mergers through impoverishment of smaller institutions, and that there was a drop of 38% in State funding. Academic staff issues were largely ignored. There was very little meaningful engagement. In their applications for TU designation, all consortia stated that they expected increased student numbers and all except Technological University Dublin, TUD, stated that they expected an extra increase over the short term due to TU designation but this bounce never came to pass.

Deputy James Lawless: I am aware of the report. I have read it. I should say that has not yet been peer reviewed. It is a draft report by two academics in, I think, Tralee that is in circulation. I am open to all feedback and suggestions, but I add the caveat that it has not yet been peer reviewed. Other academics I have spoken to do not think it will pass the peer review process, but that is open-ended.

It is a curious report in many ways. One of the claims it contains is to the effect that the planned amalgamation between Dundalk Institute of Technology, DKIT, and Queen's University Belfast is a system failure. I find that quite extraordinary, because I think that is a great, ambitious and exciting all-island university project. It depends where you are coming from and I think those academics may have a particular axe to grind. They are entitled to have that - it is their prerogative - but I certainly would not share all of the report's findings. There may be hitting some points but I think it is a curious perspective they have taken.

More generally, I would say that TUs are not failing. The number of students, including research students, at the TUs continues to grow. There might be ups and downs, as in any sector, but, widely, they are growing, and they certainly they continue to invest.

We have a number of exciting, new courses. For example, the new professional veterinary course will be offered in both Atlantic Technological University, ATU, and South East

Technological University, SETU, from this September. I might come back on this point in the next round. There are many new courses coming on stream.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: As I said, this all started before this Department was created but there are a few outstanding questions. There is a difference in the salaries of TU graduates compared with those from the university sector. A total of €363 million was spent. Does the Minister think that represents value for money?

The Minister talked about research students, but there is a difference in this regard. Smaller institutions seem to be losing out while the larger ones seem to be gaining in some cases. That causes implications for the balance of power within the university sector and poses significant challenges to regional provision.

There are questions around fees for consultants. It is a massive issue, particularly when some consultants were appointed outside the procurement process. Some of them were former senior Government authorities, appointed to the very institutions they were responsible for regulating. A report on the whole needs to be looked at.

Deputy James Lawless: I am always open to feedback. The academics and authors of that report are entitled to their views, as are others. I just do not share all of their conclusions. As the Deputy said, the consultant spending was before my time. A lot of it was before the Department even existed. The TU sector on the whole has been an enormous success, however. We now have TUs up and down the country. We have regional universities in Letterkenny, Tralee and Waterford, places which never had university status before. There are many other locations as well. It is exciting for those regional areas and towns and their hinterlands.

I mentioned the veterinary course in ATU. That means that we now have veterinary students coming through from Donegal, Sligo and the north west who do not have to travel to Dublin or, even worse, Poland for their professional education. I was in Waterford recently launching the new SEAM lab, which is a material science facility as part of SETU. It will engage in exciting, leading-edge and enterprise-focused research. The TUs have been a tremendous success already, providing world-class university education in the regions, along with investment in research.

In respect of reviews, spending controls etc. the HEA has commissioned a review of both the technological university transformation fund, TUTF, and the technological sector advancement fund, TSAF. There are reports under way. We always have to ensure we are getting value for money, spending competitively and getting resources to meet our approach.

Third Level Fees

82. **Deputy Jen Cummins** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to reduce fees for this coming academic year ahead of the summer break, CAO results and planning for the academic year ahead. [50685/26]

Deputy Jen Cummins: The summer break is ahead. I am sure many leaving certificate students are relaxing on a beach somewhere. Others have got jobs and are planning the year ahead. They are trying to figure out what they are going to do next year, how they are going

to do it, where they are going to live, etc. However, what they want to know the most is the level of fees next year and whether it will be reduced.

Deputy James Lawless: I thank the Deputy. I wish all students sitting examinations the very best of luck, as well as all those students who are coming to an end of their secondary education, whether they are going to college, further education or elsewhere. Like the Deputy, I will not get much of a break. While this House breaks up in two or three weeks' time, I will host the European research Ministers the week after that. There are a number of engagements over the summer as part of the Presidency. We will all be busy in our constituencies as well. I hope those in this House get some break, however. It is important to get a chance to recharge.

While there are several hundred commitments in the programme for Government, every year, this budgetary measure seems to be the one that gets asked four or five months ahead of the budget process. No more than any Minister in any Department, I simply cannot write the October budget in June or July. However, I will engage with the Ministers in the Department of Finance and the Department of public expenditure on this. A budget Estimate package is being put together in my Department. I am working with my officials to devise it. It will focus on the cost of college and supporting students in every way I can. That can be multifaceted. While it can include fees, it may also include areas such as SUSI, student accommodation, cost of travel, cost of materials and a variety of other things, such as placements. We will be engaging on all of those areas. Certainly, it would be premature for me to make any prediction, good, bad or indifferent, as to the content of my budget package four months out.

I will recap on some of the measures I have introduced already because it is important to put them on the record again. In the previous budget, I was pleased to introduce the first ever permanent fee cut for students since free fees were introduced almost 30 years ago with a €500 permanent reduction. It replaced the transient, previous cost-of-living measures, which were only ever temporary and could not be relied upon year to year. The €500 reduction is here to stay. It has benefitted an estimated 108,000 undergraduate students and 14,000 apprentices. That reduction cost €55.4 million this year. It is baked in at the baseline. While I may well do more every year, that reduction is there to stay. It is not temporary like previous measures. As I said, going into the budget ahead, I will again be engaging on fees and many other items. While fees are extremely important for anyone who is liable to pay them, many families and students do not pay them at all because they are subsidised, either in full or in part, by the SUSI grant system.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I know people were happy with the reduction. It is swings and roundabouts as to whether the total level went up or down, but it is what it is. No one in this House can deny the challenges students face. Of course, there are students who do not pay because of SUSI. I appreciate that the threshold for SUSI increased, but there are students stuck in the middle. This is the challenge. We have heard of students sleeping in cars or dropping out because they cannot afford it. Some students are working almost full-time jobs to get through their college course. This is not what we want. As I have said before in this House, the love of learning is why we want students to go to third level, whatever course they decide to do.

Students who have just finished the leaving certificate or the leaving certificate applied have been under huge pressure. They need time to figure out who they are and what they want to

do and discover what the future might hold for them. However, if they are under massive pressure during this time, they will not be able to do that. That will cause students to leave third level education, which will affect their self-esteem and all the different parts of their life.

Deputy James Lawless: I am committed to continue to reduce the cost of college and support measures, including fee reductions, wherever I can. Let us talk to the two cohorts the Deputy mentioned. Students sleeping in cars is an appalling vista. Of course, no student should be in that situation. If those students are paying fees, something has gone badly wrong. The only students who should be paying full fees – they are €2,500 because they have been reduced by €500 on a flat rate – are those students in households with an income above €120,000. If a student has a household income of €120,000 and is sleeping in a car, something is not adding up. I invite any student in that situation to engage with me. Alternatively, they can engage with the Deputy and she can bring it to my attention. We can then see whether something is slipping through the cracks because that should not be happening.

When it comes to students working full time, I have increased the student disregard for SUSI eligibility to ensure that students' part-time work is not counted against them when they are applying for their grants.

I have also taken a number of other measures as well as increasing the threshold to €120,000, which brought more and more students into the system. When it comes to the non-adjacent rates, I increased the grants for any student who has to travel 30 km or more to college. There is also more funding for students with disabilities or mental health challenges. A variety of packages have been introduced in the last budget. I hope to do a lot more in the coming budget but four months out is too early to outline exactly what it will contain.

Deputy Jen Cummins: The Minister is right about students sleeping in their car whose parents earn over €100,000. While €100,000 is a huge amount of money, the difficulty and challenge are when there are several children in the family also in college or doing things. That puts pressure on family budgets. We have also spoken in this Chamber about students who are alienated from their parents but cannot access SUSI grants because their income is based on what their parents earn. We need to iron that out. While we are talking about a small number of students in this situation, we need to iron it out completely to have an education system inclusive of everyone.

Of course, it is not just young people struggling with fees. Older people who decide to go back to college are also affected. It is a huge strain on them. I am aware of a mother who is under huge pressure. She is a lone parent and has to pay fees on top of paying rent and trying to get her kids through things. It is a challenge. We need to be as supportive as we can. It is not just about those aged 17 and 18 going to college; it is also about the older person who decides to go back to college or go to college for the first time. They need to be supported as much as we can. Broadly, it may work for most, but it does not work for everyone, and we must focus on including everyone.

Deputy James Lawless: I agree with what the Deputy said. For the record, it is €120,000 rather than €100,000. I increased the threshold last year. Indeed, the Tánaiste, when he held this portfolio, increased it before me. We have continued to increase that threshold to the level

that up to 70% of Irish households now qualify for at least some form of fee subvention. In fact, all benefit from the universal measures but 70% of households are now eligible for other supports.

The Deputy mentioned the scenario of multiple children from a household attending college. These are the cases I would like to look at in a bit more detail in order to see how they might be dealt with by means of targeted measures as opposed to taking a one-size-fits-all approach, which we may well do also. We must consider whether there are particular courses that are missing out at the moment and on which we could focus? The Deputy mentioned the alienation scenario, which is always raised with me and which I am taking a good look at in order to identify what we can do.

There are a number of other measures. The student accommodation strategy is up and running. Some results have begun to emerge already and some proposals emanating from the strategy in terms of greater accommodation provision. I hope to see that being accelerated as fast as possible. We have invited all colleges to make submissions in respect of the strategy. There are a number of different facets to the cost of attending college and making life easier for students.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I call Deputy Kenny.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: There is a question in my name, but Deputy McGettigan's question is the next to be taken.

Transport Infrastructure Ireland

83. **Deputy Donna McGettigan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to review the issue of commuter student terminology; and to recognise the poor experience of many commuter students in the higher education system. [49643/26]

Deputy Donna McGettigan: Will the Minister initiate a discussion around commuter student terminology? Will he recognise the poor experience of the many commuter students in the higher education system?

Deputy James Lawless: For some students, commuting to college may be a practical choice if they live close to campus. For many others, however, it is not a choice; it is a necessity. This is not about preferences; it arises as a result of accommodation shortages. Two of my daughters recently commuted to college, so I understand it gives rise to an additional burden and can be an impediment in terms of full participation in campus life. One of the things I have said is that it is an absolute goal of mine to allow students to have the full college experience, which means experiencing broader education, taking courses outside of their core disciplines, taking part in the whole networking experience, participating in student societies and doing all of the things that are part of college life. The provision of high-quality student accommodation at scale on campus is a lever to unlock that. It is critical that we deliver this.

In the context of those students who are commuting for their own reasons, including with regard to the distance they live from campus or for family reasons, it is important to recognise that we want to support them in terms of their need to commute and what we can do in each case. We provide student accommodation for those who want to live on campus or adjacent to it, but we also want to support the commuter student experience in other ways.

The national student accommodation strategy published in March found that in 2024, the most recent year for which data are available, 18% of students living at home experienced commutes that are considered to be excessive. That highlights the ongoing need for suitable accommodation, and that is central to the planning in the student accommodation strategy. One of the reasons I increased the level of grants in the most recent budget was to recognise the additional costs for students who are commuting and travelling long distances. People also have access to the student assistance fund, student accommodation systems and 1916 bursary. An additional €10.5 million has been made available this year to support those students, and 30,000 or more undergraduate and postgraduate students have benefited as a result. Collectively, those measures recognise the additional burden faced by students who are commuting to college and should go some way towards assisting them.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I take this opportunity to mention a study by Professor Liz Thomas that was informed by a commitment to institutional change rather than just expecting commuter students to fit in with unreformed higher education institutions, HEIs, which states:

This would be facilitated by an institutional enabling environment which involves aligning institutional policies, processes and organisations, and engaging with stakeholders from senior leadership to staff and students around a shared goal of an inclusive experience and equitable outcomes ...

I have spoken to students about this. I spoke to students at Jigsaw yesterday who informed me that they feel that nobody seems to be talking or speaking to them about this and that they want to be recognised as a group. They said it is a burning issue for them. One of the issues they spoke about was having to get public transport at times that do not match up with their lectures. They get to college very early and do not get home until late at night. They have to leave early. The Minister says he wants them to enjoy the whole college experience, but they are not able to do this. Because of the issue with buses, some of them are missing lectures. There is a poor outcome in some data which shows that those making long commutes are suffering.

Deputy James Lawless: I talk to students all the time. I have almost daily interactions with them. I also meet formally with AMLÉ on a regular basis. I sat down with its representatives very recently and had a good chat. That is an ongoing conversation I am involved in.

In terms of what initiatives can be taken, I welcome the Deputy's reference to Professor Thomas's report. If she wants to share it with me, I will be to look at it and see if we can action some of the recommendations it contains. One thing we are actioning is a new pilot initiative to bring together the higher education institutions, the National Transport Authority, NTA, councils and transport operators to look at a pilot scheme to improve sustainable commuting for students and to consider the different routes and timetables and the journeys that students make in order to see if we can make sure they are all aligned and synchronised to support the

student experience. The Government has supported young people with the young adult Leap card, which complements the student Leap card and which offers a 50% discount on travel fares across the Transport for Ireland network. That is practical assistance. My children use the student Leap card, which is a very helpful and practical support.

Deputy Donna McGettigan: I very much welcome the NTA, local councils and students being brought together. That is going to be very positive in terms of helping those who are commuting. The TU students' union also brought out a report. It states that approximately 25% of students say they have to commute for two hours or more. When I spoke to students about having to commute on buses for that length of time, we discussed whether they could use it as study time. However, it emerged that travel sickness would prevent some people using it for that purpose. That is on top of everything else. It will be great if that group works out and if helps students, because then they will be able to enjoy some of the overall college experience. At the end of the day, however, as the Minister mentioned earlier, the lack of student and affordable accommodation is an issue, particularly when it comes to trying to resolve the situation in its entirety.

Deputy James Lawless: I used to commute by train and would try to get a bit of work done, but it depends on the nature of a person's journey and whether they suffer from travel sickness or whatever. This goes back to the core point I made at the start that while some students might find it convenient and preferable, it would be really unfair to suggest - and I would never do so - that students are doing it by choice in all cases. Some people just have no choice and would prefer to have accommodation close to campus. That is why we have a pilot scheme.

I have engaged with the Minister, Deputy O'Brien, in the context of our Departments working together on this matter. I am looking to drill down into the detail of smarter travel plans and of aligning matters. When we meet representatives of colleges, they will inform us that there is a pattern of issues, including no bus stops outside lecture halls, students having to walk a mile down the road or whatever to get a bus or timetables not being aligned with lecture times. There are quick wins that we can identify by means of the pilot scheme. We can also look at ways to pull everything together in a way that works better for students and colleges. There may well be some relatively easy changes that we can make. If there are, we will certainly make them.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I apologise to Deputy McGettigan for getting the call wrong earlier.

Apprenticeship Programmes

84. **Deputy Eoghan Kenny** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the way in which apprenticeship provision to the higher education sector is funded; and whether his Department expects the funding in question will be used to increase administrative and support staffing in line with the growth in apprentice numbers and the recruitment of additional lecturing staff, technicians and heads of trades, given that some institutions have recorded increases in apprentice registrations of up to 72%, without any corresponding increase in administrative staff. [50204/26]

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: There is a positive aspect to this question. In the context of the way in which apprenticeship provision is funded through his Department, does the Minister expect the funding in question to be used to increase administrative and support staffing in line with the growth in apprenticeship numbers, for the recruitment of additional lecturing staff, technicians, and heads of trades, given that some institutions have recorded an increase in apprenticeship registration of up to 72%, without any corresponding increase in administrative staff. We have seen an increase in the number of apprenticeships people are taking up. In line with that, the number of administrative staff and those teaching apprentices must also be increased.

Deputy James Lawless: As the Deputy said, very fairly and positively, investing in Ireland's apprenticeship system is a central priority for me, as Minister, and my Department. Investment in the apprenticeship system has more than doubled, from a base of €184 million in 2020 to more than €415 million this year. That is very significant increase in investment in the apprenticeship sector. It reflects the Government's focus on the apprenticeship system and includes support staff, administrative staff and staff in other roles.

I am not aware of the specific case the Deputy referenced. He mentioned that there are some cases where support and administrative staff to go with the apprentices have not been provided. I am very open to the Deputy coming to me with the details in that regard. I will then be happy to interrogate the matter a little further if there is an issue in a particular location.

Higher education institutions are autonomous bodies with responsibility for managing their own staff and resources. My Department provides them with significant funding, but, to an extent, how they manage that in terms of staff hires or otherwise, is within their own control and remit.

This year, my Department is providing €113 million in apprenticeship funding to the HEA. That money will be suballocated to the higher education institutions. It covers the full costs of delivery, including operational costs like those relating to staffing. For craft apprenticeships, funding is provided by means of block grants, with a set amount allocated to each apprenticeship training block delivered by individual providers.

That allocation covers all apprenticeship costs, including teaching, technical and administrative staff costs. For consortia-led apprenticeships, the Higher Education Authority agrees a unit cost with providers that covers the full cost of delivery, including staff costs. Decisions on recruitment, deployment and internal resourcing are matters for the institution themselves, but notwithstanding that, I am happy to have a look at the individual case. I might refer it on to the relevant HEI or education and training board, ETB, as appropriate. If the Deputy likes, he can bring it to my attention and I can do that.

More broadly, SOLAS has been tasked with working through the apprenticeship system and making sure that we address any backlogs that have arisen and fast-track the creation of more places.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: That is appreciated. Institutions have come to me directly to say that, although they understand that they are the ones that deploy staff to the busiest departments

of their institutions, they feel that there is not enough funding coming to them to do so, given the increase in apprenticeships in all of their institutions.

While I thank the Minister for giving me the opportunity to focus on one particular institution, there is a broader aspect to this question. We have seen a significant number of people taking up apprenticeship roles in this country, which is positive and I thank the Minister and his officials in the Department for that. Is the Department looking at giving additional funding for the institutions to provide them with the opportunity to employ more staff, including technicians and administrative staff, so that they can keep pace with the number of students coming to them looking for help with their apprenticeships?

Deputy James Lawless: A few recent recruitment drives have been undertaken. SOLAS launched a recruitment campaign in late 2024 for new further education and training, FET, instructor staff nationwide. A campaign was run in the national media looking to recruit those personnel. One of the outputs of that saw the Dublin and Dún Laoghaire ETB in Loughlinstown fill a number of electrical instructor posts through a radio advertising campaign. Another five training centres in the City of Dublin ETB were also supported through that. There were various different recruitment campaigns looking to fill other posts. Some 135 posts were filled as a result. It started with the electrical instructors but it spread right across to carpentry and joinery, plumbing, motor mechanics, pipe fitting, heavy goods vehicles, HGVs, metal fabrication, advanced manufacturing, hairdressing and much more. I will not go through every single area. There were a couple of dozen different disciplines that had increased recruitment as a result of the campaigns. We are certainly trying. In some cases, the difficulties may not be due to a lack of budget, but a lack of available staff. That is why we are trying to do recruitment campaigns to bring in instructors, support staff and people for other such roles.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I am sure that the Minister is aware of this but I want to put it on the record. The figure of 72% came to me through Munster Technological University, MTU, in Tralee, which the Minister is very familiar with and has visited. It is important to put that on the record, but it is also important to outline the broader aspect of it. We hear a great deal about the need to build more homes, deliver major infrastructural projects and strengthen Ireland's competitiveness. None of these ambitions can be achieved unless we invest in the people who train our apprentices. Investment in apprenticeships is not simply an education issue, but an economic necessity. I know the institutions where staff have worked tirelessly to accommodate record numbers of apprenticeships, like MTU in Tralee. It is important that we continue to put this on the record.

Over the last 18 months in the Chamber, we have had robust debates about apprenticeships. There are a lot of challenges facing apprenticeships. I will specifically mention pay and conditions for apprentices. I know that is being worked through with the Department, albeit perhaps through a piecemeal approach. I again want to put on the record that the number of people taking up apprenticeships in every sector is positive, and has been so for the last 18 months.

Deputy James Lawless: I entirely agree. I thank Deputy Kenny for his support and the support of his party on the broader policy initiative. What he says is true. I have visited MTU in Tralee. I have visited all of the different technological universities, TUs, and their

components at least once, if not a few times. I recently held a construction skills roundtable event in UCD where we brought together the employers in the construction space, the trade unions and the training agencies - SOLAS, the ETBs and the HEA for a conversation on exactly that.

The Deputy touched on our ambition as a Government to build housing and infrastructure at scale, be it the metro, the DART+ projects, the roads network, renewable energy or the energy grid. We are investing significantly in all of these under the national development plan, with a budget of over €200 billion over the lifetime of the Government. To meet infrastructure, housing and other needs, we must have the capacity to build this out. That requires multiple craft apprenticeships coming on stream and being supported, and having that pipeline of talent coming through. I am committed to driving that on. It is a key part of our national initiative.

Third Level Education

85. Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science whether he will intervene urgently to address the concerns raised by petitioners, unions and academic bodies in a recently published open letter (details supplied), by immediately providing ring-fenced funding for non-commercial research. [50756/26]

Deputy Paul Murphy: I am sure the Minister is aware of it but I want to draw his attention to the open letter signed by more than 2,300 academics and researchers, which rings the alarm bell about Research Ireland's 2026 to 2030 strategy. The letter states, "The new strategy is structurally, rhetorically and materially focused on commercially translatable research and economic impact rather than supporting bedrock, fundamental, discovery research and research for the public good." Will the Minister take this on board and meet the petitioners? Will he intervene?

Deputy James Lawless: As the Deputy is aware, Taighde Éireann - Research Ireland - was established in 2024 with the legislative remit to promote excellence and research across all activity fields and disciplines. Its first strategy was published this March following extensive consultation. I am satisfied that the strategy meets the legislative remit of the agency. The strategy and the publicly available programme plan accord with my own central philosophy, which applies just two very simple criteria to all disciplines: research should be excellent and impactful. What "impactful" means is not defined narrowly, but very broadly. It can mean many things. It can be societal resilience, economic impact or a long-term, slow-burn project that manifests in an entirely different way than how it was first conceived, as with all basic and frontier research. Impact is not a narrow metric at all; it is quite a wide one.

I have also codified into my Department's strategy as one of its four central pillars that curiosity and the pursuit of knowledge are a public good, which speaks to the benefit of discovery research *a priori* without any particular exit conditions or targets at the start. The strategy has a balanced portfolio across all disciplines and career stages, with funding across different areas of study, from the arts, humanities and social sciences, AHSS, through to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, STEM - and across the spectrum of funding.

I am very familiar with the letter. Obviously, I have read it but I also met the petitioners and the lead authors of it very recently. I am engaging with them. The Deputy quoted one line from the letter. I think they have actually resiled from that line because when we met, they refocused their attention on one or two particular items. I dare say there is a level of rhetoric or subjectivity in the letter - that is their prerogative. Some of the arguments do not stand up to scrutiny but others have more merit and I am engaging with them on those. I was open to engaging with them on all of the arguments but a number of those are perhaps a little bit political or subjective. Having said that, there certainly are some very good people involved and I have been engaging with them. I have asked Research Ireland to have a structured engagement with the group going forward to ensure the petitioners' concerns are heard and reflected in the new plan.

Deputy Paul Murphy: It seems to me that what has happened is effectively a corporate or partially corporate capture of our research programme. If it continues, this is going to be to the detriment of all of us and the detriment of our education system and society, which will lose out on research that does not have an immediate commercial application and, therefore, is not being prioritised under the new strategy.

The petitioners emphasise that there was a lack of participatory process in the development of this strategy. It was not based on evidence. They emphasise that what we see here is industry-centred, commercially-focused, profit-seeking priorities at the expense of arts, humanities and social sciences. In particular, they warn about the dismantling of the current PhD scholarship and postdoctoral fellowship programmes. That is what is being proposed, with a prioritisation of research that is profit related and commercially driven by corporations. This would be to the detriment of us all.

Deputy James Lawless: There were seven bullet points in the letter. I think six of them have been accepted as perhaps not being of the same level of concern as they were. The engagement was helpful in that regard because of the engagement with the authors on a number of those points.

I strongly reject the assertion of a corporate culture. Again, maybe it is a little bit political and subjective.

11 o'clock

I appreciate that the Deputy is entitled to say it but I do not think it is a fair characterisation. There is no requirement whatsoever that there be an immediate, or any, economic impact. In fact, the strategy is very wide-ranging and allows for significant funding of discovery research, which I have always argued for. There are no metrics tied to corporate outputs, as the Deputy might have suggested. That was probably more than a little unfair.

I take the point on the Government of Ireland scholarship. That is the one that we agree needs to be revisited and examined. There are certainly merits in the proposed new approach but I also accept that there are legitimate concerns raised as well. There is engagement under way, facilitated by myself but ultimately between Research Ireland and the research community. I have had a number of meetings on that in recent weeks and will continue to do so.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Just to confirm, the Minister is saying that he is open to changes continuing to take place to this strategy. That would obviously be welcome. I ask the Minister to commit to prioritising research that is for the public good. "Research on economic inequities, democratic participation, mental health, housing injustices, climate justice, education, and the full range of human experiences and societal processes must be valued on its own terms". That is a quote from the petition, which I think is very important. The current proposal suggests that non-applied research has to demonstrate its future economic utility in order to qualify for funding. That is precisely the problem with a short-term economic utility focus, which then leads to a downgrading of humanities, social sciences and so on in favour of those that have a more immediate commercial application, which would be a real problem.

Deputy James Lawless: I do not think it actually does say that. I say that in a genuine spirit of partnership. I am not trying to catch the Deputy out or correct him. If he can find where it says that and bring it to my attention, I would welcome him doing so and we will have a look at it. I know the letter makes those claims but I do not think they are borne out in a detailed study of the strategy. If they are, it is not something I would support. I have been on the record of this House for many years saying that we need to support research across the full technology readiness level, TRL, spectrum from discovery and frontier research right through to applied. Of course, applied research has a really strong place in economic engagement and driving our enterprise and our knowledge economy is at the core. That creates jobs, talent and knowledge that can support both our economy and our society. Equally, discovery research is ultimately at the heart of all knowledge. Most of the leading, significant progressions of society and civilisation have come about through discovery research.

In terms of funding for the arts, humanities and so on, that is ring-fenced within the strategy. It is proportionate to international comparisons and benchmarks, and certainly on a par with the historic funding of arts, humanities and so on through different research agencies such as the Irish Research Council, Science Foundation Ireland or the previous organisations. There is no reduction in that at all in the strategy or elsewhere. In fact, it is actually a ring-fenced fund.

Question No. 86 taken with Written Answers.

Ceisteanna Eile - Other Questions

Apprenticeship Programmes

87. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the reforms he plans on implementing to increase take-up of craft apprenticeships; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50241/26]

Deputy Paul Murphy: The number one reform that would make the most difference is ensuring that apprentices at least get the national minimum wage from the start. That is not a radical demand. I was previously on the committee and this came up with everybody we spoke to - apprentices having to pay loads of money for tools and so on and not even getting the minimum wage. At the very least, let us give apprentices the minimum wage.

Deputy James Lawless: As I said to Deputy Eoghan Kenny a few moments ago, craft and construction apprenticeships are central to delivering vital infrastructure, including housing, and sustaining economic growth. As Minister, I have prioritised annual investment in apprenticeship delivery, which has more than doubled since my Department was established, going from €184 million in 2020 to over €415 million in 2026. Our apprenticeship system has, accordingly, continued to grow. Overall registrations increased by 78%, from just under 5,500 five years ago to just under 10,000 today, with craft registrations in particular rising significantly in that period.

We have a programme for Government target of 12,500 new registrations by 2030, with two thirds in craft and construction-related areas. I have recently secured Cabinet approval for a new action plan for apprenticeships to support further growth in the apprenticeship sector, attract more young people into careers through apprenticeships, and pivot more people towards the apprenticeship route as an equal alternative to the CAO path and the traditional higher educational route, one that can lead to a very satisfying, rewarding career in many ways.

On the Deputy's particular point about the wage of an apprentice, I take the point on board that is often raised. It is significantly more than any student will receive, which is zero. A student does not get paid at all and an apprentice does get paid as they progress through. It is not unique among occupations to receive no or little funding by way of payment during training. When I trained as a barrister - as a devil - we were not paid either. It is not unique to apprentices. There are many professions where this happens to people who go in at the early stages.

Typically, it begins to surpass the minimum wage after second year. By the time someone is out working in the economy post qualification, the median wage is about €915 within two years of qualification, which compares very favourably with alternative pathways that other students and young people might follow. I would again stress to anyone thinking about it that it is a very attractive and rewarding career option for many to go into.

Deputy Paul Murphy: That is a bit of a hard case to make to young people who are looking at their options and see that they will be getting paid €7.67 an hour in the first year, or just over half the national minimum wage. I am in favour of an increased student grant and so on, but the difference is that these people are working. They are creating value for their employers. It is a real obstacle. According to Mr. Ben Friel, who was at the Joint Committee on Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science when I was a member, many apprentices dropped out in the first year because they could not afford the tools and were expected to pay big upfront costs. The low pay, along with the fees and the price of tools, was creating many barriers to entry.

We introduced a Bill to scrap the exemption for apprentices to ensure that everyone would get the minimum wage. I was contacted by multiple apprentices saying their situations were not doable and they could not exist. These are often people with kids - we heard statistics on that. Many of them are in their 20s or older. They are not young people. This is not a bit of pocket money. They deserve to get the minimum wage at the very least.

Deputy James Lawless: I think that is fair. We are trying through Government policy to encourage people at different life stages to enter the apprenticeship journey. I agree that it is

not just young people coming out of school and going into apprenticeships any more. There are people crossing over. I met a number of apprentices, including people mid-career and at mid-life stages, some of whom had families and other commitments, so I get that. It is true, though, that if you take the usual alternative scenario of a full-time higher education course, you could have a flat with four people sharing together - two apprentices and two students - and the apprentices will be getting €7 or €8 an hour while the students will not be getting anything per hour. If we look at the alternative pathways, apprentices are being paid something as they go through and that increases in line with their training. There is a balance as well, because the employer has to be incentivised to take on the apprentice. For any trainee, they are probably costing more at the start than they are giving back in terms of useful output, given that it takes a while for them to become productive in their workforce.

We engage with the trade unions all the time and have a framework in place where the trade unions sit down and set rates in partnership with the employers and the educational framework. That is the model we have followed to date.

Deputy Paul Murphy: An apprentice - a first-year motor mechanic - contacted me after we introduced the Bill. He said:

I am currently working a 40-hour week at €6.20 an hour. I am expected to pay for my own tools. To be fair, the employer I am with gives a tool allowance of €250 but that would barely get you much. To even get into an apprenticeship in Ireland it is a minimum requirement across most trades you must be able to drive and hold a licence. As a first year, I am expected to pay the extortionate prices of insurance on top of loan repayments for the car.

Even if we forget that point for a minute - I rarely forget the issue of workers' rights and people getting less than the minimum wage - if we are serious about addressing the housing crisis and getting people into apprenticeships, then this is an immediate measure that could be taken and would have a significant impact in terms of people coming into the trades. The committee on higher education produced a report in February that recommended that a minimum wage floor be introduced, which was obviously informed by all of those apprentices who were saying this was a big issue for them.

Deputy James Lawless: There is a framework in place where the trade unions and employers engage together on setting rates. The relevant legislation falls under the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment as opposed to my own Department. The minimum wage laws are part of the Industrial Training Act 1967 and the Labour Services Act 1987. All apprentices are, of course, employees. During the on-the-job phase of an apprenticeship, they are paid a wage by their employer. Neither SOLAS nor my Department is responsible for setting the rate of pay.

In the case of craft apprenticeships, minimum rates of pay are typically determined through that collective bargaining arrangement, subject to the normal dispute resolution mechanisms and are often underpinned by sectoral employment orders. We have well-established mechanisms engaging in partnership with the representative bodies to set these rates. That is the practice that has been there for some time. Perhaps there is a conversation that has to happen across the partners in that system. Certainly, it is beyond the remit of my Department

exclusively or even at all in some cases. I hear the point the Deputy raises, and it is fair one. It is a balancing act. All the parties are at the table already setting those rates and agreeing sectoral employment orders.

Apprenticeship Programmes

88. **Deputy Eoghan Kenny** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science given the growth in apprenticeships in Ireland if he is considering plans to introduce a CAO-type application process to secure an apprenticeship; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50207/26]

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: As I have mentioned already during these questions, given the growth in apprenticeships in Ireland, is the Department considering plans to introduce a CAO style type of application process to secure an apprenticeship? We all know there is a significant number of people who are waiting and trying to get an apprenticeship and trying to get a company to take them on for their apprenticeship. There is the CAO system and an application process for students who are going into further and higher education from sixth year. Is that going to be brought in for apprenticeships?

Deputy James Lawless: I thank the Deputy. The CAO processes applications for undergraduate courses in higher education. Unlike higher education, apprenticeships are different. They are employment-led programmes that start in the workplace. The apprentices are employed, registered with SOLAS and training is a combination of on-the-job work experience and structured off-the-job training. Part of the process of starting an apprenticeship is finding an employer and arranging with that employer to take the apprentice on. It is a little bit more direct and deliberative than the CAO process where a student applies to a course and sees what availability there is. In the case of an apprenticeship, they start by going through an employer, come to an arrangement locally and then they commence their training. It is the other way around. For that reason, apprenticeships are not historically advertised on the CAO rather employers advertise apprenticeship vacancies directly. They can do that in many ways. They can use - and I encourage them to do so - the Generation Apprenticeship website and *apprenticeship.ie*. If the Deputy goes onto its website, as he probably has done, and I have done as well, he can look through it. I looked through my own county out of interest to see what was available. I was surprised to find that many were not available. When I looked into it further, I found they were being provided but the employers had not signed up to the *apprenticeship.ie* website. The response I got was that they did not need to because they are getting apprentices coming to them anyway. There is a gap there. I encourage more employers to utilise the available machinery and frameworks we have put in place to allow that kind of matching take place between the apprentice and apprentice employer.

Of course, my priority is to ensure learners can access clear information on all pathways and tertiary pathways. A new apprenticeship action plan will be published later this year. A big focus of that is improving the communication and access to opportunities. People cannot apply for something if they do not know it exists or know where to start. One of things we have done is that we have included apprenticeship information on the CAO website. It is not quite a CAO process but it is on the CAO website. Ultimately, I would like to get to a point

where we have a one-stop-shop students, apprentices, learners and all young people can come into and begin their journey.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: In relation to *apprenticeship.ie*, I ask the Department to promote this more strongly and more to career guidance teachers in our secondary schools who are probably aware of it but I am not necessarily sure how many parents or young people are aware of *apprenticeship.ie*. It is a simple fix. It probably would not need a lot of funding to promote that. The main focus of the question is on the fact they are no longer confined to the traditional trades anymore where they approach a local plumber or carpenter to take an apprentice on. It is covering areas like ICT, finance, biopharma, logistics and engineering. They are providing young people and career changers with excellent opportunities to earn while they learn. It is an opportunity so employers have more of an understanding of how to get the apprenticeships but also apprentices would be able to access local employers or national employers.

Deputy James Lawless: The Deputy is right. We need to continue to promote this pathway. My Department is very industrious and engaged on that front. Among a number of things, we launched the careers in construction action plan and relaunched it recently with a number of actions. There are over 20 actions related to the promotion of training opportunities and activities to make students and would be apprentices aware and to encourage greater gender balance across the apprenticeship sector, particularly craft apprenticeships. On International Women's Day, I attended an event with my colleague, Deputy Dempsey, in Trim, attended by students from all-female secondary schools and at which we highlighted the ability of that as a path. At a time when we have great construction challenges and ambitions, we cannot afford to leave one half of the workforce outside of that conservation. That was strongly welcomed. We have the building heroes campaign which is running at the moment. It has 12 young people sharing their stories about working in construction. Among them, there are four outstanding female young apprentices who are sharing their stories. That is a strong tool to attract people into the pathways as well.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I am willing to work with the Minister on this. Our objective should be to remove barriers and not create them. If Ireland is to meet its future skills need, we must make apprenticeships as visible, accessible and attractive as every other education pathway. I welcome the Minister's views. This CAO style application system for apprenticeships is not going to happen overnight but that is the ambition the Department should have. It is the ambition we should have in this House as policymakers and public representatives. There is an opportunity to give every young person across the country, no matter what pathway they want to go down, the best possible opportunity to access that pathway. That includes a centralised application system like the one we have for those who are heading into undergraduate programmes to provide them, as the Minister said, with a one-stop-shop. That is the level of engagement we must have with those young people who are seeking apprenticeships but also with career guidance teachers, employers who are willing to take on apprenticeships and the higher institutions.

Deputy James Lawless: I wish to take the opportunity to thank the higher and further education committee for its work on the report on apprenticeships, which I received in February, led by Deputy McGreehan and supported by Deputy Kenny and others in the House.

There are 48 actions in that which will be considered. I will action as many of them as I can in the next round of the action plan. We are engaging in second level schools. There is a documentary on careers that has been circulated. The National Apprenticeship Office has done some very good work around the promotion of apprenticeships and options and trying to remove any barriers that may exist and raise awareness. The Deputy is also correct that second level is the key point. That is where people make choices about their future career paths. Engagement with career guidance counsellors and secondary schools more broadly is something we certainly look at more. I will work with the Minister, Deputy Naughton, in the second level system around pathways there and look to promote that. We will continue to try to centralise information to have a one-stop-shop, whether a person is going down a university path, apprenticeship path or tertiary path, to ensure we have a place we can point people to and where all the information is freely available.

Education and Training Provision

89. **Deputy Tony McCormack** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the progress being made in expanding lifelong learning opportunities to support people in upskilling and reskilling throughout their working lives; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50028/26]

Deputy Tony McCormack: We are all very aware of what is happening in the AI space and the rapid pace it is taking over our lives, both at home and in businesses. What progress is being made in expanding lifelong learning opportunities to support people in upskilling and reskilling throughout their working lives? I am specifically referencing AI and the business requirements and businesses needs companies have at the moment.

Deputy James Lawless: I thank the Deputy very much for raising this important issue. Just this morning before I came into the House, I attended an event in the Accenture offices in Dublin, sponsored by IBEC, where it had a conversation on AI and future skills needs. It was a wide-ranging conversation. It has published a report. It is publicly available. I was attending the launch of that report but there was also a panel discussion on the impact of AI on the workforce and on employers and employees. There was a general finding that while many SMEs are aware of the challenges and opportunities it provides, they may not necessarily have confidence that they have the capacity to take it on at the moment. That is something I am determined to address.

The expansion of lifelong learning opportunities is a central priority for me and the Department. Most people accept and agree it is not just about the one point in life education, when a person comes out of school or college, but it is about ongoing lifelong learning, as the Deputy rightly raised in his question. We are making significant and sustained investment across a number of initiatives to make sure workers, jobseekers and employers have access to flexible high-quality learning opportunities. Skillnet Ireland plays a big part in that in terms of enterprise-led upskilling. Springboard+ and MicroCreds are two programmes I have for learning in the workforce and learning while one earns. The skills to advance programme provides further as well. I recently committed another €4 million to short MicroCreds courses employees can take while in work.

They control those now so there are subsidised voucher schemes for short-cycle courses that are provided through the Springboard+ programme.

We then have the new *aiready.ie* website, which I launched about six weeks ago. As of this morning, 7,500 users had signed up to that and were using it on a regular basis. The intention of that platform is to continue to drive that on, to add content and to add to it. It started off as an entry-level demystifying exercise to take away the fear of AI and promote it, but the intention is that the website will continue to grow to become a more advanced user portal, including gateways to other courses, such as the likes the ETBs are offering, in that space as well.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I commend the Minister and his Department on the priority they have placed on lifelong learning. It is something we should be very proud of. We now have the highest level of third level education attainment in the European Union, with over 65% of young adults holding a third level qualification. We are also performing strongly in the lifelong learning ranking, at sixth in the European Union for adult participation. However, while sixth is a strong position, we should always aim to be number one. As technology evolves and careers become more dynamic, lifelong learning is no longer simply an education issue; it is becoming an economic necessity. When I say that, I am talking about the business requirements and the jobs that will be lost. We have to be very cognisant of the opportunities that are there with AI but also be willing to make sure we achieve and keep the jobs we have already in the economy.

Deputy James Lawless: We will see a period of change and of flux. There are challenges but there are also opportunities. Some jobs may well be lost but other jobs will be created, including different types of jobs. An example was given during the conversation this morning that when the Excel spreadsheet came into widespread use about 25 years ago, there were predictions there would be no more accountants and that they would become obsolete as a profession. In fact, there are probably more of them and more accounting firms than ever. What accountants have done is move up the value chain in terms of offering strategic financial advice as opposed to being calculators. My own view is that as technology continues to evolve, we as a training system and State must remain ahead of and on top to it and embrace it in some cases.

One initiative I recently launched which may be of interest to the Deputy is the national skills round tables. I am bringing together employers, employees and the training agencies in different sectors to ask what they need from the training agency, how technological change impacts them and how other developments and demographics impact them. We had a construction skills round table in UCD recently. I had a technological round table event last week at the Vodafone office. Later this month, I will bring together professional services including accounting, legal and consultancy-type firms to ask what changes they are seeing in their workforce and how the training system education systems can respond to that proactively.

Deputy Tony McCormack: One of Ireland's greatest competitive advantages has always been the quality of the people. Increasingly, however, international investors are looking at not only educational attainment but how quickly a country's workforce can adapt to technological changes and acquire new skills. With AI, as we talked about earlier, transforming almost every

sector of our economy, lifelong learning is becoming an increasingly important factor in attracting and retaining foreign direct investment. Countries that can rapidly upskill and reskill their workforce will have a significant competitive advantage and I strongly support the work the Minister is doing in this area. Will he outline how his Department is working with employers, higher education institutions and enterprise agencies to strengthen Ireland's culture of lifelong learning and ensure we will remain one of the most attractive locations in Europe for investment now and in the years ahead?

Deputy James Lawless: A bit of shorthand I often use, and I know a number of State agencies also use, to talk about the pace of change is the four Ds - digitalisation, decarbonisation, demographics and deglobalisation. All four of these things are happening quickly and we are living in a fast-changing world. The Deputy is right that we need to be adaptable and flexible. Some of the ways in which we are responding to that include, as I mentioned, the skills round tables in which I am engaging, where each month I do a different sectoral dive with employers and training agencies around the table to understand their needs.

We also have the national skills council, which was created last year and is headed up by Dr. Kevin Marshall. A number of my officials are involved in it. It looks at the skills needs that are emerging. We have a skills observatory, which is effectively a database that provides real-time information about skills gaps, skills needs and what types of vacancies there are. There are some new occupations coming into being and some occupations that perhaps are no longer as much in demand. To get ahead of that, we need to ask if we have the people, and in many cases it is the same people, who can be skilled up for those.

I mentioned the AI ready programme. We are also exploring a number of national skills academies, which are sector-specific partnerships between colleges, employers and industries to make sure we can provide the type of training in real time that they and their industries need.

Education and Training Provision

90. **Deputy Grace Boland** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of training and education places available across further and higher education, apprenticeships and upskilling programmes aimed at developing the workforce required to deliver energy-efficient homes, including retrofitting, construction and related trades; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50102/26]

117. **Deputy Grace Boland** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the measures being taken or planned by his Department to increase the number of training places and pathways for individuals to gain the skills necessary to deliver energy-efficient homes, including in areas such as retrofitting, heat pump installation and sustainable construction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50101/26]

Deputy Grace Boland: We know we have environmental targets. We know we want families to live in warm, fully insulated homes. That has never been more important, when we look at the geopolitical climate we are living in. However, there are real concerns as to whether we have the workforce to deliver warm, insulated homes - both new builds and retrofittings. How many do we currently have in training in the industry? What steps is the Minister taking to

increase that to make sure that we not only meet our climate targets but help families to live in warm, insulated homes?

Deputy James Lawless: I propose to take Questions Nos. 90 and 117 together.

The Deputy is absolutely right that this is a really important area of focus. I mentioned earlier the broader need for construction skills across every sector to meet the ambitions the Government has set out in terms of infrastructure delivery, be that transport, the metro project or DART+ - I know the Deputy's constituency is in line for some benefits from the public transport programmes - the housing needs we have, which are central to the Government's ambition, and the retrofit and green energy revolution that is at our fingertips. In the energy space, that includes a commitment of €10 billion to enhance the grid capacity, because we need to be able to transit the energy as well as generate it, the workforce and the talent to do that - everything from retrofitting to green energy technicians and renewable energy engineers.

I was in Munster Technological University, MTU, in Tralee recently and visited the centre where offshore wind turbine mechanics are being trained up on a new course there. We also have a centre for maritime skills in National Maritime College of Ireland, NMCI, in Cork. Right around the country we see similar types of courses being created. We also have the nearly zero energy building, NZEB, and retrofitting specialty. We have a couple of NZEB centres of excellence operated by Tipperary ETB, Kildare and Wicklow ETB and Cavan and Monaghan ETB. These are creating centres of excellence for these NZEBs and the idea is that they can then have specialist training provided in areas like plumbing, electrical, heat pump installation, site supervision, renewable energy installations and so on. In some cases we have courses available for people who are already in construction or already have a qualification or familiarity in order to allow them to reskill very quickly, sometimes as quickly as three or four days. In other courses we have full apprenticeships and full programmes over a number of years to deliver those.

More broadly, and this is something I think there is great potential to do more on, we are also promoting modern methods of construction, MMC, so we can embrace 2D or 3D models where they are either partially assembled off site and then brought to the location or almost fully assembled and the finished kit is brought into place. If we can fully embrace MMC, we will have a potential 40% dividend in productivity, which means we can do more with less. That will enable us to more quickly and efficiently meet many of our needs in that area. There is a great opportunity there. Mount Lucas in County Offaly is a demonstration site I have visited a number of times with Deputy McCormack and others. That is a really good example but we have others. Wexford County Council had a project under way as well and 12 homes are being built out using MMC.

There are a number of ways we can do this. We are also implementing an action plan, which I launched last year, that contains 58 actions coming from the expert group on future skills needs. They are looking at the wide-scale adoption of MMC and how we can enhance this more and provide more training and more skills to ultimately deliver on the ambitions we all share.

Deputy Grace Boland: It is good to hear that work is under way. What I did not hear is whether we know the numbers we need to get to. As the Minister said, a broad range of skill

sets are required to deliver these homes. Is there co-ordination between the Minister's Department and the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment? We know the targets we want to get to for 2030. Do we know the numbers of skilled workers we will need across the broad range to get there? Is the Department supporting that to ensure that there are sufficient programmes to deliver the numbers of skilled workers?

I just did not hear that in the answer. It is really important that we have co-ordination. The Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment has substantial money, which should be used to support having a skilled workforce in place.

Deputy James Lawless: If there is substantial money there, the Deputy can point me to it because it is all accounted for in my budget. It would be great if I did have more money but that will be something for the Estimates process when we go through that.

In terms of the numbers that are required, a recent independent report I commissioned from Indecon, which I brought to Cabinet, looked at our future construction workforce needs. It found that we have a shortage of skilled workers projected over the next ten years if we play out all of our national missions such as the infrastructure and public transport projects, the grid renewal and meeting the housing demand. My Department and the agencies will absolutely ramp up output to the maximum possible while preserving quality in the systems, and will examine a number of ways that we might be able to do that, one of which is by using modern methods of construction but there may be other methods we can utilise as well. Ultimately, as a society we have to examine whether there will be an enduring gap. Skills migration is going to be part of that solution. Value-added migration is something we will have to be alive to, particularly when workforce needs cannot be met domestically alone. There are other areas we have to look at to help fill those gaps but first and foremost the priority would be producing the skills, the talent and the educated workers through our training agencies, universities and apprenticeship systems. As has been mentioned, we will have to reskill many workers. There are many people with particular skills who are already in working in construction and who, with a light enhancement to their qualifications such as the three- or four-day courses that are already available in places like Mount Lucas and elsewhere, can actually skill up and get to the stage where they are proficient in emerging technologies and moving with it.

As I said in response to an earlier question, change continues to come at us. We need to embrace and anticipate change and move ahead of it. That is exactly what we are doing in this area with the likes of those green energy courses, renewables and the wind turbine maintenance course that is provided now in Tralee, and many others, which are fundamental to fulfilling that training need.

Deputy Grace Boland: I thank the Minister. This is a point I made to the Secretary General of the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment at the public accounts committee. There is money there and we absolutely need to invest in ensuring that we have retrofitting, and do everything we can to meet our climate targets, not just because of the financial consequences that might arise but because it is the right thing to do. We want people and families to be living in warm and fully insulated buildings. I would like to see the Minister's Department co-ordinate with the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment, and with his colleague the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, to make sure we are doing everything

we can to make sure we have the skilled workforce to meet our climate targets and deliver for families.

The Minister, Deputy Lawless, has alluded to the awareness at second level of the importance of these various apprenticeship programmes and trades. We really need to be doing everything we can to encourage people into the sector. I would like to see the Minister continue to do his work in that space.

Deputy James Lawless: I can absolutely assure the Deputy that I am doing all I can in that space. We have a number of courses in plumbing, electrical, heat pump installation, site supervision, offshore wind turbine maintenance and many others. There is also the adoption more widely of MMC.

Specialist and technical skills are very important but other skills are equally important. The plans we have adopted to date aim to promote skills transferability and include transversal skills. This is something that has emerged from the skills round tables I have been holding with sectors, including the construction sector, very recently. It is coming through from all sectors that while it is desirable to have a technical ability in particular areas, it is even more desirable to have the ability to have portable or flexible skills, leadership or communication skills, teamwork abilities and many skills that transcend one discipline and are multidisciplinary. We have a wider project to ensure that all those kinds of competencies are instilled in all courses, regardless of the discipline undertaken. At the heart of this, and at the heart of the Deputy's question on the courses under the green skills agenda, is making sure that the workforce is equipped to deliver the retrofit programmes and the next generation of energy efficient homes, and of course to take the full opportunity that renewable energy presents to us here in Ireland.

Questions Nos. 91 to 94, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Questions Nos. 96 and 97 taken with Written Answers.

Research Funding

98. **Deputy Eoghan Kenny** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science for an update on his discussions with the European Research Council in relation to the multi-annual funding framework for science; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50208/26]

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Will the Minister give an update on his discussions with the European Research Council, ERC, in relation to the multi-annual funding framework for science? Ireland has built an international reputation for excellence in scientific research. Our universities and research institutions consistently compete successfully for European funding and Irish researchers have made significant contributions in areas ranging from health and pharmaceuticals to climate science, artificial intelligence and advanced manufacturing.

Deputy James Lawless: I thank the Deputy for his interest in this area. It is a critical area. The Deputy asked about the ERC and I think he may also want me to talk about the Horizon Europe programme.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Yes.

Deputy James Lawless: They are two separate but complementary activities so I will speak to both in my answer. The European Research Council is one of the key instruments in the EU research and innovation framework programme, Horizon Europe. It was established in 2007 and is the premier European funding organisation for excellent frontier research, funding researchers of any nationality and age. Ahead of the Irish Presidency, just last week, on my invitation the ERC's scientific council came to Dublin. They are an independent group of top researchers who guide the ERC programme. They visited Dublin to hold their plenary meeting and stakeholder engagements. I addressed the council and spoke on the re-election of the president of the European Research Council. I emphasised the importance of supporting bottom-up and curiosity-driven fundamental research, and excellence in research. The Taoiseach also attended and spoke at the same event, which I hope speaks to the high-level Government commitment to supporting this area of excellence and research across all disciplines.

The Horizon Europe programme funds the European Research Council and is the EU's key funding programme for research and innovation. The current programme runs until 2027. In July of last year, the Commission published its proposal for the next Horizon Europe programme as part of the EU budget package for the period 2028 to 2034. Following intensive negotiations the Council, made up of the 27 member states including us, agreed its position on the next Horizon Europe programme just last week in the last week of the Cypriot Presidency. That is a very significant milestone and I congratulate our colleagues in Cyprus on leading out in that agreement. It now falls to me to chair the European Research Council over the next six months during our Presidency. We will now enter what are called trilogue negotiations. Having got the agreement in the Cypriot Presidency, the Irish Presidency will now engage with the Parliament to bring that forward. Chairing it is an honest broker role, so it would not be appropriate for me to get into Ireland's specific interests, although obviously we have made those known in the past. We will now move to chair the debate in an honest broker fashion.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I thank the Minister. The EU Presidency obviously gives us a greater opportunity to work with our European counterparts and, as the Minister is the honest broker chairing that, it is essential that we gain significant experience from the amount that we can invest in scientific research.

It would probably be remiss of me not to mention University College Cork in my county, which does a significant amount of scientific research. I am very proud as a Cork man that we do such fantastic scientific research.

One of the biggest issues raised repeatedly by researchers is the need for greater certainty around long-term funding. Scientific research cannot be planned on a year-to-year basis. Major projects often take many years to develop, requiring sustained investment, international collaboration, and the ability to recruit and retain highly skilled researchers. This is not simply

about supporting academia. Research and innovation underpin Ireland's future economic success. It is good that the Minister referenced the Horizon Europe programme.

Deputy James Lawless: I could not agree more. It is something that I have put front and centre in my Ministry since I took up this office. Fundamental research is absolutely key to driving Ireland as a knowledge economy, as a society and civilisationally more broadly. It is the key to future knowledge creation, economic growth and societal resilience. It is why I created, for example, the INSPIRE research infrastructure programme, with a €750 million commitment over the term of the Government to roll out research, equipment and facilities right across every higher education authority in Ireland.

In terms of Horizon Europe and Ireland's Presidency, the Deputy rightly said that it is not just about academics. Of course, they are fundamental to it but it is also about wider society and the wider economy. I have adopted an Horizon Europe action plan for the remaining two years of the current programme. From an Irish perspective, one thing we are seeking to do is ensure that SMEs take full opportunity of the participations available to them to draw down. We have drawn down €1 billion in funding from that programme to date just in the current term but there are opportunities to draw down a couple of hundred million more within the current programme even before we get to the new one.

An action plan in respect of Horizon has been published. We partnered with Enterprise Ireland on that. I encourage SMEs that are not already involved to get involved now and make sure they draw down whatever is available for their research activities.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: On the broader aspect to this, we invest significantly in educating talented scientists. We must ensure that, having provided funding to educate these talented scientists, we do not put them in the position where they feel they must leave Ireland because they cannot see a stable research career here. I do not have statistics on that but if we are going to engage with and fund young people to become fantastic scientists, we must ensure we provide the funding to make sure they can have a stable research career here, if they wish to have one and if it is possible. Has the Department examined ways to complement the European funding model that we have alongside more predictable national investment? I do not expect him to go into that in detail. There is a budgetary process involved there. There has been significant investment in scientific research but we have to ensure that we match European funding with national investment across the country.

Deputy James Lawless: As well as matching European funding, we have surpassed it because while we drew down €1 billion in Horizon Europe funding in the current term, I have committed over €2.45 billion for research funding from State funds, so we are doing far more.

I mentioned the INSPIRE research infrastructure programme, which is a €750 million commitment to research infrastructure. I launched seven new Rinn centres, which are the Research Ireland centres, just last week. That was a €460 million investment, and those centres include things like advanced computing technology, artificial intelligence, quantum computing and big data AI. They also include things like semiconductors, biotechnology, material sciences and health informatics. There are programmes there across societal resilience and economic growth as well as the creation and pursuit of knowledge, which are fundamental

goals. Those are the seven latest centres and they complement the existing centres. Overall, over 50% of the Department's national development plan, NDP, allocation has been allocated to supporting research and innovation.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Grace Boland): Before we move to the next question, I welcome the service users from St. Aidan's Services in Gorey and in particular Nicole, Ian, Donnchadh and Caroline, who are here with Deputy Brian Brennan. They are all very welcome.

Questions Nos. 99 to 105, inclusive, taken with Written Answers.

Technological Universities

106. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will engage with SETU to deliver on the commitment in the original agreement establishing a university in the south east to include a significant campus in Kilkenny city; and his views on establishing a Norman study centre as part of the campus.- [50200/26]

Deputy John McGuinness: During the early negotiations to establish a university in the south east, Kilkenny played a key role. I was associated with those negotiations, many years after which South East Technological University, SETU, was established. What steps are being taken to expand the courses offered in Kilkenny city relative to the university? Does the Minister consider a Norman museum as something appropriate that could be championed and provided?

Deputy James Lawless: Before I respond, I wish St. Aidan's Services in Gorey well. I know the organisation very well because Gorey was my hometown before I ever lived in Kildare. My sister-in-law, Laura Walsh, is a service user in St. Aidan's. I do not think she is in the group today but if she is, I say "hello" to her and all of the other service users. The staff do a great job, and I thank them for everything they do. I am very familiar with the organisation's work.

I thank Deputy McGuinness for the question on the campus in Kilkenny city. He raised this directly with me before and I appreciate that. It is something he has championed, and I see the merit in the Norman concept, particularly as we are coming to The Year of the Normans later in this term. That is something that would be appropriate for the commemoration of that period. Kilkenny as a city with its great tradition would be a very suitable home for it.

In terms of how we organise capital projects and support them from within the Department, my Department works with the higher education institutions and education training boards, ETBs, to develop capital projects, along with their master plans. Capital investment is then allocated through a competitive process. Successful projects progress through different stages of planning, tender and construction but ultimately it is a bottom-up process. The institutions come to me with projects as opposed to me going to them to tell them what to do.

The NDP published last July includes the capital ceilings for the next four years, and that is complemented by the tertiary sector's capital investment plan. The capital funding envelop

available to me is the mechanism through which I fund these projects, which is significant with €4.55 billion allocated across my Department for capital projects.

SETU is the relevant institute in the south east, and it has multiple campuses, including a presence in the Xcelerate Centre at St. Kieran's College on College Road in Kilkenny. It has an action to enhance key strategic partnerships, as well as the establishment of a working group with Kilkenny County Council and Kilkenny Chamber of Commerce to explore opportunities for further development in Kilkenny. I am sure the Deputy is probably involved in that already but that seems to be an appropriate grouping to maybe advance this project through because if it was to put together a proposal or master plan, it could come up the chain to me thereafter.

Deputy John McGuinness: The reason that I raise it directly with the Minister this morning is that in those early negotiations, it was clearly stated that Kilkenny would have a significant role in the context of the south-east university, now SETU. I want to see that delivered on because Kilkenny was part of the agreement to establish the headquarters and so in Waterford and the other various activities under SETU. I want to see the commitment that was made to Kilkenny as part of that south-east university honoured. I suggest to the Minister that in honouring the commitment, SETU should be encouraged to discuss the possibility of a Norman study centre.

Kilkenny is associated with animation, thanks to Cartoon Saloon and so on. There is also Kilkenny Design. I am sure there are many other activities and courses that could be arranged in Kilkenny. I am trying to develop the idea and while I understand that the funding request must go from SETU to the Minister, I hope that by reminding the Minister of the commitment that was given, he might encourage discussions to advance what I suggested.

Deputy James Lawless: I certainly will, and I am open to proposals coming in from SETU on that. In fact, more than that, the next time I meet with SETU, I will inquire about the status of this proposal and what its intentions are regarding it.

Regarding SETU investment in the region more broadly, one of the most significant enhancements planned for Kilkenny is the development of Kildalton Agricultural College. It will accommodate the new veterinary programme roll-out, which will have 40 student vets attending in the south east for the first time. This will complement the 40 students that will attend the Atlantic Technological University, ATU, in the north west. That is a really exciting programme that specifically includes anatomy and pathology training facilities at Kildalton for the practical side of the training. That will go live this September with 40 new students signed up for that.

As the Deputy suggested, I see the merit in the Norman study centre, and I will raise it when I next meet with SETU. However, in the first instance, it falls on it to come forward with the proposal.

The Deputy was with me when I visited Kilkenny recently to launch the college of the future project. That is moving ahead, and I encourage it to get ready to appoint the design teams. I expect that project to progress rapidly in the near future.

Deputy John McGuinness: I welcome the development in relation to the ETB and acknowledge the significant contribution it is making in terms of apprenticeships and so on. Regarding the veterinary college at Kildalton, those 40 vets will certainly make a difference. I also believe that Kildalton college can be developed at a rapid pace to bring the numbers up in terms of veterinary students, and it is an excellent site beyond the veterinary designation that it now has.

I come back to the point that it was the goodwill of all concerned many years ago that brought about the establishment of SETU, and the different political players there were given certain commitments and that is why I am pressing the Minister. I know there is investment taking place and that there are different activities, courses and so on but I am simply anxious, as the Minister will appreciate, to ensure that it continues to grow and expand.

Deputy James Lawless: I share that ambition. It is important that it has a footprint across the south-east region.

To be fair, we met with Kildalton. We are seeing this at other locations across the south east. I take the point about that particular project, which the Deputy would like to see being advanced more rapidly. That is a fair ask. Kilkenny is a growing city with really strong employment. I worked there with VHI for a number of years, so I am familiar with the potential that the city has in the wider region and how it is already a hub for really strong employers, both domestic and international. There is FDI going into Kilkenny at Purcellsinch business park and other places. That can only continue. The veterinary college that the ETBs are putting in place and that I am supporting will be helpful to that ambition also. I understand that further investment of the type the Deputy proposes will be welcome also. I am certainly happy to take it up with SETU, and I am sure the Deputy will also do so through his own offices.

Further and Higher Education

95. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the additional measures that will be implemented to intensify collaboration and delivery of further and higher education on a cross-border and all-Ireland basis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50256/26]

Deputy Brendan Smith: The Minister will have heard me many times in this House, at committees and at meetings of the Fianna Fáil parliamentary party advocating for closer collaboration on the delivery of education on an all-Ireland basis. There is fantastic potential, especially in the further and higher education sector. I warmly welcome the Minister's initiative, along with Dundalk Institute of Technology, DkIT, and Queen's University, to develop a new partnership that will enable DKIT to become a university college of Queen's. That is a great all-Ireland development. It is a landmark decision and is of particular value for the entire north-east region and much farther afield.

Deputy James Lawless: I thank Deputy Smith for his constant engagement in respect of this matter. I know it is one that is very dear to him. Through his chairmanship of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, he is advancing ties between our jurisdictions all the time and looking

to extend cross-border and all-Ireland relationships. I very much share his ambition in that regard.

My Department is engaged in extensive collaboration with the Northern Ireland Executive and the relevant agencies to enhance further and higher education across the island of Ireland. In April, I secured approval from the Cabinet to enable DkIT to join with Queen's University to enter into a new strategic partnership, the first ever all-Ireland university. It is a really exciting project. We are advancing the legislation, and the drafting is currently under way. I thank the committee for its work on the pre-legislative scrutiny and for engaging with it so proactively. It is a landmark initiative that is fundamental to our shared, all-island missions. It will also enhance research and innovation in the north-east and along the Dublin-Belfast corridor, and provide new opportunities for students and employers.

More broadly, my Department continues to work with the Department of Health to expand cross-border healthcare training, including an agreement with Queen's Belfast to support 50 Irish-funded undergraduate medical places across the intakes of the last two years. Of course, we have the Creating Futures document, which is the new further education and training strategy that was published a month ago. It looks to strengthen all-island collaboration and foster joint initiatives between ETBs and FET schools here and their equivalents across Northern Ireland.

I worked recently with Caoimhe Archibald, the Northern Ireland Minister for the Economy, to launch the first-ever all-island apprenticeship in the area of accounting technician. We met as part of the Government summit at Farmleigh. We launched that initiative having worked together on it for several months beforehand. We have a number of other initiatives that we are looking at that are along the same lines. Both Departments have secured €50 million through PEACEPLUS for skills development, which we will continue to roll out. We also have five new online projects being delivered, and there is much more that we can do on this.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I thank the Minister for his reply. I must say that members of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, across all jurisdictions, were very strong in their praise of the Minister's contribution at our plenary meeting in Surrey, where he spoke about the opportunities for all-Ireland developments and also east-west developments.

At a recent meeting of the further and higher education committee, we had the leadership of Queen's University and the leadership of DkIT. They are very anxious to drive this partnership forward in a positive manner. They very much appreciate the leadership the Minister has shown. One of the great messages that came out of that meeting was the willingness of both Queen's and Dundalk to work with the other education colleges. They already have a partnership with colleges whereby people can commence a course in a college of further education and then complete their degree course in either Dundalk or Queen's. They are anxious to intensify that collaboration between the higher education institutes and the further education colleges across Cavan and Monaghan, and in our neighbouring counties north of the Border.

Deputy James Lawless: One project that I did not mention in my initial response is the digital creative industries programme, which is a €10 million, all-island project supported by shared island capital. It will enhance collaboration with the creative and digital industries in

areas like graphic design, movies, the arts and digital arts across both jurisdictions. It is a project that is now live. It was one of the shared island projects in my Department.

Regarding the ETBs and the options for further education and training to work on a cross-border basis, my Department is working with SOLAS to develop a detailed implementation plan for the new Creating Futures FET strategy. One of those actions is to advance all-island collaboration through specific all-island linkages and partnerships to engage with education, training, enterprise and industry stakeholders in Northern Ireland. Of course, we have the Queen's-DKIT partnership, and there are a number of ancillary projects now coming into being under that, which I look forward to supporting strongly as they come through. In fact, I am inviting proposals for that. I know the Deputy has worked closely with the ETBs in Cavan, Monaghan and elsewhere. If there are projects that he wants to bring to my attention, I would welcome that input.

Deputy Brendan Smith: As the Minister is aware, we are very anxious to progress the Cavan college of the future. I sincerely hope there will be further developments on that over the summer months. We are anxious to have that major new extension to the existing college constructed on Cathedral Road, right in the centre of Cavan town, where there is a demand for new accommodation. The Minister saw first-hand the work that goes on at the institute. It draws students from a wide area. It has a huge success rate for students fulfilling career choices, following the careers chosen before they went into college and going on to attain further higher education qualifications. It is very important that we move that project along as quickly as possible. The accommodation is needed, and the Minister can be assured that the people, the director of the college and his staff will ensure that the students who attend will get the very best options across all courses, and the best in learning and teaching as well.

Deputy James Lawless: I thank the Deputy for his invitation to visit that day, along with the Minister of State, Deputy Niamh Smyth. We had a very good engagement in Cavan and then visited the institute. I share the Deputy's desire to see the college of the future advance at pace. I hope to have a positive announcement on that in the near future. I will certainly be keeping Members apprised of that. It is my intention that the institute would be able to appoint a design team in the coming months, and that we are able to progress with that project, which is much needed. I could see that myself when visiting the site and speaking to learners and educators while traversing the school that is already there. They are doing great work, which will be enhanced by the provision of a capital project for the further training centre, which I hope to be able to support strongly in the coming months. That is a very important project on which I will continue to work.

More broadly, as part of the shared island initiative, there are other projects that fall under the ambit of the Queen's-DKIT partnership that I intend to support. I also intend to further advance the collaboration on a North-South basis. As I mentioned already, we recently launched the first all-island apprenticeship for accounting technician, and there are a couple of others that are being considered. Where possible, I intend to roll that out and increase the capacity.

Third Level Education

107. **Deputy Eoghan Kenny** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he has met with an organisation (details supplied) regarding gaps in higher education funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [50206/26]

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: Has the Minister met with the Irish Universities Association regarding gaps in higher education funding?

Deputy James Lawless: The short answer is that I have. I engaged with the Irish Universities Association, IUA, as recently as this morning, when I met Paul Johnston, the director general, at an event. I am very aware of the association's asks. It is something that we are working through with it with regard to future funding. There was a commitment through the national training fund to continue to support the core funding allocation for Irish universities. I sat down with the IUA and we reviewed its pre-budget submission, which has a number of worthwhile asks within it. I am continuing to engage with the IUA on a very regular basis, and also with the Technological Universities Association and other stakeholders within the space. I am very much aware of their asks. We have met their funding requirements for the last couple of years through a new framework emerging from, first, the Cassells report and then the Funding the Future study. That funding is now being committed on a multi-annual basis.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: The request from the Irish Universities Association is for €250 million over the next five years in capital spending to upgrade digital infrastructure in the seven universities, and €475 million over four years in capital spending to decarbonise universities and create fully sustainable campuses.

12 o'clock

We regularly hear about Ireland's ambition to be a global leader in innovation, research and skills. We want to attract investment, develop indigenous enterprise and prepare our workforce for the industries of the future. None of these ambitions can be achieved if our universities are expected to do more each year with increasingly stretched resources. I ask the Minister to continue engaging with them through the budgetary process.

Deputy James Lawless: As I mentioned in response to earlier questions, we have a commitment of €4.55 billion to the sector more broadly in the capital envelope available through the national development plan, which is record investment and strong support for research and innovation in the higher and further education ecosystems.

I have taken receipt of the IUA's pre-budget submission. I have to go through it. I understand the challenges the sector faces in terms of decarbonisation, digitalisation, globalisation and demographics, something we often speak about in the House. I am very much engaged in that. It is one among many pre-budget submissions that I have received. I will assess it with my officials. There are a number of competing demands on the system, as the Deputy will be aware. We will be able to appraise ourselves and other Members of the House on exactly where they fall in October's budget.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: I want to focus on students. They rightly expect access to modern facilities, smaller class sizes, adequate academic supports and quality learning environments.

These expectations become increasingly difficult to meet when institutions are under a sustained financial strain. Ireland has an international reputation for the quality of its higher education system. Protecting that reputation requires investment. It is far more cost-effective to invest now than to allow standards to decline and attempt to rebuild capacity later.

Deputy James Lawless: Exactly. That is why we have a record €4.5 billion commitment across the sector. Regarding student facilities, there is the likes of the bundle 2 PPP programme which enhances student facilities on university campuses across the country. I mentioned the targeted enhancement fund, which supports technological universities in their continued growth. The results are coming through. In the last 100 top university rankings, Irish universities were back in the top 100 having fallen out of the list over the past decade or so. We have seen significant progress in terms of international comparators. More fundamentally, student numbers and outputs are growing and many qualifications are being pursued. There are now many diverse pathways through the tertiary education system, including, of course, apprenticeships, which we discussed earlier. It is a success story and we want to make sure it continues to be so. We will continue to invest in and support the sector.

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Ceisteanna ó Cheannairí - Leaders' Questions

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Tá níos mó ná €50 milliún curtha amú cheana féin ar chóras bainistíochta tráchta Iarnród Éireann, córas a theip ar na tástálacha sábhála agus tá níos mó ná dhá bhliain taobh thiar de sceideal. Gan dabht, is teip iomlán é. Anois, tá sé foghlamtha againn go bhfuil na cáiniócoirí ag íoc suas le €100,000 i gcaitheamh le seachtain mar nach bhfuil cinneadh glactha ag an Rialtas ná an NTA ar cheart deireadh a chur leis an choradh seo ar fad. Anois air sin, tá an Rialtas ag caitheamh €200,000 eile le fiosrú cén dóigh a tharla an tubaiste seo ar an chéad dul síos. Beidh, agus tá, an pobal ag fiosrú cén uair a gcuirfear deireadh leis an chur amú ama agus cur amú airgead poiblí seo.

Once again, the public is asking who is taking responsibility for the extraordinary waste of taxpayers' money that has become the hallmark of the Government. The latest revelations surrounding the failed Irish Rail traffic management system are absolutely staggering. More than €50 million has already been blown and written off on a project that has failed safety testing, is more than two years behind schedule and, by any reasonable measure, has been a complete and utter failure. Incredibly, the waste does not end there. We now learn that taxpayers are footing a bill of €100,000 every single week while a decision is made on whether the contract relating to the project should be terminated. In addition, the Government is spending a further €200,000 simply to find out how this debacle happened in the first place. Members of the public are rightly asking when the waste of public money under the Government will stop. While tens of millions of euros have been squandered on this failed project, commuters are being told that there is no funding to deliver new bus, rail or rural transport services this year. That is the cost of the Government's waste. Every euro squandered on failed projects is a euro that cannot be invested in better buses, better rail services and better public transport for people who rely on it every single day.

We know from Iarnród Éireann's briefing papers that it asked for the contract relating to this project to be terminated a year ago. The company warned that it had lost confidence in the contractor's ability to deliver the project and recommended that the contract be terminated. The Department was told last October that there were risks relating to this project and that red flags had been raised. Surely the Minister should have been doing his job and should have intervened to try to find out what was going on. The Government has allowed this to continue. A year after Iarnród Éireann's request that the contract be terminated, over €50 million has been written off and taxpayers are still losing €100,000 every single week, and there is no end in sight.

This is not simply about one failed contract. It is also about a culture of waste that is tolerated and an absence of accountability. Nobody in government ever appears to carry responsibility for the millions in public money that are squandered. I have lost count of the number of times I have stood here and asked what the Government is going to do to end the constant waste of public money. I will again ask the question again on behalf of the people who are frustrated about the continuation of waste. Fifty million euro is not a small amount of money. It has been completely written off. We are now told that €100,000 is being paid every week, with no indication as to when this will end. That is the definition of public waste. Who is going to be held responsible for this latest fiasco? Why are taxpayers still being forced to pay €100,000 every week while this drags on? What immediate steps is the Government going to take to stop further public money being poured into a project that has already become one of the most expensive failures in the history of our public transport system?

The Tánaiste: How the Deputy characterised Government spending does not tally with the reality of the situation. More than €10 billion has been allocated for public transport projects across the country. The overwhelming majority of those projects are on budget, on time and making a real and meaningful difference. The list of projects delivered on time and on budget by this Government includes the national broadband plan, which the Deputy's party actively opposed. Sinn Féin did not want broadband rolled out to rural communities in Donegal and right across the country. We rolled it out. Sinn Féin opposed it vigorously. That is true. My party, Fine Gael, was the only party which supported it. We delivered it on time and on budget. Other projects include Rosslare Europort, Luas cross city, Woodbrook train station, the new platform at Kent Station in Cork and the Bray transport interchange. There are countless examples of public money being well used and resulting in projects being delivered on time and on budget. We are investing more in public transport, as we should and as we can, as a result of the strength of our economy.

The Deputy is right to highlight a specific issue regarding the traffic management system, however. The national train control centre building was delivered on time and within budget. Let us acknowledge that. It is currently in use by Iarnród Éireann and by approximately 100 members of An Garda Síochána. The new traffic management system to oversee signalling and other railway systems has been delayed beyond its completion date. That is factually correct.

The Minister for Transport met the National Transport Authority, NTA, and the contractor, Indra. The Deputy asked what the Minister is doing. He is engaging intensively. He met the representatives of both entities last year and had further meetings in January of this year regarding the delivery of the traffic management system as soon as possible. A baseline

programme has been agreed between Irish Rail, the NTA and the contractor, Indra. Quite rightly, an Oireachtas committee scrutinised this issue yesterday.

I do not accept the Deputy's characterisation that the Government is accepting that the €50 million gone and that the taxpayer must foot the bill, and neither does the Government. The reality is that the Irish Rail accounts have been submitted for consideration to the Department of Transport. They will also be scrutinised and considered by NewERA, which looks at all these issues. As the Deputy knows and as he would expect us to do, there will be a contract in place. We need to work through the issues. We should not jump to any conclusions about when and where the bill will fall due. I expect the Minister, Irish Rail and NewERA to perform their roles in terms of ensuring that the terms of the contract are delivered upon.

I want to assure people that there are contingency plans in place from a safety point of view. From a railway safety perspective, there is not an issue here. The project is taking longer than it should. No decision has yet been made regarding the approval of the annual accounts. They will be reviewed by the Department and NewERA and then published. There is a way to go in terms of working through this issue.

The Government's record of delivering projects on time and on budget in communities right across this country is there for all to see. When things go wrong and projects are delayed, it is quite right that Oireachtas committees, on a cross-party basis, scrutinise the issues involved, as happened yesterday.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This project is not just delayed. Does the Tánaiste not know what is going on here? A sum of €50 million has been written down in the accounts. Irish Rail has formally recommended ending the contract. It has been saying that since last year. It has no confidence that the project can be delivered. This is not just a project that will be delivered in a couple of months' time. The problem is that along with the €50 million that has been written down in terms of the accounts, €100,000 is being paid out on a weekly basis because a decision still has not been taken to end this contract. The NTA is telling us it will take months of engagement between it and the Department to make a recommendation.

I say to the Tánaiste very clearly that this is taxpayers' money. The NTA was very clear that there will be no new bus services, no new rail services and no new rural services this year and, yes, the €50 million could have funded some of that. The NTA representatives were very clear about that yesterday at the committee. I will again ask the Tánaiste some specific questions. Why is the taxpayer on the hook for €100,000 every week for a project that is not going anywhere? Does he accept that Irish Rail has asked the Government to end the contract? When will the Government ensure that this type of wasting of public money will no longer happen? Crucially, as everybody asks me, who will be held accountable for this? It is not good enough for the Tánaiste to come in, shrug his shoulders and just brush off €50 million of taxpayers' money being wasted, along with another €100,000 every single week.

Deputies: Hear, hear.

The Tánaiste: Of course, it is not and, of course, that is not what I am doing but it will make a great clip on the Deputy's Instagram. It is not the truth. I hope he plays the full-----

(Interruptions)

Deputy Pearse Doherty: This is a serious issue.

The Tánaiste: It is a very serious issue.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputies, please allow the Tánaiste to answer.

The Tánaiste: When I am asked about a serious issue, it is nice to be allowed to respond without a cacophony trying to shout me down, as happens every time in this House. I have made a very serious point that Deputy Doherty should not come into this House and make the point that €50 million is lost to the taxpayer when the State is doing its job in making sure that terms and conditions of contracts are scrutinised, that NewERA, a body we set up to make sure we derive value in the delivery of projects, is doing its jobs and that Oireachtas committees are doing their job as well. We should allow that process to work its way through. That is all I am saying.

I am also making the point that the Deputy's categorisation of Government spending on public projects is not borne out by the facts. He asked about €50 million. Would he get as exercised if it were £140 million? In the Department his party runs in Northern Ireland, £140 million was spent on road projects that have not even started.

Deputy Máire Devine: How boring this is.

The Tánaiste: That Department is led by a Sinn Féin Minister and it has wasted £140 million. Thank God the SDLP highlighted that terrible waste of money.

(Interruptions)

The Tánaiste: Are you getting upset? There was the £300,000 as well.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You are pathetic. Do you practise that in front of the mirror every night?

The Tánaiste: I do not need to, Pearse.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Do you stand there saying, "I wonder how this looks"? Honest to God, do you consider even for a minute what the public thinks of it?

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty, please resume your seat.

The Tánaiste: Sinn Féin wasters.

(Interruptions)

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Tánaiste, please stop provoking him. I have called Deputy Cian O'Callaghan.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You have wasted public money and do not care what taxpayers feel about it. You can go on with your gimmicks all you want.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Deputy Doherty, you are out of order.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: Do not point your finger at me, Tánaiste.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: You are out of order, Deputy.

A Deputy: TikTok props.

Deputy Pearse Doherty: You are a serial waster, Tánaiste.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I have called Deputy O'Callaghan.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: I was waiting for both of them to stop.

President Zelenskyy's visit to Ireland yesterday was cut short due to another deadly attack on Ukraine. At least 17 people were killed and more than 50 injured overnight after missiles rained down on Kyiv. As we speak, emergency workers are at a collapsed nine-storey apartment searching for survivors in rubble. This is the biggest attack on Kyiv since the war began. The mayor has declared a day of mourning tomorrow to remember those killed.

This has been the reality of life in Ukraine for more than four years now - death, destruction and devastation from attacks by Russia. According to an independent investigation, some of the weapons used in those attacks are made with raw materials manufactured in Ireland. Yesterday, President Zelenskyy said as much. He criticised the EU's failure to sanction companies still under the effective control of Russian oligarchs. He said: "Every tonne of raw material that ends up in Russia is used against us in this war."

In March, *The Irish Times* published details of an extensive investigation it carried out with the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project. It revealed that alumina produced in Ireland is being used by Russia to manufacture weapons that are killing Ukrainians. The Government is fully aware of this but has refused to act on the evidence. Instead, it has commissioned its own inquiry into the matter. How much evidence does the Government need? What exactly is it looking for?

The foot dragging by the Government is in sharp contrast to the actions of the Australians. They did not need to conduct any investigation before they acted back in 2022. As soon as Putin invaded Ukraine, they banned all exports of alumina to Russia. They did not want to be complicit in the murder of men, women and children in Ukraine. More than four years later, exports of alumina from Ireland have at least doubled and the Government is still burying its head in the sand and refusing to do what everybody knows is needed. It needs to ban the export of alumina to Russia.

These delaying tactics are not just immoral and damaging to Ireland's international reputation. They have made the risk to the almost 500 jobs at Aughinish Alumina much worse. When Putin invaded Ukraine more than four years ago, 23% of exports from the plant went to Russia. That figure has at least doubled since then, if not tripled. If the Government is scrambling around trying to find alternative markets for the company, that work is now much more difficult.

The Government cannot keep beating its chest about support for Ukraine in public while, in private, it knowingly facilitates the export of alumina to Russia, which is ending up in weapons that are killing Ukrainians. I ask the Tánaiste to be specific in answering my questions. When will the Government's investigation be completed, what kind of evidence is it looking for that it does not already have and when will it stop this pretence and ban the export of alumina to Russia?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy. The first thing we must do here is be very careful in our language. There is no pretence from the Government of Ireland to the people of Ireland or any party in this House in relation to the horrific, illegal and brutal war Russia is carrying out on Ukraine. President Zelenskyy certainly did not feel any pretence when he was here yesterday; quite the opposite, in fact. We decided as a country, as we decided as a Government, that we wanted to be joined here in Ireland by President Zelenskyy on the first day of our Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which we were, to show solidarity with the people of Ukraine and support for his courage and the inspiration he is providing to his own people and, indeed, to all Europeans.

This country and this Government have acted in support of Ukraine and the people of Ukraine at every opportunity. We need only look at the number of people we have supported in terms of refuge, with the opening of homes and hearths, the amount of financial assistance we are giving and the support we provide to Ukraine in terms of its journey towards European Union membership. While there is a legitimate issue of importance here, it can in no way muddy the waters in terms of the very clear, consistent and unequivocal stance taken by the people of Ireland and the Government of Ireland, which, I think, reflects the political consensus in the Oireachtas, in terms of support for Ukraine. I join the Deputy in condemning the horrific attack on Kyiv last night. It is just another reminder that Putin has no interest in peace and, therefore, we must continue the process in terms of sanctions and hurting the Russian economy where it matters by applying maximum pressure to Putin and his regime to end this brutal and illegal war.

In relation to Aughinish Alumina, the first thing to say is that it is the European Commission, not EU member states, that proposes sanctions. The Commission proposes sanctions and member states ultimately vote on those packages of sanctions. The Government has supported every single package of sanctions. We believe in sanctions. We have had 21 packages of sanctions in regard to Russia and I hope we can see the development during our Presidency of a 22nd package of sanctions.

We need to establish the facts in respect of Aughinish Alumina. I think President Zelenskyy understands that. Indeed, I think he appreciates the work that is being carried out in that regard. This issue would have been discussed when he met yesterday with the Taoiseach and the Minister, Deputy McEntee. The European Commission is being kept fully plugged in to the

information coming out of the investigation. My understanding is that the investigation is nearing finalisation. I do not want to cut across that process. I again make the point, which I made this morning, that I do not think it is a binary choice, which the Deputy is not suggesting it is, between supply chains and sanctions. We have seen time and again that Europe has had to diversify and find workarounds and other ways. We are very clear in our minds and in our position that we cannot cherry-pick when it comes to sanctions.

What we are doing is establishing the facts. We have received information from a variety of sources, including the Ukrainian Government. We are plugged in with the European Commission. That information is now being stress-tested and I expect the process to come to a conclusion very shortly.

We will keep the European Commission fully briefed. Ultimately, it will be the European Commission and not the Irish Government that will decide whether to propose sanctions or not on a company or individual.

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan: Australia acted more than four years ago, as soon as Putin invaded Ukraine, because it did want to have anything to do with the supply of raw material to Putin's war machine. It was abundantly clear to Australia that it needed to act and it did so. More than four years later, the Government has not acted. That is despite the growing evidence staring the Government in the face. Exports of alumina from Ireland since the invasion began have at least doubled, if not tripled. According to Swedish tax authorities, the plant in Aughinish is controlled by a Russian oligarch who is a supporter and close ally of Putin. We had the independent investigation published in March showing that alumina going from Ireland was being sent to Russia to smelters where it was making aluminium that was then being used by the Russian military. What more evidence does the Government need before it acts? When will it act on this? When will it stop these exports? When will it take the kind of action that is needed to show that we actually do as a country stand in solidarity with Ukraine in everything we do?

The Tánaiste: Australia is obviously not in the European Union, so it has taken its own decisions on measures and sanctions imposed on Russia. We have imposed sanctions as part of the European Union, not on one, two or three occasions, but on 21 occasions. We have been very clear that, during the Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, we want to work with other member states on developing further sanctions. Be it from a defence, security or economic point of view, the best way of having impact on Putin is through financial sanctions. We remain absolutely committed and resolute on that. The Minister, Deputy McEntee, will be working with her colleagues through the Foreign Affairs Council, FAC. The Taoiseach, everyone else and I will be working to continue to maximise the pressure on Russia.

Alumina has not been classified as a dual-use product. There has been on many occasions, as the Deputy will remember, information around the plant in Limerick. On many occasions, it has been assessed by Europe and the US and the assurances given have been satisfactory at the time. The Deputy is right that new information has come into the public domain. That is not an investigation in itself. It has to be investigated and facts have to be established. We, as a member state, are providing the maximum amount of information and facts to the European Commission. It will be the European Commission that will decide whether sanctions should be imposed on any company. Let not the word go out in any way contradictory to this from

this national Parliament: the people of Ireland deplore the actions of Putin, as does this Government, and we will take every step we can to support the people of Ukraine for as long as it takes.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: The EU Presidency gives Ireland the opportunity to set the agenda, lead discussions and influence decisions that will be felt across Europe, including Ireland, in the coming years. We should use that opportunity ambitiously. Over the next six months, there will be hundreds of meetings and countless headlines, but for the families struggling with the cost-of-living crisis here and with issues like accessing childcare, none of this will matter unless we can deliver results that work for them.

The Government has identified priorities, including strengthening competitiveness, enlargement, security and delivering an EU budget. The decisions taken over the coming months will shape Ireland and Europe more widely for years to come. A major objective is advancing EU enlargement, and President Zelenskyy coming yesterday underscored that. Ireland, rightly, strongly supports Ukrainian membership. However, enlargement must be accompanied by reform. We must streamline how the EU institutions make their decisions. We have repeatedly seen how a single veto can paralyse the European Union. If Europe is to become larger, it must also become more effective and make decisions faster.

The most important challenge that the Government may face is the multi-annual financial framework, MFF. There are growing demands to increase funding for security, research and competitiveness, all of which is understandable, but with that comes pressure to divert funding from agriculture and cohesion, which Ireland has often pulled from. As a significant net contributor, Ireland has influence. We must use that influence wisely. The Government must insist that new priorities be funded through new EU revenues, not through cuts to the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP. Ireland must place food security firmly on the agenda. This means protecting agricultural land, supporting family farms and ensuring that Europe remains capable of feeding itself. Food security is no longer a future issue. This summer, Europe is once again experiencing prolonged droughts and extreme weather events, damaging harvests and reducing output. Europe cannot allow itself to become increasingly dependent on imports of food while simultaneously reducing its own capacity for production. Ireland must firmly stand against attempts to weaken the CAP and undermine investment to protect Ireland and Europe's long-term food security.

I have four questions. Will Ireland support institutional reform of the EU to ensure that decisions on issues like Palestine and enlargement of the EU bloc can happen quickly? Does the Government support the EU having new revenue sources to fund new priorities? Will it ensure that the next EU budget continues to fund food security? Will the CAP be protected?

The Tánaiste: I thank the Deputy for the question. Let me assure him and the people of the country that while the Government is very pleased that Ireland has the Presidency of the Council of the European Union for the next six months, we take seriously the Deputy's point about the domestic agenda. I would make two points on this. Governments have to do more than one thing at a time. There are 97 days until the budget, if anyone is counting. We are continuing to work on a budget that will address many of the cost-of-living issues that were highlighted, namely, a personal income tax package, childcare and how we can make structural progress on issues that are of concern to the Deputy's constituents and mine.

The second point I would make - in fairness, the Deputy has acknowledged this - is that the work at European level is not decoupled from the important impact on our own citizens. We are of Europe and in Europe. We are at the heart of Europe, so having a successful Presidency on issues such as competitiveness and budgetary matters will have an important and positive impact on people in this country.

Regarding the multi-annual financial framework, it is a commitment of the European Council that Europe would seek to agree its multi-annual budget for 2028 onwards before the end of this year. That is an important thing to do. At a time when there is a lot of uncertainty in the world, we have to look at what certainty we can bring to it. In the European Union, it is entirely within our gift to agree a budget, so why not do that and provide that certainty to our citizens and businesses and to those who wish to invest when there is so much uncertainty in the world? Ireland's job will be to intensively engage with member states as an honest broker, hear their views and, ultimately, publish a negotiating box - a new compromise proposal, so to speak - towards the end of September, but more likely the start of October. At that point, it will get sent to the European Council and fall to the President, António Costa, to work with European leaders to seek an agreement.

There are different views on the budget. Some members think that the proposed size is too large and some that it is too small. It is not too dissimilar to a domestic budget - everyone has ideas on new things to spend money on. It is often harder to find agreement on how to fund those things. There is a need to continue to fund important programmes like the CAP and the social cohesion funds. We are also living in a new world in terms of defence and security, the green transition and the digital transition. Ireland's job, which is not easy, is to try to find a balance among all of those things.

On the issue of institutional reform, Ireland is always open to exploring ways for the European Union not to have to work at the pace of the slowest member state. However, at the same time, our diversity is our strength and we have to operate within the treaties. We are always willing to have those conversations.

The point about new money for new initiatives was a fair one. During our Presidency, we have been tasked by the President of the European Council to look at the issue of own resources. Any decision on own resources has to be something that can pass the European Council and be deliverable in terms of having a real impact by 2028. I do not underestimate the significance of that. We have to act as an honest broker by not prejudicing the budgetary process. However, issues such as food security, agrifood and protecting the agricultural sector, not just in Ireland, but across the European Union, are core, vital issues for any MFF.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: We both know that Europe works by consensus and that there is only so much we can do to facilitate as an honest broker. While competitiveness is incredibly important, with the capital markets union and the 28th regime coming forward, workers' rights were not mentioned once yesterday at the event in Dublin Castle. This gives us an opportunity to bring the Irish people with us rather than this Presidency just being felt within the bubble of Leinster House. I am not sure if people outside these walls understand its importance or understand it will directly affect them. This question is at national level rather than supranational level, but what concrete milestones does the Government have in mind for us to

achieve during the six months we have the Presidency that will benefit Irish people outside the walls of Leinster House?

The Tánaiste: That is a very fair question. Europe can often seem something remote, so it is our collective job to do as the Deputy said and bring it home in terms of the real impact it makes. I think workers' rights were mentioned, but if they were not, they should have been because they are very much a core part of competitiveness. We cannot make our economies more competitive and grow our wealth without the workers who run the industries and deliver that productivity.

There is a whole load of areas where Irish people can expect to see benefits. To give the Deputy one, the whole issue of online safety for children is a core concern for parents right across this country and, I would argue, right across this Union. There is a very clear commitment in our Presidency's priorities to make progress on that. We have always been of the view that it is most impactful if it can happen at an EU level. If it cannot, we reserve the right to take our own action here. Listening to the comments of President von der Leyen, there is a real chance that we could make progress on that during the Irish Presidency.

In terms of providing access to funding and investment for Irish businesses, including SMEs, getting an agreement on a savings and investment union and on deepening our capital markets union will benefit Irish businesses. Of course, reaching an agreement on the MFF will provide certainties for farmers and fishers. There are many more examples, too.

As the House continues to reflect during this six-month period, we should look at making the work being done at Presidency level relevant to people, because it certainly is.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Today, I am raising the issue of wind farms and their health implications. A number of weeks ago, I was copied into a serious letter from the Communities and Environmental Protection Alliance, CEPA, to the Minister of Health. I am informed that there has been no response, not even an acknowledgement. Representatives from five counties are in the Public Gallery today. They are from Limerick, Mayo, Kilkenny, Wicklow and Offaly, including members of the Stonestown community in County Offaly who live beside the Cloghan wind farm. For more than three years, that community has raised noise complaints with the local authority, the HSE and the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA. The crucial point is that the HSE environmental health service examined the matter, visited the community and requested a public health investigation into the complaints. The public health section denied it. One part of the health service was looking for an investigation but the Department's public health section denied it. I want to understand why. The HSE is our expert public health agency. If its own environmental health service believes a matter warrants further investigation, what justification does the Department of Health have to refuse its request?

This is not an isolated issue. In Limerick, there are long-running complaints relating to turbine noise and shadow flicker in Kilmeedy and Morristown. In County Clare, the HSE investigated a wind farm following complaints and at the request of the local authority. I have a copy of that investigation.

The Tánaiste and I met CEPA a number of years ago and we discussed these complaints. The Taoiseach is on the record 13 years ago saying that there are health implications to wind

farms. There is something that I want the Tánaiste and all other Members sitting around the House today to do. There are two children sitting in the Public Gallery with their parents, a 12-year-old and a ten-year-old. I want the Tánaiste to tell them that he is going to sit there and not investigate the issues and hide things until 2030. Their parents get complaints that they have to come to school because their children are falling asleep in class. If it was the Tánaiste's child, how would he feel as a parent? Would he deny this for 13 years? Would he deny it for ten minutes if it was his child?

It has been proven without doubt that there are health implications to wind turbines in certain areas. I am not against wind turbines in areas where they do not have health implications, but this one does. So, when the Tánaiste is giving his reply, I want him to think of the children and families this is affecting.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy O'Donoghue. It is not the first time he has raised this issue. I acknowledge his genuine interest and active involvement in this issue.

I am consistently on the record on the importance of publishing new guidelines in relation to wind energy and wind farms. I am a believer, as I believe the Deputy said he was, in the switch to renewable energy. It is really important. We have seen what happens when we live in a country that is too reliant on fossil fuel. We all know that. We can have debates about how to make that transition but our country is still addicted to fossil fuel. The impact of that on consumers and citizens in the Deputy's constituency and mine every time somebody makes a decision thousands of kilometres from here is not an abstract thing any more. It has happened not once, but twice in the last five years and plunged us into challenges like the cost-of-living crisis and real difficulties for people. We all accept that point and are not rowing on that point or debating it.

What the Deputy is saying is that it is important that there be guidelines that are clear, evidence based and published. The Deputy will remember the Planning and Development Act, which passed through this House at the end of 2024. That replaced ministerial guidelines with a new structure of national planning statements. It is a more robust and better process. Work is nearing conclusion on a national planning statement in relation to this issue. That needs to provide certainty and clarity on who can and cannot build a wind farm, where they can be built, the distance, the flicker and a number of the other issues the Deputy has raised.

I hear different things. I am not getting into a row or dispute with anybody, but I am told that in Offaly, for example, the council has been extensively engaging. Perhaps people have different views but that is what I have heard from my engagement with Deputy Clendennen on this. It is important that people engage. It is important that the planning authority engage and take on board the views of local communities. It is most important that we have clarity, as we need renewable energy. We need to make that switch with a sense of urgency. In fairness to everybody, including the children, communities and constituents the Deputy referenced, settling the question once and for all and having clarity as to what an appropriate distance is will be useful. We had Private Members' legislation on this matter from, I believe, Deputy Stanley. The Government took the decision not to oppose that but to have a timed amendment to provide that space for the new national planning statement to conclude. On foot of Deputy O'Donoghue raising this matter, I have asked the Minister, Deputy Browne, and the Minister of State, Deputy Cummins, to revert to him.

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: I thank the Tánaiste. The issue here is the inconsistency. In the Dún Laoghaire–Rathdown area, all noise complaints received by the local authority are investigated by the HSE. Residents in Offaly and Limerick are wondering why this other approach is being taken in their case and why it depends on what county one lives in whether one gets investigations. It is inconsistency that is going on here. Why should access to a health investigation depend on the county where somebody lives? We can see that it is different in Dún Laoghaire.

It has been more than two years since the Tánaiste met CEPA and the people with the wind farms. I want the Tánaiste to meet them and the people in Offaly. I will attend as well. I would also like to have the Minister for Health there to meet these people and to see if we can relieve concerns and meet young people and their families' entitlement to a night's sleep. This cannot go on for more years. We have been talking about this for years. We must think of the health implications and how we can help. Will the Tánaiste agree to meet CEPA and family groups with the Minister for Health and me?

The Tánaiste: I am at this long enough to know not to start making diary commitments on the floor of the Dáil. However, the Government will continue to engage with communities on this issue. Indeed, the Deputy has referenced some of my own constituents. Obviously, I engage with my own constituents. I am happy to do that also.

I am not across the level of detail the Deputy has just given me - let me reflect on that - but the point he makes around inconsistency in general is an issue we want to stamp out. A planning system does well when it is consistent. That is one of the reasons we changed the rural planning guidelines this week. It is one of the reasons we are changing the exempted development guidelines. Particularly in a small country, we should not have a different approach to planning from one place versus another above and beyond normal norms that local authorities may wish to have.

The purpose of moving to national planning statements is to move away from those inconsistencies. I accept, and it would be wrong and disingenuous to suggest anything to the contrary, that it has taken a very significant period of time to get to the new wind guidelines. It is true. I know it is a cause of significant frustration for communities, as it was when Deputy O'Donoghue and I had that meeting. However, I would point out that a lot has changed since, including the Planning and Development Act. It is really important that these new standards be up to date with the best possible information, and-----

Deputy Richard O'Donoghue: Will the Tánaiste meet us?

The Tánaiste: -----I expect that to happen this year. I will certainly arrange for a meeting to take place with the Government in terms who the appropriate people are. I will revert to the Deputy.

Ceisteanna ó na Comhaltaí Eile - Other Members' Questions

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: In April and May, members of the Irish Defence Forces' 1st Armoured Cavalry Squadron travelled to the Fort Benning in the US, where they achieved historic success at the 2026 Sullivan Cup, becoming the first non-American team to win the competition since it began in 2012, and this while using fighting vehicles with which they had no previous familiarity. We frequently speak here of the pride we have in the Defence Forces, but this is yet another example of how the men and women of the Irish Defence Forces continue to distinguish themselves internationally.

I come, as the Tánaiste knows, from a constituency where the Defence Forces are at the heart of every aspect of our community. I have watched as the strength of our Defence Forces has declined over the past decade or more, and while recognising something of a stabilisation and upturn in recruitment in recent years, I have to say that I am profoundly concerned at the current strength of our forces, standing, as it does, at just 7,741 personnel across the three services - Army, Naval Service and Air Corps.

It is a disappointment that, as we take the EU Presidency and rightly commit to spending more on defence, we have not succeeded in boosting our force numbers to what could be considered an acceptable level. The establishment figure stood at 9,739 personnel in 2025, with a target to move towards the Commission on the Defence Forces' recommendation of 11,500 personnel by 2028. However, by having a policy of 400 recruits per year, it means it will take us ten years to get to the establishment figure.

I accept that the Government has acted to significantly improve pay and conditions but much more needs to be done. I acknowledge that the Government accepts that there is a structural deficiency in the cadet pay system, which is a real disincentive to young men and women joining the officer corps. A return to the traditional pension scheme and a total abandonment of the single pension scheme would also help.

At a time when we can be happy to boast of full employment arising from the diligence of the Irish population and the sound economic policies pursued by successive Governments, we have to ask ourselves where the new recruits are to come from. The Government needs to be creative in how it approaches this challenge, but it needs to be approached in a far more resolute manner than it has to date. If the required level cannot be achieved because the population is already at work in other areas, a question arises as to whether there are people in the State not at work or in education who could be encouraged, via some form of voluntary national service to sign up with our Permanent Defence Force.

Let us look, if we can for a minute, at the health service. I recently reviewed stats that revealed that 40% of all practising doctors in Ireland were foreign trained. The same set of stats indicates that 54% of practising nurses in Ireland trained abroad and a staggeringly massive 78% of new nursing registrants in 2024 came from abroad.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ó Fearghaíl and I join with him in congratulating and commending those involved in the Sullivan Cup and the success they brought to themselves and our country. I acknowledge not just Deputy Ó Fearghaíl's interest in our Defence Forces, but his long-standing advocacy on behalf of them, which is coloured in part, I am sure, by the community and constituency in which he lives and, therefore, the knowledge he has in regard to that lived experience in County Kildare.

I am proud of our Defence Forces. Every day, I am proud of the men and women of Óglaigh na hÉireann and how they serve our country with distinction. I was particularly proud of them yesterday and they do an excellent job on ceremonial and security occasions for this country. I was very proud of them when I visited them in Lebanon in the not-too-distant past. I saw the incredible contribution they made to peacekeeping in some of the most dangerous and troubled parts of our world and the hope they gave to the people of Lebanon of one day seeing a brighter, peaceful future. The links they have built with communities there and the trust they have of the local people are quite inspiring.

The Deputy is right to say we should be proud of them. He is also right to say that we all need to do a hell of a lot more. We are absolutely committed to that - the Minister, Deputy McEntee, the wider Government and Deputy Ó Fearghaíl. We need to increase the numbers and strengthen retention. It is positive to see, after years of this going in the other direction, that we are moving back into a period of growth in regard to the numbers in our Permanent Defence Force. I believe there was growth of nearly 200 last year, with 790 inductions. There is a target of 850 inductions for this year. Overall application numbers for careers in the Defence Forces continue to grow. There were - this is quite a staggering figure - 16,510 applications received in 2025 and more than 10,000 received to the end of May 2026. That tells us something. It tells us that at an initial moment of time, there are a hell of a lot of people interested in serving in Óglaigh na hÉireann. What we need to do, and what the Defences Forces need to do and are doing, is work out how they can convert that high level of applications into a much higher level of inductions. I acknowledge the work that the Defence Forces are doing in preparing a new strategic workforce plan. I believe it has been submitted to the Department, which has a number of recommendations and modelling tools as well. The aim of this process is to provide that pathway to achieving a strength of 11,500, inclusive of civilian personnel.

There has been progress in regard to cadets and pay. Upon commissioning, an officer's starting salary ranges from €46,823 to €52,265, depending on whether they join as a school-leaver or a graduate. The Minister has had discussions with the Representative Association of Commissioned Officers, RACO, agreeing to give further consideration to the issue of cadet pay prior to commissioning. That process is ongoing, which is important. We have the current public service pay agreement as well, which members of the Permanent Defence Force are part of, too.

I take the Deputy's point. We need to significantly increase the numbers further and, at the same time, we need to increase the capabilities. Indeed, increasing capabilities without the personnel to utilise those capabilities will not be adequate. Therefore, we are looking at ways of turning that very significant level of interest in applications into a faster level of induction. That work is ongoing and the new workforce plan will assist.

Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl: People with far greater knowledge than I have are deeply sceptical about the number of applications that are being shown, but anyway. I want to go back to that comparison with the health service because, for me, it raises the legitimate question of whether we should be looking overseas to secure recruits. If we were to do so, we should be looking at countries where Irish Aid is active and where we could recruit members to the Permanent Defence Force on fixed-term contracts to allow us achieve the strength level required in our Defence Forces to fulfil their mandate.

Many national armed forces make formal or informal provisions to recruit non-nationals. Reasons vary, including historical regimental practice, manpower shortfalls, diaspora links or pathways to citizenship, but the result is the same: foreigners in regular state militaries. The French Foreign Legion, for example, offers a five-year contract, I understand. It would be of dual benefit for such a foreign recruitment process, delivering, as it would if linked to Irish Aid, necessary numbers for our own forces and providing a degree of financial support for families coping with war and the ravages of climate change in disadvantaged countries.

The Tánaiste: I take that point because I hear it often. You see it in Garda numbers as well - the number of people who initially apply and how "serious" the applications are if only a very small percentage turns into inductions. There must be something in it, in the sense that the gap between the level of applications and inductions is very high. The Defence Forces is working through its strategic workforce plan to seek to make improvements on that.

My own sense, for what it is worth, is that there can be people who apply at a moment in time. There are a lot of opportunities out there for people now and if you do not strike while the iron is hot and get them in while the interest is there, you can lose them. Faster processing and processes are important. Regardless of applications, inductions are thankfully rising. The size of the Permanent Defence Force is growing again.

The issue the Deputy raised about recruiting from abroad is one I do not want to give a knee-jerk response to on the floor of the Dáil because it deserves policy consideration and the views of the Minister for Defence, but I will certainly ask that she revert to the Deputy on it.

Technology is also going to change security and defence, the skill sets that we will need in our Defence Forces and the roles of people in Óglaigh na hÉireann. The opportunities that may exist there and the careers that may present are also worth considering, but we will keep in touch on this.

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

Deputy Pearse Doherty: For months, the Government has tried to present abolishing the triple lock as a reasonable and necessary change. Yesterday, however, the Taoiseach made the implications of that decision crystal clear. He argued that Ireland must be free to participate in EU military missions without a United Nations mandate.

That marks a profound shift in Irish defence and foreign policy. It weakens one of the key safeguards underpinning Ireland's military neutrality. As the Government today rolls out the red carpet for Ursula von der Leyen amid the EU's increasing militarisation, those safeguards matter now more than ever. Why is the Government so determined to remove one of the fundamental protections of Irish neutrality? Why should the Irish people accept that abandoning the UN safeguard is in Ireland's national interest?

The Tánaiste: When the Deputy uses phrases like "rolls out the red carpet" for the President of the European Commission, the mask kind of slips. It is a sharp reminder that Sinn Féin has opposed every single European referendum, including the one to join the European Union. It is a Eurosceptic party; it has been since its foundation. If it were up to Sinn Féin, Ireland would

not be in the European Union because it opposed joining it. It is nothing to do with the colour of the carpet, but more to do with Sinn Féin's politically inward-looking ideology.

In relation to the triple lock, this is an act of sovereignty. We do not believe that the British Prime Minister, the US President, the Chinese President or the Russian President should decide where we send the men and women of Óglaigh na hÉireann. As someone who has stood with our troops in Lebanon - I do not think Deputy Doherty has - I believe they should be able to continue doing their excellent peacekeeping work there but they cannot because people who are not the Deputy or me have made that decision. If other European countries came together to continue peacekeeping in Lebanon, I would like Ireland to have been involved in that conversation because I am proud of the decades of tradition of the men and women in Óglaigh na hÉireann. However, other people - not me, the Deputy or the Oireachtas - have decided that is not possible.

Removing the triple lock is in the programme for Government. It should not come as a surprise to anyone on any side of the House that we intend to change this legislation because it was voted through as part of the programme for Government. The Minister will take the legislation through this House in the course of this year. It is an important reform.

Deputy Pádraig Rice: Last Wednesday, the Traveller committee published a damning report on Traveller health inequality. The statistics show extreme levels of inequality due to systemic discrimination, racism and neglect by the State. The statistics speak for themselves. Suicide rates for Travellers are six times higher and infant mortality three and a half times higher, while life expectancy is over a decade shorter for Traveller women and 15 years shorter for Traveller men. These statistics are alarming, but all we have gotten is silence from the Minister for Health, the HSE and the Department. Has the Government considered this report? Was it discussed at Cabinet this week? What is the Government going to do about it?

The report calls for a radical and urgent change of direction from Departments, State agencies and public services. It calls for the introduction of an ethnic identifier across every public service, as called for as far back as 2010 but not implemented. It also calls for an annual parliamentary account mechanism whereby the Minister for Health comes to the Dáil every single year and reports to us on what he or she has done on these recommendations. This cannot be allowed to sit on the shelf and gather dust like all the other reports.

The Tánaiste: I reject the idea that any report has sat on the shelf and gathered dust. I have had many engagements with the Traveller community in a whole variety of roles, most particularly in the education space. Indeed, it was my party in government that recognised Traveller as an ethnicity, which was an important moment for members of the Traveller community.

The report is a valuable piece of work. It highlights stark inequalities and discrimination that still exists in this Republic. Certainly, I and the Government as a whole will give it consideration. I will also ask the Minister for Health to come back to the Deputy directly on what is quite a damning report in terms of the level of progress that still needs to be made in our country to improve outcomes for Travellers across a whole variety of areas.

Deputy Ciarán Ahern: The Minister for justice, as part of his long-running campaign for the Fianna Fáil leadership, is in the process of critically undermining our system of criminal justice. He has introduced a new fee structure for District Court criminal legal aid without proper engagement or consultation with the practitioners involved. The Minister is asking criminal law solicitors to run entire cases for the same amount that he would have charged for one hour of his own time as a commercial law senior counsel. The Minister now refuses to publish the underlying data being used to justify the move to a flat fee. If the evidence is as the Minister says, why will he not publish it? I would have thought he would be familiar with the concept of discovery, whereby the other side in a case can test the evidence being relied on.

Solicitors are resigning *en masse* across the country from legal aid panels. It is awful to see. Will the Tánaiste intervene? Is Fine Gael happy to see criminal prosecutions being put at risk? Will he ensure there is a pause to allow for engagement and consultation? Will he ensure the underlying data informing the Department's report is published?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Ahern for that colourful intervention, but on an important matter. The Minister for justice has introduced an 8% increase in criminal legal aid fees payable to solicitors and barristers in both the Circuit Court and High Court from 1 July. This is now a total restoration of criminal legal aid fees cut under the financial emergency measures in the public interest, FEMPI. He has also proposed, and is trying to bring about reform with, a move to a flat-fee model. I would also point out that he has moved on the level of that fee. The figure represents the current fee paid for five appearances in the District Court, plus an 8% increase. The weighted average of appearances by a solicitor in criminal cases legally aided is five, but many cases obviously require fewer appearances to be concluded.

Everyone wants to see progress on this. The Minister is pursuing a reform agenda. No one wants to see justice in any way delayed or disrupted. I am informed that no solicitor has formally resigned or withdrawn their name from the criminal legal aid panel, but I have certainly heard media commentary to the contrary. I think three solicitors wrote to the Department indicating they would be seeking to withdraw from the panel, but I hope a resolution can be found. I understand and support the reforms the Minister is trying to bring about.

Deputy Charles Ward: Last week, I asked the Taoiseach when homeowners could expect the review of the remediation of dwellings Act, following the publication of IS 465, to be completed. His response was that it could take approximately three months to report to the committee and that the homeowners already know this. Will the Tánaiste provide a clear timeline as to when the necessary amending legislation will be published, enacted, communicated and commenced? Given that the science is now clear, the Government must ensure long-outstanding appeals for downgraded homeowners are determined without any further delay. They have been waiting over 18 months.

Replies to parliamentary questions suggest that homeowners who were recommended remediation measures under the original scheme, such as outer leaf replacement, may be entitled to a review under the new IS 465. However, I have yet to receive clarification on this. Can the Tánaiste confirm that those homeowners will be entitled to a technical review?

The Tánaiste: I may have to ask the Minister to come back on some of the specifics, but I know that the Remediation of Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks Act 2022 sets out a clear process for what should happen when a new standard is made available. It requires that a review of the operation of the Act commences within three months of that standard being published. The Minister for housing now intends to commence a review of the operation of the Act in the coming weeks. I will ask him to keep in close contact with the Deputy on that.

In the meantime, the scheme can continue to operate and fix homes for many homeowners who have already received a determination and a grant amount under the former scheme. I will ask the Minister to come back to the Deputy specifically on those questions. We hope the review will be under way within weeks.

Deputy Ken O'Flynn: Scoil Padre Pio in Churchfield, Cork, is a DEIS plus school catering for five special needs classes. They are operating in prefabs installed in 2005. The prefabs are now costing the State roughly €110,000 per year to maintain. Additionally, despite the energy grants, it is costing the school about €34,000 per year to heat those prefabs with storage heaters. The school has been stuck at stage 2 for the last three years. It has not been accepted onto the list for 2026-27. I invite the Tánaiste, along with the Minister, to visit the school. It is an absolutely fantastic school. It is a treasure. People from all over the city try to get access to the school because of the tremendous work it does with children with special needs. I ask the Tánaiste to come down on his next visit to Cork, perhaps with the Minister, to visit the school. Let us get the school moving along the line. Let us get the planning permission granted and over the line to the next stage so we can build this. When this was first announced, it was a €2 million project. We are now looking at a €7 million project and I am fearful that, if we let it go on, it will hit €10 million.

The Tánaiste: I would be happy to visit Scoil Padre Pio. If the Deputy wants to liaise with me, I will make arrangements to do that in due course in the new school year. I thank the school, based on what the Deputy has told me, for the leadership role it is playing in the provision of special education. I will certainly speak with the Minister, Deputy Naughton, about the school building project.

What I would say all Members of this House, including Deputy O'Flynn, is that while we have announced a significant increase in capital funding for schools, it is not the final word on the matter. There will be a requirement for additional capital funding for school projects. There are quite a number at stage 2b. The Government has additional capital to allocate as part of our medium-term fiscal plan and we will work our way through that in the time ahead. I am happy to engage and I will ask the Minister to look specifically into the building project.

Deputy Erin McGreehan: The Tánaiste might have heard that there is a bit of excitement in Louth at the moment. I do not know if anyone has missed it, but Louth is into its first All-Ireland football semi-final since 1957. This is not just one brilliant season for Louth GAA, however. Louth GAA is on the rise and, thankfully, so too is our stadium. We have a valid application under the large-scale infrastructure fund for phase 2 of our project. Phase 1 is being built and is nearly finished. We are ready and we need to keep this funding going. Where

projects elsewhere are not in a position to draw down their allocation, will the Department consider reprioritising funding towards projects that are ready to proceed?

1 o'clock

There is little point in having money sitting idle when communities are ready to deliver. Our stadium is becoming a field of dreams for all of us Gaelic lovers and sports lovers in County Louth. The county board, players and supporters are all doing their part and we ask the Government to finish the job. Louth has shown we are ready to compete with the best on the pitch and I want the Government to help us build a stadium that matches that ambition and success. Who knows, if we keep winning we might come back here and ask for more money for a bigger stadium, but we will be happy with the money for our current plans.

The Tánaiste: That contribution made me smile to see the positivity, infectiousness and county pride the GAA can bring. I look forward to attending that game because, of course, what the Deputy did not say in her contribution, is that County Wicklow is in the Tailteann Cup final on the same day, just before that match. Wicklow will beat Down and then Louth and Mayo I am not getting involved in, but I wish everybody well.

I take the point about the large-scale projects. Indeed, I had an opportunity quite a while ago to meet with some of the Louth county board members while I was in Louth, and I know how serious this project is. It is the county that has the outstanding need for those county grounds. I have spoken to the Minister, Deputy O'Donovan, about it before. On foot of the Deputy raising it today, I will talk to him again and ask him to come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Grace Boland: Dublin is buzzing with headline gigs, from Katy Perry and Calvin Harris to CMAT and many more, as well as many sporting events. However, what we do not have is a national major event transport planning framework. We really need this. It is impacting on people's decisions on where to go. People from Skerries and Balbriggan simply will not go to Marlay Park any more because getting home is too difficult. Will the Tánaiste please talk to the Minister for Transport and instruct him to require the NTA to pull together a planning framework? If necessary, it needs to be a condition of licensing that a transport plan, bringing together event organisers, venues, local authorities, An Garda Síochána and the transport operator, is co-ordinated by the NTA so that people know how they can get home.

The Tánaiste: This a great round of Questions on Policy or Legislation. We have gone from GAA pitches to concert events. The Deputy raises a very important point. It is great to see the level of activity and the concerts going on right across the country and particularly the city and county of Dublin. Deputy Boland is right; the joy can be somewhat taken out of that if there are real challenges in terms of traffic, congestion and a lack of co-ordination. I know that is an issue that can affect her own constituency of Dublin Fingal West, particularly during the summer months. As she said, the NTA is the organisation with statutory responsibility for pulling all of this together. There is significant collaboration between the NTA and all public transport operators, but I think she is right. There is an issue that needs to be resolved. On foot of the Deputy raising it, I will engage directly with the Minister for Transport and others, and we will come back to her to see what more can be done.

Deputy Johnny Mythen: The primary care service operators in County Wexford are creaking at the knees. Occupational therapists, OTs, in the community health organisation, CHO, 5 south-east area are burned out and under enormous pressure due to the current workload from a long list of clients waiting for appointments and treatment. The integrated health area, IHA, in County Wexford has a total of 1,643 children on waiting lists, almost double that of any other area. There are 132 children aged five or under waiting over 12 months, while 434 five- to 17-year-olds have been on the list for over two years. Nineteen five-year-olds, along with 305 17-year-olds, have been waiting for over three years. The list goes on. There are 252 children, to be exact, waiting on primary care occupational therapy services for between four and five years in total. Will the Tánaiste investigate these unacceptable delays and seek an explanation as to why this is happening? These are children who require an immediate intervention. The longer the delay, the more they will regress. The sooner the treatment starts, the sooner they will progress.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Mythen for raising this issue in relation to primary care services in County Wexford and the impact it is having on children waiting longer periods on waiting lists. I will certainly raise this issue with the Minister for Health and ask that she discuss it specifically with that CHO and the HSE to see what more can be done to make progress. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, to come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Carol Nolan: There are serious and ongoing concerns regarding the lack of access to occupational therapy for elderly people. I am dealing with a situation where an elderly man of 90 years who worked all his life and paid his taxes cannot get access to an occupational therapy appointment despite at least eight separate medical referrals. I have followed up myself and sent an email to the HSE and the local primary care centre and also the Minister because it is simply wrong, and this man is not the only elderly person I am dealing with who cannot get access to occupational therapy, which is a very basic service. He urgently needs an assessment and it is causing him great distress and frustration that he cannot get this basic assessment despite, as I said, having worked all his life.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Nolan for raising this issue in relation to access to occupational therapy for older people. I will speak to the Minister about that broader issue but also specifically the issue she has raised regarding that elderly gentleman who is seeking an assessment and has a number of medical referrals. If she wants to send me the information, I will ask the Minister, Deputy Carroll MacNeill, to engage with the HSE and come back to her.

Deputy Tony McCormack: I welcome the continued success of IDA Ireland in attracting foreign direct investment at a time when global competition for investment has never been more intense. Today, companies are looking for countries that can provide certainty, speed, skilled people and investment-ready sites. Offaly is well positioned to compete in this. IDA Ireland has already demonstrated its confidence in the county by acquiring a strategic site for future industrial development. However, the land alone does not attract investment. Companies need sites that are fully serviced and ready for development. Will the Tánaiste support prioritising the enabling of infrastructure needed to bring this site to market as quickly as possible? The race for investment does not begin when a company contacts IDA Ireland. It begins years earlier when the Government ensures that strategic sites are ready to compete. If

we are serious about balanced regional development, counties like Offaly must be equipped to win the next generation of investment and the high-quality jobs that come with it.

The Tánaiste: I think Deputy McCormack for raising this issue. I will discuss it with the Minister, Deputy Burke, and ask that he revert to the Deputy. More broadly, the IDA is continuing to deliver very successful results in a very challenging environment and is securing more sites that, as the Deputy said, are able to be accessed because they have the enabling infrastructure to try to keep ahead of the curve. The world is getting more and more competitive. It is more vital than ever to have that joined-up approach to securing sites but also to ensure they are functional and ready to rock. That is an absolute imperative. I will speak to the Minister and he will revert to the Deputy.

Deputy Martin Daly: I wish to ask if the Government has or is developing a policy for the development of industrial hemp production in Ireland. Industrial hemp is a remarkable plant. It is a recognised crop grown largely in France, Belgium and Germany and is governed by an EU regulatory framework to keep the active tetrahydrocannabinol, THC, content lower than 0.3%, which is important because it is part of the cannabis family. I think it is prejudiced because of that.

We had farmers, processors, building industry representatives and construction academics at the agriculture committee last night. This remarkable crop has over 70 recognised uses, including hemp concrete, insulation, textiles and building blocks. It is grown quickly, with immediate carbon sequestration, and is sustainable and profitable for farmers, with an estimated profit of €250 per acre. It is a most suitable building material for Ireland with our damp climate. However, it requires a co-ordinated approach by Government to support it as an industry. Does the Government have a policy on industrial hemp production and will it encourage the Departments of Health, agriculture and enterprise to progress this, because at the moment it is licensed by the Department of Health and not by the Department of agriculture? In my constituency, a €20 million investment in a hemp production factory was turned down because we could not get the funding from the just transition programme. Part of the reason for that was the prejudice against this plant because of its association with cannabis.

The Tánaiste: I do not honestly know the answer to the question of whether we have one. I have not seen it if we do, so I presume we have not. On foot of the Deputy raising this, I will ask the relevant Ministers to take a look at it because I am conscious he is a doctor as well as a Deputy and there is a very clear differentiation between what he is trying to achieve from an economic point of view and the broader discussion in relation to cannabis and the likes. That idea of the industrial use of hemp and the good that could come of it is certainly something that should be explored. I will perhaps ask the Minister, Deputy Burke, in the first instance to come back to the Deputy.

Deputy Seán Crowe: There is a commitment in the programme for Government to enhance driver training but this has not been of much comfort to learner drivers who cannot get an appointment for a test. Numbers on the waiting lists for driving tests continue to climb and waiting times grow longer. Several weeks ago, the Road Safety Authority, RSA, pulled the plug on a proposed new driving centre in Sandyford, despite the Minister saying it was mere

weeks away from opening. This would have relieved the enormous backlog affecting in Tallaght and Dún Laoghaire tests centres, which are permanently at the top when it comes to the waiting lists.

There are 17,000 on the waiting list for the centre in Tallaght. That represents 10% of the State's total number in a network of 60 test centres. I have raised this on a number of occasions, including with different Governments. Could the Tánaiste give the people who rely on the Tallaght and Dún Laoghaire test centres assurances that a new test centre will be opened in south Dublin in 2026? This is something that needs to be tackled. At this stage I have raised it with a number of Governments.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Crowe. I can hear his frustration. From memory, I think the waiting time for driving tests is falling, albeit from a very high place. I take the point that there can be geographic differences in relation to that too. I am not sure of the situation in relation to the Sandyford test centre but on foot of the Deputy raising it, I will speak to the Minister of State, Deputy Canney, who has responsibility for the RSA and road safety to see what can be done. More broadly, we are having a conversation about the role of the RSA. I will come back to the Deputy directly and see what can be done for the people in Tallaght and Dún Laoghaire on those wait times.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I am trying my absolute best to find out what has happened to the 119 bus service from Glendalough, through Roundwood to Bray. It was meant to start last September, as the Tánaiste is aware. One month ago his office told constituents that the service was financed, sanctioned and overdue and that it would come into operation very soon and that there should be a firm date in the next week. That was a month ago. As recently as yesterday I had confirmation from the National Transport Authority, NTA, that there is no money for that service and that is why it has not begun. The Minister for Transport told me a couple of weeks ago that he hoped it would start early in 2027. It was meant to start last September. Similar bus routes in Ennis and Mullingar did start when they were meant to start. I am not sure why the 119 has not started. Is there funding for this service? If there is not, could the Tánaiste ensure that funding is provided? I think it would cost approximately €80,000 to get that really vital service up and running from this coming September until when the longer term funding comes into place.

The Tánaiste: I genuinely thank Deputy Whitmore for her work on this. I know her work to get this bus service up and running is sincere. I very much support it. This is where State agencies have to stop with the codology. Deputy Whitmore and I did not make up that this bus was coming to Wicklow. This information flowed from the NTA. She is right that certain bus routes have started and certain other ones have not. I watched back some of the NTA's contribution in response to the Deputy. Deputy Whitmore and I, as a Wicklow TD, were given assurances that this bus service was to be delivered within the timeline. I expect State agencies to keep to the commitments they give and not to go into Oireachtas committees with measly words and try to suggest that somehow the idea just dropped from the sky. It came from the NTA. I am very happy to meet the NTA with Deputy Whitmore in relation to this and to try to get this bus service up and running as quickly as possible.

Deputy Robert O'Donoghue: If we wait around long enough in here, two opportunities can come in a day - much like the 33 bus, which I am going to again raise in regard to its reliability. I acknowledge that the Minister's priority is to make the route more reliable rather than increasing the service this year. I also recognise that recruitment challenges and traffic congestion have contributed to cancellations across the 33 fleet. However, these are not new problems, and this is not the first time I have raised these concerns. I continue to receive emails from frustrated constituents about buses that are simply not turning up on a daily basis.

We need to improve the integration of our public transport network across the north county. The 33 bus timetable should be aligned with train services, and the location of Rush and Lusk train station, which is not in Rush or Lusk remains a significant barrier to people accessing public transport on the northern commuter line.

A dedicated Local Link service connecting surrounding communities in Rush and Lusk to the station would greatly improve access and encourage greater use of public transport. I am hoping these issues can be resolved so that my constituents in Dublin Fingal West can have a public transport system they can rely on.

The Tánaiste: Deputy O'Donoghue is having a busy day. I thank him for raising the issue of the 33 bus again. I take the point that there is always a balance between the reliability of the service and increasing the frequency of it. I know the Minister's aim in the first instance is to improve reliability.

The Deputy has put forward some suggestions as to measures that could be taken that would pass the common-sense test in terms of helping get people to and from train stations and the likes. I am very much aware that he represents a constituency with a growing and young population where investment in public transport is crucial. I will ask the Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, to come back to the Deputy in the first instance. I hope we can focus on public transport and bus provision in the forthcoming budget because it has been a challenging year for Local Link and the likes.

Deputy Eoghan Kenny: The Tánaiste will be well aware that last night SNAs overwhelmingly voted to reject the proposed SNA workforce development plan. I understand Fórsa's education divisional executive committee will meet next Wednesday, 8 July. I accept what the Minister, Deputy Naughton, said about there being significant stakeholder engagement on the creation of this workforce development plan but the reality is that SNAs do not accept it. One of the core issues is the 72-hour obligation on SNAs. I suspect that this issue forms part of the reason for the rejection of the plan. My question is fairly simple. What now?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Kenny. First, I respect the outcome of the ballot because it is important that processes are respected. I know Fórsa opened a consultation ballot. It is important to say that the union representing SNAs did recommend acceptance of the plan but the members rejected it. That is a statement of fact too and that is how democracy works. In terms of what happens next and what now, Fórsa has said it will consider the outcome carefully. I understand, as the Deputy outlined, that its education divisional executive committee will meet next Wednesday to consider the outcome and determine the next steps. We, as a

Government, and the Department await the feedback from Fórsa's engagement with its members. We are respectful of that. The Minister, Deputy Naughton, and the Minister of State, Deputy Michael Moynihan, and their officials are ready and willing to constructively work and engage with Fórsa and all stakeholders to address any concerns or issues. We all want to get agreement on this. In fairness, I know the SNAs want to get agreement on it. They have waited a long time for it. This was seen as an important step forward. We need to hear what was behind the outcome of the ballot to see if we can tease through some of the issues. We look forward to hearing from Fórsa after the meeting next Wednesday.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: What plans does the Government have to reform Uisce Éireann, which is totally out of control, given its continued failure to deliver on its core responsibility of providing a safe, secure and reliable water supply. Last week alone 28,000 homes and businesses across south Tipperary, from Carrick-on-Suir right up to Tipperary town, were affected by boil water notices. That is simply unacceptable in 2026. These notices, along with repeated unplanned outages, are not just an inconvenience, they force businesses to close, disrupt farming operations and place huge pressures on families and small businesses and undermine confidence in Irish Water-Uisce Éireann. People are asking how these failures can continue while Uisce Éireann executives continue to receive generous top-ups and bonuses. Where is the accountability? I think it was Einstein who said the definition of insanity was doing the same thing over and over again. Not a week goes by without Deputies from all over the country raising this issue here. We, as public representatives, have literally no access to Irish Water. It is a complete farce. Tipperary town is on a boil water notice since February and it is likely to continue until October. Absolutely no information is coming to public representatives or to the public. How long can this madness continue? Uisce Éireann has been a failure since it was set up by the then Minister, Phil Hogan, who was in the Tánaiste's Government. It must be stood down or massively reformed because it is just not fair. A soft drinks company in Clonmel has a bill of €40,000 for buying clean water and it has got no satisfaction from Irish Water.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: The Deputy should conclude.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: That is not acceptable.

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy McGrath. As is often the case I agree with some of what he says and disagree with some of it also. The establishment of Uisce Éireann, to have one national body for co-ordinating and directing a very significant level of investment in water quality, water services and the water supply we need for housing, is a good thing. I genuinely believe that and I stand over that decision.

However, the Deputy raised two other issues. One is the boil water notices in his constituency and the very significant impact they have had on his constituents. I will raise that with Irish Water and ask that it comes back to him directly. The second issue is the accountability of Irish Water. I am only one Member of this House - it is for the House to consider this - but it is my very clear view that Uisce Éireann should be accountable to Dáil Éireann through parliamentary questions. I do not understand why it is not. It was intended to be set up in a different way. Deputy McGrath will remember those battles. He referenced my

former colleague, the then Minister, Phil Hogan, but it has not been established in that way. Therefore, I think it should be covered. I do not think it is acceptable. I do not blame the Ceann Comhairle or the Leas-Cheann Comhairle - far from it - but at the moment if a Deputy asks a question about Uisce Éireann, it is ruled out of order. If we ask a question about the HSE, the Minister answers it and refers it to the HSE. We need to do work in whatever the appropriate committee is - the Committee on Members' Interests or the Oireachtas Commission - on how we are going to bring accountability. This is an organisation with vast sums of public money. Deputy McGrath's frustration is shared by Deputies across the House.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: It is not the Leas-Cheann Comhairle or the Ceann Comhairle; it is the legislation.

The Tánaiste: Absolutely. We should work it out together.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: I just want to make it clear. I agree with the Tánaiste.

The Tánaiste: I defended the Leas-Cheann Comhairle's honour but we need to seriously look at this.

Deputy Michael Murphy: While I welcome the supports available to older people, there is a growing concern that the social welfare system does not address the additional costs associated with advancing age.

What I am asking the Tánaiste to examine, in the context of budget 2027, is additional supports for older people, particularly those over the age of 80 and 90. I am particularly thinking about the fuel allowance. We have 189,000 people over the age of 80 and 29,000 over the age of 90 but not all have an automatic entitlement to the fuel allowance. It is those cohorts of people who are particularly vulnerable to fuel poverty. As I said, only 29,000 people are over the age of 90. Most of them are already in receipt of the fuel allowance but there is a small cohort who are not because they are above the financial threshold. It would be a great step by the Government to consider an automatic entitlement for those people over the age of 90, perhaps first, and then extending it to those over the age of 80.

The Tánaiste: As is often the way, there is a lot of logic in what the Deputy is suggesting. We have to consider these matters as part of the budgetary process. I am proud that we are in a Government that has significantly expanded the fuel allowance and made sure that more homes and more people than ever before are receiving it. We have increased the amount of the fuel allowance and took the decision to extend the fuel allowance season this year when the energy prices went in a very bad direction globally and in Ireland. The Deputy is making the point that there is a certain cohort of people of an age who still do not qualify and he would like that examined. On foot of his raising this, I will ask the Minister, Deputy Calleary, to give it consideration and come back to the Deputy directly.

Deputy Peter Roche: I want to put the spotlight on the primary medical certificate and the very rigid rules there are with regard to eligibility. It is fine if a person has a very physical disability; they will qualify. Those who lose eyesight, for example, would not be eligible. The

appeals process is also quite complex. Is there any prospect of a review of the scheme? On the backlog of appeals, is there anything to speed up the numbers who are waiting on decisions?

The Tánaiste: I thank Deputy Roche for raising this issue. I will reflect on what he says in respect of the actual process itself. Specifically on the issue of the length of time for appeals, I acknowledge the appeals board is independent but the board does run regional clinics on occasion where appropriate facilities can be sourced and where there is sufficient demand and attendance. For instance, over the past 12 months, it held these regional clinics in Cork and Galway and I think that helped somewhat with those delays. I am advised that the location of alternative regional clinics is kept under review by the board. This is very welcome. On foot of the Deputy raising the matter today, I will ask that his views are conveyed to the board as well. Those regional hearing centres could make a real difference in speeding up those times and I know it is something the board is open to as well.

Prevention of Energy Wastage Bill 2026: First Stage

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I move:

That leave be granted to introduce a Bill entitled an Act to amend the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 to provide for the utilisation of curtailed and constrained renewable electricity in order to support the achievement of the national climate objective and carbon budgets, to advance a just transition, and to reduce energy poverty by facilitating access to lowercost renewable electricity for eligible electricity customers; and to provide for related matters.

This Bill has a very simple objective. It is to stop the wastage of renewable energy and help people reduce their electricity bills. One in seven households is in arrears on their electricity bills and, as of yesterday, electricity has gone up again, with Electric Ireland, the State's largest energy provider, putting its prices up by 8%. For the average household, this will add €138 to their electricity bill. Electric Ireland has about 1.1 million customers across the State, so a huge number of people are going to be impacted by this price hike. At this point, it is well known that Ireland has the highest electricity prices in Europe, with us paying 40% more than the EU average. This usually costs around €480 per year for an average household. People across the country are really struggling to make ends meet and, considering these figures, it is not hard to see why.

Yet, at the very same time, huge amounts of renewable energy are just being wasted. There are wind turbines all over this country that are being switched off because our electricity grid cannot manage the energy that they would be producing. In some cases, this is due to limitations on the grid while in others it is because the wider electricity system cannot absorb the energy safely. No matter the reason, renewable energy that could be used is being thrown away. This costs us approximately €500 million per year and, amazingly, some of that actually ends up being paid through individual electricity bills. While people in Ireland are in arrears on their bills, struggling to make ends meet, and faced with the highest electricity prices in Europe, they are also paying to switch wind farms off. There is something really wrong with a system where renewable energy is being wasted while people struggle to heat their homes, and I think that is something we could all probably agree on.

Now, there are ways of dealing with this. We could have every immersion in the country programmed to switch on at night and use that energy. We could do it the way Germany does it, by using electric vehicles as *quasi* batteries to store the energy. We could indeed just put large-scale batteries on every wind farm to store that energy rather than wasting it. The technology is there but the Government, for some reason, is stubbornly refusing to actually consider it.

The Prevention of Energy Wastage Bill 2026 seeks to address this issue and prevent that electricity wastage from happening. This Bill amends the climate Act to provide a statutory basis for the utilisation of renewable electricity that would otherwise be wasted due to electricity system curtailment or constraint. In short, this Bill would force the Minister to do something with that energy, such as to provide it to households at low cost or to people at risk of energy poverty for free. The Bill itself prioritises vulnerable households, those at risk of energy poverty, and community benefit projects. This is not a new idea, nor is it the first Bill to come to the Dáil on the issue of renewable energy wastage. Two Fianna Fáil TDs brought one forward about two years ago, the Energy Poverty Reduction (Use of Surplus Renewable Energy) Bill 2025. This issue is clearly recognised across parties and there are even provisions for it in the programme for Government. I really hope this Bill will receive cross party support but not just support. I want to see this Bill actioned. I want to see people's electricity prices come down and I want to see us using the renewable electricity we can produce for the benefit of people in this country.

EnergyCloud has examined this issue in detail, of the scale of surplus electricity on the grid. It has proposed mechanisms through which the wasted energy could be redirected, and its work has formed the basis of much of this Bill. I would like to thank EnergyCloud for its advocacy on this really important issue and for its support in the development of this Bill.

This Bill is really an opportunity for us all as legislators and as representatives of our communities to support households, to tackle energy poverty, to reduce waste and to make better use of the renewable resources that are available to us. I really hope that will be recognised across the Oireachtas and that this Bill will be supported.

An Leas-Cheann Comhairle: Is the Bill opposed?

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): No.

Question put and agreed to.

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

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

Question put and agreed to.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar fionraí ar 1.28 p.m. agus cuireadh tús leis arís ar 2.08 p.m.

Sitting suspended at 1.28 p.m. and resumed at 2.08 p.m.

2 o'clock

Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2026: Second Stage

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

I am pleased to bring the Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2026 before the House. The main purpose of this Bill is to support the smooth commencement of the remaining provisions of the Planning and Development Act 2024 later this year and to provide clarity and further policy direction on a number of matters that have already commenced in Part 3 of the 2024 Act, including: the timely introduction of ten year county and city development plans; speeding up the implementation of the new procedural rules for planning judicial reviews that were introduced in the 2024 Act by applying them to any remaining Acts or decisions to be made under the 2000 Act; and completing a number of actions that were assigned to my Department following the Government's approval of the 2025 accelerating infrastructure plan to enhance the timely delivery of critical infrastructure projects.

Members will recall the scale of the Planning and Development Act 2024, which was enacted in October of that year. This body of legislation is the third largest to be enacted in the history of the State and was underpinned by a 15-month review led by the Attorney General, informed by dozens of key stakeholder voices in the planning arena, while also subject to considerable scrutiny when it passed through the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Given the scale of the 2024 Act, it has been necessary to commence and implement it on a phased basis in order to facilitate the transition from the arrangements under the current legislative framework to those under the Act. The ongoing implementation of the Act is a key priority for me, as Minister of State, and for the Government. A considerable volume of the legislation has already commenced, with the remainder on track to be commenced by the end of this year following the enactment of the Bill before the House. I assure Deputies that my Department is finalising revised regulations to accompany the 2024 Act and is working closely with local authorities and a range of other key stakeholders to ensure that the system will be ready for full implementation.

As already stated, the main purpose of the Bill is to support the smooth commencement of the remaining provisions of the Planning and Development Act 2024, which is due to take place later this year.

The amendments in the Bill can be broken down into five key areas. First, the Bill amends Part 3 of the Planning and Development Act 2024 to speed up the move to plan-making under the 2024 Act and to ensure that the transitional measures already provided for will operate as originally intended in line with the hierarchy of plan-making. Part 3 of the 2024 Act was commenced at the end of last year and is already being operated by planning authorities. We recognise that the ongoing practical implementation of the transition to the 2024 Act presents a challenge for the current system from a capacity and prioritisation perspective.

The amendments in this Bill take into account the ongoing engagement with the sector on how the legislation is operating in practice and will provide clarity and further policy direction

on a number of important matters, including the Government's expectations around the timely introduction of ten-year county and city development plans under the 2024 Act. The approach has been discussed in detail and worked through with all key stakeholders including the Office of the Planning Regulator and our planning authorities. This engagement has happened at all levels across all organisations, including the oversight group chaired by my Department that was established to oversee and help manage the sector through the ongoing commencement of the 2024 Act. This Bill will ensure that the review of the three regional spatial and economic strategies will be completed in a timely manner through the introduction of a deadline of 31 December 2027. It will also allow for planning authorities to amend the expiration dates of their current development plans for a defined maximum period between February and December 2030. This new expiration date will act as a trigger for the adoption of new ten-year development plans under the 2024 Act and will mean that planning authorities must begin the process of making their new development plans under the 2024 Act in the period beginning in July next year and running until July of 2028 at the latest. It will also make it clear that since the commencement of Part 3 of the Act at end of 2025, all development plan reviews must be carried out under the 2024 Act only.

Second, the Bill extends the judicial review provisions in Chapter 1 of Part 9 of the 2024 Act to acts done or decisions made under the Planning and Development Act 2000. We are all aware that a number of planning proposals are delayed due to judicial review proceedings, which is why changes to judicial review processes were introduced under the 2024 Act and brought into operation in August 2025. Given the lead-in time before there could be a formal decision made or action taken under the 2024 Act that could be subject to a challenge, it would likely be several months after the commencement of Part 4 of the 2024 Act before the new planning judicial review rules could have an impact on proceedings. To further expedite judicial review processes going forward, it is now proposed to extend the judicial review provisions in the 2024 Act to decisions made or acts done under the 2000 Act. This change will speed up the transition to the new rules and will mean that they will have an earlier impact in the second half of this year. The processes being updated include the removal of the requirement to apply for leave to apply for judicial review proceedings which reduces the time required for such proceedings, removes unnecessary additional legal costs to all parties and amends various procedural rules relating to proceedings. These changes will mean that the expected benefits of the new judicial review processes will have an earlier positive impact on the planning system later this year.

A range of measures are proposed in the Bill to enhance the delivery of critical infrastructure projects and complete several actions that were assigned to my Department in the Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan, which was published last year. A number of actions were already in train, but the relevant timelines have been brought forward and included in this Bill to ensure completion within the ambitious timelines set out in the report, which was approved by Government and published in December of last year. This includes the introduction of a definition of “material contravention” of the development plan which should assist in the timely development of critical infrastructure and housing projects by providing clarity and certainty for the decision-making process and thereby avoiding the potential for additional legal challenges. It also includes a number of other amendments to streamline certain application processes for critical infrastructure projects, including those by or on behalf of statutory undertakers. This includes the change set out in section 35 of the Bill which make

it clear that landowner consent is not required when making a planning application for development undertaken by statutory undertakers in the performance of their statutory functions, such as ESB Networks when they are seeking to develop critical electricity infrastructure, including across multiple properties. This amendment makes it clear that the application may be made by or on behalf of the statutory undertaker in the first instance, but does not alter the requirements or predetermine the outcome of the planning process itself. All relevant parties, including landowners, will still retain their existing rights to participate in the planning process.

Another example is section 53, which makes an amendment to help speed up the delivery of critical electricity infrastructure. It provides additional flexibility so that an application for the distribution of electricity infrastructure may be made under Chapter 3 of the 2024 Act, thereby having the development treated as standard development and considered first by the planning authority, rather than under Chapter 4 of the 2024 Act, where it is considered only by An Coimisiún Pleanála, as may otherwise be applicable.

The Bill will also make amendments to allow for the modification of an existing permission in accordance with appropriate apartment design standards. The agile application of these criteria to permissions already granted including, where relevant, the development of a greater numbers of dwellings in apartment complexes, will help support the viability of the development of such apartments in the immediate term. The amendment being introduced sets out specific circumstances where such a modification of an existing permission is non-material for the purpose of the 2024 Act, noting that any such modification is still subject to the requirements of the environmental impact assessment directive and the habitats directive, where applicable. The Bill sets out the specific criteria for the applicability of such a process. Those criteria will only apply where work has not yet commenced and if the modification is made within two years of the enactment of this Bill.

Following a comprehensive internal review of the legislation that took place in early 2026, and engagement with the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel to the Government, OPC, on the drafting of corresponding provisions, a number of amendments are proposed to clarify the competent authorities and related screening obligations for both appropriate assessment and environmental impact assessment. The amendments have been drafted on a no-policy-change basis and will support the smooth commencement of the remaining provisions of the 2024 Act later by ensuring that the provisions operate as was originally intended when they were enacted.

The Bill includes a large number of amendments that make up over 50% of its sections. These amendments are technical in nature and are proposed to correct cross-references and typographical errors and to clarify the existing text without changing the intent behind it. The Bill also includes amendments that provide for the formal repeal of the vacant sites levy provisions in the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015, which have been superseded by the residential zoned land tax.

Amendments to the Housing Finance Agency Act 1981 are also proposed in order to increase the statutory borrowing limit of the Housing Finance Agency from €13.5 billion to €15 billion. The Housing Finance Agency provides low-cost finance to approved housing bodies, local authorities and higher education institutions for social, affordable and student housing. This amendment will enable the Housing Finance Agency to continue to fund social

and affordable homes up to June 2027 and ensure there is no interruption in their housing pipeline.

I will now outline the main provisions of the Bill, which consists of 149 sections set out in 4 Parts. Part 1 comprises sections 1 to 3, inclusive, and contains provisions of a general nature, including definitions, citation, commencement and repeals. Part 2 comprises sections 4 to 139, inclusive, and amends the Planning and Development Act 2024, referred to as the Principal Act. Part 2 is split into 18 Chapters, with each Chapter providing amendments to specific Parts of the 2024 Act.

Chapters 1 and 2, which comprise sections 4 to 8, inclusive, amend Parts 1 and 2 of the Act of 2024 primarily to correct typographical errors and cross references. Section 4 includes a transitional clarification in the definition of “exempted development” to ensure that planning exemptions under the Act of 2000 can continue in force under the Act of 2024, as provided for in section 627 of the 2024 Act, until such time as they are repealed and replaced by regulations made under the 2024 Act.

Chapter 3, which comprises sections 9 to 31, inclusive, amends Part 3 of the Act of 2024. Alongside typographical corrections and minor amendments, Chapter 3 provides for: the designation, in sections 9, 13 and 20, of towns with populations of 10,000 or more as key towns; a 90-week deadline for the completion of a regional spatial and economic strategies review in section 14, which means it should be completed by 31 December; the amendment of the expiry date of the current county and city development plans in section 27; and a trigger for the review of development plans in section 19. The revised expiry dates are grouped in batches, separated by two-month intervals, and depend on the expiry of the current development plans. These amendments will operate in such a way that the planning authorities will be obliged to begin the process of making their new development plans under the 2024 Act in the period from July 2027 to July 2028 at the latest, and conclude the processes in the period between February and December 2030 at the latest. In line with the hierarchy of plan-making, these amendments should provide for the timely introduction of ten-year development plans.

Chapters 4 and 5 comprise sections 32 to 78, inclusive, and amend Parts 4 and 5 of the Act of 2024. Alongside typographical corrections and minor amendments, they provide for: a definition of “material contravention” in relation to development plans in section 32; eligibility requirements for the making of planning applications on behalf of statutory undertakers in section 35; flexibility for applications for the distribution of electricity to be made under Chapter 3 of Part 4 and to be treated as standard development in section 53; the removal of the requirement to have a maritime area consent prior to entering into the pre-application consultation process in section 54; and the alteration of an existing permission for apartment developments that is in accordance with appropriate apartment design standards in section 62.

Chapters 6 and 7 comprise sections 79 to 114, inclusive, and amend Parts 6 and 7 of the Act of 2024. Alongside typographical corrections and minor amendments, these sections clarify the competent authorities and screening obligations for both appropriate assessment and environmental impact assessment in respect of: retention permission; retrospective consent; local authority development; State authority development; planning schemes; and development schemes.

Chapter 8 comprises section 115 and amends Part 9 of the Act of 2024. It inserts a new section 303A in Chapter 3 of Part 9 to apply the new procedural rules for judicial review set out in Chapter 1 of Part 9 to decisions made or acts done under the Act of 2000. This applies to a range of specified procedures, where those procedures are initiated after section 303A comes into operation.

Chapters 9 to 18 comprise sections 116 to 139, inclusive, and amend various Parts of the Act of 2024. These mainly consist of typographical corrections and minor amendments. Section 129 amends section 588 of the Act of 2024, which requires a declaration to be signed with planning submissions and appeals. The amendments in this Bill will provide for exclusions from the application of section 588 for specified bodies that are entitled to be given notice of certain planning applications and are invited to make observations due to their specific functions.

Part 3 comprises sections 104 to 148, inclusive, and amends the Planning and Development Act 2000 and other enactments. The amendments to the Act of 2000 are consequential to the Part 9 judicial review amendments. The amendments to the other enactments correct typographical errors in references to the Act of 2024 in those other enactments.

Part 4 of the Bill comprises section 149 and amends the Housing Finance Agency Act 1981, providing for an increase to the statutory borrowing limit of the Housing Finance Agency, from €13.5 billion to €15 billion.

I emphasise that the measures included in the Bill as proposed deal with a number of important and time-sensitive matters that are relevant to the planning system. They will provide clarity and further policy direction on a number of matters that have already commenced in Part 3 of the 2024 Act, including the timely introduction of ten-year development plans under the Act, before the end of 2030. The Bill will also speed up the implementation of the new procedural rules for planning judicial reviews that were introduced in the 2024 Act by also applying them to any remaining acts or decisions made under the 2000 Act. The Bill contains a number of measures that will enhance the timely delivery of critical infrastructure projects, which I am sure all Members support. The substantial majority of the provisions in the Bill are technical and their timely enactment will enable the remaining provisions of the Planning and Development Act 2024 to be brought into operation later this year.

As the House is aware, the ongoing implementation of the 2024 Act is a key priority for Government and we want the remainder of the 2024 Act to be commenced as soon as possible. With the support of both Houses and with your co-operation, I hope to have this Bill enacted before the summer recess. These changes will provide legislative clarification for the planning sector, including planning authorities and An Coimisiún Pleanála, in order that they can finalise their preparation for implementation. The timely enactment of this Bill will make sure that the smooth commencement of the 2024 Act can take place in the autumn.

I will seek to respond to various matters that Deputies may raise. I look forward to further engagement next week during the Committee Stage debate on this important Bill. In the meantime, I commend the Bill to the House.

Deputy Eoin Ó Broin: I would like to start by thanking the officials from the planning section of the Department who facilitated a detailed briefing for members of the Oireachtas committee on Monday. I am deeply disappointed with what I consider to be the disrespectful way in which the Government has introduced and intends to proceed with this Bill.

The Minister of State said "With the support of both Houses and with your co-operation, I hope to have this Bill enacted before the summer recess." We will have no say in that enactment. The Government has already decided that the Bill is going to be railroaded through the Houses in a matter of days. Given the complexity of the legislation in front of us, its impact on our planning system and, on foot of that, the impact that will be felt by hundreds of thousands of people, I have to say that what is proposed is wholly inadequate. The Government has allocated four and a half hours for the Second Stage debate. That is fine, but two hours for Committee and Remaining Stages next week to scrutinise a Bill that runs to 83 pages is wholly inadequate.

The Bill was published on Friday last. As the Minister of State outlined, it is very technical in nature. The amendment deadline for Committee Stage it was 11 o'clock this morning, before we even had the benefit of the Second Stage debate. Earlier, the Business Committee agreed to the tiny amount of time allocated for the debate next week. This means that those sections of the Bill that were subject to pre-legislative scrutiny will not be subject to any meaningful committee scrutiny next week. That, in itself, is problematic, but there are considerable sections of this Bill that are new, that were not included in the general scheme and that were not subject to pre-legislative scrutiny. They will be the subject of no scrutiny whatsoever.

We want to get the opportunity to bring in impacted parties, professionals and other experts to give us their views. The problem with what is happening is that we have a long history in this House of Government rushing through technical and complex planning legislation at the tail end of Dáil terms. Because we do not take the time to scrutinise such legislation, mistakes and errors are made.

Substitute consent is the best example of that. The legislation had to be revisited and reintroduced a year afterwards because of the mess that was made.

When I say "mess", I want to be very clear. I am not in any way criticising officials in the planning section of the Department because they work hard and do their job very professionally, but when they are put under unrealistic timelines by the Government, when they and the Members of this House are not afforded the opportunity to scrutinise and hear other opinion, bad legislation is made, bad outcomes arise and legislation has to be revisited. I say this about a Bill many aspects of which I am not opposed to. Not only is it disrespectful to this House, but it is deeply disrespectful to the members of the Oireachtas housing committee, of which the Minister of State was previously a member, because we are not being afforded the opportunity to undertake the job to scrutinise legislation from the Government, a job that we take seriously.

There is also the irony that when the then Minister, Deputy O'Brien, announced in 2022 that he was going to do a once-in-a-generation reform of planning legislation, one of the primary reasons was because, in the 20 years following the passage of the planning Act in 2000, there had been so many amending pieces of legislation that the Act was unwieldy. It was too complex, cumbersome and difficult to navigate.

He then undertook process whereby he took a Bill of 700 pages that ended up at 1,000 pages long, with all of the amendments during 2024. If I am not wrong, this is now the second piece of amending legislation of that "once-in-a-generation" rewrite of our planning law, the purpose of which was to do away with the need for constant revisions and amendments. Are we going to get one of these amending Bills every year? We had one last year. It passed through the House and was much shorter than this one, which is more substantive. Sure, some of the sections of this Bill are corrections, but not all. There are lots of substantive elements in this Bill, which I am going to deal with now, and it is not lost on people, particularly the professional planners out there who have to make and adjudicate on applications, that the system is probably more complicated and cumbersome today as a result of the then Minister, Deputy Darragh O'Brien, and his successor, Deputy James Browne's poor efforts.

I will run through some of the key general concerns I have with the Bill. The proposed amendments to Part 3 relate to plan-making, which was one of the areas of the 2024 Act that we were generally in agreement with. We wanted to move to more plan-making, including ten-year plans, to create a consistency between regional, county and local plans. The real issue here, however, is that unless there is a proper multi-annual workforce plan to give our planning authorities the staff that they told the Government back in 2023 they needed, all of these new provisions will fall foul of the inability of our local authorities, through no fault of their own, to have the dedicated staff to do the plan-making.

In my local authority area, we are dealing with the city edge project, which the Minister of State's officials know very well because they were before our local authority previously. We have just made some very ambitious decisions in terms of substantial extensions to Adamstown through material variations. There are new master plans on the cards for the coming years for Adamstown south and west, and Grange Castle.

How are we going to get our planning authorities to move into the space where they have sufficient time and capacity to develop these kinds of plan when the number of additional staff sanctioned so far has been substantially less than what the County and City Management Association, CCMA, told us in 2023 they needed? There is no multi-annual plan not just to employ, but to recruit the planners whom planning authorities need.

While I have no objection to the sections of the Bill that propose to amend Part 3 of the Act, in the absence of a parallel and clear multi-annual workforce plan to train, recruit, attract and employ the planners that we need, it is going to be very difficult to achieve these objectives.

With respect to the amendments to Part 9 on judicial reviews, and as I said when the Act was making its way through the House in 2023 and 2024 and during the pre-legislative scrutiny of the general scheme of this Bill, I am concerned that there is a real risk that this could lead to increased litigation and project delay. I hope I am wrong, but the only way we are going to know is if there is regular reporting by the Department to the Oireachtas housing committee to demonstrate the outworking of this legislation. I invite the Minister of State to discuss with the Minister, James Browne, and the officials introducing some reporting mechanism, perhaps every six months, to the Oireachtas housing committee so that we can track the progress. This means that if the Bill does what the Government intends it to do, we could congratulate the Government and say "Job well done". I would have no difficulty doing that, rare and all as such a thing occurs. However, if it leads to increased litigation and delays, as some of us fear but none of us wants, we would be able to highlight that.

The amendments also ignore the fact that the biggest obstacle to the timely expediting of judicial reviews is that we only have three judges in the Planning and Environment Court. We need at least six. Given the resources available to the Government, it is not within the realms of impossibility that the number of judges could be doubled, they could be provided with some additional back room staff and support, and, crucially, the good practice guidelines of the court would be put on a statutory footing so that we would have statutory timelines for judicial reviews depending on size and complexity. We have statutory timelines for some elements of our planning process, although not as many as there should be. There should be for judicial reviews, too.

With respect to the amendments to Part 4 on the infrastructural task force, this is one of those areas where our committee could have played a useful role in inviting in external experts, such as the utilities, our planning authorities, the Irish Planning Institute and others, to give their views on these proposed changes to the Act. All of us want to see increased and accelerated delivery of critical underlying infrastructure, which these amendments broadly deal with, but also of public amenities and public services like transport, schools and health facilities, all of which are sorely lacking in those parts of the State where there is increased residential development.

One of the big disappointments of this Part is that it does not deal with the thorny issue of parallel consent. We raised this with the Department's officials during the course of our briefing. The utilities have been crying out for parallel consents to speed up the process for years. Whether they require foreshore licences or Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, licences as well as planning consents, there should be a single standardised format where those consents and grants can be applied for in parallel rather than consecutively, which is the case currently and adds considerable periods of time to the process.

In principle, I am not against the definitions of material contraventions here and elsewhere in the Bill, but our committee did not scrutinise them and there was no public airing to examine whether those definitions were correct or would cause difficulties. That is a missed opportunity. I am not against the idea in principle, but the Government is doing itself and the State a disservice as a consequence.

I am fundamentally opposed to the amendments to Part 4 dealing with alterations to existing apartment planning permissions. As the Minister of State knows, I was a strong critic of the revised design standards when they were issued as section 28 guidelines last year and as draft planning policy statements this year, in part because they had all the same pitfalls and challenges of the former Minister, Eoghan Murphy's previous section 28 guidelines. They are not good standards for the development of good urban environments or good and well-planned communities. That is not just my view. That is the view of the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland and the Irish Planning Institute, as well as many professional architects and planners.

As we heard in the housing committee only a couple of weeks ago, the irony is that the alleged savings that were to be introduced as a consequence of those inferior design standards have already been taken over by inflation. Despite the fact that renters are going to get smaller and darker apartments with less storage and communal space, the savings that were meant to be provided are gone and because the Government has decided to remove any protections on rent controls between tenancies, those tenants will be paying ever greater rents. This is a

retrograde step that will come back to bite the Government badly in the time ahead, but as is always the cases with these matters, it will be renters who bear the burden of that.

Notwithstanding all of those criticisms, and the Minister of State was not surprised by any of them, there is an obligation on the Government to periodically report back to our committee on the operation of these particular sections in terms of the number of alterations that are sought, the nature and detail of those alterations, whether they actually result in commencements of new homes, and the types, quality and price of those.

I suspect the Government will not do that because it is going to be nervous about proper public scrutiny of the negative outcome of that particular policy proposition that it introduced last year and is advancing further here. The argument is going to be that this measure will help to activate apartment developments that otherwise would not be built. Let us wait and see. I genuinely do not believe it will have that impact, and even where it does have that impact, marginal and all as it is, it will have very negative impacts on renters in terms of size, quality and, crucially, cost.

I would like the Minister of State, whether today or on Committee Stage next week, to talk in more detail about the provisions of the Bill that deal with the derelict sites levy and its interaction with the residential zoned land tax. That would benefit from some public airing.

With respect to the Housing Finance Agency, HFA, that was on the cards and is very welcome. Here is the problem. The additional funding from the Housing Finance Agency is only of benefit if approved housing bodies, AHBs, through the capital assistance scheme, CAS, the capital advance leasing facility, CALF, and the cost rental equity loan, CREL, can scale up the delivery of social and, crucially, affordable homes in the time ahead. I am strongly of the view that there is an increasing crisis of viability in the operation of the cost rental equity loan. It was badly designed at the outset and, increasingly, delivering projects is proving difficult under it. What we also know is that the projects it is delivering are far too expensive for the overwhelming majority of people for whom cost rental was originally designed, those just above the thresholds for social housing and unable to access market housing. On average, for example, 29% of the applicants for Land Development Agency, LDA, schemes are refused solely on the affordability grounds, and for the three-bed units, in many cases, it is as high as 50%. The figure is similar for the AHB sector. I urge the Minister of State, in the context of the increase in the lending ceiling for the Housing Finance Agency, to fix the problems with CREL.

CAS and CALF have a separate problem, which is the inadequacy of the payment and availability agreement, or the management agreement in the case of CAS. That is going to become an increasing constraint on the ability of the AHBs to develop additional schemes and draw down the HFA funding that the Government is making available today.

Of course, the crazy thing is that for cost rental, local authorities can borrow from the Housing Finance Agency at a lower rate of interest than AHBs, so much so that when the former chief executive of the HFA came in front of our committee, he indicated that the difference in borrowing could result in a lower rent of at least €100 a month. Yet, despite the fact that local authorities could deliver larger volumes of lower priced cost rental, the borrowing cap that has been placed by the Department of housing and, ultimately, the Government on the local government sector is hampering it beyond belief. For example, Dublin City Council is working

on the cost rental project at St. Michael's, but that is going to blow its ability to borrow for any other schemes at any other stage. There has to be a sensible conversation. I am not talking about reckless borrowing or no limits, but there has to be a conversation in government and with the Oireachtas committee about changing that ceiling and giving greater flexibility to local authorities to borrow.

With the indulgence of the Chair, I will make two further comments. Yesterday, the Government published the draft planning policy statement for rural and Gaeltacht houses. Many of us had been waiting for that statement to be published for a long time. It is noted that, unlike the publication of the draft policy statement for design standards, the Government has not announced any formal public consultation or invitation for sectoral organisations to make submissions while it is doing the strategic and environmental assessments - the appropriate assessment - and before they are incorporated into the city and county development plans. Nor is there any indication of whether the Government is going to request the Oireachtas housing committee to give its scrutiny to these matters.

I urge the Minister of State to talk to the line Minister. Between the assessments and the reworking into the development plans, these rules are not going to come into effect until the end of this year, at the earliest. A shortened, time-bound, formal consultation with the sectors and our committee could help to strengthen them. There are some very real concerns about aspects of these. The Minister of State will know of these through his own backbenchers and because sectoral organisations are raising them. We want to get these planning guidelines right, and consultation is required.

Today, the Department issued the circular to local authorities on the new transfer protocol for victims and survivors of domestic and gender-based violence to be able to move from one local authority to another and take their years on the waiting lists with them. This is something we have been calling for over many years, and I warmly welcome it. However, there is a problem. It only applies to households on local authority housing waiting lists and does not apply to households in receipt of housing assistance payment, HAP, and the rental accommodation scheme, RAS. Almost half the potential households that will desperately need this vital protection are excluded from the protocol. I understand that there are some challenges because those people are on the transfer lists of their local authorities, but there are no grounds on which a woman and children who are today experiencing domestic or gender-based violence, and who are in HAP accommodation, should be precluded from availing of the protocol.

I see the Minister of State has a quizzical look on his face. I have checked this. It has been confirmed to me today that it does not apply to women trying to escape domestic and gender-based violence who are on HAP or RAS. The only reason I am raising it is to urge the Minister of State to act. This is a valuable move. It is one of those rare occasions where I want to be able to commend the Government, but if half of the potential households that need this are being excluded, the Government needs to go back and fix it very quickly.

There are times when we come in here and it does not matter how much scrutiny or how much debating time there is because we are not going to agree with the Government. There are also times when legislation is brought forward on which there is very little politics to be played and very few votes to be got. Planning legislation is typically that kind of legislation. I cannot emphasise enough, and I think I speak for all colleagues in the Opposition who take

our scrutiny role in committee very seriously, that to allow two hours for Committee and Report Stages for a Bill of 83 pages is wholly unacceptable. In that time, we have to try to discuss the Bill and invite the Minister of State to explain, clarify and, in some cases, justify elements as well as consider reasonable amendments. It is frustrating that every year, at the end of a term, this is what we are left with. I urge the Government to reconsider, although I do not think it will. Then we will decide as we go through the Bill next week how we proceed on Final Stage.

Deputy Rory Hearne: I echo what Deputy Ó Broin has outlined, which is the Opposition's extreme disappointment at the pace at which this Bill is being rushed through. It does not take seriously the role of Parliament. It is also extremely frustrating that the Government gives out and complains that the Opposition does not come forward with solutions when the key point - the only point, really - at which we have a real opportunity to engage with Government policy in a meaningful way is on legislation, amendments and discussion at committees. With this Bill, we have two hours for 86 pages. This shows me that the Government is afraid of something here. It is unwilling to engage in serious debate and discussion on what is in this Bill. If it were not concerned, it would give the Bill the time.

Is the Government rushing just to try to be seen to be doing something, given that it is not taking substantial time to look at this Bill? There are very significant changes in the Bill. In particular, the one that I am most concerned about is the change to apartment sizes. This has the most impact on my constituency. New apartments are being built in places like Santry and Whitehall, and will be built in places like Ballymun. It is all apartments that are being built in my constituency.

These are going to have profound changes for the livability of those apartments. It feels like the Government is simply ignoring the Opposition and is not taking our concerns seriously or giving us the time to scrutinise the Bill and discuss it with professional bodies.

I want to highlight what the Irish Planning Institute said about the changes being made to apartment guidelines. It stated very clearly that professional planners not only recognise the gravity of the housing crisis, they welcome meaningful evidence-based reforms but the institute is not convinced that the announced changes to apartment sizes and standards would achieve what is intended. It said the erosion of unit mix requirements presents a market-led approach to housing that is fundamentally at odds with the significant work undertaken by the Department of housing to create a plan-led system with high-quality long-term sustainable outcomes. That is the major concern.

What we are building will not provide sustainable communities and homes. A significant concern is that this is about cramming as many units as possible into a site for two reasons. The first is for viability, which is profitability, and the second is so the Government can say it is delivering whatever number of units but are they actually homes?

I also want to read into the record an article by Dr. Lorcan Sirr on the implications of the changes to apartment sizes for climate change. He referred to the real issue, namely that apartments with windows on more than one side, known as dual aspect, have a considerable advantage over those that do not as windows can be opened to cross-ventilate the dwelling. Single aspect apartments can get stiflingly hot and have limited capacity for ventilation. The point he made was that new apartment standards introduced by the Minister will now make apartments smaller and reduce the amount of dual aspect apartments required in any one

development, the requirement for balconies and floor-to-ceiling heights, all in the interest of increasing financial viability for developers. The viability of being able to live in these apartments, in particular with more frequent hotter summers, has not been given as much ministerial attention.

I ask the Minister and his officials to give the committee some clear detail next week on how these apartments will be livable, in particular in the context of climate change, and what impact climate change is likely to have on these changes and the livability of the apartments. I am concerned that the apartment standard size changes the Minister is about to make are about reducing standards and the livability of apartments to achieve what the Government calls viability but which we should call profitability. The term "viability" is a politically safe word.

The Government will not state the truth, namely that this is about reducing housing standards so they are sufficiently profitable for developers and institutional investors who are already making hundreds of millions in profit. They are doing so because the State is dependent on the private sector to build. It is funnelling, and will funnel in the coming years, millions of euro in public money into private developers and investor funds and reduce the livability of homes at the same time in order to increase their profitability so that they will build more units which are not actually homes. This is about increasing units, not providing homes.

IRES REIT and the developers and investors have been very clear that they are delighted with the changes and being given open access to a public sector ATM slush fund, which is effectively what we are doing rather than expanding our public sector and councils and developing a State construction company that would build affordable homes. The reality is that more expensive built rent units will not solve our housing disaster or provide any more new homes for people to buy that are affordable. Just a tiny fraction of what is being built in Dublin, including in my constituency, will be available for sale. No apartments are available for sale. Nothing is being sold at a reasonable price. Of course, this adds to house price inflation because everyone is trying to buy existing built homes and there is no supply of homes to buy that could reduce house prices. The lack of affordable homes to buy being delivered in our cities, in particular Dublin, is the fundamental problem.

The Minister spoke about the justifications for these changes, which are outlined in the Bill. He said it is about addressing homelessness and providing residential supply. He spoke about what is changing. The reality is that the housing disaster is happening right now. What is the Government is doing about it? It will not put in place a ban on evictions, which it could do and would solve people being pushed into homelessness. Instead, it is making changes that institutional investors and developers want. It is deeply unfortunate that the Government is taking this approach.

I want to highlight a case that came to me. There is a human reality to all of this which I have raised in the House again and again and which the Government is completely ignoring. There is a human cost to the housing crisis. A constituent who was in touch with me highlighted that they have been in homelessness for year. Prior to that, they were in homelessness for three years and got a HAP property for a year but were made homeless when they were evicted. This family, with three children aged 16, 12 and four, have been homeless for four out of the past five years. The mother described how stressful it is for her older kids. She said they have been in this situation and have seen no normal life. She said no child should have to deal with this and they are stuck in extreme conditions, living in rooms together. She said they have no family

to visit because her mum and dad passed away. They cannot get a break. She said it is distressing and embarrassing for the children.

This is something that frustrates me. The impact of homelessness on children is not being taken into account. It is extremely damaging for children, even if a child is homeless for a short period of time, such as a week or two weeks - we know it is often much longer. One could argue that this is not related to the Bill but it is directly related to it because it claims to address homelessness. The Bill will not address or solve homelessness. It will not provide homes that people can live in because the changes to apartment sizes and standards are about increasing profitability so developers and investor funds build more units that nobody can afford to buy or rent. As we have seen in reports from the Central Bank and others, institutional funds increase rents overall.

The Government's claim that this is about increasing supply and will eventually reduce rents is untrue. The Department repeats the same mantra, namely that increasing supply will reduce rents. There is no point in the near future when that will happen. Rents will simply increase, which is pushing more and more people into homelessness.

I support some aspects of the Bill, such as giving the Housing Agency increased borrowing capacity. It is important to increase that. Unfortunately, other aspects of the Bill make it very difficult to support it as a whole. I will continue to engage with it and I hope the Minister can address some of these issues in committee.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2026 provides another opportunity to address long-standing failures in how we plan and deliver our communities. While legislation can amend processes and procedures, it must also confront the reality experienced by families across the country, in particular in rapidly growing counties like Meath.

3 o'clock

For too long, our planning system has treated community infrastructure as an afterthought. I am not convinced this legislation will improve things. Houses have been built in huge numbers but the parks, playgrounds, pitches and other community facilities that make places liveable have too often been delayed, downsized or simply never delivered. The people of Meath kept their side of the bargain. They bought homes, raised families and built communities, yet local and central government failed to ensure that the essential public amenities those communities depended upon were provided. That failure has left children without places to play, sports clubs struggling for facilities and growing communities without the green spaces they deserve.

The fundamental problem is that our planning system remains fragmented and reactive. The Bill before us does little to address that. Too much depends on informal arrangements between developers and local authorities, with little accountability when commitments are not honoured. Developers receive permission to build, houses are occupied and all too often the promised community infrastructure never materialises. That is not good planning. It is a system that places private interests ahead of the public good.

If the Bill is to make a meaningful difference, it must strengthen the planning framework to ensure community facilities are delivered alongside housing, not years later or, worse still, not at all. Mandatory sequencing should become the norm, with legally enforceable requirements

linking residential development to the delivery of parks, playgrounds and sporting facilities. Earlier today, I welcomed a wonderful group of women from Teach Mná in Ashbourne to Leinster House. They highlighted other infrastructure deficits, including in transport. They are absolutely right.

Development levies must be protected and ring-fenced for the infrastructure they were intended to fund. Local authorities need both the certainty of funding and the statutory powers to deliver projects without unnecessary delay. Sinn Féin has consistently argued that community infrastructure, including green spaces, should be recognised as a core element of every development plan, not an optional extra. Through our Delivering Liveable Urban Spaces policy and our proposed ciste beithe, we have outlined practical measures to accelerate investment in pitches, playgrounds, public parks and open spaces while ensuring communities have a genuine voice throughout the planning process.

The same applies to transport, education and other community, public and critical infrastructure. I welcome the recent GAA report No One Shouted Stop - Until Now, which highlights the enormous pressure demographic growth is placing on sporting facilities. Its call for a strengthened planning framework and an all-island strategy for sports infrastructure deserves serious consideration. We should also maximise the use of existing facilities by supporting greater community access to school sports grounds.

Planning legislation should not simply facilitate development. It should create sustainable, liveable communities where families have access to the facilities they need from day one. That is the standard the Bill should meet. It is the standard that communities in Meath and across Ireland have every right to expect.

Deputy Conor Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire Stáit as a bheith anseo inniu. I thank him and his officials for the detailed briefing we received on the Bill. It is a long and technical Bill. One aspect of it is that it seeks to raise the borrowing limit of the Housing Finance Agency, which is fine. However, the other aspects are quite technical and detailed. Deputy Ó Broin alluded to a recurring theme across Departments, not just the Department of housing, whereby the deadline for Committee Stage amendments to Bills is given before the Second Stage debate. I do not appreciate that and it does not set a good precedent. In many cases, Second Stage allows us to tease out queries, issues or concerns and have the Government respond to them. It allows us time to consider what amendments we might table.

This Bill, which has 149 sections, is being rushed through the Dáil two weeks before the recess. I have been a TD for only a year and a half and this is the second time I have debated one of these amending planning and development Bills. I was not a Member of the previous Dáil but I was told that the huge 2024 planning Bill, which had 900-odd pages, was a panacea and that we would not need to revisit these issues. The Planning and Development Act 2000 was fundamentally good legislation. The issue was all the amendments that followed, which turned it into a unwieldy dog's dinner of an Act.

I have a number of concerns about the Bill before us today, mainly relating to section 115, which inserts a new section 303A into the principal Act. These provisions deal with the judicial review changes. The Government would have us believe the planning system and judicial reviews are the biggest obstacles to housing delivery. That is not true. In fact, the biggest obstacles remain a lack of serviced land, inadequate infrastructure, soaring construction costs,

labour shortages and the chopping and changing of Government policy. I support efficient planning. Nobody benefits from unnecessary delay. However, achieving greater speed cannot become an excuse for weakening transparency, accountability or access to justice.

The proposed judicial review changes are troublesome. Judicial review exists for a reason. It is not there to frustrate development. It is there primarily to ensure public bodies follow the law. If the Government really wants to reduce delays, it must properly resource the courts and ensure planning authorities have adequate staffing - I will say more about that presently - to improve the quality of decision-making in the first place. Codifying the restrictions placed on public participation and potentially breaching our international legal obligations under the Aarhus Convention is not a road I want us to go down. The convention provides that environmental judicial reviews must not be prohibitively expensive or overtly restrictive. I have concerns that the stricter limits being placed on judicial review could breach that requirement. There is also a risk that removing the automatic right of appeal to the Court of Appeal, leaving only redress to the Supreme Court, could be unconstitutional. My concern is that instead of speeding up infrastructure delivery, which is the intention, we could end up with a wave of satellite litigation and spend years in court arguing over procedural technicalities.

There are other aspects of this that are concerning. The whole idea of forcing courts, in effect, to police the corporate governance rules for volunteer-led community groups is a bit strange. The notion of shifting the responsibility of micromanaging community group governance to the courts system, thereby consuming valuable judicial time, does not make sense. The Government would have us believe planning is the principal obstacle to housing delivery, but it is not. Blaming judicial review for housing backlogs is a distraction. Data from the Law Society shows that the number of judicial reviews brought by individual citizens was already falling while the number of cases taken by commercial developers was increasing.

I have concerns about the new section 138A, to be inserted in the principal Act by section 62, which deals with the relaxation of apartment standards. I fundamentally believe it is a race to the bottom to allow developers to shrink floor sizes, lower ceilings and reduce natural light. In effect, this is calling for smaller and darker apartments. I am concerned as well that these new lower standard apartments will disproportionately affect social housing tenants and renters, who are transient dwellers, by locking them into long-term inferior living conditions while developers maximise their profits.

I also have a concern about the erosion of democratic oversight.

By classifying these structural reductions as non-material modifications that only require a local authority certificate, the law effectively locks out the public. Neighbours and community groups have no right to review, object to or appeal these down-sized designs. These were, of course, rammed through. By eliminating minimum or maximum requirements for specific bedroom mixes, this policy actively incentivises a monoculture of small studio and one-bed units, again pushing families out of urban cores. The State committed a severe error by failing to conduct a strategic environmental assessment before introducing these lowered guidelines. The Government's constant changing of legal mechanisms to bypass court challenges has created massive regulatory uncertainty and delays in apartment delivery.

I also want to talk about sections 21 and 42, which refer to adjusting the time for local authority development plan reviews and outline what will occur when elected officials fail to

make a plan. The shift from six-year to ten-year development plans is a good idea but it is complex. This Bill allows current local development plans, made under the 2000 Act, to remain legally active on a transitional basis. I have concerns here regarding local government and the role of councillors. Handing ultimate power to central government, if councillors fail to make a plan, is again reducing the power and democratic influence of locally-elected representatives over zoning decisions.

I want to move on and talk about planning in terms of planning posts and resourcing our local authorities. I would argue there are potential resourcing issues here because moving the goalposts for plan review simultaneously across multiple local authorities is logistically very complex. Through the CCMA, local authorities have voiced concern over the severe shortage of qualified planners to meet these compressed transitional deadlines. Replies to parliamentary questions I have received in recent months tell me that a fairly significant number of planners who have been reassigned to, or have been recruited from local authorities by, An Coimisiún Pleanála. We need clarity from the Department as to how these critical vacancies will be back-filled at local authority level. I raise this because I have asked a number of parliamentary questions about planning posts. I cannot find out from the Department how these posts will be back-filled. The Department cannot tell me the workforce data for the local government planning sector because of section 159. It cannot tell me the percentage of current or senior executive planners who are eligible for retirement. When we look at the action plan on planning resources, the LGMA said a number of years ago that it needed 541 planning posts. Two hundred and forty four were sanctioned, which is not even half. When we look at phase 1 in 2023, that is fine but phase 2 did not actually come until 2025. The fact remains that a significant majority of council planning positions approved over the past two years remain unfilled due to a lack of available graduates and retention issues due to the fact that, in many cases, the local government sector cannot compete with the private sector on salaries.

I have concerns about potential bottlenecks around the fact that a local development plan cannot be finalised until the regional spatial and economic strategy, RSES is complete. There is a 90-week deadline on regional reviews. I hope there is not any delay at regional assembly level because that will set off a domino effect for local authorities.

I want to talk about section 149, which has to do with the increase in the Housing Finance Agency, HFA, borrowing limit. I have no issue with this; I support it. It is also the second time we have done it in the past year. I would argue that it does not go far enough and that the State needs to invest more in the direct delivery of social and affordable housing. Given that we only extended the borrowing cap in quarter 4 of last year, I would like the Government to take a longer-term review of the remit of the HFA and its borrowing ceiling and to look at the borrowing cap of all 31 local authorities, which is far too low.

As I said, I support efficient planning. I do not think anybody benefits from unnecessary delay but we must have proper planning and that is a fact. I cannot support apartment changes that make developments cheaper by making homes smaller and reducing amenities and design standards. We have already paid the price for poor planning decisions in relation to apartments, when we consider that virtually everything built during the Celtic-tiger period is in some way defective. Every apartment built today should be a home that somebody can comfortably live in permanently.

We, in Labour, have consistently argued that once again, the State must become a major builder of housing. We cannot continue to rely on a volatile private market to solve a crisis that the market itself has failed repeatedly to solve. We need to empower local authorities more. We need to better support the AHB sector, and I will go into that. We also need to look at establishing a State construction company. We need to invest more in modern methods of construction. We need a stable, predictable and properly resourced planning system.

In some of the time available to me, I want to talk about the issues with the cost rental equity loan, CREL, scheme. I have had a decent bit of engagement with the AHB sector, as I am sure the Department has, around the 40-year repayment period. Due to soaring construction costs, many in the AHB sector are saying that this is making cost rental unviable for them. We have AHBs that are pulling the plug on cost-rental developments because they are saying they are not viable. However, at the same time, the way the cost-rental system was designed here means that it is not proper cost rental; it is market discount. We now have a situation where rents in the cost-rental sector are far too high. Yes, they are 29% lower, on average, than on the open market but they are still too high and they need to come down. In the first instance, the Government needs to look at the equity element of the CREL to make sure more cost-rental developments do not end up being pulled.

As I said, I will engage constructively with this Bill. Where there are measures in it that I believe will accelerate housing delivery, while protecting the integrity of proper planning, I will support them. However, where the Government seeks to weaken safeguards, reduce standards and continues to not address the real barriers to housing delivery, then I will continue to challenge that.

Deputy John Clendennen: I welcome this Bill. It will ensure the planning code works effectively when the remaining provisions commence later this year. If we look at the tone and sentiment of this Dáil term, it has been all about delivery across all types of infrastructure while maintaining public confidence in the planning system. If we consider some of the representative bodies, there is a changing view regarding how the pace of progress is increasing.

Over 35,000 homes were delivered last year, an almost doubling since the start of the decade. Some of these measures will ensure that we will have a viability rather than a profitability argument around home development. Sometimes people lose sight of the difference between those two. In reality, we need to ensure we have viability for these projects so that income can cover costs. You can be profitable but have a very unsustainable business model. It is important that with this Bill and its planning guidelines we will see a level of certainty and ensure that the sector can invest. Far too many contractors and developers have moved overseas in recent times because of delays in the system. In fairness to the Minister of State and the Department, they have worked to iron out those challenges and ensure certainty can be given.

Judicial review reform has been critical. We have had several debates at the Oireachtas Committee on Infrastructure and National Development Plan Delivery. In this country, judicial review is seen as the norm rather than the exception. It is part of the planning process. We have five times more judicial reviews than the UK. That is simply not acceptable. If we want to see large-scale projects delivered and certainty for further investment, we have to ensure that

the planning system works rather than the judicial system having to work in relation to planning development.

The Minister of State has talked about An Coimisiún Pleanála and some of the measures there to introduce statutory timelines for applications. They are very necessary. However, I am concerned that where a timeline is given, the applicant hears back at the eleventh hour from An Coimisiún Pleanála. There should be some means by which it identifies a problem early and remains engaged with the applicant in the best interests of time and, where possible, it could discuss concurrent issues over time to ensure the challenges are mitigated.

In respect of the development plan, the ten-year period is a welcome step. Again, it gives certainty and we have to be cognisant that any piece of land in this country that is serviced should be in a development plan, regardless of the size, the population or the current demand. We need to be very ambitious about that. With land that is zoned because it has been serviced, an onus has to be put on the landowner to ensure that land is made available for development. Utility providers, such as Irish Water, need to show a greater element of transparency as to what capacity they have in every town and village right across the country and keep that updated with potential developments.

The interpretation of standards around the country can vary. I have seen this in my constituency with the over-the-shop grant that has been introduced. There seems to be a level of complication there and the whole purpose of what the Minister of State and the Department are doing is to iron out those challenges and ensure we make these more seamless.

Housing delivery is key and I fundamentally believe that ensuring planning permissions that are already in the system can continue without unnecessary delay will be an important part of this Bill. The Government is making a commitment for increased funding. I have seen in my county what the land activation scheme has done to unlock 2,000 new homes and rely not just on public sector development of housing but on the private sector as well. There is a commitment here that will go down well with the construction industry to ensure we can see a greater level of development.

We are committing almost one in five euro to the likes of energy in the current infrastructure plan for the country. That is a monumental change to our commitment to infrastructure. It will give the confidence to ensure we see the housing, transport development and water development.

In relation to modern methods of construction, a company in County Offaly, Banagher Precast Concrete, specialises in precast concrete and exports it all over the world. Recently, from a transport perspective, the Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets, DMURS, was introduced to ensure more footpaths and narrower roads. However, there is then an issue with these oversized vehicles being transferred along the roads of Ireland. We have to get that right. We cannot have the construction industry moving to more prefabrication and more consistency in quality by moving to in-workshop manufacturing and transporting it on the road while roads are being narrowed.

I want to touch on the area of resources. Planners and the Office of the Planning Regulator are going to play a key role in this. I get a sense of concern from planners on the front line about this and about how it is going to be interpreted and implemented. The one thing I call for today is that if the Office of the Planning Regulator is currently committed to engaging with

senior planners in relation to that training and roll-out, they might ensure it goes further down through the organisation so planners at all levels are aware and can share on-the-ground issues that senior planners, no disrespect to them, may not be aware of.

Overall, this Bill is very positive and constructive. It sends out a very important message that we want to deliver, deliver, deliver. I thank the Minister of State for bringing it forward. I will share the remainder of my time with Deputy Devlin.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank Deputy Clendennen. I welcome and support the Bill, which implements the reforms agreed by the Dáil in 2024 and will accelerate the supply of housing. The housing crisis is the defining challenge facing this country and we all see the impact in our weekly clinics. The Planning and Development Act 2024 was the largest reform of our planning legislation in a generation. I want to focus on three elements of the Bill. The first is the judicial review. The Bill applies the new procedural rules for planning judicial review, introduced in the 2024 Act, to remaining decisions made under the 2000 Act. That means the removal of the separate leave stage. It also means a case can be remitted to the point where a procedural breach occurred, rather than an entire permission being quashed. It means an end to further appeals to the Court of Appeal in those cases.

Each of these measures cuts time and unnecessary legal costs for all parties concerned. It is worth being clear about the impact. This is not about shutting anyone out of the courts. Judicial review remains available to any person with a genuine case. What these changes remove is duplication, cost and delay. Of course, delay serves nobody.

On the second point, strategic planning, the Bill sets a 90-week deadline for the review of the three regional, spatial and economic strategies so that they will be completed by the end of 2027. It allows current development plans to remain in force on a transitional basis until a fixed date no later than the end of 2030. That gives local authorities the space to complete their reviews properly and to introduce a ten-year development plan on time. Ten-year plans give certainty for communities, for councils and for those delivering homes and the infrastructure that serves them.

Third, on infrastructure, the Bill delivers on actions assigned to the Department under the Accelerating Infrastructure Taskforce Report and Action Plan 2025. Homes need water, they need power and transport, and the Bill streamlines the consenting process for the critical projects that make housing possible. It also allows existing apartment permissions to be modified in line with updated apartment design standards. These measures can unlock sites that are permitted but stalled. Permitted but stalled is the worst of all worlds, and we have too much of that.

I want to address public participation directly, because it matters. Streamlining and participation are not opposites. Under the Bill, public consultation on development plans remains. Submissions on planning applications remain, as do appeals. What changes is the speed and the certainty of the process, not the right of people to have their say.

In my constituency of Dún Laoghaire, residents engage seriously and constructively with the planning system. I will always defend their right to do so. A faster system must also be a fair system. Every month that we take out of the planning process is a key turned in a front door a month sooner. That is what this Bill is essentially about.

I ask the Minister to publish a clear commencement timetable for the remaining provisions and to ensure that local authorities, such as Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, are properly resourced for the transition to planning under the new Act. Housing is the priority and this Bill helps us deliver it. I support the Bill and look forward to its implementation.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill. There are certainly constructive and long-overdue elements within this legislation, particularly the reforms proposed around judicial reviews. For far too long, communities, local authorities and applicants have been trapped in cycles of chronic delay - delays that frequently extend into years. We all know of cases where judicial review has been used not as genuine oversight but as a tool for procedural abuse of the courts.

Anything that brings greater clarity, tighter timelines and more predictable outcomes is certainly welcome.

I also want to address the multiple sections of the Bill that amend the Planning and Development Act 2000 to introduce a new planning designation of key towns. As I read them, these sections appear to outline how certain towns will receive prioritised treatment in development plans, investment strategies and planning decision-making. While the concept may have merit in regard to balanced regional development, I must raise a very direct concern on behalf of many small towns and villages across my county of Offaly and the wider midlands area. We cannot allow a situation where preferential treatment for designated key towns ends up diverting resources, planning capacity or infrastructural investment away from the smaller communities, communities with populations under 10,000 that already struggle to secure basic services and development certainty. Will the Minister of State provide clarity? Will these sections create a two-tier planning system? We certainly do not want to make our planning system any more frustrating, bureaucratic or unfair than it already is.

Will smaller towns and villages be disadvantaged in favour of the key designated towns and what safeguards will be put in place to ensure rural communities are not left behind? Counties like Offaly depend on balanced development, not concentrated development. These sections must not become a mechanism that unintentionally sidelines rural Ireland or disadvantages rural Ireland in any way.

While the Bill seeks to reduce delays in planning processes, I must contrast that ambition with the massive and escalating backlog within Tailte Éireann, an issue I have repeatedly exposed through parliamentary questions. We are all given an Oireachtas email to correspond with Tailte Éireann, but, as far as I can see, it is an absolute waste of time. In the past few weeks, I have sent at least four issues to Tailte Éireann. These were genuine issues relating to businesses, in the context of their registration, and to elderly people who want to sell their properties and move into a town. Both process are affected by delays. The stock response seems to be to get the lodging party to expedite their case. If a TD is already informing those involved of the circumstances and outlining genuine reasons relating to an elderly person's well-being and health and stating that they want to get their registration finalised, what is the point of telling us to go to the solicitor again? Is that not creating more of a maze and a bureaucratic mess?

I am fed up contacting Tailte Éireann. I ask the Minister of State to intervene urgently with it. I am not happy at all with the responses I am getting. I feel I am being fobbed off. What is

happening is a cop-out. Registrations should not take three years to complete. There is something seriously wrong if they are taking that long. What is happening is totally unacceptable. I have several cases, as I said. I was approached by a business that needs to expand as a matter of urgency. It is tied up in this. I have several elderly constituents who are also tied up in this. I am asking for urgent intervention with Tailte Éireann because, in my view, it does not seem to be fit for purpose.

This Bill seeks to reduce delays I welcome that, but if we are serious about doing so, we need to improve efficiency as well. That is why I feel that the reins need to be taken and that action taken in respect of Tailte Éireann. The data provided to me also confirm a rapid and exponential build-up in property registration delays, as I have already outlined. I have confirmed already that for 2025 alone, over 50,000 applications remain pending. That is disgraceful. What message is that sending out to businesses or even companies looking to come in here to invest. What sort of a message is that sending out? That is a logjam that should not be there.

Across the years, arrears now exceed 90,000 applications. This backlog has seriously delayed property transactions, agricultural transfers, conveyancing and housing delivery and has had a direct impact on market efficiency across Ireland. It is also damaging our reputation in respect of companies or businesses trying to expand or invest, when they see this. This has to be sorted out. I accept that some steps have been taken in regard to fully staffing Tailte Éireann registration team and accelerated recruitment, but I, as a TD, I am not seeing the benefits. There is no point in giving us an email address for Tailte Éireann if it is not going to give us proper responses. There certainly needs to be change in that regard. The figures speak for themselves. They are the facts. The backlog that has escalated dramatically and that continues to impose uncertainty and delay on families, farmers, solicitors and businesses is totally unacceptable. There should not be a backlog. If we are serious about tackling delays in our planning system, then we must also be serious about tackling delays in the property registration system. One cannot function without the other.

While we are discussing planning reform, I have to take the opportunity to highlight the deeply distressing situation facing families in Stonestown, Cloghan, County Offaly, in terms of a wind farm development. Those families have been living through what can only be described as mental and physical torture arising from excessive wind turbine noise, vibration and operational practices. I raised this issue here in the Dáil a number of times. Those families need to be listened to. Their health is suffering. I met the families involved. They are young couples, and they and their families are suffering terribly as a result of what is happening in the context of a wind farm that was imposed on them and that they did not want.

I have reviewed the noise diaries kept by the affected families. To say that they are harrowing is an understatement. They provide a harrowing record of the families' suffering. The constant humming, a heavy vibration throughout their houses and nights of relative quiet while testing equipment is present, followed by a sudden return to a roaring noise once the equipment is removed. That seems to be what is happening. These families are enduring sleep deprivation, physical pain, emotional distress and severe disruption to their lives. They have been left waiting almost six months for a basic communication from Statkraft's contractors. It is not good enough. There should be respect given where, if there are health issues and concerns, then immediately a wind farm should be told to stop its operation. There are serious

health concerns. I call on the Ministers to intervene in that case. It really is a public health failure that has been enabled by weak enforcement and inconsistent monitoring. I will continue to raise this matter on behalf of the families of Stonestown in Cloghan with the Minister, the EPA and Offaly County Council. No family in Ireland should be subjected to what these families are being subjected to in Stonestown.

While I welcome aspects of the planning Bill, particularly the judicial review reforms, I must emphasise that planning reform cannot be selective. It has to be cohesive and ensure that proper practices, procedures and agencies are operating efficiently. I refer, in particular, to *Tailte Éireann*, which is not fit for purpose. There needs to be something done there.

The Bill cannot focus on one part of the system while ignoring others. It cannot prioritise key towns while leaving small towns and villages in rural Ireland behind and it cannot claim to reduce delays while thousands remain stuck - in what should be a simple registration process - in a backlog that has totally spiralled out of control. We need a planning system that is fair, efficient, transparent and responsive, and that also collaborates properly with TDs. We are sick of stock answers. I will not be accepting any more stock answers. We need a registration system that is a properly resourced and functional system and we need an enforcement system that protects people.

I look forward to the Minister of State's clarification regarding section 11 and its implications for rural Ireland in the context of the priority towns. My county of Offaly has been disadvantaged. We have not seen enough investment or balanced regional development, and, no more than any other county in the State, we need to be treated fairly.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Deputy Ó Broin spoke about how the Planning and Development Act 2024 was meant to be the be all and end all and that there would be no need for all these updates.

That is not the position we find ourselves, however. I echo the complaints made by Deputy Ó Broin and others about this legislation being rushed. While we can accept that there are technicalities that need to be dealt with, this is just not the way to do it, particularly in circumstances where Committee Stage amendments needed to be submitted prior to Second Stage commencing.

I recall talking to some planners about the Planning and Development Act. They spoke about the issues they had with and fears about the initial iterations of that legislation. Those issues and fears came from a perspective to the effect that what we were doing was simply creating, on some level, a large piece of legislation that would be taken apart in court cases. Unfortunately, we still do not have a fit-for-purpose system to deliver sensible and sustainable planning, while also allowing for all the necessary inputs.

At some level, we welcome the fact that we have seen something in respect of rural and Gaeltacht housing. We have all been waiting for guidelines on one-off houses in rural areas for a long time. We need to deal with the issue of the Gaeltacht. We must facilitate people from the Gaeltacht to live there. We must also take into account the rights of Irish speakers. I am not entirely sure that is going to happen, however. We have worries that we could be looking at a circumstance where this could mean fewer homes being built for Irish speakers within Gaeltacht areas. That needs to be addressed.

We have seen a bit more flexibility when it comes to one-off rural houses. I do not think there are too many in this House who come from rural backgrounds or who have huge rural areas in their constituencies who have not had to deal and have conversations with planners about what constitutes backland and ribbon development. We always look for that level of flexibility, while accepting that health and safety issues, particularly sight lines, are sacrosanct. At times, we have seen planners in different areas and those operating in the same areas come down differently on particular issues. We must ensure we see that flexibility on backland development and rural rightsizing.

We must also consider the wider idea of economic need and include the likes of teaching as a service, rather than simply those who work directly in agriculture. We all need to see that because we have seen the difficulty those who want to live in the area where they were born have in this regard.

In the context of infrastructure, there are huge issues with Uisce Éireann. I am looking a follow-up meeting with Uisce Éireann in respect of my constituency. I would welcome if the Minister of State would add his voice to that. I am seeking to ensure that we have sustainable planning. There is currently a big planning application in Louth around Cú Chulainn's Castle. I would like to think all necessary stakeholders have put in their observations. We must ensure we look at this from a point of view of housing, heritage, history, etc.

Deputy Brian Stanley: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important Bill. I echo what the previous speaker, Deputy Nolan, said regarding Tailte Éireann and the email address we were given. Like me, the Minister of State is from a country area and will, therefore, have heard the saying, "Playing handball against a haystack". That is what trying to deal with Tailte Éireann is like. The registration system is simply not working. I have cases, as other Deputies will have, where there are delays with registration. I would like the Minister of State and his officials to take note of this, because there is a real problem. I have a case of a young farmer who has to change the plot of land the farmhouse has been on for the past 200 years. The title is in the name of a previous landlord. That landlord is long gone, and the title has to be changed into the farmer's family name. He farms the land around it. He owns that 90-acre farm, but he has to live in a town eight miles away. He is living in private rental accommodation with his young family. He is a young, active and progressive farmer, but there are constant delays with this. Solicitors are even on to us inquiring whether we can do anything about it. Something has to be done.

I will provide an example. Ten years ago, whenever I had a case in Laois where there was a difficulty with registration and I needed to contact the Land Registry, I phoned the office on Cork Road in Waterford and asked to be put through to the Laois section. The phone was always answered, which was fantastic. I gave the folio number and if the staff were not able to solve the issue there and then, they came back to me within 24 hours. They never failed in that regard. They did their best. I understand that there are procedures to go through, such as the notification of interested parties or parties who may have an interest in property, but this email system is like trying to play handball against a haystack. I ask the Minister of State and his officials - it comes under the Department of local government and housing, as far as I know - to sort this out. Someone needs to do something.

There are some good things in the Bill. Of course, there have been concerns about judicial reviews. We cannot have a situation where project after project is delayed unnecessarily, particularly by people who are not affected and who may be objecting for other reasons. However, I defend the right of affected parties to have the option of taking a judicial review as a last resort. That may include people who own adjoining properties but who do not live in the relevant area. More particularly, it is about those who live in the area. I support tightening this up and ensuring that it does not unduly delay projects that are badly needed.

The concept of having key towns is good and makes common sense. Obviously, we do not want to see smaller towns and villages suffering as a consequence of what is being done in this regard. I will come back to that point before I finish. If we are going to designate key towns, they must have essential services, including jobs, health and educational services, school places and sports and leisure facilities. They cannot be just a series of housing estates dropped in fields around the edges of towns. That is important.

Some Deputies indicated that they welcome the certainty with the county development plan process. While I definitely do not want to be delaying these things for too long, I have concerns about the ten-year duration. I was on the council for the makings of a couple of county development plans. One problem I see with this - it could be an unintended consequence - is that we could end up with variations to county development plans. We will have material contraventions, which can be carried out within the period of county development plan while awaiting a new one. I have been there for those. Two weeks ago, Laois County Council implemented a variation. I have the new plan in my office. The variation is as big as the plan. Effectively, it is a new plan. This is something that the Minister of State needs to take on board.

The other thing is the role of the councillors. The briefing note from the Department outlines the engagements it had in this regard. It states, "The Department and the Minister engaged with the County and City Management Association [fair enough], the Planning, Environmental and Local Government Bar Association [that is all right too], the Irish Planning Institute and the Construction Industry Federation". Engagement with councillors is not mentioned. There was no engagement with the representative body of local government. Why was the Association of Irish Local Government not contacted? The Local Authorities Members Association was not contacted either. Year after year, with every issue and piece of legislation that has anything to do with local government, councillors are never contacted. I remember raising this kind of nonsense with Phil Hogan when he was Minister 15 years ago. Councillors were forgotten about. No one, not senior officials or anyone at a senior political level in government, thought it fit to speak to councillors.

That is what it says in the briefing note and that is an omission. That is the other concern I have with ten years. I see the need for certainty. It is a six-year process at the moment. Fair enough, we could go to seven or eight years but ten years is a lot. It is a long time. We will finish up with an unintended consequence of material contravention to the plan having to be brought before the councils on a regular basis, as well as variations. The variation made in County Laois is a positive one. It was needed. The Department and the Government requested it and the councillors and management obliged. The councillors got it fairly right. They put a lot of work into it along with the planners. I want to highlight that.

Regarding apartment sizes, what are we going to do? Are we going to keep going until we have people living in shoe boxes? Before I came in here I measured 32 sq. m in my office, so

I know what it means. Part of my office in Leinster House is 32 sq. m. That is lunacy and it is really unfair. I know the developers wanted it and the Construction Federation of Ireland has been hammering on the Minister's door for a few years to try to extract more profit. The Minister of State will say a lot more apartments are being built now but there are a lot of other reasons for that and we all know what they are. This means more profit, less space and the position of renters and people trying to buy their first home being diminished. Some 32 sq. m is awful. Some 76 sq. m for three-bedroom accommodation is awful. Has anyone here ever lived in a house of 76 sq. m? I lived in a house that was 57 sq. m and it was very small. It is 32 sq. m for a two-bedroom house. A three-bedroom house of 76 sq. m is awful. It is not fair to people. We have to start thinking about quality of life. Profit has won out in this country over everything else.

On the rural planning guidelines, in general I welcome what has been announced this week by the Minister. We do not have all the details yet. We need to be careful that we do not end up with scatters of housing all over the place. People who genuinely need to live in a rural area for work reasons or who have a family connection should be allowed to do so, subject to considerations such as environmental and planning regulations, etc. Laois County Council has operated close to that model over the years.

However, it is a missed opportunity, and the Minister of State may tell me he will come back to this. If we want rural development done properly, we need to build up, along with the changes in the guidelines. As I said, we need to be careful. We do not want a turbo-charged bungalow blitz, although we want to facilitate those who genuinely need to live in a rural area. If we want to do rural development properly, we must build up and consolidate the cores of our villages. If we want to create and strengthen rural communities, we must have living villages.

The Minister of State knows that in his constituency as in mine, there are many villages which are not living villages. The shop is closed and the post office, service station and Garda station are gone. If we want rural areas to play a significant role as well as address the housing crisis, we must have strong village structures. That has to be part of and central to any housing policy.

I support genuine efforts to speed up the delivery of and to facilitate housing. Too many of our villages have been hollowed out due to a lack of new housing and opportunities to live in them. There are huge benefits to living in a rural village. Young people can walk to school and people can walk to the local pub, church or sports field. In nearly all villages, there is now a bus link and that is important. If we can consolidate the cores of villages and get people living in them, children can walk to school and people can walk to the local shop, pub, church or sports field. As I said, most villages have at least a limited bus service and that reduces the need to always use a car. In villages people have neighbours and family support, often nearby. If a person needs home help services when they get elderly, it is easier to provide it in villages than it is way out in the countryside. Importantly, in villages people also have access to utilities, which also reduce a person's carbon footprint about which we are all concerned. One-off housing does not have that. I am not against one-off housing. In general, I support what is being done in relation to the policy on those who genuinely need to live in a rural area. However, we need to be careful not to cover the whole place with unnecessary rural housing. I am arguing instead to consolidate the cores of villages.

This needs the councils to zone land close to the centre of villages. There cannot be leapfrogging. There are too many examples of leapfrogging over the years where ten fields have been missed and then half a mile up the road there is a new housing estate with no footpath, no public lighting and a long distance to connect sewers. It is expensive to do that and the car is still used to get to the local shop. That is not the way we should be doing it. These houses should be close to the centre of the village. This means zoning land for private and public housing close to villages and local authorities building, where needed, small clusters of social housing. There are some good examples of that but we need more of them.

I suggest that councils develop serviced sites, and there are a few good examples in County Laois. Castletown is one example and Ballyroan is another. Sites, roughly a quarter of an acre on the edges of the village, are sold at cost-price to people in the area who want to build their own modest house and have a reasonably-sized garden. The Minister of State knows that many people in rural areas are self-employed, and they might have a van, a trailer, JCB or something like that. A person cannot bring that into a housing estate but if they are living on the edge of a village and have a quarter of an acre of a site, that is the problem solved. This fits in with the lifestyle. I ask the Minister of State to take the example of Ballyroan in County Laois, which has ten serviced sites developed by the council. Since we zoned land there in 2006, the Cross of Newtown, the Glenbrook estate and Gleann na Glaise, which is a council estate, have been developed there, along with the ten council serviced sites. Everything is in three or four minutes walking distance to the school, church, the pubs, all of which are open, and to the GAA and the soccer clubs. The other day a fantastic new playground opened. That is the type of development we need to see. I can show the Minister of State villages where that has not happened and where the whole village has been hollowed out. Many of the villages need a small wastewater treatment system or what the one they have to be upgraded. Some of that will come by way of development levies but some of it will not and will need funding. My point is that is one way of doing it.

I argue that if we are serious about rural development, along with making it possible for people who have to live in a rural area to build a one-off property, we have to build up our villages and connect them with public transport. A start has been made and it is working well but there is more work to do. Every county has a network of villages, which could help us to solve the housing crisis.

I accept that the vacant property grant is working reasonably well. We are not getting any complaints. That is how I know it is going all right. If it was not working well, people would be complaining about it. It is bringing houses, including some in rural areas and villages, back into use.

I mentioned Tailte Éireann. I would say it is like playing handball in a haystack. It is absolutely frustrating. The Minister of State is a Waterford TD. Ten years ago, if there was a problem with a registration or property and a constituent or their solicitor were getting nowhere with it, they would contact me to see if I could do anything about it.

4 o'clock

I would ring the Land Registry in the Minister of State's constituency, on Cork Road in Waterford, and ask to be put through to the lease section. Someone would answer the phone, if not the first time then I would get them an hour later and they would address the problem

immediately. They were very helpful. Now we have an email address and we might as well be doing something I will not say in the Chamber. That is the point I am making. There are some good things in the Bill, such as the judicial review measure, but we need to be careful with people who are living in the locality.

The change to apartment size is the one I have a real problem with. I measured 32 sq. m in my office to see what is involved before I came to the Chamber. It is tiny. It is not fair to ask people to live in accommodation of that size. Three-bedroom accommodation of 76 sq. m is awful. We need to start thinking about people's quality of life. At the same time we are doing away with the common spaces. We cannot have it every way. There is not going to be any storage or common area, yet a family is going to be confined in a three-bedroom apartment of 76 sq. m. That is not good enough. That is the piece I have a problem with. Everybody has got their way - the Construction Industry Federation, CIF, the investors, the developers and everyone else but tenants and purchasers who are paying big mortgages and high rents are the ones that are suffering.

Deputy Barry Ward: Cuirim fáilte aireach roimh an mBille seo. Níl mé cinnte go bhfuil gach rud atá sa Bhille i gceart. Tá roinnt fadhbanna agam leis freisin. I give a cautious welcome to the Bill. I recognise what it is attempting to do but I want to raise a couple of issues with the Minister of State. The first one is something I raise in general about legislation, which is a drafting issue. It is not specific to planning legislation. When the Bill becomes an Act, if a citizen tries to read it, almost every single section describes an amendment to either the Planning and Development Act 2000 or the 2024 Act, which means that this Act will not be legible without also having copies of those two Acts. That makes it very difficult for any citizen to penetrate. It is not unique to this legislation. It is something that we do as a matter of course in this House but I think it is bad practice. We should be able to pick up the law and read it and have an idea of what it says. Even in the description of the sections it does not tell us what the amendment is supposed to do. It just says it is an amendment to section 38 of the 2000 Act, or whatever it might be. It would be much more constructive, in the first instance, to say what that amending section is supposed to do but, second, to take the section that is being amended, repeal it and restate it in the legislation so it is there for everyone to read. It is a simple thing that we could do as a general practice in this House but we do not. That is obviously a drafting point that will get exactly no traction with anyone outside this House but it is pertinent to this legislation because one of the aims here is apparently to improve clarity, if the explanatory memorandum and the bumpf around this is to be believed. It is a simple thing.

Generally speaking, the aims of the Bill are clear and well placed. It makes perfect sense to me to increase the Housing Finance Agency's statutory borrowing limit to €15 billion. I do not have a difficulty with that. I wonder if maybe we should index link these limits rather than coming back every few years to change them in an amending piece of legislation. We could save ourselves the hassle if we just linked the limit to an index that allowed it to increase accordingly every year.

I also agree with the comments that have been made about apartment sizes. We cannot win on this in some respects because on the one hand we have people telling us that in order to make projects viable, they have to reduce the unit size in order to make them easier to build. I get that but I honestly find it difficult to understand how developers cannot make a profit in the current environment with house prices and rental prices where they are. It is difficult to

understand how when it was profitable to build the same thing a number of years ago, even taking into account the increasing cost of materials, etc., it cannot be built in a profitable way even at the standards we had before. I am not sure that the reduction in building standards and the size of apartments is the answer.

I live in an apartment of less than 80 m sq. It is not a bad place to live or anything like that but the more we reduce the size the less livable the space becomes. That is increasingly true if we have families in that space, especially larger families with more children. Irish people have not got their heads around the notion that we can live in apartments perfectly comfortably. One of the mistakes we have made in this jurisdiction in terms of apartment living is that in a three-bedroom apartment, for example, there is only one reception room or one living space. If you have in that space two or three kids - anybody who has two or three kids will be familiar with this notion - one space can be very difficult and it is not built for harmonious family living. Maybe changing the attitude to what a family dwelling looks like in terms of the layout of it will be an important thing.

I also welcome the move to ten-year county development plans. The existing structure means that almost as soon as the last one is finished, we are looking at preparations for the next one so I think a ten-year period is more reasonable. I would favour much greater powers for elected councillors. Again, this is something I have complained about to the Minister of State. I complained about it to him when we were both councillors, never mind when he became Minister of State in the Department of housing. We do not give nearly enough power or credit to councillors. They are the hardest working elected people in this country, yet they have no resources but worse than that, they have no powers. The reality is that most councillors around the country, be they city or county councillors, are effectively local ambassadors to the chief executive of a given local authority or the director of services. In real terms, decisions are made at local government level by unelected officials who are not accountable to the local population, who will never knock on the door of a local resident and ask them what they think about the development plan or whatever issue it is, and who do not actually have their feet on the ground the way councillors do. Councillors are doing this all the time. They are knocking on doors. They are at residents' meetings and public meetings. They are available to people and they hear people's views all the time. In my view they are much better equipped to make decisions for the people they represent than officials who are answerable really only to the Custom House or to the Department of local government.

We have the least powerful and most centralised local government system in the whole of the European Union. We should change that. Changing it is a vote of confidence in the fact that at local level, we have genuinely competent, capable, responsible, hardworking elected representatives and we should be devolving power to them, particularly when it comes to planning. We all know that in the 1990s, there was a certain small cohort of councillors who misbehaved and acted in a criminal fashion in some instances. I understand why when we got to the year 2000 that the law had to be changed to take planning decisions out of the hands of councillors because they had been misused and we had to re-establish confidence in planning decisions but the world has changed a lot since 2000. The level of accountability, scrutiny and regulation of councillors has massively changed. It was our party that set up many of those changes in how we require people to be accountable, in terms of their behaviour, their conflicts of interest, moneys they receive, donations, fundraising, all of that stuff. That has been completely changed. We now have the Standards in Public Office Commission whose sole job

is to regulate politicians in terms of that behaviour. It is important to have this debate in the context of this legislation. We should now be looking at returning to a situation where we are giving decision-making powers about local planning back to councillors rather than constantly leaving it in the hands of officials who are not accountable.

At the moment we have a massive democratic deficit in terms of planning decisions that is unique in the context of the European Union because councillors are not making planning decisions. In fact, when I was a councillor, I avoided ringing planners about issues because I did not want to be seen to be interfering in that process when, actually, I should have been the one making the decision. I am not a professional planner but we used to have planning committees that were advised by professional planners and we had the benefit of all that expertise. If the decision to be made is to be a democratic one, it should be made by democratically elected people and should reflect the democratic will of the people in a given area. That is a broader point than the legislation before us but it is important given this is planning and development legislation.

I will turn to what I think is probably the main impetus of this legislation, which is about the reform of the judicial review in the planning process. Again, in broad terms, I welcome this. I recognise that Gabriel Makhlouf, the Governor of the Central Bank, said last year that the number one problem in housing development delivery was planning - not financing or other things but planning for the provision of local amenities and utilities. That is a fair criticism. It is far too slow. I recognise also that in Dublin, for example, at the moment there are 9,562 houses being delayed by judicial review. That is an astonishing figure given where we are in the current crisis and what we have to do. That is also about 16.5% of all the development in Dublin, so it is a shocking figure. It does merit being dealt with and a situation where we actually address that problem.

However, there are ways we can address it other than trying to put a stricture on judicial review. Judicial review is a constitutional right that is afforded to Irish citizens. It is built into our Constitution and is a really positive thing. It is something that we have beyond most European countries, in fact. We have this right as a citizen to challenge an administrative decision made by a State agency, Minister or whatever it might be, go to an independent High Court judge and say we think this decision has not been made correctly, there is a flaw in the process and we want the judge to examine it. That is a right that we have given the people of this country since the 1930s. I understand that it is frustrating. Sometimes, the exercise of rights is inconvenient. I also understand that the Minister of State has to do something about it because he cannot allow the situation to continue where there is delay in the construction and delivery of housing for the people who need it. I accept all of that. Faster decisions and faster delivery are aims we must all strive for. However, we can look at the way we do it.

For starters, one of the reasons judicial review is slow is because of the resources allocated to the courts. We do not have enough judges, courtrooms or staff in the Courts Service to process these decisions. We had this problem many years ago in relation to corporate cases. We stepped in and changed the way they were dealt with. There was a specific, highly managed list created within the High Court for cases involving companies and cases that were worth more than €1 million. One judge was responsible for saying what the timeline was once a case came to court, including the deadlines - side A would present their submissions in two weeks' time and side B would respond in four weeks' time, there be an opportunity in six weeks' time

to come back, and there would be a hearing to deal with the case in eight weeks' time. There were severe penalties built in for people who did not comply with that timetable. There was an order of the court to move it along. That could be done with judicial review but there is a resource issue with doing that.

Equally, the penalisation of fees is essentially an attack on those bringing judicial reviews. I do not think that is the answer either. I wonder about access to justice and whether this is the right road to go down. There is obviously the *locus standi* issue as well, which I know is being addressed. The notion that I could live in Letterkenny and object to something in Wexford town is an absolute nonsense. In very few other areas of law is somebody with no standing allowed to make an objection the way they are in planning cases. That is something I favour removing. You should be able to demonstrate some interest in a decision or some reason as to why you are affected by it before you are entitled to start to interfere, delay or review it. That is common sense. It is what normally applies in all other areas of law.

In terms of what this Bill is actually trying to achieve, if we could come at it in a slightly different way, it would be better, fairer and more transparent. We should not be afraid of judicial reviews or of the High Court stepping in to look at a decision openly and transparently. In a court, everything is done in public and a decision is usually written and delivered afterwards where it is set out in clear terms why the decision has been made one way or the other. We should not be afraid of that. We should be resourcing reviews so that decisions can be rendered quickly rather than delayed, as is currently the case. While I appreciate the end point we are trying to get to and the fact that nearly 10,000 houses in Dublin cannot continue to be delayed where a judicial review is partly responsible, let us look at this in the round and see if there is a better way.

I give a cautious welcome to the Bill. I hope I am wrong about this and that it is going to deliver things and there will not be any ancillary problems. I look forward to its passage.

Deputy Máire Devine: Before I start, the Housing Agency was tasked with researching and monitoring housing-based interventions that sought to strengthen social cohesion. I am wondering if that report informed this Bill, or if there is yet to be a report.

If you ask the people of Dublin South-Central, they will clearly tell you that affordable and social housing is key in addressing the fragmentation and displacement of their communities, as vulture funds, student accommodation and transient accommodation smother their area. Swathes of high-rise, transient accommodation have been imposed on their communities. The historical community of the Liberties is choked with eight-to-12-storey blocks of student accommodation that have forever changed the small streetscape and skyline of Dublin's oldest settlement. Likewise, the aparthotels that cater for this, the premier tourist trail in the country, have resulted in what we call a tourist paradox, a phenomenon that is growing worldwide where tourism and transient visitors destroy the cultural environment that is necessary for tourism activity in the first place. The recent protests at Thomas Street's aparthotel development proved to be the tipping point for locals, who are furious at yet another planning permission for a bland, featureless and cheapening development while their community is scattered to the wind, along with the exodus of home-grown businesses and community facilities. Unaffordable housing is divisive. Tensions are rising and discontent is wholly understandable.

The affordability crisis represents a social challenge that must be addressed. It must be front and centre and the cornerstone of Government policy. Access to affordable housing enables broader social cohesion and strengthens communities, something we desperately need to encourage, support and nurture in these days of sometimes turmoil across our cities and Europe. This legislation should include and encourage site visits so as to give a helicopter view of the context of what is being proposed when assessing large developments, or at least a real-time video of the area and a virtual walk-through to gain a perspective on and understanding of the visual impact, scale and impositions of developments of this nature in the inner cities. They have swallowed up and bulldozed a lot of traditional streetscapes, and with them a lot of our communities in the inner city. Those streetscapes are our urban gems and they are being diluted and dismissed regularly. This has been concentrated in inner cities over the last decade.

Affordable housing is a linchpin that sets the groundwork for a stable living environment for families. It is crucial for personal and communal growth. Stability nurtures people and protects their well-being. Government policy must prioritise this and not be an indifferent bystander to the experience of inner city communities that have long encountered deliberate neglect, disinterest and abandonment. The Minister, Deputy James Browne, got some insight into this when, albeit pushed, he visited the Liberties. That visit was welcome and propelled the decision to answer to the locals and replan the generation that was parked. The State must invest in our people, our families and our working-class communities. That is the priority. We deserve better.

An Ceann Comhairle: Before calling Deputy Michael Collins, I would like to welcome to the Gallery Joe, Lorraine and Micheál Croke, who are visiting from Lowertown in Schull at the request of Deputy Collins.

Deputy Michael Collins: I concur with the welcome you made to the Croke family, a Cheann Comhairle. They have been so helpful to the people of Lowertown and Cross Barry for many years on a voluntary basis, helping people with local gardening and all the works that need to be done there. They are a great addition to be here in the Dáil today.

Independent Ireland supports the objective behind this Bill. We all know that our planning system has become too slow, complex and bureaucratic. Delays in planning are delaying homes and infrastructure and frustrating communities right across rural and urban Ireland. There are a number of positive measures in this legislation. The extension of existing development plans provides certainty, while local authorities prepare the new ten-year plan. The measures aimed at accelerating electricity, gas and other strategic infrastructure are welcome. Without adequate infrastructure, we simply cannot deliver the housing that people desperately need. We also recognise the potential benefits of allowing approved apartment developments to be modified more easily. If sensible changes can help deliver more homes and improve viability without unnecessary delays, that is something we should support.

However, faster planning must never mean less accountability. One concern for Independent Ireland is the growing centralisation of decision-making. The Bill allows regional directors and chief executives to take greater control where deadlines are missed. We must ensure that elected councillors and local representatives are not sidelined in the process. Local democracy matters and local communities deserve to have their voices heard. We also need

assurances that rural Ireland will benefit equally from these reforms. Faster infrastructure delivery cannot be confined to major urban centres.

Rural roads, water services, electricity networks and community infrastructure must receive the same priority if balanced regional development is to become a reality.

The Government says that these changes will reduce delays, increase housing supply and improve legal certainty. Those are worthwhile goals. However, the real test will be whether more homes are built, infrastructure projects are delivered faster, and whether the public continues to have confidence in the planning process. Independent Ireland will engage constructively with this Bill. We support cutting red tape and removing needless obstacles, but we will also need to insist on protections for local democracy, ensuring that rural communities are not left behind, and the maintenance of safeguards.

Communities have concerns. There is one thing we have to be careful of. I met a group from Wexford last week. Its members want clarity. The Minister of State might be able to give it to me today or at a future date. Precisely what grant of planning permission exists for new railways overbridge at Park-Carcur just outside Wexford? I have been told that the CEO of Iarnród Éireann and the Minister for Transport claim that this bridge is covered by a planning application from a third-party developer, but it seems that that is not the case. The bridge appears to have been constructed with taxpayers' money without planning permission. I would appreciate if the Minister of State could clarify that issue in the days ahead.

In this Bill, we have to look at the current situation. We are talking about county development plans lasting longer, but my concern is that mistakes are being made. The mistake in the county development plan is that the local representatives are being squeezed. I know it from my time from 2014 to 2016 on the local authority. We had a hell of a lot to say in relation to county development plans. Now, I find that my councillors have very little say. It is from the top down. We need to change that.

There was a village nucleus. We want to look after the survivors of rural Ireland. Urban areas are hugely to Independent Ireland, too. They put a village nucleus into areas where there was public transport, a local church and a local shop. You build around that area. They withdraw that in the next county development. That was a negative move to make because it was killing rural Ireland. There are communities out there losing their post offices, little creameries and churches because communities are dying. They are losing GAA clubs, which is a very serious concern, and their soccer clubs. We need to put the focus back on how we build small rural communities. That is how we do it. If there is a local school bus service or local rural transport service passing these doors, that is how you build around a community and that community grows. That is an area that the Department needs to look at and have a very serious focus on. County development plans are from the top down. That is not the way it should be. The local authorities need to have a stronger say.

We have to look at issues like housing, roads and transport. Money is being spent on infrastructure. It is hugely important. Uisce Éireann has become unaccountable. One cannot talk to it. When I send correspondence to it, it is like I am talking to old Jack the dog at home, but the dog would waggle the tail at least. Uisce Éireann is unaccountable. Imagine, it is getting billions of euro from the State and does not have to account for it to anybody. I know people who are willing to invest in infrastructure to build local communities. I spent months

looking for a meeting with Uisce Éireann - the local person is willing to put the money into building infrastructure that Uisce Éireann should be doing but cannot do - but cannot get one. It is not just me. Everybody else comes in here saying the same thing. There is no accountability. The Government seems to be forking out money without accountability. That needs to change. I ask the Minister of State to stand up to Uisce Éireann. A lot of TDs came in here and showed a lot of concern about Uisce Éireann, and it came across the road and met us, but it has not met us since. It has not followed up on the queries that we had. That was just fake, a bit of box-ticking to get rid of us again for another couple of years. All Uisce Éireann needs to do is ask for another billion or million euro. It does not matter. It just ticks a box and it will get it. We need to make changes in here so that there is accountability and we can go back and say that there is somebody willing to pay this out. It happened in my own community down in Durrus. The construction company of a man who is dead now built the wastewater treatment plant there. That town has been thriving fairly well since and able to build houses since. It does not seem to be happening in the rest of the country. Look at the Shannonvales, the Dunmanways, the Rosscarberys, the Ballydehobs and the Goleens. What is happening? For Shannonvale, there is now a promise that something is going to happen. In Dunmanway, a TD told the Dáil six or 12 months ago that 50 houses were going to be built. Now, I have heard that there are only going to be 15 houses. Imagine, 15 houses for the next 20 or 30 years. That is a disaster for a growing town like Dunmanway.

We are not moving with the times. We are way behind. The more rural you are located in this country, the worse things get. The N71 from Rosscarbery to Owenahinch is so dangerous that it is impassable. Regarding the road in Ballydehob, I am continuously raising concerns that might save lives. If there were passing bays, it would bring people into our community in west Cork. We have every right to fight for our constituents. That is why we were put into Dáil Éireann.

I spoke to young Micheál Croke, who is above in the Gallery. He talked to me about the concerns at Cross Barry regarding a footpath there. I stay out in Bray when I am here in Dublin. I saw that a lovely, safe, concrete footpath was built in one its areas, but a beautiful wooden one was also put in just to add to the area. It is lovely. Down in Cross Barry, there is an incredible amount of danger in walking the bridge there, given the number of lorries and other traffic. They need an inside timber bridge, metal bridge or something to save lives, yet nothing happens year after year and promise after promise. Lorries keep striking the wall there and people are within inches of losing their lives, but nobody is accountable and nobody cares. Obviously, something has to happen, then everybody will start running and shouting.

We are talking about speeding up plans in relation to Gaeltacht areas. We have to look at the islands. I represent eight islands. I talk about Cape Clear, Sherkin Island, Long Island, Dursey Island, Bere Island, Whiddy Island and Heir Island. When was the last time a house was built on any of those islands? The Minister of State will not be able to answer because I will tell him: there has been none. They cannot even get planning there, never mind being able to afford to build. When was there a social house built? People have every right to live on their islands. It is the same as those who cannot afford a house being entitled to get social housing. Why cannot the people of those islands at least included in a social housing programme the same as every other community? The living life has been squeezed out of islands. As public representatives, we meet the islanders. They want their young people. They want their schools to survive. Their schools are closing down because people cannot get a

home. They have to go back down to the mainland. There is a rush or race to send people away from rural areas.

Planning permission can be very frustrating. Deputy Ward talked about, for example, a person from Donegal objecting to something in west Cork. That is outrageous and has to stop. There is only one way to do so, and that is to put legislation in to make sure that things like that do not happen. People will say to me that they have a right to object, but there is a proper way to do it and an improper way to do it.

It is often pointed out to me how a local person could not get planning but somebody with a lot of money ended up with a house down the road. That is hard for me to explain because I am not on the inside when it comes to planning, but we have to ask questions about how that happened. I am not saying that it happens very often, but it does happen. It is frustrating for the people who have lived all their lives there and are refused when someone they do not know does get planning permission. That happens quite a lot. It is an area of frustration that the Government needs to look into further.

There is a vacant home grant, and it is very welcome. A lot of people have availed of it and I could not fault it, but there is a bit of a concern that money sometimes does not get out to the people fast enough. That is beside the point, though. It is building up in rural areas. One planning matter that the Minister of State needs to look into is where people find a ruin. They think that this great - a ruin in a rural community falling asunder - and this is going to be built. The first thing they will be asked for is to have a conservation repairs document prepared. Then there will be a bat report, an invasive alien plant species report and a nature impact statement report. It is €20,000 before they put a block in the ground. I recall how, when I was growing up, I built a house at home. It cost me £22,000. It was a six-bed dormer bungalow. Now, people cannot even get a project off the ground for that money. The paperwork has to be finished. There are all these reports. Somebody is making a hell of a lot of money out of this. At the same, when people come into my constituency office - I presume it is the same for the Minister of State - and I look at it, it is a ruin. It is falling down. Would the Government not be delighted to encourage these guys to build and start a new life for themselves?

Deputy Paul Lawless: I know of a family in Mayo. The mother attended the local primary school in the parish. Her father attended the same local primary school. Her children are now attending the same local school. She sought planning permission to build in the catchment area of that primary school. She was denied on the basis of local planning need. Three generations living in the same area and she was refused planning permission.

That is how discriminatory and unfair the planning system is in Ireland. I very much welcome the fact there have been changes and progress is finally being made on this. It is welcome and I support it. I will absolutely fight to make sure the changes will accommodate as many people to live in rural areas as possible, because it was wrong. For too long, we had a planning system that prevented people living. We have a situation in the planning system where families have to go through report after report for bats and environmental report after environmental report. There is no report done, however, on the council's or Government's side to see whether this family need a house and what the impact is on this family and all of the families across Ireland who want nothing from the State except to be left alone and be allowed

to build in their local areas. I welcome the progress and I urge the Minister of State to get on with the implementation of that.

In respect of the auxiliary units, the modular units, this was first spoken about over a year ago in the Dáil and I welcomed that at the time. I am still waiting for the legislation and the guidelines to be published. We talk about delays, and I welcome some aspects of this Bill because the Minister of State is trying to address the delays, but we have been waiting for this to be published for over a year now. We know, broadly speaking, that the units may be 40 sq. m but there is no insight. People are ringing me, families are phoning me and builders are phoning me asking me what is happening and we do not know. There has been delay after delay. This is a crisis and I believe it is time that Deputy Cummins, as the Minister of State who is working in the Department of housing, actually realised it is a crisis.

I want to talk about the Bill in relation to the county development plans and the ten-year timeframe. I understand there is some value to this in terms of processing time and speeding up the timeframes. However, I have concerns and I want to register them here on the floor of the Dáil. I will give an example. A council term lasts for five years and if we are now moving to a situation where county development plans will last for ten years, then obviously that plan should be in line with the new council and the new mandate. If the people of a local area vote out the councillors because they are not happy with the work they are doing or with the development plan, then the new council should have the mandate to change that plan. That is a big concern I have. What is the point in having an election if there will be no impact? The truth is that local government has been downgraded to such an extent that councillors have virtually no power. Now we will see the power they have in terms of development plans being pushed further out and that is a big concern. I ask that changes, flexibility and amendments be allowable. In Mayo, we have a county development plan that was produced in 2022, before I was elected to the council or the Dáil. My understanding is that this plan was supported by all of the councillors in Mayo at the time. It was ratified on 29 June 2022. Now we are stuck with this development plan until 2028. The big problem with this plan is that it classifies huge parts of the east, south and north of the county as being preferred for wind turbine developments. Now the councillors have realised that they no longer support the plan and want to see changes to it. My fear is that if we elongate the duration of county development plans, it will prevent councillors making changes. I urge the Minister of State to ensure councillors have the flexibility and ability to make amendments and so on because that is important. A new council should have the ability and flexibility to change the plan significantly.

In relation to key towns with a population of under 10,000 for the purposes of development, funding and so on, the problem is if there is a ten-year plan and the population grows beyond that. There should be a level of indexing within that plan whereby if the population goes above 10,000, it should still be considered a key town.

I was going to talk about wind turbines as well but my time is up.

Deputy Paul Nicholas Gogarty: The Bill is another piece of omnibus legislation. It tidies up the 2024 Act and is designed to fast-track the judicial review changes, clarify and firm up the ten-year development plan timelines, look at the critical infrastructure and increase the Housing Finance Agency's borrowing capacity. There is a lot contained in the Bill, on one side, but nothing on the other, to be quite honest, because it is primarily enabling legislation, at least

in the areas I would like to focus on, namely the critical infrastructure measures and the development plan process.

On paper it is important to facilitate the planning system where development plans, regional strategies and infrastructure delivery can be aligned. I say "can be" because while the Bill mentions and strengthens the transition to a ten-year development plan cycle, which I am agnostic about, it sets the deadlines for regional spatial and economic strategies and allows the Minister of State and his colleagues to designate key towns, which I hope will include suburban areas like Lucan, Clondalkin and a joined-up Rathcoole, Saggart and Citywest so that the corridors between them can be planned in a coherent way, unlike the fragmented housing conurbations we see around these historic villages.

However, there is no guarantee that all of these tie-ins will be provided. There is reference to accelerating infrastructure delivery and the Bill streamlines the process and implements recommendations of the accelerating infrastructure task force. We have had references to the size of apartments and how the Bill allows existing apartment permissions to be updated without restarting the entire planning process. If we are putting people into boxes, and I call some of these apartments "boxes", we have to have something on the outside. What has happened is we have taken away parking spaces. We have provided insufficient playing pitches, gathering spaces, community halls and leisure facilities. There is no tie-in with public transport.

I have said before that we are potentially creating what will be ghettos in ten years' time. I say that having spoken to developers who are creating very high-quality housing in terms of the BER rating and the framework they were given. However, the framework is not sufficient, whether it relates to people being able to charge their EVs on their domestic tariff or having parking spaces because sometimes people need to be able to get from A to B in a car even if we are trying to encourage a modal shift by making it more difficult for those short journeys when people should be walking or cycling. In areas like Seven Mills, parts of Adamstown, Citywest and Kilcarbery, we do not have that infrastructure. When this legislation is passed, there will be no guarantees. We need to see a firm commitment to providing that; otherwise, we will be creating bad planning.

Deputy William Aird: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill and support its passage on Second Stage. Ireland faces a housing infrastructure challenge that is well known to every Member of this House. Families are struggling to access affordable housing, communities need vital infrastructure to be delivered and businesses require certainty within our planning system. Good planning must always protect public participation, environmental standards and proper oversight but it also must be capable of making timely and effective decisions. The Bill builds on the reforms already introduced. Its main objective is to ensure those reforms can be implemented smoothly and effectively by removing barriers that have caused delay, uncertainty and unnecessary costs throughout the planning process.

I welcome the measures relating to judicial review procedures. Planning decisions must always be open to challenges where genuine legal issues arise, but we must recognise that lengthy and complex court procedures can delay housing, public infrastructure and investment projects for years and years, as the Minister of State can see himself. I welcome the reforms

in the Bill intended to streamline procedures, reduce unnecessary delays and provide greater certainty for all stakeholders.

One of the most important aspects of this legislation is the clarity it provides around transition to ten-year county development plans. Moving to a longer term planning scope is a significant and necessary reform if we are serious about meeting Ireland's future needs. The Bill provides certainty that local authorities will move to this new ten-year cycle. That clarity is essential for local authorities, communities, developers and our infrastructure providers. A ten-year planning framework will help ensure that we maintain an adequate supply of zoned land for housing over a much longer period. Too often we have found ourselves planning for immediate demand instead of anticipating future need. By extending the lifespan of the development plans, the local authorities will be in a better position to zone sufficient land, co-ordinate infrastructure and investment, and create the pipeline of housing delivery that our growing population requires. Long-term housing supply demands long-term planning, and this reform represents a very important step in that direction.

Another welcome measure in this application of the revised Department standards is to the existing planning permissions. This is a practical and sensible reform that has the potential to unlock housing delivery in the short term. By allowing those updated standards to apply to existing permissions, the Bill will improve the viability of a large number of schemes and help turn permissions into homes. I also welcome the increase to the borrowing limit of the Housing Finance Agency. At a time when the delivery of housing remains a national priority, we must ensure that the agency has the capacity to support housing investment. Access to finance is a critical aspect of housing delivery. This measure strengthens the State's ability to support local authorities, approved housing bodies and wider housing initiatives.

Of course, legislation alone will not solve our housing challenges. We must continue to address issues relating to infrastructure provision, the servicing of lands, construction capacity and the availability of skilled workers. However, an efficient and modern planning system is an essential foundation for all other housing measures. It is also important that as the Bill proceeds, we continue to engage constructively with local authorities, planners, communities, environmental groups and the legal profession. Effective planning reform requires public confidence. The public must be sure that transparency, accountability and environmental protections are at the heart of the decision-making. Ultimately, what people want is homes built more quickly, infrastructure delivered more efficiently and decisions made without unnecessary delay. They want certainty, fairness and common sense.

The clarity provided on the transition to ten-year development plans and the measures to improve the viability of apartment developments are practical reforms that will directly support housing delivery. I acknowledge the work the Minister of State and his Department have done on this to try to ease the burden that is on people out there. We are talking about rural development as well as urban development. When we talk about urban development, we must include, or else have it separated, all the villages we have throughout all our counties. I am a firm believer that if we can get the infrastructure into our villages, then people who come from there and want to build in a rural area and who are looking to buy a site there will consider moving to the village. I will give an example from my own area. If somebody wants to build in Camross, perhaps they would prefer to build in the village rather than go 2 miles or 3 miles outside the village, where there might be problems that the Minister of State and I know about

as public representatives, and where they might not get the planning. At least they could live in the rural village. If we do not adopt that attitude, and I am thankful this Bill will do that, I will have to come back and stand up here and criticise the Minister of State, which I certainly do not want to do. I believe this is our opportunity to ensure we give viability and oxygen back to all our small villages throughout our counties, for the people who left those villages because they could not get planning.

I do not ever talk myself up as a representative, but I will tell the House one thing here. I have probably been involved in more planning applications in my county of Laois than any other public representative ever. I gave over 40 years in Laois County Council and a lot of my work went into planning issues. It was awful to see that people could not live in an area in which they had gone to school in, been reared, played football and where they were members of the community. They could not live in that area because they could not get planning. I assure all those people here today that this Bill, once enacted, will give them an opportunity.

I will take this opportunity to thank all the people involved in planning, not alone in County Laois but throughout the country. They had a very hard job. They never wanted to refuse planning but they were forced to do so under what we would call the very famous county development plans. I will argue all my life about county development plans. County development plans were supposed to be plans of the public representatives of the county council at the time they were being drawn up. While plans were always presented to us in the county council chambers, however, and while we could put observations in and vote on the plan, which we did several times, a message would come back to the local authority. In respect of what we the public representatives were asking of the chief executive about the plan that he had produced, and which we were not agreeing with, we would be overruled by a Minister. Whose plan was it at the end of the day? I am delighted that I am getting an opportunity to stand in the Houses of the Oireachtas and to repeat what I have said for many years. When we did our county development plan every five years, I would inquire as to which Minister had said we were not to zone the land or that people from a rural area could not live in that rural area, but I could never get a copy of the letter from the Minister who had sent it to the local authorities.

With regard to the county development plans going forward, I ask one thing of the Minister of State. Will he allow the public representatives who are elected throughout this country and who engage in county development plans in their own local authorities to be provided with the same advice that the executive staff can get when they are preparing the plan to present it to the councillors? This is not a big ask. The Minister of State and every public representative who sits in this House will at some stage make representations to their local authority and to their planners. What will the planners say to them in return when they are making that observation on behalf of a constituent who wants to live in a particular area or wants to get planning permission? In my time the planners would hold up the piece of paper and say, "That's the bible; you drew up the plan." This is why I ask the Minister of State to ensure that every possible advice is given to local authorities as well so that they will have a throughput into the make-up of a county development plan.

I will move on to the type and quality of housing that the Minister of State will preside over in the Department of housing. I ask him to please look at the size of the houses being built. I do not have a problem with apartments but I do have a problem with the size as a family grows.

At the moment in our local authority, I will make representations, as I have done and always will do, for people who need a one-bedroom house. Again, the officials in the housing section of Laois County Council go on what is presented to them and the plan they have to work off. I will be told that where two people cohabitate or whatever, they would maybe get a two-bedroom house. A person with one child would get a two-bedroom house. As time progresses, however, all these people should be given the opportunity to move up to a three-bedroom or four-bedroom house, or whatever the case may be.

With regard to the housing we are building, I am very concerned about the amount of recreational space that is left available. I ask the Minister of State in his own good time, and maybe he knows it, to go back sometime and look at what happened in the Marian year in this country. The Government of the day took the initiative and thousands of houses were built. I would say that there is not a person in this House who does not have a "Marian something" in their area. The Minister of State should look at the quality of the houses. A green area was built around them, and if there was misbehaviour or anything, the lady of the house would knock on the window and say something.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the Minister of State and all his officials who have worked on the new plan. This is oxygen that has been given to people. I thank the Minister of State for the very good job he has done.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy John Cummins): I thank all of the Deputies for their engagement in the discussion on this Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill. As I stated at the outset, the commencement and implementation of the Planning and Development Act 2024 is a key priority for this Government.

While I appreciate some of the concerns that have been raised about the length of the debate, we are going to conclude this debate ahead of the time that was allocated to it, and I am speaking to a practically empty Chamber. I suspect that this is not lost on most people who might be looking in.

It is my priority as a Minister of State to ensure that we have the timely commencement of the 2024 Act. That is why we need to ensure that the transitional provisions that are provided for in this Bill are enacted before the summer recess. As I stated at the outset, I certainly hope that all Members will support those endeavours as we take this Bill through the Houses over the next couple of weeks.

I want to address some of the points that have been raised throughout the debate by Members. One area of concern that was raised by a number of Members relates to workforce plans and ensuring that we have sufficient planning staff within our local authority system. It is important to note that under the ministerial action plan on planning resources, 244 planning staff have been approved over the past number of years, including an additional 45 intern positions and another six members of staff for our regional assemblies, and I will continue to support the increased provision of staff within our local authority system and within our planning system overall. However, what I am trying to do as Minister of State is remove red tape from the planning system by introducing the likes of exemptions, and I know that provisions for modular housing were mentioned by one of the Deputies earlier. It is my understanding that these provisions were laid before the House today and will go to the

Oireachtas committee on 14 July 2026, and I will sign those provisions shortly thereafter. I know they have been eagerly awaited by many people.

Removing red tape from the planning system will free up resources within our local authority staff, as well as the provision of the eplanning system, through which 80% of all applications are now being made, which is very welcome.

Section 138(a), on apartment standards, was mentioned and many Members spoke about the viability of apartment development. It is important to understand the difference between the construction of regular housing units and apartments. When a developer goes into the ground to develop an apartment complex, they have no out. They cannot release apartments in phases. They all have to be completed before they are ultimately approved, certified and released to the market. The changes and provisions that are provided for within this Bill ensure that we have a viable apartment sector. It is not about profitability. It is about ensuring that we delivery in terms of the apartment space.

In addition to that, we have made available the likes of the croí cónaithe cities scheme. I note that one of the Deputies who raised viability measures also opposes the provision of the croí cónaithe cities scheme, which is specifically intended to provide apartments for sale to individuals and families across our cities.

Parallel consent were raised by a couple of Deputies. It is, of course, the priority of this Government to ensure that we have parallel consenting permissions across Departments. It requires that technical work across all Departments. It is contained within the accelerating infrastructure task force recommendations and we are working on ensuring that they are in place before the end of the year.

A number of Members raised the judicial review process. I do not propose to reopen the discussion on this matter, which was dealt with in the 2024 Act. Many long debates were had at the Oireachtas joint committee, which I was a member of at the time, and in both the Dáil and the Seanad. Importantly, the provisions in this Bill are about providing for decisions made under the 2000 Act post the commencement of this part of the Bill. It is taking what has already been legislated for under the 2024 Act and applying it to decisions that are going to made post the commencement of the provisions within this Bill.

On the move to ten-year development plans and the transitional provisions provided for within this Bill, I spent 11 years on Waterford City and County Council and I respect and understand the importance of the role of local government. A local democracy task force implementation plan will be coming to Government shortly following the work done by the task force over a period of a year, and I thank its members for the work they put into that. The provisions of the ten-year development plans are important in ensuring that we have sufficient land zoned across this country and to ensure the transitional provisions provided for are contained within this Bill. It puts a deadline of the end of next year in terms of the regional spatial and economic strategies. That is a hard deadline to ensure that there is alignment for the first batch of local authorities that will be progressing the reviews of their development plans by July of next year.

In terms of the key town provision, and I am sure this is something Deputies will take up on Committee and Report Stages, it is not about creating a two-tier planning system. It is merely about reflecting the number of towns that have populations above 10,000 and are not

currently reflected in the regional spatial and economic strategies. They are key growth towns that have the capacity to provide further housing and opportunities, but certainly not at the expense of rural villages and towns. Members mentioned the rural national planning statement, which I published on Tuesday following Cabinet approval, and I thank people for their support in that respect.

Affordable housing was referenced. We have gone from a standing start a couple of years ago to having over 6,000 cost-rental units in the country.

5 o'clock

The provisions relating to the Housing Finance Agency and what is provided for in this Bill will ensure the continuation of the funding provision arrangements that are in place. The purpose of the vacant site and RZLT provisions is to ensure that we do not have a double taxation element, and that in repealing one, we have the RZLT in place.

I agree with Members when they say that timely decisions are important. There are statutory timelines for decision-making within the 2024 Act. This Bill will allow the transitional provisions to be brought forward in order to bring those statutory timelines into force. I acknowledge the significant work that has been done by An Coimisiún Pleanála in reducing the number of cases on hand from over 3,600 to fewer than 1,300 cases last month. That is significant progress. Of course, we need to continue that, and the statutory timeline provisions are important.

I commend the Bill to the House and look forward to the Committee and Report Stage debates next week.

Question put and agreed to.

Ábhair Shaincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Matters

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú): I wish to advise the House of the following matters in respect of which notice has been given under Standing Order 39 and the name of the Member in each case:

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

Deputy Tom Brabazon - To discuss consolidation of leases from the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine to Howth Yacht Club.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger - To discuss the sudden closure of an English language school in Limerick.

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

Deputy Louise O'Reilly - To discuss the need for the provision of bus transport to the Flavours of Fingal show.

The matters raised by Deputies Louise O'Reilly, Tom Brabazon, Ruairí Ó Murchú and Ruth Coppinger have been selected for discussion.

Saincheisteanna Tráthúla - Topical Issue Debate

Bus Services

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: Ireland's largest summer festival will take place this weekend at Newbridge House and Farm in Donabate. The Flavours of Fingal is in its 14th year. It has been a hugely successful festival. It is one that I really enjoy going to every year. Many of my neighbours and people from my community also really look forward to it. It is a fantastic opportunity for local vendors such as cheese makers and craftspeople to showcase their wares. It is a big event in their calendar and of huge importance to our local economy, as well as just being a good day out for families and people in general.

Between 65,000 and 75,000 people attend, which makes it one of the biggest summer festivals. Part of the success of Flavours of Fingal has been the shuttle bus service that operates all around the Fingal area. It brings people from Rush, Lusk, Skerries, Balbriggan, Swords and the surrounding areas, and means they can get to and from the festival with ease. I do not expect the Minister of State to be familiar with every aspect of north County Dublin. Donabate is situated on a peninsula, which means one road in and one road out. It is very tight. What we do not want to see is people having a bad experience on their way to the festival. Also, from a sustainability and environmental perspective, I am scratching my head trying to understand why this money was pulled. I would love to know where the money was reallocated to, but more importantly, I really want people to be able to get to Flavours of Fingal easily and to get home easily. I know the vendors and the people who are there to showcase their products want that as well. This is a huge event and a huge day in their calendar. It is a day when people get the chance not just to make money, but also to showcase local talent and local produce.

Thousands of extra cars on the road means extra pollution, as the Minister of State knows, but it also means that people are less likely to get in. It is a real bottleneck. We have had trouble with traffic there, which is part of the reason the shuttle bus service was such a success. It is fine for people who live along the train line. The Minister of State will know there is a train line that runs right through my constituency. They will be grand because they are getting the train anyway. However, the vast majority of people who attend Flavours of Fingal do not live on the train line. As a result, they will find themselves in a situation where they have to travel by other means.

Added to this is the eye-watering cost of parking a car, which is €40. That is a lot. If someone is bringing a couple of kids, they will want to have a few bob to buy them an ice cream and to fully experience all the delights of the show, but they cannot add €40 on top of that. It is a real ask for families. We really want the Flavours of Fingal to continue to be the success story that it is, but without the shuttle buses, there is going to be traffic chaos. I do not want our big summer festival getting a name as a place that people do not want to go to because of traffic congestion.

I am not sure what can be done at this late stage. This matter raised previously in the Dáil by my colleague Deputy Ann Graves. The Taoiseach told her, "I will talk to people to see what can be done there." He also said, "I will talk to the Minister and see what can be done." Perhaps the Minister of State has a message from the Taoiseach for us.

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I thank the Deputy for raising this important topic, which I am taking on behalf of the Minister for Transport, Deputy O'Brien. I would like to clarify that the Minister has responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport, but neither the Minister nor his officials are involved in the day-to-day operation of public transport services.

I am familiar with Loughshinny, Donabate, Rush and Portrane. My grandfather was the sergeant at Rush back in the 1940s, and my mother grew up there and went to school in Dublin.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: In that case, the Minister of State will know what I am talking about.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: The National Transport Authority, NTA, has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public transport services nationally, working with the public transport operators that deliver the services and have responsibility for day-to-day operational matters. In this regard, while it is the NTA's priority to provide scheduled public transport services on the Transport for Ireland, TFI, network, it works with event organisers, operators, local authorities and An Garda Síochána to provide additional transport supports where possible to do so. Its focus regarding events is providing additional transport to support large-scale events where required and where operators are in a position to provide additional services.

In the context of this specific event, Flavours of Fingal, which is arranged by Fingal County Council in Newbridge House in Donabate for this Saturday and Sunday, 4 and 5 July, the council has provided a private bus shuttle operation each year of this event, which was run by Marathon Coaches to Blanchardstown, Rush, Balbriggan, Swords and the Naul. However, this year, the NTA was informed that Fingal County Council withdrew from providing this bus shuttle service, which is outside the control of the NTA. This was a decision taken by the council, and it was fully removed from the NTA.

The NTA's priority this weekend will be to cover major events at Croke Park and the Aviva Stadium. If capacity on the rail network allows, Irish Rail will support Flavours of Fingal. The bus operators do not have any capacity to put on additional services to Donabate because they will be servicing other, larger events in the city centre. As the Deputy rightly said, there will be between 65,000 and 75,000 people there, so a shuttle bus would be needed. It has to be noted that all TFI operators, including Irish Rail, Dublin Bus and Go-Ahead Ireland, have just serviced nine concerts in Malahide Castle, which concluded on Tuesday, 30 June, last, in circumstances where they all provided significant additional resources for each of the concerts in the series. The NTA is not in a position to provide any further services at this time due to resource availability.

The NTA has a dedicated team that attends pre-event meetings in order to plan what additional transport can be provided. Co-ordinating transport across events in different local authority areas can be very challenging, especially at this time of year. For example, last week there were large events at the Aviva Stadium, Croke Park, Malahide and Marlay Park, all on the same day, which put constraints on services. Therefore, the challenge facing the NTA and

the transport operators is the number of large-scale events being scheduled concurrently. The resources simply are not available to support them all because support for such events requires vehicles, drivers, support staff, site personnel and security teams, all of which have limited availability due to the normal workload associated with the scheduled services.

The Department of Transport requested that the NTA be included as a prescribed body in the draft regulations under the Planning and Development Act. This should assist the NTA in working with local authorities, event organisers and transport operators to ensure a more co-ordinated approach to event licensing and management of transport to and from events.

In addition to the specific transport provided for events, as part of the BusConnect's network redesign, the NTA has introduced 15 24-hour bus services across the city, significantly enhancing late night and early morning travel options. This has allowed more people to avail of public transport services. In addition, there are 12 Nitelink services running from the city centre to suburbs on Friday and Saturday nights, providing extra capacity during late-night demand periods.

Deputy Louise O'Reilly: I thank the Minister of State for the reply. He will forgive me for saying it is an incredibly disappointing reply. Donabate is in the constituency of the Minister, Deputy O'Brien. I am sure his constituents will be very interested to hear that the NTA has other priorities, including Croke Park, Lansdowne Road stadium and Marlay Park, none of which is in Fingal. I appreciate that the Minister of State is taking this on behalf of the Minister. The Minister told us about Nitelink but he should know that Flavours of Fingal is over long before the Nitelink buses start running. In any event, it would have been of absolutely no use to people going to Donabate for what is one of the biggest events of the summer, attended by between 65,000 and 75,000 people.

My concern is that there will be traffic congestion, in the first instance, and a reduction in numbers. I have had contact from quite a number of people who told me they look forward to going to Flavours of Fingal and they and their kids travel on the shuttle bus because it is convenient and means they do not have to worry about parking. It is disappointing that the attitude of the Minister is that people can pay €40 for parking and other major events are on, which are more important. I am sure his constituents would like to feel like they were something of a priority for him. They will get that message loud and clear. Will the Minister of State take back to the Minister a request that engagement starts now to ensure there is additional capacity through the NTA, or whoever it is that has to provide it, to ensure that people can get to and from Flavours of Fingal using public transport? Effectively, and contrary to what the Government has told us about its climate action targets, people will be forced into their cars, which is regrettable.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I assure the Deputy that the NTA meets all public transport operators on a regular basis and advises event promoters about what, if any, additional public transport services are available for particular events. Some events are organised without any input or involvement from the NTA. As a result, the authority may not be aware of them until a very late stage. The NTA suggested that there may be a need for more scrutiny of transport availability when licensing such events, in particular when different local authorities licence events to take place concurrently or in close proximity to each other.

The Department has ensured significant collaboration is taking place with the NTA and operators so that sufficient public transport capacity is provided for major events. Again, I am not sure whether the Minister has a huge role in this. His job is to bring the NTA and various stakeholders together. For example, in the last week in respect of public transport we discussed Malahide, the Aviva stadium, Marlay Park and Croke Park. There have been many events in the city and the NTA has said it is difficult to service all of them.

The NTA is cognisant of the increased demand such events bring and is working to establish a co-ordinated framework that balances meeting demand and efficient co-ordination within existing resources. However, decisions by event organisers, such as in the case of Flavours of Fingal, is completely outside the control of the NTA and Department.

There has been huge growth in public transport use in recent years. The Government remains committed to ensuring that public transport continues to be affordable, reliable and an attractive option for all passengers, including those attending concerts and events. I will take the views of the Deputy back to the Minister.

Despite the council briefing elected officials, I have been told they were informed by management that hosting the full-scale Flavours of Fingal represented a significant cost to the council and cancelling the sprawling regional shuttle network was a direct measure to contain mounting festival expenses. It was stated that the events, transport and overall scale were being adjusted to free up funding for events elsewhere in Fingal following a request from other local councillors who wanted the festival budget to be distributed more evenly across the entire county rather than heavily concentrated on a single flagship event. The fight is never what the fight is about.

Harbours and Piers

Deputy Tom Brabazon: Howth Yacht Club caters for all types of people. One might think a yacht club is the preserve of the wealthy middle class but the club goes well beyond that and has ambitious plans to become an inclusive club catering for those less able and less fortunate than regular club members. Recently, the EPA granted a licence to dredge the harbour, which is a welcome development and the first time it will have been done since the 1970s. It is a great development for the harbour as a whole. It will necessitate the yacht club replacing its marine infrastructure, which is a very expensive operation. It will cost a large sum and the club will look to the State for grant funding from the large scale infrastructure fund.

Like all funding streams, one of the necessary proofs is having good title to the land that it occupies. The club has five leases from the Department of, Agriculture, Food and the Marine. To tidy up the title, the club hired a specialist solicitor to try to consolidate the leases to simplify the title in order to ease grant applications. The draft lease was sent to the Department in July 2024 and was forwarded to the Office of the Chief State Solicitor in August 2024. This work has still not been completed. We are two years on and the work needs to be finalised without further delay.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank the Deputy for raising this issue. The Department owns, operates and maintains six designated State-owned fishery harbour centres, located at Castletownbere, Dingle, Dunmore East, Howth, Killybegs and Ros An Mhíl, under statute. It

also has responsibility for Cape Clear, Cleggan and some piers, lights and beacons. Fishery harbour centres are established under the Fishery Harbour Centres Act 1968 as centres in which to promote, develop and carry out sea fishing, including the production and sale of fish and fish products and related activities.

Responsibility for the fishery harbour centres transferred to my Department in October 2007 from the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources. Each fishery harbour centre owns land and properties within its respective boundary. Such properties, which are vested in this Department under the 1968 Act, are to be used for such purposes connected with the improvement and development of the fish industry and the provision, improvement and development of services ancillary to, or connected with, the fish industry. Therefore, the harbours contain a diverse property portfolio reflecting their role as working fishery harbours and the locations for a broad range of other marine activities.

There are currently 265 properties in total, excluding pier infrastructure, across six fishery harbour centres, 83 of which are located in Howth Fishery harbour centre. Almost 30% of all properties are used by the Department in the operation of the harbours, providing facilities for net mending, pier service areas, storage for fishing gear and weighbridges, for instance. The remaining properties are occupied by a variety of public and private sector tenants under formal lease agreement and are vital economically and socially to the remote and coastal communities that the fishery harbour centres serves. Some of the properties operate as commercial premises, such as fish processing facilities, restaurants or clubs and, for example yachting, rowing, and scout halls. Other properties reflect more functional aspects of the harbour such as car parking, marina and boat houses.

The Department works closely with the Office of the Chief State Solicitor to progress the often complex and protracted legal aspects relating to property leases. A solicitor is employed by the office at the Department's request to deal solely with the harbours' property portfolio, the cost of which is met from the Department's fishery harbour centre fund. While it is Department policy to not discuss individual leases publicly or with parties other than those immediately involved, I assure the Deputy that the Department and its legal advisers are actively working through the details and the drafting of the lease terms for the tenant concerned.

Due to the complexity of the multiple leases and the level of detail involved, the Department is carefully considering each aspect to ensure the terms are properly reviewed, accurately reflected and reflective of the current advice of the Chief State Solicitor's office. The Department is committed to giving the time necessary to ensure all terms are thoroughly reviewed and correctly addressed. I am informed that the consolidation is progressing steadily, with strong engagement with all stakeholders involved in the process.

Deputy Tom Brabazon: I certainly would not be raising this issue in this public way in the Chamber if the matter were progressing in the manner the Minister of State has described. We have been waiting two years for the resolution of a consolidated lease in circumstances where the club's specialist hired solicitor has, in effect, done the work for the State. He has drafted the lease for the Department. It should take only a matter of hours for a competent solicitor to read through it and either approve it or suggest amendments. I would not be raising this issue on behalf of the club, two years on, if what the Department is claiming was factual.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: I thank the Deputy for his measured approach. The process taking two years is reason enough for him to raise this important issue here. It is welcome that the Department maintains an open and proper relationship with the tenant and is always available to provide an update on progress or to address any queries. As recently as 25 June, the Department provided an email update to the tenant on the current progress. This was in addition to in-person meetings at Howth Fishery Harbour Centre on 26 May this year and 27 November 2025.

These matters often move more slowly than the parties would like. It is important to recognise that all due diligence must be completed thoroughly for the safeguarding of all involved. This is a commercially sensitive issue and aspects of it cannot be discussed publicly. The consolidation involves four leases that were taken out at different times, on different terms and with different clauses. As discussed, this is a process that requires significant due diligence. The Department is progressing the matter appropriately. I assure the Deputy that the matter is in hand and there is no risk to the tenant as all leases are well within their term, with the earliest expiration being a few years away. The Deputy has made some very interesting points. I will convey them to the Minister.

Industrial Disputes

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I raise the issue of the industrial action being taken by staff at Oberstown Children Detention Campus. The facility looks after some of our most vulnerable children who have found themselves in a particular set of circumstances. Care is provided by social care workers and supervising officers both day and night. At maximum capacity, the centre can hold 42 boys and four girls. Since Thursday, 25 June, Fórsa members have been operating a work-to-rule measure after a ballot for industrial action received 91% support.

The easiest way I can explain the circumstances and situations that have led to the industrial action is to refer to statements from Fórsa. A union official has stated that the proposals put forward by management were "not grounded in operational reality" and did not adequately address the ongoing impact of staffing pressures on employees. It is all about safe delivery of services, including ensuring there is capacity and ensuring the safety of the people who work there and the young people detained there. Fórsa has stated:

Members have repeatedly raised concerns that staffing shortfalls are placing unsustainable pressure on services and increasing risks in a challenging custodial environment for children and staff alike. If it isn't safe for staff, it cannot be safe for the young people in their care.

That really is the crux of the matter. A union official has said: "Members have previously reported serious incidents at the facility, including assaults on staff and injuries requiring hospital treatment, in circumstances where staffing levels were stretched and operational demands intensified." That is the situation with which we are dealing.

I am sure the Minister of State will talk about the State's industrial relations infrastructure and framework. However, the underlying issue at Oberstown arises from the problems with staffing capacity and the safety of those who work there. We have all heard about assaults that have happened previously. Like many others, I have heard from people working in the facility that there are huge issues that were not being addressed. It was no shock whatsoever to me that we got into a set of circumstances whereby we now have industrial action. What frightens

me is that the industrial action continues and the issues have not been addressed. We can all talk about going through the correct protocols and procedures but we know there is the possibility of having conversations. If the underlying issues that caused the industrial action were dealt with, we would not be in this set of circumstances.

I have to hand figures for legal fees and associated State Claims Agency payments in recent years. The figure was €132,806 in 2020, €901,590 in 2021, €482,454 in 2022, €845,645 in 2023, €826,541 in 2024 and €861,807 in 2024. That points to the serious issues that need to be addressed. This is not good enough. I hope the Minister of State can provide a helpful answer.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: On behalf of the Minister for children, I thank the Deputy for raising this very important issue and affording her the opportunity to respond. The Minister would like to make clear at the outset that the safety and well-being of the children in the care of Oberstown, and of the staff who support them, is and will remain the highest priority. The Minister notes that Oberstown, as the employer, is engaging directly with staff representatives through the appropriate industrial relations mechanisms, including conciliation under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC.

The industrial action is ongoing and has not been stood down but there are efforts to maintain open lines of communication to resolve the matter. Engagement via conciliation at the WRC remains open to the parties. I understand that local engagement is scheduled for this coming Monday in an effort to find a way forward. The Minister respects the rights of workers to take industrial action. At the same time, continued engagement by all parties, including through established dispute resolution mechanisms, is encouraged in order to reach a resolution that is practical, sustainable and centred on safety.

Oberstown is the State's only national facility for the detention of children and, as such, it operates within wider pressures in the youth justice system. Demand for places has increased. In February 2026, the Minister informed the Oireachtas of her intention to increase the capacity for boys in Oberstown by four to 44 during the course of the year. At the end of March, she increased the capacity for boys at Oberstown to 42 from 40, at the same time reducing the capacity for girls from six to four. No decision regarding capacity is taken without a clear understanding of its implications for staffing levels, safety conditions and the overall care environment for the children. The staff and management of Oberstown have handled the change in the certified capacity with the professionalism and care that have become the hallmarks of the facility.

The Department has increased funding to Oberstown in recent years to support service delivery, strengthen operations and enhance the overall care environment for the children. That sustained investment reflects the Government's commitment to ensuring the campus is properly resourced. The Department is working closely with Oberstown management to ensure staffing levels are aligned with operational demands, workforce planning is strengthened and staff are appropriately supported in what is a highly challenging role. The Government provided €2.176 million in additional funding for Oberstown in 2026 to increase staffing levels, including funding for 11 additional whole-time equivalent staff posts. That includes additional day supervising officers, who are support staff, and assistant unit managers.

In the first six months of 2026, Oberstown has been successful in recruiting the majority of those extra staff despite tight labour-market conditions.

The safety and well-being of staff and young people in Oberstown Children Detention Campus is of the utmost importance to the Minister. The following details demonstrate how Oberstown cares for its staff. Staff in Oberstown are supported with access to an on-site psychologist, peer support workers, employee assistance services and structured after-incident reviews, forming part of a systemic approach to supporting well-being in a challenging workplace. All staff working with young people in Oberstown receive training in suicide prevention, self-harm mitigation and incident management. Oberstown has adopted the ISO 45003 certification on psychological health and safety at work. Furthermore, Oberstown maintains an ISO 45001 health and safety management system on campus. The health and safety officer in Oberstown works closely with all the staff and all incidents on campus are followed up as soon as possible. These measures demonstrate a commitment to ensuring the highest possible standards of staff safety, well-being and professional support.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I ask that the Minister of State go to the Minister, Deputy Foley, and reiterate the point that this issue, first of all, should not have got here. This is abject failure. We all accept that it would be a difficult place to work and there would be very difficult situations. We are talking about children whom a determination has been made to detain. It frightens me when we hear about assaults on staff and insufficient safety for those who work there and the children detained there. This is not working.

The only the only piece of positive news - and that is a bit of a stretch - is the fact that local engagement is scheduled for this coming Monday, in an effort to find a way forward. I ask that maximum effort be put into finding a solution to this and ensuring that we have a safe level of staffing and that we have the correct protocols for dealing with issues where there may be the possibility of violence and that we have the correct protections. We all know that on some level it is a societal failure when we are looking at children being detained in the first place. We all know that we have to put an awful lot more work into those early interventions and help for children and their families that could avoid if not all, then at least some of this. However, we need to ensure that we protect those who are working in what are very difficult circumstances. If they are not safe, it will be impossible for the children in their care to be safe. I have brought up this issue with the children's committee. I requested that there would be a site visit, but beyond that, there are many questions to be answered. We need to ensure we have the correct protocols for dealing with issues of assaults and ensure there are sufficient staff and protection for those working there and that we ensure safety in Oberstown. I ask the Minister of State to bring this back to the Minister.

Deputy Frankie Feighan: The Minister and I thank the Deputy for raising this important issue, which is a priority for the Department and I will bring his concerns back to the Minister. In the medium term, there has been a significant increase of €5.75 million in capital funding for Oberstown under the National Development Plan 2026-2030. This sustained investment reflects the Government's commitment to ensuring the campus is properly resourced and projects are under way that will alleviate occupancy pressures. However, in terms of the current dispute, the Department remains committed to supporting efforts to resolve the matter as

quickly as possible and urges continued engagement through established industrial relations channels.

The safety and well-being of young people and staff at Oberstown remain the overall priority of the Minister and Oberstown management. In the context of the work-to-rule action, the Minister wishes to reassure the Deputy that the management has put in place contingency arrangements which will be monitored closely to ensure that essential services continue and that standards of safety are upheld. Since the certified capacity of Oberstown was amended in March, Department officials and Oberstown's management have been engaging intensively, including holding weekly meetings to monitor progress. The welfare of children in detention is a priority for the Oberstown management, who will ensure that children continue to receive appropriate care, supervision and support. They will also ensure that staff are protected and supported in their roles and that the campus always operates within safe parameters. I will end by wishing the parties well ahead of their engagement on Monday.

Language Schools

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Student Campus college in Limerick suddenly closed last week, leaving hundreds of international students and staff in limbo. I was contacted by people in Limerick to raise this issue. Approximately 250 students were already studying in the school, with reports that over 300 additional students had paid fees before travelling to Ireland. Students were left with uncertainty regarding their education, tuition fees and immigration status. Student Campus college on the interim list of eligible programmes, ILEP, approved providers list. This list is provided by the Minister for justice for approved programmes. The school stated it had learner protection through an academy-plus arrangement with the trade organisation Progressive College Network. This is a type of insurance that if the school fails to offer courses, alternative arrangements will be made. There have been reports indicating that a plan is under way for the school to reopen under new ownership or management, with the aim of allowing students to finish the courses they have paid for. I do not know if the Minister of State has clarity on this. The school lost its PON status in June and no learner protection has been issued since May. It is unclear, going forward, how that will operate under new ownership. It is simply being stated that there is an emergency fund that existed from previous owners and a reliance on insurers doing the right thing.

Teaching staff have reportedly been offered their positions back if they teach under the temporary arrangements. Already, there are unpaid wages owed to teachers since the closure and there is a distrust from teachers about this school, with teachers saying they do not trust the organisation. There is still no clarity on the reopening date either, and whether all students will be accommodated or what options will exist for students seeking refunds and transfers.

There are broader issues here. Oversight of English language schools has been an issue for a long time, particularly regarding the adequacy of the learner protection arrangements and the safeguards for international students. These types of schools are invariably privately owned, with a lack of regulation in the sector. In May, 250 students in Monaghan were still asking for refunds from one of those schools after their reapplications for visas were rejected. What immediate steps is the Government taking to protect the students affected by the closure in Limerick? How exactly will the Government improve the English language school sector to ensure that international students are protected? The issue is not about this being a back door,

which the Minister made a statement about recently. The implication was that some use the language schools to get visas. It is about ensuring that international students can be protected. God knows, many of their families will have scrimped and saved for them to come here to learn English and improve their lives.

What about the staff working in these schools? I know Unite The Union was making attempts to unionise staff following on from a previous closure. I would certainly encourage all workers to get involved in a union so that they have protection. What is the Government doing to stop this uncertainty for students and staff happening in the future?

Minister of State at the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (Deputy Catherine Ardagh): I thank the Deputy for her question. The students, prospective students and teachers are in a very difficult situation. What is really important now is that we have a clear information stream going to the students so they know what is going on. The Department is aware of the current issues regarding Student Campus college in Limerick. Officials in my Department and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science are monitoring the ongoing and evolving situation. They will provide information in relation to the status of any affected students' immigration permissions in due course.

I can advise the Deputy that in order for a non-EEA national student to register for a stamp 2 immigration permission, they must enrol in and commence a course of study from the interim list of eligible programmes. Education providers such as Student Campus college are required to have met certain standards and requirements to have their programmes included on the ILEP and be accredited by recognised Irish awarding bodies. All providers must remain in compliance with the relevant criteria to retain a listing on the ILEP. Instances of non-compliance may, and have, resulted in the removal of schools from the ILEP.

When a provider is listed on the ILEP, they are required to notify my Department of matters such as, but not limited to, any changes to the ownership of the school, any change in locations or additional centres, changes to their academic management or teachers, and student capacity numbers. It should be noted that the relationship between a student or agent and any education provider is private and contractual. My Department has no function in relation to disputes between students, agents and their education providers in seeking refunds, course transfers or other rebates. Having said that, I understand that the Department of further education is very much aware of the situation and I note from the Deputy's contribution that the standard of English-language courses and our reputation as a provider of such courses is of concern.

Additionally, I can inform the Deputy that the ILEP is being superseded by TrustEd Ireland, the international education mark launched in September 2024 by Quality and Qualifications Ireland and our colleagues in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. TrustEd Ireland is a new statutory quality mark and part of a suite of legislative measures designed to further protect international learners. Once the ILEP is discontinued, only education providers granted authorisation to use the TrustEd Ireland mark will be eligible to recruit students from outside the EEA to English-language programmes, foundation programmes and higher education programmes leading to awards within the national framework of qualifications. The new mark will be awarded to higher education and English-language education providers that have demonstrated that they meet national standards. This will ensure a quality experience for international learners from pre-enrolment

through to the completion of their programme of education and training. Applications are currently being reviewed for the first application cycle and we expect decisions to issue in the coming months.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Maybe it is time that the State get involved in this rather than leaving it to any private individual or private company to set up a language school, take money off desperate people who want to come here and learn English, and then just go away with that money. The Minister of State has said there is no function for the Department here. I only got this answer handed to me as the Minister of State started reading it. It really would be helpful if we could get these replies in advance.

People were happy to take fees from international students and the moneys international students bring here, which is a significant amount. They pay rent and so on. However, there does not seem to be any checks of whether these schools have reserves of funds - for example, to pay staff wages - or whether there is something like a sinking fund. Are there no checks and balances that can be done?

This is not the first time. Student Campus college is not a new offender. There was a report that an Algerian man is owed €2,137, has been waiting 14 months and still has not gotten it back. What does the Minister of State's Department do when complaints like that are made? The school is allowed to continue to operate and advertise itself as a provider. As the Minister just said, Ireland has this great reputation for English-language tuition.

There seems to be light-touch regulation again and again by this Government. The way the system is structured is leading to this as well because we know people have to register at a school and then apply for the visa. There is an incentive there. I am not saying this is the case with Student Campus college, by the way, to quickly clarify that. However, people who are not honest brokers could set up a business, get money from people and then exploit them.

Deputy Catherine Ardagh: I note the Deputy's points. We cannot allow profiteering on foot of students whose families have made huge sacrifices to send them to Ireland to learn English. The new TrustEd Ireland quality mark will hopefully provide a better regulated environment for providers so that when people are coming to Ireland they will be able to come here with the assurance that their college will be well accredited and from that will flow the stamp 2 visas in the correct format.

Obviously, my Department has responsibility for immigration matters solely. Any sort of contractual disputes in relation to providers would have to be dealt with in a different forum. I fully appreciate that any students affected are seeking certainty at what is undoubtedly, especially for students already in Ireland, a very difficult time. I assure the Deputy that my Department is continuing to monitor the situation closely.

As I have outlined, all education providers with programmes listed on the ILEP are required to have learner protection insurance arrangements in place as part of their criteria for inclusion on the list. These arrangements are intended to provide protections for learners where a provider is unable to deliver a programme as planned.

More broadly, the transition from ILEP to TrustEd Ireland represents a significant strengthening of the quality framework for international education in Ireland. As this new

framework is implemented over the coming months, it will further strengthen confidence in Ireland's international education sector while ensuring that students can continue to choose Ireland knowing that appropriate quality assurance and learner protection measures are in place. I thank the Deputy again for raising this matter today.

Animal Health and Welfare (Ban on Hare Coursing) Bill 2020: Second Stage [Private Members]

Deputy Paul Murphy: I move: "That the Bill be now read a Second Time."

It is an honour to finally be moving this at Second Stage after the Animal Health and Welfare (Ban on Hare Coursing) Bill was first introduced in 2020. It has been a long road getting to this point. This section of the road will finish next Wednesday with a vote. I will start and finish with an appeal to the public to get on to their TDs and demand they reflect the big majority opinion in this country that we should take this opportunity to ban hare coursing.

This road has been going on for a very long time. This is the third Private Members' Bill to attempt to ban the barbaric practice of hare coursing. Tony Gregory tried over 30 years ago. Maureen O'Sullivan introduced her Bill in 2015 at First Stage and it was voted on at Second Stage in 2016. Now, here we are again, ten years later in 2026 as one of only three European countries that still allow this annual torture of the hare to continue.

In the last 15 years, more than 65,000 Irish hares have been captured from the wild and forced to participate in barbarism all because a relatively small number of people enjoy watching animals being absolutely terrorised and some want to make money through gambling on this torture. The Irish hare is a unique subspecies of mountain hare found only on the island of Ireland. We do not have many unique animals but the hare is one of them. Its cultural status was cemented for many decades on the old Irish three pence coin. It is iconic across Irish folklore where hares were often seen as spirits of the dead, leading to a taboo against eating them. We could do with renewing and broadening that ancient taboo by banning hare coursing too.

We would not be here at this step of the road, debating this today, without the tireless and Trojan work of the Irish Council Against Blood Sports, the National Animal Rights Association and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Some of their tireless activists are in the Visitors Gallery today. Countless dedicated individual activists have stuck with this day in, day out over many years. They are the best of humanity. They know what empathy is. Those who support this cruelty do not.

In the last while we have seen Elon Musk, JD Vance, and other leading figures on the US far right denouncing empathy and declaring war on empathy. Musk has claimed that "the fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy" and suggested that there is an "empathy exploit". Others are going so far as to talk about the sin of empathy. The vast majority of ordinary people will rightly think that this is bananas, and that we have plenty of empathy because empathy is a fundamental part of what makes us human.

It allows us to feel solidarity with other human beings, including people we do not know, who we have never met or do not look like us, and to empathise with animals, like the Irish

hare. Empathy is our natural reaction when we see videos of greyhounds ten times the size and weight of hares smashing into terrified hares, throwing them up into the air, pinning them to the ground and hurting them. Instinctively, we feel for the hare. All of the waffle we have heard in the debates in the media and that we will presumably hear today from the Government benches about rural pursuits is to try to cover up and suppress that instinctive human response. The Government and Sinn Féin TDs know that in their heart of hearts too. I know many of them would vote to ban this barbaric practice if they were not being whipped into voting for it to continue.

We saw with Sinn Féin a few months ago on the issue of fox hunting that TDs were whipped to vote against a ban and then shortly afterwards, thankfully, the Sinn Féin Ard-Fheis voted in favour of a ban. I suspect the same breakdown of a vote at a Sinn Féin Ard-Fheis would happen now in a ban on hare coursing. Sinn Féin members would vote in support of a ban on hare coursing. There are very few people who would support fox hunting and oppose hare coursing or *vice versa*. If that is the position, and we will see what the position is, that is not a position that would please anybody. Sinn Féin needs to stand up and make the right decision, which is to ban hare coursing here, just as it is already banned in the North. There should be no more partitionism on this. Hare coursing in this country is a legacy of British colonialism introduced here by the British Army.

To all those TDs who privately support a ban on hare coursing but will troop through the voting lobbies or, more likely, press the buttons at the seats to vote against a ban, all they really have is the coward's defence. They are just following orders. I hope that, at the very least, they will try to persuade their party leaderships that these orders go against public opinion and that a free vote should be granted. The public out there is overwhelmingly opposed to hare coursing in both rural and urban areas. There is not an urban-rural divide on this issue despite the attempts to turn it into some sort of culture war issue. In fact, the Red C opinion poll on hare coursing, which found that 77% of people were opposed to hare coursing, actually showed a slightly higher percentage of people in rural areas opposed to it than those urban areas. It was some 78% in rural compared with 76% in urban. Support for a ban in Munster, the supposed stronghold of hare coursing, was 77%, compared with 76% in Dublin.

The Minister of State should not come out and tell me that rural people are the only ones who know about coursing and that they want it to continue, when the evidence suggests that, yes, they do know about it but precisely because of that, they want it to be stopped, because they have been more personally exposed and know the realities of the horrors of this so-called sport. The truth is, the vast majority of Irish people want hare coursing banned. Only 9% in the Red C opinion poll opposed a ban, or fewer than one in ten people. It has been banned in the North for over 20 years, since 2003, on conservation grounds as well as the appalling cruelty. The Assembly then voted to make the ban permanent in 2010. The National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, NSPCA, supports a ban. The Irish Wildlife Trust supports a ban. The NSPCA is the foremost authority on animal welfare in this country and it should be listened to by the Government.

The supporters of hare coursing may prove to be a majority in this House but they are a tiny minority of the population. It speaks to how out of touch this place is with public opinion. What is happening here is the same thing that has happened with fox hunting. A well-connected minority that wants bloodsports to continue, that enjoys making animals suffer and making

money out of it, is the tail that is wagging the dog and the result is all sorts of spurious arguments that we will hear. One of those is that because coursing has gone on for a long time, it is somehow all right. The same was true of badger baiting, wild animals in circuses and fur farming, all of which have been rightly banned in this country. We do not have to accept a lazy appeal to tradition for one minute.

It is worth noting, again from that Red C poll from 2019, that over 85% of over-65s supported a ban, higher than the average support for a ban of 75%. Any notion of a generational divide rooted in tradition is complete nonsense. Just because this cruelty has gone on for a long time does not make it right. In fact, it makes it all the more outrageous because it means the scale of the suffering caused to these beautiful animals over decades is truly enormous.

Another baseless claim put out by the Irish Coursing Club and its supporters is that coursing areas have significantly higher hare populations than other areas and that this means, somehow, that coursing protects hares. The mechanism through which this causative link happens is not really explained but, somehow, capturing a load of hares from the wild, putting them into captivity and terrorising them is apparently good for hare conservation. The origin of this claim is a tiny sample of 135 hares taken in a small area of east Donegal way back in 2003, which was then compared with a sample of hares in another part of the country four years later in 2007, and then extrapolated to the whole country to say that hares are 18 times more common in coursing areas than non-coursing areas. To be blunt, this is junk science.

Coursing advocates also claim that coursing does not really hurt because the greyhounds now wear muzzles. This is also fake news. First, there is the stress of being hunted with nets, captured and put into crates and held in captivity for months. Unlike rabbits, hares are solitary animals, so being kept in confinement with multiple other hares is extremely stressful and unnatural for them. During those months, they are trained, which causes them more stress and terror. Then, you have the coursing meeting itself. Two dogs race to see which is the fastest to turn, pin or catch the hare, within which more than 4% of hares are killed. Many more are seriously injured. If they survive all of that, they are much more likely to die after being released back into the wild than hares that have not been coursed.

A study funded by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, although used by the supporters of hare coursing, followed up coursed and uncoursed hares. The bottom-line finding was that after six months, it could find only one out of 20 coursed hares alive, compared with eight out of 20 uncoursed hares. Even if you are one of those rare psychopaths like Elon Musk, who is devoid of human empathy and does not care about the suffering of other living creatures, it is possible, although perhaps unlikely, that you might still care about biodiversity and the survival of the ecosystems upon which we all depend to survive. That is unless you are Elon Musk and you are planning to head off to Mars.

For anyone concerned about biodiversity, the impact of coursing on the Irish hare population-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): Deputy, can you refrain from describing people as psychopaths, le do thoil?

Deputy Paul Murphy: Even Elon Musk?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): Even Elon Musk.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I cannot call Elon Musk a psychopath.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): You can keep saying it over and over again but I have asked you not to.

Deputy Paul Murphy: If you cannot say that, what can you say?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): I have asked you to keep in line with the Standing Orders.

Deputy Paul Murphy: Thank you. I will keep going. For anyone concerned about biodiversity, the impact of coursing on the Irish hare population should be a major concern. A National Parks and Wildlife Service study indicates an eight times lower survival rate for hares after they are released from coursing. That is a significant additional stressor on wild hare populations, which are already in decline, along with most of our other native species. Those involved in the practice of coursing and capturing the hares each year know that. Every year, they are capturing fewer and fewer hares to be terrorised. When I first introduced this Bill, I was talking about over 5,000 captured per year. Now it is over 3,000 captured per year.

One report of a coursing meeting in Roseberry, County Kildare, in December 2024 said that only two hares ran, with hare stocks low that year. Data from the Irish Coursing Club show this steep decline in the number of captured hares. Ten years ago, 5,348 hares were caught, compared with 3,124 in 2025 and 2026, a fall of 41%. Coursing was first halted in the North in 2002 because of evidence that hare populations there had declined by 25%, yet here in the South, it is allowed to continue seemingly no matter what.

Of course, there are lots of reasons hare numbers are falling. The intensification and industrialisation of agriculture has increased the use of heavy machinery that can kill and injure hares. There are also much greater numbers of dairy cattle in particular and a reduction in the natural variety of grasses for hares to eat, due to the limited varieties of grasses being sown to increase milk yields. On top of that, rabbit haemorrhagic disease, RHD, has ravaged rabbit and hare populations across Europe, with a new, more deadly strain, rabbit haemorrhagic disease variant two, RHD2, first detected in England and Wales in 2014.

6 o'clock

One would think that all of that might have prompted at least a temporary ban to protect this supposedly protected species. That is one of the ironic things about this - the law says that hares are a protected species but, in turn, it goes on to say that people can get a licence to capture and chase after them with big dogs. Of course, the gambling, coursing and greyhound industries took precedence. They will be the final nail in the coffin for many hares.

I have heard today for the first time the claim that the industry is worth €70 million annually to the Irish economy. I am intrigued about that. This may come up in the debate, but I will ask it in advance. Where does that figure come from? I looked online but could not find any source for it. The greyhound industry is usually said to be worth €120 million, and there is creative

accounting happening with that figure, too. I do not understand where this figure of €70 million comes from or what study is being referred to. I suspect there is more creative accountancy that takes no account of the damage caused to families and communities by the scourge of gambling and gambling addiction.

I point out that the Bill is explicit in allowing lure coursing, which is where there is a mechanical hare, as happens in Australia.

I will finish with two points. The first is an appeal to Members of this House to put pressure on their parties to fight for a free vote and, in any case, to vote with their conscience. They should not vote to allow this cruel practice to continue. Second, I appeal to those outside of this House, namely, the ordinary, decent people, both rural and urban, who oppose this practice. The vote will be next Wednesday. We have time to build more pressure on TDs and parties to take this opportunity to stop hare coursing.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Niall Collins): I convey the apologies of the Minister, Deputy Heydon, who is unable to attend. I am taking the debate on behalf of the Government.

I wish to clearly state at the outset that the area of animal welfare is of the utmost importance to me, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Government as a whole. Our Department devotes considerable resources to protecting the well-being of animals and dealing with breaches of animal welfare legislation. The Government remains fully committed to promoting good practices that respect the welfare of all animals.

The Government fully recognises the strong views on both sides of this debate and policy area, which have been the subject of extensive debate over the years. On behalf of the Government, I am opposing the Animal Health and Welfare (Ban on Hare Coursing) Bill 2020. I will now outline the reasons. During the passage of the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013, a detailed debate was held in this House on the issue of hare coursing. The Dáil voted overwhelmingly to allow the continuation of hare coursing in accordance with certain rules. The 2013 Act in particular states that the hare can only be coursed in a space from which it has a reasonable chance of escape. If a hare is chased in a space where it has no reasonable chance of escape, it violates section 12 of the Act and constitutes a criminal animal cruelty offence. Where a specific case of animal neglect or cruelty is identified, offences may be prosecuted under the 2013 Act. When the Act was enacted, it significantly increased the penalties. On summary conviction, this may include a class A fine of up to €5,000 and, in some instances, a class A fine and-or up to six months' imprisonment. On indictment, it may include a fine of up to €250,000 and or imprisonment up to five years.

I will now turn to the existing legislative and regulatory framework. Regulated muzzled coursing, operated chiefly by the Irish Coursing Club, exists under a significant and overlapping statutory framework that includes: the Wildlife Acts 1976 to 2018, the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013, the Wildlife (Wild Mammals) (Open Seasons) Order 2005, the Greyhound Industry Act 1958, and Irish Coursing Club rules, directives and guidance notes. Coursing licences carry 44 separate conditions overseen by the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Coursing meetings are supervised by the National Parks and Wildlife Service to ensure compliance with the 44 conditions associated with section 32 and 34 licenses issued by the Minister of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Browne. A panel of pre-

coursing inspectors, selected for hare expertise, inspects every club in advance of a meeting and issues a certificate to course only where standards are met, with hares examined by a veterinary surgeon before, during and after every meeting. A monitoring committee on coursing is in place, comprising officials from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the Irish Coursing Club and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, to monitor developments in coursing. In that regard, the situation is kept under constant review to ensure that coursing is run in a controlled manner.

Hares are legally protected under the Wildlife Act. Catching and tagging of a hare requires strict adherence to conditions. It is illegal to catch and tag hares outside of the licensed coursing and tagging season. Additionally, hares cannot be caught using unapproved nets or within restricted areas. No hare must be coursed more than once on the day. Hares that appear sick, injured or pregnant while in captivity may not be coursed.

With regard to the scientific evidence, a 2023 study commissioned by the National Parks and Wildlife Service on survival, movements, home ranges and dispersal of hares after coursing found no significant difference in observed mortality, movement patterns, home range sizes or dispersal distances between coursed and uncoursed hares released back into the wild. A separate population study found 18 times more hares in areas managed by coursing clubs than in the wider countryside, which is direct evidence that coursing clubs' habitat management has a measurably positive effect on hare populations. The current hare casualty rate at coursing meetings is below 0.5%, down from 15.8% prior to the introduction of muzzling in 1993. In the 2025-26 season, 99.38% of the 3,020 hares netted were released back into the countryside. The Irish hare is currently assessed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature, IUCN, as being “of least concern”. The most recent EU habitats directive report in 2019 found the conservation status of the species to be favourable and stable, comparing favourably with the majority of the other 68 protected species assessed.

I will comment on the economic and social contribution to rural Ireland. In 2022, an independent economic analysis estimated that coursing contributed approximately €70.7 million annually to the Irish economy, the vast majority of which directly benefited rural communities, with €37.9 million attributable to the life cycle of the coursing greyhound itself. The sector receives no State funding and is entirely self-resourced through club fundraising, membership and voluntary effort.

Coursing provides a strong social function for rural communities, particularly for older members during winter months. A ban would remove this voluntary activity and community infrastructure without replacing it. Regulated coursing under the Irish Coursing Club has continued for over 100 years, with individual rural coursing clubs operating across generations and membership often passed down through families and communities for well over a century. Coursing provides a structured introduction to animal care and responsibility for young people. Training a coursing greyhound and looking after hares exposes young people to the practical realities of animal husbandry on a consistent and daily basis.

We are opposing the Bill. We do not do government by referendum or opinion poll findings, as quoted by Deputy Murphy. We take a structured and regulated approach to this and other issues. While it is a minority pursuit, it does not mean it cannot continue. Under this Government, it will continue.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): I thank the Minister of State. I call Deputy Aird.

Deputy William Aird: I have listened with interest to the debate. I hear exactly what is being said but I stand here as a person who has a great interest in the hare. The hare has been a part of our heritage since long back, as both speakers said. The hare was on the old threepence coin. It can be seen in many pictures in many places throughout the island of Ireland. As a person who farms and likes land, and loves all kinds of animals in the wild, what I have observed with the hare is illegal hunting by people who have no concern for its preservation and are using new devices. A debate like today's is one-sided against people - the only ones out there besides conscientious people - and I take umbrage when farmers are mentioned as sowing grass seed which is affecting the hare population. That is totally untrue. The eating of grass does not affect the hare and I can be a witness to that; I have seen it. With my leisurely pursuits whenever I get the time I love to be in the countryside. We fail to mention the natural habitats which are there for the hare, such as bogs where hares really thrive.

Many is the time I stood to watch the hare. It is a beautiful animal to see running. There is nothing I see with the hare more than the pleasure of a hare when it sees a dog when people are out walking. If the dog pursues it, any owner who is ever in the countryside will see it has a natural route out of its habitat and what it will do is take the animal pursuing it - it does not have to be a dog, it could be a fox - around the place and exhaust it. The hare goes out to its natural footpath and then it will stand up on its hind legs and look back, as if to say "I have you finished", and off it will go. The animal pursuing it could be lying flat on the ground exhausted. I have seen that numerous times. The Deputy is laughing but I would like to know how many times he has been in the rural parts of Ireland - his rural pursuits - watching this.

If it was not for the people looking after the hares there would be far fewer of them because of the illegal netting going on. They illegally pursue with specially-bred dogs which have speed and follow hares, sometimes under the cover of darkness. I have seen it. I have witnessed it. These are not people who look after the hare, who go out and make sure when nobody else is interested that illegal hunting is not taking place and report it to the gardaí when they do see it. Only recently there was a big article in the paper stating that fines are only €250. What deterrent is that for anybody who is going out intentionally to kill a beautiful animal like a hare?

I would like the people putting this Bill forward to look at this issue. There is a preserved bird called the buzzard. I personally have nothing against the buzzard. It is lovely. For people who might not know it, it spreads its wings and you can hear it calling. However, I have witnessed on at least ten occasions the buzzard dropping down and picking up a little leveret, which is a young, small hare. It is able to catch it with its eyesight. No-one else could. A person could be walking beside a leveret and it will not move but the buzzard is able to catch it. It will swoop to the ground. I have seen it, it is awful. It picks the little leveret up, goes up like a rocket, and drops it. When the leveret goes down it is either stunned or dead. This happens in a couple of seconds. The buzzard picks it up and it is gone. I do not want to see that but I have seen it a few times. I would like those involved - and they do great work, those who list birds and animals which cannot be hunted so they do not become extinct - to look at the buzzard. While we want to preserve it and I want to preserve it - I do not know enough

about the buzzard - it is wreaking havoc in the countryside on the small, young hare. That is all I can say.

I have no problem saying I acknowledge the work those clubs do in preserving and watching the hare. They are watching because they know they are looking at an animal that is in this country for as long as we have existed. There are fewer of them, but why? I would like an answer. We can see that less than 1% is due to what is happening in the debate being presented here today. I ask somebody to please look into the overall picture and find out the real reason our hare population is going down. I acknowledge that is happening and I support all the studies which go into it. We find ourselves seeing fewer and fewer of the curlew, corncrake, and all of the other birds which at one time we saw frequently. We come along and ask if it is because we are building houses in rural areas. I saw a debate one night about that. It has nothing to do with that. We need to go back and see what the root problem is when animals like that go extinct. If we are going to have a debate we should not have one where the issue is being blamed on one particular set of people who, in my opinion, are looking after the hare. We should look at the wider picture and then come back to a debate when there is proof.

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank Deputy Murphy for bringing this Bill forward. It is important that we have a debate on these issues. It is an issue that needs further scrutiny and we need to look into it, but from a Sinn Féin perspective, we will not be supporting the proposal. While we recognise that there are of course always issues when it comes to sports of this nature where there can be abuse and animals can be the victims of cruelty and we need to ensure that does not happen, hare coursing is highly regulated. We recognise that as well. Those regulations are well-adhered to and people look after the animals very well.

On keeping greyhounds, people mentioned it is not an urban-rural issue, and it certainly is not. There are many people in urban Ireland who keep greyhounds and have a huge interest in this area as well, but this is specifically about the coursing of the hare. I hear stories of hare coursing in my community going back many years where people have had an interest in this particular pursuit or whatever people want to call it. I do not particularly have an interest in it but there are many who do and are very aware that one has to be very careful to ensure the animal is not hurt on either side, whether it be the greyhounds or other dogs involved, or the hare.

We also recognise - this is a big part of it for me - that when we ban something like this or have a situation where we try and stamp it out completely, it goes underground and would continue in a way that was not regulated with no vets involved and no assurance that there would be any sense of making provisions so that cruelty could not happen. Hares, when caught, might not be treated and released properly. These things would not come under regulation. That is one of the fears I have. In other jurisdictions where there are bans in place, there are huge problems with underground and illegal hunting and coursing. That is a big issue we also need to bear in mind.

That said, the Minister of State mentioned it was 2013 when there was previously a substantive debate on this issue. It is time for the Minister and the Department to look at having a commission to look at this issue and examine how effective these regulations are, how well they are working, and whether there are issues which need to be dealt with, if improvements can be made, and if so, whether recommendations can be made.

In the context of the debate we are having here, while I absolutely understand where this particular Bill is coming from, it is not appropriate at this point to do that without having a proper examination of the situation. The big danger is that if we ban something, we will drive it underground and make the situation far worse, both for the animals concerned, namely, the hares, but also for the greyhound industry as well. That would be a detrimental thing to happen. From that perspective we will not be supporting the Bill but we will encourage the Minister to consider putting a commission in place to examine it and have the relevant expertise in place to ensure that we can perhaps make changes to the regulations if necessary. I do not know whether they are necessary or not.

I take on board that the issues that have been brought forward by Deputy Murphy and others need to be listened to. If there are people out there who have strong voices and opinions in this regard, we need to listen to them. I am sure also that on the other side of it we will have people who are engaged in these particular activities who will have equally strong views as to how well the regulations are working. It is probably time that we looked at having some kind of proper independent examination of how this is working, or not working, as the case may be. If changes or some level of improved regulations need to be put in place they should be considered. A ban is not the way forward to deal with this situation.

In many of these situations, these things fade away in many areas. In some rural areas they were a big pursuit 30 years or 40 years ago and they are not any more. They still are in some areas of the country and in those areas we need to examine it and ensure that we have adequate regulations in place and that they are adhered to and properly enforced. We all have a responsibility to ensure that animal cruelty does not happen. At the same time, we also have a responsibility to ensure that we do not create situations that make animal cruelty worse. Bringing in a blanket ban of that nature could give rise to such a danger. That is why I would encourage the Minister of State to consider speaking to the senior Minister in respect of it, and that we would look at having a commission in place to examine this and to report back and to see if recommendations are required.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Some 77% of Irish people favour a ban on hare coursing. The reason they want to see a ban on hare coursing is, simply put, that it is cruel. It is completely unnatural to pull a wild animal from their environment, to cage it for weeks and put it out in front of a greyhound and essentially let it run for its life. To do that and to call it a sport is probably one of the things that I have most difficulty with. We need to have a conversation about it. I have been listening to the debate. We need to have a conversation about natural, ecological processes in this House versus human intervention and using wild animals and being cruel to them for entertainment. The reason we have buzzards hunting hares is because they are meant to. They are part of the system. They are part of the food web. The buzzard plays an equally important role in that food web as the hare plays. We do not want, if at all possible, to interrupt that process. What is not part of the natural ecological process is for humans to go out and pluck these hares, which are solitary beings, and to cage them with a number of other hares in a completely unnatural environment and then to stress them by getting them chased by dogs and have them fear for their lives.

Earlier on it sounded like Government TDs were saying that the hare actually enjoys this; this is what they were built for; they love it; they really enjoy going out onto the course and trying to avoid the dog. That is just a ridiculous concept. Of course they do not enjoy being

chased and fearing that they are going to be eaten. In this House we need to really start thinking about what should happen naturally and what should not happen; what we accept as a country and what we are going to stand up and say we do not accept. We do not accept a situation where, for the entertainment of a very small minority of the population, we are going to allow this cruel activity to happen. It is unnatural and it is unnecessary. The sport can continue if we put in an alternative, such as the lure. If people want the greyhound industry to keep operating and people to be able to go down and enjoy seeing greyhounds chase something, let it chase the lure. Why does it need to be a live animal? How can anyone possibly get pleasure or entertainment from that?

I had a quick look at the Facebook page of the Minister of State, Deputy Collins. I really appreciate that he was sharing posts about protecting our dogs in this heat and making sure they have enough water. Would he be happy if his family puppy or cat were being chased around by greyhounds so that other people could bet on them? These are living creatures. The Minister of State is laughing at me now.

Deputy Niall Collins: I am not.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: That is ultimately what it is about. As Deputy Paul Murphy said earlier-----

Deputy Niall Collins: That is a nonsense comparison.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Why is it a nonsense comparison?

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Just stay quiet and listen.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Why is it a nonsense comparison?

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): The Minister of State should allow the speaker to continue. There is no space for back and forth here. He should please allow the speaker to continue without interruption.

Deputy Niall Collins: Through the Chair, it is a nonsense comparison.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: This is what it comes down to - it comes down to empathy, as Deputy Murphy said earlier. It comes down to whether we can look at a wild creature and feel that we should not torture it or inflict any level of pain or stress where we can avoid it. I am not talking about hunting for food purposes or any of that. I am talking about hunting for sport. For creatures like the hare, I just do not understand how anyone can be happy that their entertainment is worth more than putting a creature like that through a level of pain. I do not think it is a ridiculous argument to compare it to a domestic animal. I really do not.

Deputy Niall Collins: Well I do.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I know the Minister of State does.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): The Deputy should be allowed to speak without interruption.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: What it all comes down to is a level of empathy and what we consider to be acceptable in society and what we do not.

I also want to respond to the argument about driving it underground if we do not allow it to continue. It is incredible, but in no other circumstances do we hear the argument that something is wrong but we are going to allow it to continue because if we do not, criminals will continue it any way. That is essentially what Deputy Kenny is saying. That makes absolutely no sense. If it is wrong, we deal with it; we ban it. We do not say we are not going to ban it because then we are just going to force it all underground.

I completely agree with Deputy Aird. Illegal hunting is awful. Yes, we absolutely should deal with it, but let us deal with it. We do not say we are going to allow this to happen but this is awful activity on this side because it is illegal, while the legal activity is okay, because it is not. It is all cruel. He seems to enjoy his environment and appreciates looking at it but what is missing is the piece where he can connect with what an animal is feeling and whether we are inflicting pain or terror on the animal. As a nation I wish that we would start to put our principles at the forefront of what we do and ensure that we just do not tolerate any cruelty. That is what the public want. That is what voters want. I can never understand how issues like this, the fox-hunting Bill or the legislation on puppy farms get the support of the Government. It is not a rural-urban thing. There is a very small minority of people in this country who want those kinds of activities to be going on

For some reason, the Government has their back and continues to fight for that small minority, when governments all over the world are recognising that this is not something that modern society should be involved in. The Government and, unfortunately, Sinn Féin in opposition are also supporting it. I honestly do not know who is in the Government's ear or how their lobbying is so strong that it continues to defend the indefensible when it comes to animal cruelty. I really hope that over the next week every person out there, the 77% of the population of the Republic who oppose this, writes to their TDs and expresses their voice on this. What we need is for that voice to be heard in this Chamber, and not the voices of the very small minority of people who are making money from this or gaining whatever benefit they gain - I do not understand it - and that it is not those people dictating what happens in this Chamber and dictating our legislation. The majority of people want to see reforms in this area and want a Government that has empathy and will not tolerate animal cruelty. I hope that those people make their voices heard and that the Government listens.

I know there are some TDs in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael who do not agree with hare coursing and I ask that they be given an opportunity to express their opinion, to represent their constituents and their values. It would be very unfair to expect someone to vote against this Bill when it goes against every grain of integrity or every principle they have when it comes to animal cruelty.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: Is as an gcathair dom. Tá sé sin soiléir. Tráth dá raibh, áfach, bhí giorriacha in Dollymount Beach. When we look back at the hare and how it has evolved on our island since the Ice Age, with the retreat of the ice caps, giorria, fia, the small deer, it is intrinsically linked to our culture. The hare featured on our old currency. It is a beautiful animal but, sadly, there has not been any on Dollymount Beach in my constituency since 2017 or 2018, due to illegal lamping and the illegal use of vicious dogs. The two golf clubs on the island loved the hares, as opposed to the rabbits, because they did not burrow on the golf courses.

I thank Deputy Paul Murphy. I fundamentally disagree with him a lot of the time but I do agree with him on this issue. I welcome the fact that he mentioned an Independent TD. It is good to see that he thinks some of them are good. Tony Gregory was a proud Dubliner, a man who raised this issue back before there was lobbying and an online world, and before the survey was done showing 77% oppose coursing. He also understood the power of being inside the tent, so I recommend that. He was also sadly defeated when he brought this issue up. Some 33 years on, we are still here. I thank Deputy Murphy for raising it, too. We hear Deputies from across the House say we should allow Teachtaí Dála to express their opinion on this matter, this barbaric killing of one of our beautiful native species. Thousands of wild hares are netted, I believe. Am I correct in saying it is 65,000?

Deputy Paul Murphy: Yes.

Deputy Barry Heneghan: They are crowded together, bringing and spreading disease at a higher rate than they would naturally in the wild. They suffer broken legs and dislocated hips - some of the footage I have seen is quite gut-turning, to be honest. I am a man who has always loved my animals, from growing up. I cannot imagine that being done to one of my pets. This practice is cruelty with a licence.

The species, the Irish hare, is one of the few mammals that is uniquely our own, as well as the red squirrel and other native species. It is woven into our culture. I would love to see the Irish hare back in the places in my constituency that it never should have disappeared from. It actually was reintroduced. I only found this out recently. It was reintroduced to Bull Island but, sadly, it was brought out again by illegal lamping. There is a real opportunity for that reintroduction to happen. For us in the constituency of Dublin Bay North to get out to Dollymount Beach, is tearmann agus éalú í ón saol gnóthach. Bíonn muid i gcónaí ag breathnú ar ár gcuid scáileán ar líne. Nuair a théann daoine amach chuig áit mar sin, áfach, feicfidh siad giorriacha, sionnaigh agus na hainmhithe nádúrtha ar fad. It is something that can get people out of their heads. I will continue to work with the Government to have the Irish hare reintroduced in my constituency. I spoke to my granny before she passed about being a young girl from the area, going down collecting bottles. That was back before we got rid of the bottle deposit scheme, although I know it is back now. She was collecting bottles with her family, and there were thousands of hares. There is not one now. It is very sad, and this is a UNESCO heritage site.

I thank Deputy Paul Murphy for introducing this Bill, which I support. I am committed to the programme for Government and to financial matters but this is something that I fundamentally believe is wrong. None of this happens on its own. I thank all the campaigners, the National Animal Rights Association, the Irish Council Against Blood Sports and the ISPCA

for everything they do. I thank the National Parks and Wildlife Service, everyone who has met and spoken to me, year after year and decade after decade, about a cause that should not have to be argued at all.

In other European countries and in Australia we can see how people are changing their outdated laws. We need to protect our wildlife. I urge everyone, at home and in this House, to look at what once was and what we can still protect. We still have a lot of the great species on Dollymount but I look forward to bringing the Irish hare back. This barbaric practice is out of step with all of the EU countries and it is well past time it was ended.

Deputy Jen Cummins: I thank Deputy Murphy for bringing this Bill forward. It is so important. Hare coursing is called a blood sport. That is where we should start. In what world is that acceptable, a blood sport? Think of what that actually means. What previous contributors have said has really landed with me today. We need to look at anything that is called a blood sport and realise that maybe in 2026, we are a little bit outdated.

We are constantly talking about improving the lives of animals in this country. I am a city TD, as everybody knows. However, I have very firm roots in the countryside. I have explained before my love of tractors and the countryside. I miss the time I spent as a child in the countryside. I caution that this should never be a divide. A conversation about this cannot be divided between city and country. We are all people. It is not a judgment on country by city or *vice versa*. We need to work together. In other countries where this used to happen, it has been banned. That is why we need to look at it now. Things evolve and it is an evolution of that. We cannot stay static just because it is tradition. I do not like that divide between city and country because it creates division, which is not helpful.

As previous speakers have said, hares are recognised in Irish law as a protected wild species. It is beyond me as to why we would have a protected species and then round them up, keep them in captivity and put them out to be chased by dogs. It does not make any sense. We would not accept that for a horse, our pet or anything else, to round up something that is protected and then use this as a way of entertaining people.

I was struck by the Minister of State's comment that things had changed and evolved in the Act of 2013. I think 13 years on we might change, evolve and move to banning it altogether. We have a biodiversity crisis. Native species like hares are vital to the continuation of biodiversity.

We have to look at the climate crisis that we are in at the moment and see what we are doing to preserve our future. People might say that it is only a hare. This is a balance. It is a very fine line. Deputy Aird spoke so well about how there is that line of animals, where they fit in and how it is the natural part. As Deputy Whitmore said, when we come as humans and interrupt that balance, that is where the problem is.

As others have said, a free vote is important on this issue. The reason for that is people need to vote with their conscience on this. I am sure others are getting emails about hare coursing and asking us to support Deputy Murphy's Bill. I ask that each party has a free vote and that we are able to vote with our conscience. I ask Deputies to think about it deeply. What does this mean? If we are not protecting an animal, which is a protected species, what does that say to us? If we were explaining this to a young child, how would we explain that? If we cannot

explain laws in simple English like that to a child and it does not make sense, then it is not making sense and it needs to move on. If we were explaining to a young child that hares are protected but we are going to let them be captured, and we then run them around and get a dog to chase after them, but then hopefully they will know how to get out and off they go, and thank God the dogs have the muzzle because then the hares will not be mauled to death because we have evolved from 2013 and evolved to moving that on, that child would look at us and say, "What? That makes no sense." Again, when we are looking at how we treat things that are more vulnerable than us, we need to be able to stand over that. There is no standing over that.

I do not wish to use all my time because I am probably saying stuff that other Deputies have said. I am conscious that it is a Thursday evening and people are busy. Ireland needs to show a little bit of leadership in animal welfare. I am sure that other Bills are going to come forward in the next little while about many different animals. This is something that other countries have banned. It used to happen in Australia. New Zealand, India, England, Scotland, Wales and the US used to all have hare coursing and they do not now. We should not have it either. We should follow the example of people who have evolved. We should move towards that. I would be concerned about it going underground and the illegal coursing that might happen but then let us make sure we have enforcement, and the gardaí making sure they are doing it and all the agencies are put there to make sure that it does not happen. If it is illegal it is illegal, but that does not mean we should not go after those people who are doing those illegal things. That is not a reason not to move on from 2013 to now in 2026 to banning hare coursing.

Deputy Ruth Coppinger: Enclosed hare coursing, like we have in Ireland, was banned in Britain in 1914. It was deemed unsporting. It is so contrived and unnatural. Those were the words that were used by the coursing clubs that agreed with it being banned. Ireland is becoming a complete and utter outlier on animal rights. I am embarrassed at some of the things that I am about to talk about here. If anybody is listening from any other country, it is the idea that some of these practices are continuing in 2026. We have seen other countries banning greyhound racing, such as Wales, Scotland and New Zealand. This is way worse. We had a debate on fox-hunting here a few months ago. In many ways, this is worse because it is taking a wild animal, capturing it, putting it in cages for weeks on end, making it do something completely unnatural and then it is allowing greyhounds in to chase after it in a very enclosed space, although I know there are escapes. I noticed that the Minister of State kept using the word "muzzled" in his answer. The hare does not know that the greyhound is muzzled. It does not make any difference. They are running for their lives in terror. They can still have damage done to them, including injuries and so on. The fact that the hare is protected but licences are given to capture it and treat it in this way is beyond belief.

In 2019, a poll was done showing that 77% wanted a ban on hare coursing. The Minister of State said that we do not run the country by poll, apparently. I am in favour of minority rights, but the point of these polls is to show how unpopular these practices are and how out of touch this Government is in maintaining them. They are backward, medieval and barbaric. That is why people do not agree with them. Unlike foxes hares are protected, yet we are allowing them to be licensed to be captured. The Minister grants these licences to specific clubs; I understand there are 89. The NSPCA is the national body - a very respected authoritative body - in relation to animal welfare. This is what it had to say about hare coursing:

it is a "cruel, outdated, and barbaric practice, which is currently permitted to satisfy just a small minority of Irish people." That is an official animal welfare organisation.

Hares can be held for 12 weeks before being released to be chased by dogs. They are not on their own but are in with many other animals, which is against their nature. The NSPCA is supporting this Bill and asking TDs to be allowed to vote for this Bill. It is asking for a free vote. The Minister of State mentioned a couple of things. He said that it was so well-regulated and inspected that there was no difference in the outcome for coursed and uncoursed hares. I have a summary of the study that he referred to. There were 40 hares that were GPS tracked and, across all cohorts, nine out of 40 animals were confirmed alive at six months and three confirmed dead. The remaining 28, or 70%, were lost to the study. Their fate was never determined. In other words, we cannot have a credible study with this lost 70%. The assumption by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, is that they survived and went on their merry way. It is like saying that cancer patients could not be found and, therefore, they are all still alive. It just does not make any sense. On the outcome for coursed and uncoursed hares, one of the 20 coursed hares could be relocated alive six months after release compared with eight of 20 of uncoursed controlled hares. There was a massive difference in the outcome.

I emphasise that this is cruel to dogs as well. It is linked with the greyhound industry. Often, dogs only last one or two seasons. The Minister of State is particularly affiliated and has a liking for this industry, but that is the reality. Greyhounds live a very short amount of time if they are raced in this way.

I will mention the financial aspect. We are hearing incredible claims about millions being made from this. The Minister of State said there was a study in 2022, but he did not give any source. Maybe the Minister of State can give us the source for that. Unless he is talking about illegal gambling or something, there is no verification of €70 million anywhere. It is true that all these blood sports are linked with gambling, which is something that we should be striving to eliminate completely in society and certainly not be encouraging. The damage that it does is untold. That is the only way in which it is being maintained. The Minister of State also said that it does not get any State funding. However, according to figures that I have seen, Greyhound Racing Ireland gives money to these coursing clubs. A total of €500,000 was given to the clubs between 2017 to 2022, which came largely from the Government funding that is voted in this Dáil every year.

I will move on to the political aspect of this. We are calling for a free vote. Free votes have been given in the Dáil when it comes to women's bodies and women's health.

If you like, they are given to things that are demonised. This should be demonised and I think there should be a free vote. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael have for far too long stood over these really bad animal rights practices. I cannot believe Sinn Féin is coming back again with exactly the same arguments recycled from a few months ago in relation to fox hunting. They are probably word for word: regulated, set up a commission, etc. This is completely out of touch with the population and its base. Sinn Féin had a debate on fox hunting and this is exactly the same. It is a blood sport and I do not understand how anyone would stand over it. It does not augur well for what Sinn Féin would do in government if it is not willing to move on these issues in opposition.

In relation to some of the arguments made by Deputy Aird, I live in a place called Buzzardstown. A buzzard is a bird of prey. The Deputy stood over there telling us what a bird of prey does and I do not know what the linkage was with this issue. As has been said by other Deputies, it is constantly recited in here and happened with fox hunting, that when a fox does something that is completely natural to a fox, therefore foxes are bad. There is no justification for what was cited by the Deputy.

I reiterate that this argument that it is regulated and there are more hares in areas where there is coursing and therefore we should keep hare coursing as to ban it would drive it underground is not an argument against changing a law to outlaw something. According to the Minister of State, there are loads of inspectors right now going around the coursing clubs, so those inspectors could look after the illegal, underground coursing. The reality is that a study done by *The Journal* found there were 200 coursing events and four inspectors between 2019 and 2024, so there is very little inspection taking place.

I will finish by asking whether the Minister of State is in favour of cockfighting because, to me, it is exactly the same. It is unleashing two animals for one to damage the other for the entertainment of human beings. It is absolutely embarrassing that anybody would stand up in a parliament in this day and age and justify it but that seems to be what the Minister of State is doing. He spoke about nonsense arguments. I do not see any difference between a domestic pet and a wild animal. They all deserve to be protected. I do not see any difference at all; I do not think they should be treated differently. Maybe that is where we differ in that some animals are more important than others. There is this argument we should treat wild animals in a certain way and capture them for our entertainment. We have to lose these notions and actually decide that animals have their own integral rights to be on the planet without being used for our entertainment.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: I am happy and pleased to support Deputy Murphy's Bill today on behalf of the Green Party. This is probably the fourth substantive debate we have had on animal welfare related issues during the term of this Dáil. We are discussing hare coursing today. We discussed fox hunting, puppy farms and greyhound racing. I recognise the work of those Deputies who have brought these issues forward as Private Members' Bills or motions. I welcome the focus during the term of the Dáil on these issues. It is indicative of the fact that people have moved past where the bigger parties are on issues of animal welfare.

Unfortunately, for progress to be made and for laws to be changed, we need a majority across this House. In 2020, I was part of programme for Government negotiations on a wide range of issues. I remember being in the room when we debated issues of animal welfare and our party was not able to change the minds of the two other coalition parties at that time. We know from the speeches given today already, that when a vote is taken on Deputy Murphy's Bill, there is not a majority right now for this change and there is not a majority for some of the other changes that have been debated. It will be interesting when the Government's Bill on puppy farms comes forward. I welcome the fact the Government is advancing legislation on that but it is not strong enough and I hope we will be able to see the Government listen and be willing to make amendments to improve that legislation.

The challenge here is that the larger parties in this House are not where the people are at. I welcome the recent decision of the membership of Sinn Féin to change party policy in respect

of fox hunting. Muzzling of coursing greyhounds was introduced in 1993. It was brought in for the coursing meets themselves. It is not done for training, of course - there is no law around that - but I do not believe the introduction of muzzling justifies this blood sport. I do not believe you can muzzle cruelty. While the coursing itself may no longer result in a live hare being torn apart, we still have to consider the trauma a hare experiences in terms of its capture, a wild animal being held in captivity for a period of time, the trauma of release from captivity if it survives the coursing meet, but most significantly the trauma that comes from violent exposure to two far larger animals, even if they are muzzled, and all of the risks that creates. We know the Irish hare faces a variety of threats. It faces threats from hunting, probably most significantly from the destruction of a large amount of its habitat, from infectious diseases such as rabbit haemorrhagic disease and European brown hare syndrome, and it faces competition from other species as well.

The Minister of State made a point about the risk, if Deputy Murphy's Bill is passed, that hare coursing will be driven underground.

Deputy Niall Collins: I did not say that.

Deputy Roderic O'Gorman: Apologies. I know the point has been made about the risk of hare coursing being driven underground. First, it is important to recognise that illegal hare coursing already takes place underground. It is probably the biggest cause of mortality among hares right now. I do not believe the existence, and continued existence, of an illegal practice justifies the continued State support for a practice that is currently legal. While it is important the State takes those steps to deal with illegal coursing as it happens at the moment, I do not believe that should be linked to the continuance of hare coursing in legal meets.

I see hare coursing as an issue that is interconnected with the wider issue of the greyhound industry in this country. I have a real concern, from responses to multiple sets of parliamentary questions I have submitted to the Department and the greyhound racing board, about what the traceability system that has been put in place is actually showing us. It is worthwhile to talk about one year, 2021, when 11,600 greyhounds were born. Of those, only 450 are still actively racing, five years later. Of the rest, 1,500 have been rehomed, something I welcome, but 3,300 of those dogs born in 2021 are dead. These are dogs that did not get past their fifth birthdays. A further 5,300 have been exported to countries where we have no control over the animal welfare standards they face. Those dogs may have been re-exported subsequently as well. The State provides significant funding to this industry - €20 million of taxpayer's money every year. It is my view that funding should not be provided any more. I know in the previous Dáil, my colleague, former Deputy Neasa Hourigan, brought forward Private Members' legislation to decouple the funding of greyhound racing from the funding of the wider equine industry.

Ultimately, the point we will be voting on is the specific issue of hare coursing. I and my party do not believe the trauma caused by this practice, even in the muzzled context, is justified. I think Ireland should adopt the change, the evolution in thinking on this matter, that has been seen in many other countries.

7 o'clock

The introduction of the muzzle in 1993 was a reflection of the fact that the Irish people no longer believed it was morally justifiable for a live hare to be torn apart at the end of a coursing. In terms of their opposition, the Irish people's views on hare coursing have changed, evolved and have become more trenchant. The vote on this matter will demonstrate a House that is out of step with where the Irish people stand. Unfortunately, Deputy Murphy's Bill will not pass Second Stage, but I do think this matter will come before the House again. We have not seen the end of it.

Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Niall Collins): I absolutely respect everybody's opinion in relation to this or any other issue. People are perfectly entitled to take a position on this or any other issue, to articulate that position and to exercise their mandate to debate in these Houses, as am I doing as both a constituency TD and a Minister of State at the Department of agriculture. It is wrong, however, to try to misrepresent what I have said and the factual position in relation to how highly regulated the activity of coursing is. There was not one iota of acknowledgement on the part of any Opposition speaker in relation to the fact that there are 44 conditions attached to the licences that are issued to coursing clubs. There is a robust and thorough inspection regime before, during and after coursing events take place. Again, that was rubbished. There was also an attempt to demonise people who are involved in coursing and those who have a view in support of coursing. That is very regrettable. Yes, it is a minority pursuit. The fact that an opinion poll shows a particular point of view among people does not mean that the Government has to follow a course of action based on that view. As stated earlier, if were to follow the utterances of some people on the Irish political stage, everything would be the subject of a referendum. We would be having referendums on the triple lock and the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement. We would be having referendums every day of the week. People would probably want a referendum on this issue also.

I have set out quite clearly why we are happy to support hare coursing. I know a lot of people who oppose it, and I respect their point of view. I do not have an issue with their point of view. Equally, I know a lot of people who are very involved in, supportive of and invested in coursing. I do not mean they are invested in a financial way. Again, there is an attempt to try to demonise people who are involved. I regret that, because they are very decent people. I know people right across my constituency and the entire country who are involved in coursing clubs. Coursing is an activity they engage in. It is very important to put on the record again that for people who are involved in coursing, animal welfare is their top priority. The supporters of this Bill to bring about a ban on hare coursing seek to try to dismiss that and to rubbish it. All I can say is that they are wrong. The people involved in coursing have to ensure that the highest standards of animal welfare apply to the greyhounds involved and that the hares associated with coursing are the subject of the highest standards of animal welfare. The latter is the case, particularly in the context of the input from the National Parks and Wildlife Service, its wildlife officers and the veterinary people who are associated with the regulation and inspection of coursing.

I reiterate what I said at the outset. We are opposing the Bill. We do not do government by referendum, by opinion poll findings or by any such approach. We are taking a structured approach and a regulated approach to this matter. It is fair to say that coursing has evolved over the years. It has done so in a highly regulated and structured environment. It has moved

with the times. While coursing is a minority pursuit, that does not mean that the Government cannot continue to support it. We are absolutely continuing to support it. Under this Government, there will not be any change in relation to that approach. There will not be a free vote either.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I thank all the Deputies who participated in the debate. I will start on the point about hare coursing being highly regulated, and that we do not give that more credit to that and to the idea that animal welfare is a top priority. Let us consider what hare coursing is in essence. You can regulate it all you like - and we are in favour of more regulation - but the essence of it involves going into the wild and capturing hares who are out there living their lives. They might sometimes be brutally short lives because of nature, which is fine, but they are out there living them. You go out, you make a lot of noise, you capture them in nets and you terrify them. You put them in little crates and then you put them in enclosures with a bunch of other hares. Then you allow dogs to chase after them. Some are injured and some are killed as a consequence. That is what hare coursing is. Unless you regulate the hares out of hare coursing, which is what our Bill proposes to do, then I do not see how the Minister of State can claim that animal welfare is a top priority. The Minister of State can make the case that he is concerned about animal welfare. If animal welfare really was a top priority, however, people would not be capturing hares from the wild and allowing dogs to run after them. Let us get real about what sort of regulation we are talking about and what hare coursing involves.

I want to emphasise a point. I do not know if Deputy Aird really intended to suggest that the hares enjoy it, but that is what it sounded like. Obviously, they do not enjoy it. They are not running for the craic. They are running because they think these dogs are going to kill them. They do not volunteer to be captured. They try to get away. That is why nets have to be used to catch them. They are not happy to stay there. That is why they have to be in enclosures. It is very clear that if we could ask a hare about this, it would say "No. I really would prefer if you do not engage in setting dogs on me".

This brings me to the point about nature being brutal and so on, which it often is, but the difference is that humanity has evolved. We are highly evolved. We have evolved to the point of having empathy with each other, and, hopefully, with other living creatures. That is why, on a philosophical level - and I recognise that there are people with different, genuinely held opinions - it is fundamentally cruel and wrong for us to put animals through difficult, damaging and sometimes deadly situations purely for our own entertainment. I believe this to be the view that is held by the majority of people in this country. That is why, philosophically, there is something fundamentally different with regard to engaging in and supporting the continuation of hare coursing and a hare being killed in the wild.

It was also pointed out that you have to be very careful to make sure that the dogs and hares are not hurt. It was good that people referred to dogs being hurt, but hares are also hurt. One can go through the reports from the National Parks and Wildlife Service, and we can see how many letters I received just in respect of last season. I will go from A to Z. In Abbeydorney, four hares were hit by dogs and one was pinned to the ground. In Abbeyfeale, seven hares were hit and three were pinned. One of the pinned hares was not examined for injuries until the following day. In Ardpatrick and Kilfinnane, three hares were hit. A few days before the event there, individuals entered the hare park in an attempt to steal hares. In Balbriggan, at least one hare was hit and pinned to the ground. In Ballyduff, one hare was pinned to the

ground and was examined for injuries. In Ballyheigue, four hares were caught and pinned to the ground by dogs. In Borrisoleigh, three hares suffered hits and three were pinned. One hare was found dead. In Cappoquin, six hares were hit by dogs and two were pinned. One hare died from its injuries.

In Cashel, a hare suffered bruising after being pinned to the ground by a dog. In Castleisland and Millstreet, two hares were hit by dogs, and another hare was pinned with such force that an ear tag came off. In Cavan, Dungannon and Westport, five hares were hit and one was mauled into the ground. The hare that was mauled was found to have a graze on its back. In Charleville and Mallow, three hares were caught by dogs and pinned to the ground. The reality inherent in hare coursing is injuries to hares and some hares getting killed.

I want to address the rural-urban divide. The Government does not have to rule by opinion poll and it does not have to go with what every opinion poll says, but we have an opinion poll says quite definitively that there is not an urban-rural divide on this issue. It says that people in rural areas are more opposed to hare coursing than people in urban areas. What is this all about suggesting that this is coming from a bunch of city slickers who do not what it is like to be in the countryside where a tiny minority of people engage in hare coursing? It is an attempt to defend the indefensible by creating a culture war barrier by saying that what is really going on is an attack on rural life.

The vast majority of people in Dublin are not as separated from rural life as the Minister of State might think. Neither of my parents was born in Dublin. They came to Dublin and then they had children. I am a first-generation Dub. I spent plenty of time on farms in my childhood. I have plenty of connections to my cousins who continue to live in rural Ireland. Ireland is a small place. We are not so distant from each other.

A related point is that unless someone has been to hare coursing, he or she does not really have a right to have an opinion about it. If we think about that logically, we do not apply that to other things in the world. We can know a lot about hare coursing by reading about it and watching videos of what happens on YouTube. People do not have to go and see it. I made this point on the radio earlier. I am opposed on principle to the death penalty. I have never watched an execution take place, but I know that humans killing other people with the death penalty is wrong. It is correct for people to not go to hare coursing because they do not agree with what goes on there and still have a right to have an opinion on it, including putting forward legislation to ban it.

In relation to the arguments raised by Sinn Féin, the main argument seemed to be that it would drive it underground. That is interesting because it seems to accept that this is a bad thing and something that should not be happening, but that there could be more of it if it was driven underground. There is illegal hare coursing in Britain, but there is much less illegal hare coursing than there was legal coursing before, so we have some evidence of what happened. It seems unlikely that by criminalising something, we are going to create more of it. The point was also made that it would be a question of enforcement. As Deputy Coppinger pointed out, there was the call for a study and so on. The irony is that everybody knows that if there is a Sinn Féin Ard-Fheis in a few months and there is a vote on hare coursing, as there hopefully will be, and it changes its position and it supports a ban on hare coursing, all of the calls for this new independent study and so on will quickly be forgotten and its members will vote the correct way, if that happens, because the membership will push them to do it. It is really about

finding justifications for not going in line with the party's membership, assuming that the vote on fox hunting and hare coursing would be very similar and not in line with the majority of Sinn Féin's voters and people who are looking to the left and who want a society based on human empathy and decency, which includes animal rights.

I want to quickly address a few of the arguments that the Minister of State made. In terms of the 2023 study from the NPWS, Deputy Coppinger demolished the argument that it any way suggests that hare coursing is positive for hare populations. The reality is that only one of the coursed hares was found alive. A reference was also made to the study in Donegal from 2003, which was based on a tiny population group.

I want to finish with a question for the Minister of State. The 2022 independent economic analysis that found that coursing benefits the economy by €70.7 million. I cannot find reference to it anywhere. There have been plenty of debates in the Dáil about hare coursing between 2022 and now and lots of parliamentary questions have been asked about what the economic benefit of hare coursing is. No one has ever referenced this study before. I heard it today from Deputy Peter "Chap" Cleere. It is obviously part of a speaking note and a briefing. I would like to see this study. I have Googled it, and I cannot find it whatsoever. I would genuinely be interested in this study being published and for it to be referenced.

Finally, I want to encourage people to keep up the pressure, and I thank the campaigners in the Gallery. We have the benefit of almost having a full week between the debate and the vote to maximise pressure on TDs.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): That concludes our debate for this evening. I thank everyone for their contributions.

Question put.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Deputy Louise O'Reilly): In accordance with Standing Order 85(2), the division is postponed until the weekly division time on Wednesday, 8 July 2026.

Cuireadh an Dáil ar athló ar 7.16 p.m. go dtí 2 p.m., Dé Máirt, an 7 Iúil 2026.

The Dáil adjourned at 7.16 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Tuesday, 7 July 2026.